

**Parshat Noach:  
Leaving the Ark and Praying on the Road:  
The Righteousness of Engagement in the World**  
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If there is any story in the Torah that has “made it” in the mainstream, it is the story of Noah. The story of the righteous man together with his family and the animals of the world being shielded by an ark through a terrible flood has a childlike simplicity to it, particularly when it culminates with the image of the beautiful rainbow, symbolizing God’s promise never to destroy the earth again. It is no wonder that artistic depictions of the story, particularly those aimed at young children, become almost cartoonish, with adorable animals poking their heads out of the windows of a charming ark while a rainbow arches its way across a sunny sky.

However, these images mask the horror of the flood story. We can only imagine what it must have been like for Noah when he exited the ark after the flood waters receded to survey the demise of human civilization. The biblical text is conspicuously silent about Noah’s feelings at this moment, but the rabbis attempt to fill in the picture. The Zohar, the central text of Jewish mysticism, illustrates Noah’s profound anguish and despair by describing a conversation between Noah and God:

*What did the Master of the Universe respond to Noah when he came out of the ark and saw the destroyed world and began to cry before Him, saying, “Master of the Universe, you are called Merciful. You were supposed to have mercy upon your creations!” The Master of the Universe responded to him saying, “Stupid shepherd! Now you say this to me?! Why did you not say this to me at the time that I said to you, ‘You are a righteous man before me’ and after that I said to you, ‘I am bringing a flood of water’ and after that I said to you, “Make an ark for yourself of gopher wood” --- all this I said and I held off in order that you would make a claim for mercy on the world, and from the moment that you heard that you would be saved in the ark, it never occurred to you to ask for mercy for the occupants of the world and you entered into the ark and were saved. And now that the world is lost, you open your mouth to speak before me about petitions for mercy?*

מה השיב הקדוש ברוך הוא לנח כשיצא מן התיבה וראה את העולם חרב והתחיל לבכות לפניו ואמר: רבונו של עולם נקראת רחום, היה לך לרחם של בריותיך! השיבו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר: רועה שוטה! עכשיו אמרת לי כך?! למה לא אמרת לי בשעה שאמרתי לך: 'אותך ראיתי צדיק לפני' ואחר כך אמרתי לך 'הנני מביא את המבול מים' ואחר כך אמרתי לך 'עשה לך תיבת עצי גופר' — כל זה אמרתי ועיכבתי בעדי כדי שתתבע רחמים על העולם, ומאז ששמעת שתנצל בתיבה לא עלה בלבך לבקש רחמים על ישוב העולם ונכנסת לישוב בתיבה וניצלת. וכעת כשאבד העולם פתחת את פיך לדבר לפני בבקשות ורחמים?

We feel Noah’s emotional devastation in this narrative expansion and we understand his wails to God. As he looked around him and saw the ruin and destruction, he could not imagine that a just God could have purposefully caused it. Where was the mercy for which the Almighty was known?

But what comes next is surprising. Rather than soothe Noah by telling him that he would rebuild and all would be okay, or remind Noah that, as hard as it is, this had to be done due to the evil of humankind, God turns Noah’s anger and grief back at him. “Now you come to me?” God asks. “I gave you, who are supposedly so righteous, so many chances to ask for mercy for your fellow human beings, and all you cared about was the fact that you were being saved!”

This midrash is a difficult one for us to understand. It leads to troubling questions. Is God really blaming the destruction of the flood on Noah’s failure to ask for mercy on behalf of humankind? If Noah had asked for mercy, would God actually have granted it? As in every midrash, however, we need to dig a bit deeper to find the message the rabbis sought to transmit.

God's anger at Noah is a message about what it means to be a righteous person. It is not enough, God tells Noah, to follow God's commands unthinkingly. Building the ark according to God's instructions and collecting all the animals was not sufficient. Noah should have questioned God's plan, and should have tried to intervene on behalf of humankind. Separating himself from the rest of the world without questioning may have been what God instructed, but it was not the most noble path. God expects more of a righteous person.

This midrash reminds me of the famous gemara in the Talmud Bavli, Masechet Brachot 3a:

*It was taught: R. Yose said: Once I was walking on the way, and I entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah (the Prophet) — may he be remembered for good — came, waited at the entrance for me, and stayed until I concluded my prayer. When I finished my prayer he said to me, "Peace be upon you, my master." I responded, "Peace be upon you, my master and teacher." Then he said to me, "My son, why did you enter this ruin?" I responded, "To pray." He said to me, "You should have prayed on the road." I responded, "I feared lest passers-by interrupt me." He said he to me, "You should have offered an abbreviated prayer." At that moment I learned three things from him: first, one should not enter ruins; second, it is permissible to pray by the roadside; third, one who prays on the road should offer an abbreviated prayer.*

תניא: אמר רבי יוסי פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך ונכנסתי לחורבה אחת מחורבות ירושלים להתפלל. בא אליהו זכור לטוב ושמר לי על הפתח (והמתין לי) עד שסיימתי תפילתי. לאחר שסיימתי תפילתי, אמר לי, שלום עליך רבי. ואמרתי לו, שלום עליך רבי ומורי. ואמר לי, בני מפני מה נכנסת לחורבה זו? אמרתי לו, להתפלל. ואמר לי, היה לך להתפלל בדרך. ואמרתי לו, מתיירא הייתי שמא יפסיקו בי עוברי דרכים. ואמר לי, היה לך להתפלל תפלה קצרה. באותה שעה למדתי ממנו שלשה דברים: למדתי שאין נכנסין לחורבה, ולמדתי שמתפללין בדרך, ולמדתי שהמתפלל בדרך מתפלל תפלה קצרה

In this story, R. Yose leaves the path of his journey to *daven* in the ruins of Jerusalem. Presumably, he sought a quiet and contemplative place to pray, and the ruins felt like a spot in which to connect with God. Elijah appears to R. Yose and gently rebukes him for his choice to leave the path of his journey. When R. Yose explains that he did so in order to avoid interruption from "passers-by," Elijah tells him he still should have stayed on the road, and if he feared interruption, he should have offered an abbreviated prayer.

R. Yose, good student that he is, then outlines the lessons he learned from Elijah. Those lessons appear simple, but upon second glance, they are actually quite deep. The exhortation not to enter ruins, but rather to remain on the road, seems to mean here that we should not live in the past, separated from the rest of humanity, seeking only to commune with God. Rather, we should stay in the present and amongst our fellow humans even if we need to sideline ourselves every once in awhile to connect to God, and even if it means that those moments of connection may need abbreviation. Interestingly, the gemara uses the phrase "*ovrei derachim*" to describe the passers-by that R. Yose feared would interrupt his prayer. While this phrase literally means "passers-by," the word "*over*" also means "sinner." The gemara's ultimate lesson is that we must remain among the sinners, the "*amcha*" (regular people), and not sequester ourselves in the rarified atmosphere of ruins in which only God's presence dwells.

We have now left the month of Tishrei in which we spend many days separated from the rest of the world and communing with God. Now that we have entered the month of Heshvan, the message of the Zohar and of the story of R. Yose must ring in our ears. To truly do God's will on this earth means not to separate ourselves and fixate only on our relationship with God, but to remember that we are human and our lot is among humankind, working together to create a more righteous and perfect world.



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