

Shabbat Shalom Sinai Members and Friends!

As I experiment with ways to stay in touch with all of you – especially when I’m not in Cheyenne - this week I am sharing a message for the next two weeks, which include our re-entry into the Book of Breishit (Genesis) through the first two parshiyot, Breishit and Noach. Had I been there with you this past week, we would have had a raucous *Simchat Torah* (virtual or in-person), where we could have physically experienced the joy of ending Deuteronomy and starting over again. Like a circle, the cycle of Torah is never really over, but returns us to the Beginning and in effect “renews our days as of old.” By the way, many people mistakenly think Simchat Torah celebrates the giving or receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai; that is not correct, for that is commemorated by Shavuot. Simchat Torah is essentially the same day as Shemini Atzeret (“8th Day of Assembly”) but in the Diapora it is an added 9th day, appended on to the end of Sukkot. The custom of celebrating the cycle of restarting the Torah stems from the 1st century, but became a separate holiday during the 10th century in Iraq. As some of you may know, many Soviet/Russian Jews in the early 60’s began celebrating Simchat Torah to publicly “come out” as Jews. In some Western cities, several synagogues will celebrate it together in a nearby street or park, and in Jerusalem, it is customary to dance with the Torah to meet at the Western Wall. Klezmer music and bands are a big part of Simchat Torah. It is one of my favorite holidays, so you all better show up next year!

Here’s a fitting piece by my friend Marty Potrop from Berkeley:

THE O [circle] IS COMPLETE...YET NEVER COMPLETED

Today with the celebration of finishing reading the Torah Scroll's Deuteronomy, and beginning to read it once again, Genesis, the cycle of the Jewish New Years, High Holy Days and Holidays reaches its PEAK.....

...as the Torah is finished and restarted so our lives turn another page into a Chapter of Blank Pages Ready to Be Written by YOU and me....may we each and all be BLESSED with a chapter of love, healing, joy, companionship, fulfillment, recognition, peace, and all that is good that your heart desires.

In the past 55 days we've spent 30 forgiving & asking for forgiveness, and then within 25 days, (3 High Holy Days, 6 Days of Turning and Returning, 5 Holy Days, 5 Half Holy Days, 3 Sabbaths) 22 Days devoted to self-reflection, atonement, at-one-ment, New Year of the World & Fall Harvest & Torah Cycle Celebrations, remembrance of those we've loved who've lived and left, thanksgiving, and some very peculiar customs, like building and living in a fragile hut for a week, and during same week shake and wave a palm frond, citron, myrtle, willow to the 4 winds/directions, up to the sky and down to the earth (sort of really ancient genuflections with props) in the self-same hut....

...during its midst quite a stretch needed to grasp the colorful, unusual, diverse panoply one is immersed in.....and now we, rejuvenated, re-enlightened, recommitted walk on into the world of our everyday lives, hopefully cleansed in spirit thought imagination and sight to live our lives a little bit closer to the values we honor and cherish, individually and collectively.

To which I add: “WHEW!”

Thoughts on *Parshat B'reishit*

Parshat B'reishit affords us an embarrassment of riches for interpretation, making it hard to decide where to start. This single parsha weaves together several stories: the Creation of the world, the first curiosity of early humans which leads to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the first murder, the genealogies of the longest-living people on earth, and even a strange passage suggesting that celestials and humans had intercourse and gave birth to “Nephilim,” whatever that might have meant. The parsha also concludes with an ominous foreshadowing of what will happen next:

“When the Eternal saw how great was the wickedness of human beings in the earth, that the direction of their thoughts was nothing but wicked all the time, the Eternal...thought ‘I will wipe the humans whom I created from off the face of the earth – ...and with them, the beasts, the reptiles, the birds of the sky, for I rue the day I made them.’ But Noah found favor in the Eternal’s sight.” (Gen. 6:5-8)

As I will discuss on my upcoming **weekend of October 8-10**, these are MYTHS, LEGENDS AND STORIES, NOT scientific facts; however it is possible that some of it was based on ancient memories. Creation and Flood legends are found in multiple cultures throughout the world. The Hebrew version wove some of these earlier legends into a story WITH SEVERAL MORAL MESSAGES, some of which I explore below. To reiterate, for more, show up at services that weekend!

