

Noah 5778

The Aftermath

During the years that I was a small child - a little older than Ezra - there was a trend in primary schools in England for school choirs to sing 'jazz' versions of stories from the Bible. One of these made the big time - *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* - but this score had predecessors, and one of them was *Captain Noah And His Floating Zoo*.

After this length of time I don't have total recall of what we sang, but it's surprising how much stays behind. The final two numbers were, first, a description of the rainbow:

*Oh what a wonderful scene
The rainbow overhead
Violet, indigo, blue and green
Yellow, orange and red...*

and a rousing final number describing how the animals left the Ark:

*Go forth, increase and multiply
By two, by two, by two....*

And that's the end of the piece.

But of the Biblical story is not so simple or straightforward. Noah's story has a postscript - in fact, a postscript in three episodes.

The first episode describes what Noah did when he came out of the Ark. You may remember that he plants a vineyard which seems to produce fruit immediately; he turns it into wine, also apparently without effort, since the next thing we hear is that he drank the wine, got blindingly drunk and sprawled around in his tent with no clothes on. It's unclear exactly what happens when his sons discover him and try to cover him up, but the outcome is that once again, a child falls out of favor. Ham - now called Canaan - is cursed while his two brothers Shem and Japheth are blessed. Although Noah lives for a cool 350 years after that, he never seems to forgive his son.

This episode segues into the next, when we find that Ham becomes the ancestor of - wait for it - Mitzrayim - Egypt. Egypt in turn is described as the ancestor of the Philistines (the people in the Sisterhood class will know who *they* are), as well as Cush, the ancestor of Nimrod, the Bible's first hunter and founder of Babylon and Nineveh; and Canaan whose descendants we will hear more about later. There's another son called Put, who seems to disappear. Still, that is plenty to be getting on with - and you will note that just about all of the enemies of the Israelites for the period between the patriarchs and the destruction of the first Temple appear on that list.

The third thing that happens after the flood is the episode of the Tower of Babel (which we pronounce differently in England). The upshot of this story is that humans become unable to understand each other and are dispersed across the earth - a fact the Torah takes care to tell us twice. We might think that we have never understood each other properly since.

I see these three episodes as aspects of the same phenomenon - the aftermath of a disaster.

Now, this community knows better than many what that period can be like. But I think the Torah is teaching us not so much about the physical but the psychological aftermath of a disaster.

The first episode is the most personal. We can understand Noah's drunkenness as a response to the fact that everything he knew as reality had been swept away. It isn't surprising that he seeks oblivion, and quickly. It's as if he can't wait to fall into a stupor so that what he is feeling will stop. This in turn leaves him vulnerable; and as is so often the case when we feel vulnerable and somebody does something we perceive as wrong, to the irreparable rupture of relationships. Noah and his youngest son become the odd ones out in the Biblical set of favored younger children. Their relationship is over. We, too, may have witnessed such breakdowns.

In the second episode we see the immediate consequences of disaster, its first fallout. The breakdown of Noah and Ham's relationship repopulates the world with legions of enemies. We can almost envisage it as figures taking their place on a chessboard - Egypt, Philistia, Canaan, Babylon, all aggressive and warlike (it's not an accident that Nimrod is described as a hunter) setting the scene for long-term tension. This, too, is an aspect of aftermath that we have seen kick in after other disasters - the choosing of sides and the choosing of stories.

And finally we see the world dimension. With the story of the Tower of Babel, the disruption spills over on a wider scale. Human misunderstanding becomes endemic to the human condition. And again we ourselves have seen how this aspect of aftermath works in our world.

So the wish for oblivion, extreme vulnerability, fatal misunderstanding, enmity, long-held grudges and ultimately worldwide disruption all form part of the aftermath of disaster. It was true at the time of the Flood and I think we can say any modern disaster, on whatever scale, also has the potential to trigger these phenomena.

The Biblical story seems to have nothing good to set against the aftermath. There seems to be no point of light in the darkness. Rather, ten generations march forward at the end of Noah's narrative to get us to Abraham, Humanity 1.3, another Godly reboot, with whom our story can begin in earnest.

Why is this? I think perhaps the clue lies right at the beginning of the story, with the words that start off Noah's narrative - the words that form the anchor of the Midrash in this week's Shabbat brochure. Noah was an *ish tzadik b'dorotav* - a righteous person in, or for, his generation. Noah is never really described as having feelings of any kind. Did the Flood make him sad? frightened? apprehensive? Was he happy when it ended? How did he feel about all those people and animals? We never know. He seems to lack any kind of emotional apparatus. Perhaps this is one reason why he could only deal with the immediate reality of the Flood and not what came after.

A week or two ago one of you wrote to me to reprimand me in the kindest possible terms for not letting the community know enough about the damage Hurricane Maria had done in Puerto Rico and soliciting support and help for the community there. While I had indeed sent out one email - which not unsurprisingly lost itself in the slew of other emails about other disasters going on at the time - the reprimand hit home for me. I think that I had probably got caught in the *b'dorotav* trap, of thinking that a limited response was sufficient, at least for the moment. But we all know that it isn't.

The difference, I hope, between this community and Noah is that we can take a longer-term perspective. We all know that the aftermath of a disaster - whether on a large or a personal scale - can be just as damaging, perhaps more so, than the reality of the disaster itself.

Sad to say, we have plenty of disasters to choose from right now. And so, in concluding these words, I ask us over the course of next week to think about aftermath, notice what we are feeling and consider and what we each might do to help; and then to do something, act somehow, in however small a way. Noah's line fails. Perhaps the moral is that it is kindness, generosity, empathy, compassion - all those aspects so notably missing from his story - that hold the real secret of human success.

Shabbat shalom.