



Countering Destruction: Lessons from Noah

By Rabbi Yonatan Neril¹

“*And God saw the earth and behold it was corrupt (Genesis 6:11). R’ Hiyya adduced the following text: And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way (Jonah 3:10). See now, he said, when the sons of men are righteous and observe the commands of the Torah, the earth becomes invigorated, and a fullness of joy pervades it, because then the Shechinah rests upon the earth, and there is thus gladness above as well as below. But when men corrupt their way and do not observe the commands of the Torah, and sin before their Master, they, as it were, thrust the Shechinah out of the world, and the earth is thus left in a corrupt state. For the Shechinah being thrust out, another spirit comes and hovers over the world, bringing with it corruption.*”²

-The Zohar, 1:61a

The story of the flood teaches of an important connection between human action and planetary health. Ten generations after Creation, all life on the planet had “corrupted (*hishchit*) its way on the earth.”³ In response, G-d told Noah to build an ark to save species from the impending flood that would wipe out all terrestrial life. Noah built the ark, brought the animals into it, and lived on it for the duration of the flood. He then sent a raven and afterward a dove to see whether the floodwater had subsided. After Noah left the ark, G-d made a covenant with Noah,⁴ designating the rainbow as the sign of the Creator's commitment not to destroy the world.

Although the flood and the life of Noah occurred thousands of years ago, these stories offer relevant and profound lessons for the world in which we live. When we take a deeper look at Noah, seeing him through the eyes of some of the various rabbinic commentaries, we can discover a portrait of a man who spent his life innovating a lifestyle of what today would be called environmental concern. Noah lived in a generation of corruption (*hashchata*), the same root as the word for destruction (thus, the mitzvah of “Bal Tashchit”—do not destroy). The commentator Bet Yaakov notes that this “*hashchata*” (corruption or destruction) caused G-d to respond measure for measure with *hashchata* (destruction) of living beings.⁵ Noah, the one man who had not corrupted (*hishchit*) the world, worked to prevent the total destruction (*hashchata*) of human and animal life when he built the ark, the vessel that would preserve the planet's animal life. A fresh look at the life of Noah can provide us many lessons as we strive to bring our world back to a state of holy balance.

Warning Signs: Before the Flood

According to the Midrash, a compilation of teachings from the Jewish oral tradition, before the Flood, G-d gave

¹ Several small sections of this article have been included here with permission from Shimshon Stuart Siegel's “Noah: A Paradigm for Environmental Consciousness,” available at www.canfeinesharim.org. The author would like to thank Evonne Marzouk for her editorial assistance in developing this article.

² The Zohar, volume 1, p 61a, translation by Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, Soncino Press: London, 1934, p. 198-9

³ Genesis 6:12. Translation by JPS.

⁴ The rainbow covenant was actually a second covenant G-d established with Noah. In the first, G-d told him to reproduce, and gave him permission to eat meat.

⁵ Genesis 6:11 reads “And the earth was corrupted”—*va-tishaheth*, root *shaheth*. The use of this particular root, which is the same as that used for the destruction by the flood in verse 14, brings home the fact that this punishment was measure for measure. Beit Yaakov commentary to this verse, cited in [Torah Shlema](#) and translated by Rabbi Dr. Harry Freedman

humans 120 years to improve their ways. The Creator did not warn people Himself, but chose Noah as his messenger. G-d told Noah to build the ark during this period as a sign to the people that the flood would come unless they changed their actions.⁶ The Midrash continues that during these 120 years, Noah planted, watered, and cut down trees to make the ark.⁷ Noah said to the people of his generation, “return from your evil ways and deeds, in order that the waters of the flood may not come upon you and wipe out all human offspring.”⁸ This vision of the Midrash portrays Noah as a messenger of the Divine imploring them to repent.

How did people miss the message? We can see parallels in modern times. For example, since the 1970s scientists have articulated a theory of why the planet is warming—due to human combustion of fossil fuels.⁹ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was created in 1988, as an effort by the United Nations “to provide the governments of the world with a clear scientific view of what is happening to the world’s climate.”¹⁰ Their warnings, however, have been largely unheeded. Even those who take the problem seriously have struggled to significantly change their actions.

The natural world has buffered the effects of climate change,¹¹ an apparent indication of G-d's mercy towards us. Yet we are starting to witness the effects of our actions. The 2010 heat wave in Russia and floods in Pakistan, and 2011 drought in China and massive grain losses that resulted from all three events point to what scientists have been warning us about for decades. As in Noah’s time, the climate crisis poses a religious question: will we change our actions and live in a way that does not bring on destruction?