Stewardship, not Domination

God then blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and tame it; and hold sway [have ‘dominion’] over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”
Gen. 1:28

This passage has been misunderstood and misused to justify unlimited hunting and exploitation of Nature in the service of human desires. This is simply wrong, and a terrible misreading of both intent of the text and the Hebrew words themselves.

As Rabbi Ellen Bernstein has written: “Humanity's role is to tend the garden, not to possess it; to ‘guard it and keep it’ (Genesis 2), not to exploit it; to pass it on as sacred trust, as it was given. Even though we are given the authority to have dominion over the earth and its creatures, we are never allowed to own it, just like we can't own the waters or the air. "The land cannot be sold in perpetuity" (Lev. 25:23). The land is the commons, and it belongs to everyone equally and jointly. In the biblical system, private property does not even exist because God owns the land and everything in it...The blessing of mastery over the earth calls us to exercise compassion and wisdom in our relationship with nature so that the creation will keep on creating for future generations. We use nature every day in everything we do; nature provides our food, shelter, clothing, energy, electricity, coal, gas. "Mastering" nature involves determining how much land to us, which animals should be designated for human use, how to manage the development of civilization, and what should remain untouched.” For a more detailed analysis of this topic by Rabbi Bernstein, see this article:

[The Bible Does Not Validate Endless Exploitation and Domination of the Environment](#)[Tikkun](#)

Free Will.... means the possibility of rebellion or failure as well

The Torah posits that humanity has free will, and it is that very free will that makes us human and makes us capable of good. Yet the first human beings are portrayed as using this free will to choose to disobey God’s first request: not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. But as we know, telling a child “don’t touch that hot “stove” is likely to lead the child to do just that. Just telling someone to “be good’ is often insufficient: the more we exhort people to “be good,” the more likely they might do the opposite. It is the essence of being human to have free will. The Babylonian Talmud (Sukkah 52a) puts it this way: "Everything is determined by heaven, except the fear of heaven," meaning, everything in a person's life is predetermined by God—except that person's choice to be either righteous or wicked, which is left to their free will.

The Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* imagines that half of the angels argued with God NOT to create humanity, because they knew of this tragic flaw, while the other half argued to create humans, because they knew humanity would also do loving deeds. God ultimately says “Enough!”...and the great experiment begins....

As Rabbi Mel Gottlieb teaches: “We might wonder what was wrong with eating from the Tree of Knowledge in the first place. Our Sages suggest that there was nothing inherently wrong in eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the seeking of knowledge is honorable. However, the mistake was eating from the Tree before the Sabbath, before living through a spiritually inspirational experience that would make the search for knowledge a search in enhancing the glory of G-d. Thus, G-d wanted Adam to wait before eating from the tree. Our Sages suggest that the difference in Adam's consciousness after he ate from the Tree is that his bodily consciousness, the desire to bring pleasure to the body, transformed the state of truth from absolutes to subjective pursuit of pleasure. Thus, it was important for him to retain the inspirational image of the Sabbath to ward off pursuits of pleasure that did not lead to the enhancement of the Glory of G-d.”

“Oh, the Farmer and the Cowhand Should be Friends”

The Torah suggests that jealousy and conflict have been part of human history since the beginning. One cannot help but notice that the professions and lifestyles of Cain and Abel are diametrically opposed: While Abel is a shepherd with a nomadic wandering livelihood, Cain is a farmer who tills the soil, with all the “settled-ness” of this agrarian lifestyle. The clash between these two livelihoods is one of the oldest conflicts on earth, appearing, as the story suggests, in the very first generation forced to live outside the Garden of Eden and apply the toil of their hands to their own survival. The tension between the settled farmer and the solitary herdsman forms the core of the narrative. Adding in sibling rivalry sets the stage for Cain’s act of aggression. Cain’s offering comes from the soil; while Abel brings the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. God, reviewing the offerings, accepts Abel’s and ignores Cain’s. Did God favor meat? Or is this a foreshadowing of later choices of the younger or weaker brother over the older and more dominant one (Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his brothers)? We shall see, and we shall discuss.

