

Reflections on the Tree of Life:

Noah, the flood and the Tower of Babel

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Writing in celebration of the 1967 Woodstock concert, Canadian songstress Joni Mitchell wrote these words:

Well maybe it is just the time of year
Or maybe it's the time of man
I don't know who I am
But you know life is for learning
We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden

The misguided innocence of Woodstock is long past, and since that time terrible wars have come and gone, millions of precious human beings have had their lives devastated by other human beings, and the environment is being damaged at an astonishing rate. It would seem that we have truly lost our way. But despair is no way forward. We are nothing if not resilient. Countless acts of goodness, great, small and usually uncelebrated, are carried out every minute of every day, and despite the real existence of evil in this world, God gave us good hearts, souls that are a little flicker of His light, and the intelligence with which to choose which paths our lives, and thus the world, will take. We are stardust, we are golden. God also gave us religions, and to each religion, holy books, sources of wisdom from which we can learn and gain insight about how to live and what to do.

The conference theme this year is big, far reaching: "Coexistence in Divided Societies: Pedagogies of the Sacred, of Difference, and of Hope." This is nothing less than a call

for us to repair the world through education, to devote our vocations to getting back to the garden. When I first saw the theme, I was both inspired and intimidated. It seemed too big, too much for me, for us. But then I thought, each of us can look to the scriptures of our traditions and find wisdom and sparks of light to carry us forward. Surely this is what religious education is about.

The famous verse from Proverbs (3:18), recited every time Jews return the Torah scroll to the Ark at the end of reading from it, says: "It is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it, and all who cling to it find happiness. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." Trees of Life exist in most religions and cultures around the world, symbolizing variously the connection between earth and Heaven, the connectedness of all living things, and the true order of the world. Trees of Life are found in shamanic, Hindu, Egyptian, Sumerian, Toltec, Mayan, Native, Norse, Celtic, Judaic, and Christian traditions (Graef 2015).

In Judaism the tree refers specifically to the Torah and the infinite wisdom contained therein. I believe that each of us can view our religion's scriptures as Trees of Life. Jews read the entire Torah during one year, reading a portion each week. We finish the whole Torah and start a new cycle after *Simchat Torah* (the joy of the Torah). "Torah" essentially means a teaching or guide, and each week's portion sheds light on our lives, often on ethics and morals, and sometimes uncannily offers insight into current events. Every week people in Jewish communities give *divreh* Torah, words of commentary and interpretation, that reveal meanings and provide insight into the *parasha* of that week. One of the main points of these homilies is to connect the lessons in the Torah portion to what is going on in the community and help people to learn from these lessons.

At the time of the REA conference we will have just read the first portion of the Torah, the story of the Creation, and of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where the Tree of Life grew. For the week of the REA conference the second portion, Noah, is read. This portion not only tells the story of Noah and the flood, but also the story of the Tower of Babel, before the building of which "The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose" (Genesis 11:1).

Taking the Tree of Life to heart, and following the tradition of searching for insight in the weekly Torah portion, this presentation will bring commentaries on the stories of Noah and the Tower of Babel, finding relevance to the conference theme. Just as the Tree of Life is a universal symbol, it is significant that as well as Judaism and Christianity, Islam, too, shares the stories of Adam and Eve, and of Noah, albeit with differing details. This modest presentation, from someone who is by no means a Torah scholar, is intended to engender discussion of how all of us, regular people from diverse backgrounds, can connect with our own traditions' scriptures and find direction there. I hope that we can draw some common insights, and that people who choose to come to this session will bring commentaries and ideas from their own traditions, Christian, Muslim and others, as well as personal thoughts about the relevance of scriptural study to some of the big issues raised by the conference theme.

The story of Noah

"Noah was a righteous man, wholehearted in his generations; Noah walked with God." (Genesis 9.6). Some commentators take this as a favorable evaluation of Noah's character: he lived at a time when humankind had become corrupt, yet Noah still managed to be righteous. Other commentators interpret the meaning to be that in comparison to his corrupt contemporaries, Noah was righteous, but had he lived in a time when there were other righteous people, he would have been unremarkable. Noah is compared to Abraham. Noah "walked with God," but to Abraham God said "Walk before me, and be thou whole-hearted" (17.1). Regarding the different levels of Noah's and Abraham's closeness to God, the great Biblical commentator Rashi says that Noah needed God's help. He had the desire to extricate himself from the corruption around him but lacked the strength to do so. God saw his desire and helped him, saying "Walk with Me." But Abraham walked in righteousness by himself, and God said to him, "Walk before Me." Because of their different levels of spirituality, "Noah was singled out for survival, Abraham for a mission" (Leibowitz 19: 64). Martin Buber says that "Noah stays put in nature; a man of the soil is rescued from the deluge. Abraham is the first to make his way into history as a proclaimer of God's dominion" (Buber 1968: 35). In the context of this REA conference, and in general, of religious education, I believe that we can see this as a

source of hope. Most of us are likely closer to the level of Noah, who was in some ways just a poor *schmuck*, struggling, with limited capacity, but with desire for good. God was listening to Noah and He is listening to us. If we turn to him, he will respond.