What provoked God to carry out the most serious environmental catastrophe in human history and wipe away virtually all living creatures? The Rabbis of the Talmud teach that the judgment was sealed because of the sin of robbery (*chamas*). Rabbi Samphson Rafael teaches that “*Chamas* [wrongdoing] is a wrong that is too petty to be caught by human justice, but if committed continuously can gradually ruin your fellow man.” With no one being tried for stealing miniscule amounts, store owners suffer significant losses and may have to shut down. No one desires or *intends* to cause such an outcome. It simply occurs due to the small-scale misconduct of many individuals put together. Yet in response to this human wickedness, the Master of the World *intentionally* destroyed almost all terrestrial life by flooding the earth.

Today, perhaps the greatest risk of humans destroying the world comes not from those with the *intent* to do so but rather from the collective, *unintentional* actions of billions of people. Seemingly inconsequential actions are having a dramatic effect. Small acts by billions of people aggregate to global changes: turning on the car’s ignition, buying the plane ticket, eating the food that comes from far away. We are little by little compromising the ecological balance on which we and future generations will depend for our survival. For the first time in human history, we now have the ability to destroy or radically alter virtually all life on earth.

Taking Responsibility: On the Ark

⁶ Eitz Yosef commentary to Tanhuma, Parshat Noah, section five

⁷ Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Noah, section five

⁸ Pirke D’Rebi Eliezer chapter 32. Translation by the author. This dvar Torah explores the Rabbinic approach that views Noah as acting righteously and taking responsibility. A different Midrash in Midrash Tanchuma sees Noah as not caring about the destruction of his generation and not protesting when G-d tells him that He will destroy them.

⁹ From Maslin, M., *Global Warming, A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004

¹⁰ Online at http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization_history.shtml

¹¹ For example, the oceans are believed to have absorbed between 20-35% of the carbon industrial society has put into the atmosphere. But now the oceans appear to be becoming saturated and less effective at absorbing atmospheric carbon dioxide. See the study, “Reconstruction of the history of anthropogenic CO₂ concentrations in the ocean,” by S. Khatiwala et. Al, *Nature* 462, 346-349 (19 November 2009) Online at doi:10.1038/nature08526. A press resource is online at <http://www.earth.columbia.edu/articles/view/2586>. There it says that the researchers estimate that today, the oceans hold about 150 billion tons of industrial carbon. “The more carbon dioxide you put in, the more acidic the ocean becomes, reducing its ability to hold CO₂,” said the study’s lead author, Samar Khatiwala, an oceanographer at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. “Because of this chemical effect, over time, the ocean is expected to become a less efficient sink [i.e. storage source] of manmade carbon.”

Unlike the other people in his generation, Noah took responsibility by building the ark, bringing the animals into it, and taking care of them during the flood. According to the Midrash, “throughout those twelve months, Noah and his sons did not sleep, because they had to feed the animals, beasts and birds.”¹² The Midrash also notes how Noah brought a grape vine and fig clipping into the ark in order to replant them after the flood.¹³ These teachings imply that Noah was committed to restoring life on a devastated planet.

Feeding thousands of animals was only part of the work. As the Talmud explains, the ark had three levels, one for Noah and his family, one for the animals, and one for the waste-- tons upon tons of animal droppings.¹⁴ The rabbinic sources debate the layout of the ark and the design of Noah's waste-management system, but it seems likely that Noah and his family spent a lot of their time shoveling manure.¹⁵ Whether they systematically removed it from the ark, stored it in a designated waste facility or found practical use for it, the Talmud implies that Noah and his family toiled to maintain cleanliness, health and safety on the ark.

Today we also have a problem with overwhelming animal waste – and we are not handling it with the responsibility demonstrated by Noah. The US Environmental Protection Agency has coined the phrase Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) to describe large-scale factory farms with tens of thousands of animals in each facility.¹⁶ The waste from these facilities far eclipses that on Noah's ark, and pollution of water sources from the waste has been a persistent problem stemming from these operations.

The Midrash teaches that Noah first sent a raven out of the ark to see if the floodwater had subsided. Being one of two ravens in the world, it argued with him, fearing it would die and then its species would be lost forever. In response, G-d told Noah to take the raven back into the ark.¹⁷ Noah then sent the dove, of which seven were in existence. The Midrash portrays Noah as preserving the diversity of life on earth.

Rabbi Sampson Rafael Hirsch explains that this value of preserving diversity is a deeper meaning of the rainbow. He teaches that the colors of the rainbow emerge from white-- “one pure complete ray of light, broken up into seven degrees of seven colors.” These colors are symbolic of different types of living beings—the 'red' ones seemingly closer to the light, the darker ones more distant. Yet “G-d unites them all together in one common bond of peace, all fragments of one life, all refracted rays of the one spirit of G-d, even the lowest, darkest, most distant one, still a son of the light.”¹⁸

Partnership: After the Flood

Following the flood, G-d said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I give between Me and you, and every living being that is with you, to generations forever; I have set My rainbow in the cloud...And it shall happen, when I place a cloud over the earth, and the bow will be seen in the cloud, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living being among all flesh, and the water shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”¹⁹ What is the meaning of this covenant?

