

## Noah 5781

### The Comforter

This week, we meet Noah. Actually, we met him right at the end of last week, when his father named him and said - we can imagine, wistfully - *This one will provide comfort...* The last sentence of last week's parashah tells us, *Noah found favor in the Holy One's eyes.* And this week he is introduced again - *Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.*

Yet despite all this, our rabbis and commentators aren't fans of Noah. They point out that he was the best of a bad lot - 'righteous in his generation' isn't a compliment - and only this week Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - to whom we wish a *refuah sheleimah* - wrote a piece about him titled, "Righteousness Is Not Leadership." The Hassidic teachers call him a *tzaddik im peltz*, a Tzaddik in furs - keeping himself, and only himself, warm. He doesn't speak up to challenge God, like Abraham does. He doesn't seem to mind that the world is going to be destroyed, just as long as he gets to be safe. Comfortable, yes. Comforter - maybe not so much.

I'm a little loath to push back against such a weight of tradition. But as we read about Noah this year - eight months into a pandemic, two weeks before an election - I'd like to look a little more closely at his behavior and see if perhaps he has a lesson or two for us.

We begin our journey by looking at Noah's environment. And the first thing we notice about the way it is described is that one word comes up over and over again - the Hebrew root *sht*.

It's about as nasty as it sounds. It means 'corrupt' and 'wicked' and 'ruined' and 'ruinous' and 'destructive' all at the same time. We are told within only a few verses that the earth 'became corrupt' - *tishahet* - and that it was corrupt - *hinei nishatah* - and that every living creature was doing its own ruinous thing - *hishit kol basar et darko al ha-aretz*. The Talmud<sup>1</sup> imagines how even the animals violated their natural boundaries. Noah and his family would have been living among a kind of gleeful, destructive anarchy.

---

<sup>1</sup> BT *Sanhedrin* 108a

So perhaps it's no wonder that he doesn't complain when he's given a way out. And not unlike us over the past eight months, Noah also goes into isolation. The rhythms of his life change completely and he's confined, with - as the Torah tells us - only a single window to look out of.

But - and this is important - Noah doesn't get to step away on his own. He goes into the Ark with his wife, and his children and their wives. He's not going to be left alone. In fact, there's a wonderful Midrash that I turned into a children's story about how he had to set up a very strict timetable for feeding the animals - all of them needed feeding at different times - that meant he hardly got any sleep. Shut away from the world outside, he remains in relationship. In our own arks, too, as we shelter from the pandemic, we might do well to follow his example. Somehow Noah manages to maintain what is necessary to reconstitute humanity once the Flood is done, and we might ask ourselves what that is. Patience?

We can also wonder what he thought about, there in the Ark. He had a long time to think. On Thursday before the Torah reading in minyan we noticed that first there were 40 days of rain, and then 150 days - 5 months - when it looked and felt as though there was nothing happening at all. It was only then that the waters began to diminish, and it still took another five months for the world to dry out. And remember - Noah wouldn't have known that the end was in sight or what it might be like. His job was just to wait it out, day after day, night after night.

That quality of waiting, confined made me think of Anne Frank. Shut away from the world in that tiny annexe, she had to work very hard emotionally and spiritually to keep some kind of perspective. This is what she wrote in her diary on 15 July 1944:

*It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I'll be able to realize them!*

Maybe Noah's silence was his way of staying strong. He didn't keep a diary, so we can't know what he was thinking - but we do know that having stepped into the Ark, he stepped out of it again ten months later into the sunlight, to be rewarded by a covenant with God.

That sort of resilience is a kind of heroism. And perhaps that's the reason that Noah is, after all, an *ish tzadik*. No, he doesn't do well once he actually settles back down - perhaps the trauma of the flood was just too much for him to take over the long term - but I think we have to admire his capacity just to hang in and hang on when everything around him was falling apart.

So maybe this year, for us, Noah is the one who provides comfort, just like his father said he would.