We cannot really compare our generation to the generation of Noah. In our time there is misunderstanding, hatred and prejudice, but there is also goodness and the desire for dialogue and for creative and compassionate coexistence. Our time is mixed, with suffering, unfairness and cruelty, but also with good people doing good work. The many corruptions of the generation of Noah were widespread and extreme. They are variously described by commentators as sexual corruption and social crimes such as robbery, but all the commentaries agree that the most terrible human crime was violence, which dominated society, and only violence is referred to by God when He tells Noah that he is going to destroy humankind: "And God said to Noah, the end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them" (6.13). One commentary on the topic of violence says that "he who prays to God with hands soiled by violence is not answered" (Shemot Rabbah). Yet, in the story of Noah, God gives humankind numerous chances to repent, while the ark is being built, and when the rains begin. In fact, Rashi states that at the beginning the rains were gentle, they descended with mercy, so that if people were to repent, the rains would be a blessing. Only after the people still turned away from God did the rains become a deluge.

Violence is a corruption of the divine nature God gave us in the Garden: "So God created man in His own image; In the image of God He created him; male and female he created them" (1.27), and participating in violence further corrupts us. And while we could endlessly debate kinds and levels of violence, from outright murder to violent speech and even not speaking while violence at the hands of others continues, the element that disrupts and often prevents violence, is our ability and desire to listen and talk to one another. We must try to relate across our differences, and across some canyons that may seem unbridgeable. Life is complex, moral decisions are often difficult, the lives of humanity are not painted in black and white. Though Gandhi would disagree, a life of absolute non-violence may not be possible in our time. Sometimes violent action becomes necessary, such as in the waging of wars that must be fought in order to

vanquish great evil at the hands of corrupted individuals and societies who have no interest in listening and talking unless it is to get their way, and who aim to kill innocents. Even with these people, before fighting we attempt to engage in dialogue. Some wars must be waged, with the caveat that first "When you draw near to a city to wage war against it, you shall call out to it for peace" (Deuteronomy 20.10). In the story of Noah God patiently waited for humankind's repentance before finally sending the flood. We, who are indwelt with tiny sparks of God's light, must emulate this patience. And when violent response to violence is absolutely necessary, we should still remember the words of the prophet Habakkuk: "In wrath, remember compassion" (3.2).

After the flood there is a rainbow, a sign that in some way signifies the Divine promise never to destroy humankind again by means of a flood. Commentators provide various explanations for the shape of the rainbow. One explanation is that the bow is like the shape of a bow from which arrows are shot, but it is not aiming towards earth, it is upturned. This symbolizes that "retribution and anger...are being replaced with an era of love and peace" (Leibowitz 1954, 2019: 86). Other commentators are not satisfied with this explanation, because in fact hatred and violence had not and have not been eliminated. They say that the rainbow is a reminder which does not require interpretation. We are simply to see the rainbow and remember God's kindness, patience and mercy.

Noah and his family are tasked with rebuilding a ruined world. Interestingly, they are given something that was never given to Adam: the right to eat meat. Commentators have suggested reasons for this dramatic change after the flood. The Ramban and others say that since Noah and his family saved the animals on the ark and worked so hard to keep them alive, people earned the right to consume them for food. R. Hirsch says that mankind was weaker after the flood, as reflected in shorter lifespans, and needed the greater nourishment that meat provides. On the other hand, Rav Kook, one of the great rabbis of the 20th century, says that once the perfection of the Garden had been lost, and the world had become filled with violence, it was too late to go back to an absolute prohibition of killing; humankind could not return to that ideal level. The flood washed away the evil people and their deeds, but humankind had nevertheless been lowered by violence and could not completely return from it. After the flood God permitted people to

kill animals for food, but not to kill human beings, the implication being that the violent (carnivorous) part of humanity would express itself in the killing and eating of animals. Rav Kook sees this as a temporary, transitional stage until the Messiah comes and the world is perfected. According to Rav Kook we will then no longer kill and eat animals.