The Ramban (Nahmanides, 12th century Spain) teaches that the rainbow signifies an upside-down bow and serves as “a reminder of peace.” The feet of the rainbow are bent downward to show that the Heavenly

¹² Midrash Tanhuma 58:9

¹³ Genesis Rabba 36:3, cited by Rashi to Genesis 9:20

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 108b

¹⁵ This understanding fits with the Ibn Ezra's general understanding of the ark, that it existed within natural law. The Ramban, by contrast, sees the ark as a miracle and supernatural occurrence.

¹⁶ See http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/home.cfm?program_id=7 for regulatory information on CAFOs.

¹⁷ Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 38:4. See also Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b

¹⁸ The Pentateuch, vol. 1: Genesis, translated and explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch. Rendered into English by Isaac Levy from the original German, Judaica Press, Gateshead, England, 1989. To Genesis 9:15, p. 182

¹⁹ Genesis 9:12-15, Artscroll Translation

'shooting'--a.k.a the torrential rains—have ceased.²⁰ Rabbi Shlomo Riskin explains the meaning of the Ramban's teaching: “ancient cultures fought their wars with the bow and arrow, and the side which surrendered, pursuing peace instead of war, would express their will to do so by raising an inverted bow that the enemy could see. Similarly, G-d places an inverted bow in the heavens as a sign that He is no longer warring against humanity.”²¹

The mystical tradition teaches that before creating this world, G-d created seven worlds and destroyed them.²² On many occasions the Creator destroyed the world He created. But not so this world. The rainbow testifies to the Creator's intention for life on our planet to continue to exist. It is a sign that G-d desires the existence of the world and not its destruction.

Rabbi Riskin continues that the symbolism of the rainbow extends beyond G-d's commitment to encompass humans as well: “The rainbow is a half-picture, lacking a second half to complete the circle of wholeness. G-d can pledge not to destroy humanity, but since He created humanity with freedom of choice, He cannot guarantee that humanity will not destroy itself.”²³ Yet the rabbis make clear that G-d does not want us to destroy His Creation either. The Midrash teaches that “When G-d created Adam, He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him...Be careful not to spoil or destroy my world—for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.”²⁴

According to the Perush Ziv Zohar, the rainbow as a whole reminds us to turn our hearts to improve our actions.²⁵ Salvation from environmental destruction may ultimately lie with individuals taking responsibility for how they live and how that impacts others.

In Israel, rainbows can first be seen soon after the end of the Rosh Hashana/Yom Kippur/Sukkot holidays, when the winter rains begin to fall. Perhaps the timing of the appearance of the rainbow, soon after the long period of tshuva/return, can motivate us to keep improving ourselves: to direct our energies to being better servants of the Creator and stewards of Creation.

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²⁰ Commentary to 9:12. He also explains that the rainbow shows that the bow has no rope upon which to bend the arrows. See also commentary of Rabbi Samphson Rafael Hirsch to 9:15.

²¹ Commentary on Parshat Noah, 5769. Rabbi Riskin is the Chief Rabbi of Efrat. Available online at <http://www.ohrtorahstone.org.il/parsha/5769/noah69.htm>

²² Rabbi Yitzhak Luria (the Arizal), Etz Chaim, Sha'ar Shevirat HaM'lachim, cited by Rabbi Erez Gazit in a class at Yeshivat Bat Ayin, spring 2008

²³ Ibid. A similar point is made by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, in his Address to The Lambeth Conference, July 28th ,2008 : available online at <http://www.chiefrabbi.org/UploadedFiles/Articals/lambethconference28july08.pdf>: “The covenant of Noah is not a covenant of faith but a covenant of fate. G-d says: Never again will I destroy the world. But I cannot promise that *you* will never destroy the world -- because I have given you free will. All I can do is teach you how not to destroy the world.”

²⁴ Midrash Kohelet Raba, 7:13. The Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yona Metzger, said that a literal reading of this Midrash is possible, that it is referring to not destroying the environment. Dvar Torah given at Conference on Torah and the Environment at Jerusalem City Hall, July 2008.

²⁵ Footnote 43 to Zohar Noah 72b. In a similar light, the Sefat Emet teaches based on the Zohar that everything depends on the groundswell from below [of people] to reveal the colors in Heaven, referring to a Supernal rainbow that will appear at a time when the Divine Presence is more fully manifested. The Seforno to 9:17 understands the double rainbow as a wakeup call for Noah and his family “to [spiritually] wake up in seeing it, and to awaken the people of the generation to repent, to be wise, and to do good.” The Sages in several places caution against *staring* at the rainbow, based on a mystical understanding of the rainbow's significance.

developing educational resources relating to Judaism and the environment.