The tower of Babel

The generations after the flood are recorded in considerable detail, with people being, for a time, equal: "The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose" (11.1) until "Cush begot Nimrod; he was the first to be a mighty man on earth. He was a mighty hunter before God" (10.8-9). Then "equality of all men was replaced by oppression, brotherhood by tyranny" (Leibowitz 1954, 2010: 91). Nimrod and his followers sought power. Humanity's creative genius had led to technical advances that freed them from the work of day to day sustenance that made them dependent on the natural environment. People were now able to build cities even in places where there was no stone: "They said to one another, 'come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire.' And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them as mortar" (11.3).

This is a conundrum faced in every age, and perhaps never more so than in ours. Technical and technological advances in many ways make our lives better, but there is always the danger that we will, in effect, come to worship the technology, forgetting our spiritual nature and its source. In the case of Nimrod and his followers, who could now make bricks, and thus buildings and towers, and settle anywhere they chose, "demoralization sets in very quickly. This technical mastery gives way to overweening pride and self-confidence" (Leibowitz 1954, 2010:102). This is a common theme among Bible commentators, that technological advances lead to lives of increasing comfort and dissatisfaction with a simpler life based on the bounty of the natural world, and to the danger of forgetting that we are not the masters of the world. This does not mean that we should not use our God-given abilities to discover and create. In many places in the Bible we are told that we are supposed to work and follow our talents and creativity. In Deuteronomy (14.29) it says clearly that "God will bless you in all your handiwork that you will perform." There is even a commentary in the *Midrash*ⁱ (Bereshit Rabbah 11.7) that "Whatever was created during the six days of God's handiwork required working

on." Our job is, in effect, to complete the job God began. We are His partners. Diseases have been cured by human creativity and ingenuity, and many wonderful inventions and discoveries have allowed us to live longer and better. The danger seems to be that our egos take over and we begin to think that we alone are the creators, and we do not need God.

In the time of our story in Genesis, building cities and towers led to the acquisition of wealth, the creation of a class system, and unequal distribution of wealth and power. "Come, let us build a city, with a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11.4). Commentators say that Nimrod planned to build a tower so high that it would reach to Heaven, where Nimrod and his army would wage war against God, and their names would rival or be greater than God's. The word Babel in Hebrew is *bavel*, from the verb *lebalbel*, to confuse. God dealt with the people's arrogance by dispersing them and destroying their ability to understand one another, splitting them into different tribes and nations, with seventy different languages. The lust for power and the unequal treatment of people led to this genuine loss. Today even those who speak a number of languages still do not understand most of them.

In our time, despite a multitude of languages, cultures and religions we can and must work towards understanding one another, trying by small acts of kindness, courage and communication to repair the world. We must never stop hoping for and working towards the day when suffering, evil and misunderstanding will end. Perhaps on that day we will once again be able to speak to and understand one other without confusion: "For then I will turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent" (Zephaniah 3.9). Whether that will mean one religion is neither here nor there. All our religions are branches of the Tree of Life.

Closing thoughts

During the time that I was writing this paper the *parasha* of the week was the final section of Numbers (33.38), in which the Israelites' journey from Egypt during the forty years they wandered, is recapitulated, marking the places they travelled through and some of the events that occurred. This passage contains the only reference in the entire Torah to

the date of a particular person's death, the only *yartzeit* that is marked. The death is Aaron's. Why is Aaron's death marked and remembered? Not Abraham's, not Moses', not any of the great prophets. Only Aaron's. The commentators say this is because Aaron spent his whole life, all one hundred and twenty-three years of it, seeking to make peace between people. Between husbands and wives, between neighbors and tribes engaged in dispute. He worked tirelessly to bring peace between persons and their fellows. He embodied compassion, empathy and kindness. And it wasn't easy – he was dealing with a pretty contentious and obstreperous bunch, who built the golden calf to worship not long after they had seen God face to face at Mount Sinai, and who complained and bickered all the way from Egypt to Israel! Aaron specifically worked at the level of person to person interactions. He was not a politician or a policy maker.

With this I would like to close. It seems to me that this is something REA has always known, and what this conference and the other activities of the REA strive to enable: person to person interactions, the chance to hear and know the other, and to find common ground in our shared humanity. It isn't easy, it will never be easy, but this is one important role of religion and religious education. Religious education usually aims to inculcate new generations into a particular religion, but not only that. All religions preach peace, and that means listening to the voice of the other, reaching across to those in other religions and to those who profess no religion, working to communicate across differences. We are told in Ethics of the Fathers (1:12) that each of us should become "a student of Aaron." May we in our own lives and in our teaching be students of Aaron, and may our work truly contribute to bridging (not eliminating) differences, and to furthering creative, compassionate co-existence in our divided society.

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ⁱ The Midrash is a collection of ancient commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures. The earliest Midrashim come from the 2nd century CE, although much of their content is older. Shemot Rabbah and Bereshit Rabbah, mentioned in this paper, are Midrashim.