Here again, free will plays a role. God’s tells Cain:

“Why are you so angry? Why your fallen face?
Would you not do well to lift it?
Would you not do well to lift it?
For if you do not do well—
sin is a demon at the door;
you of the one it craves,
and yet you can govern it.” Genesis 4:6-7

Thoughts on *Parshat Noach* (For more, please come to services on Shabbat, October 9).

In Parshat Noach, God watches humans descend into destructive and corruptive behaviors – even the earth itself “becomes corrupt before God” (Bereshit 6:11). God decides to “put an end to all flesh” (6:13). God says about humans and beasts alike: “I regret that I created them” (6:7).

Imagine the disappointment, the anger – God has experienced powerlessness – powerlessness over our human behaviors and choices. And when God confronted God’s own powerlessness, God destroyed everything. God sent the flood, destroying all of humanity and all the beasts, except for one family and two animals of almost every type.

But then something changes. After the waters recede and the remaining people and beasts emerge from the ark, after Noah makes that first sacrifice to God and God smells that “pleasing odor,” God says: “Never again will I ever destroy every living being, as I have done” (8:21). God makes a promise, a Covenant, not to

destroy all life ever again. Why? Because God sees the impact of God's actions – the destruction and devastation – and regrets those actions. Then God takes responsibility for future actions with this Covenant. Rather than expecting perfection as in the Garden of Eden tale, God comes to accept that humans are “only human.” In other words, God does t'shuvah!

Gen. 6:9 states: “Noah was a righteous man in his generation; Noah walked with God.” Later commentators pointed out how ambiguous this phrase is. Was Noah only righteous in comparison to others in the time in which he lived, or in comparison to others throughout history? And which is better? It is easier to be “righteous” when everyone around you is wicked, or is it harder?

So there was Noah, living a simple life when God singled him out to build an ark, to save animals of every kind, and to repopulate the earth after the Flood receded. Thus, Noah is a hero for carrying out God's command and thereby ensuring the survival of life on earth. But what happened to Noah after this moment of greatness? When the waters recede and the animals disembark, he builds an altar to God. Another moment of greatness. However, Noah's next act was to plant a vineyard. And no sooner had the wine fermented, then Noah got drunk and was discovered drunk, lying naked in his tent by two of his sons. Our hero is tarnished!

Many people are uncomfortable reading this passage, joke about it, or try to ignore or downplay it. But the rabbis do not. They fault Noah for turning to alcohol instead of rebuilding the world. We can't miss this hint. Was Noah the first Jewish alcoholic?

By including this episode, the Torah teaches us that even heroes have failings. Noah may have been an alcoholic, but he was also a hero. The Jewish community has learned to stop ignoring addiction and alcoholism, and to instead reach out and help addicts to achieve a state of healing - shalom. If we recognize the fact that someone is an alcoholic and offer assistance, we help that person to achieve *shleimut*, "wholeness." Noah was imperfect, yet Jewish tradition upholds him as a hero. Perhaps we, too, can rise above our own failings to do great things.

In the end, the character in the story who truly evolves or learns is...God. God realizes that in order for humanity to progress, the next step in the “Great Experiment” must be to have rules, laws and norms, and to choose a few righteous people and families to become teachers and role models.

Next stop, Avraham and Sarai in Ur.

Shalom, See you in shul!

Rabbi Moshe

Everything I need to know about life, I learned from Noah's Ark...



- 1** Don't miss the boat.
- 2** Remember that we are all in the same boat.
- 3** Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.
- 4** Stay fit. When you're 600 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big.
- 5** Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.
- 6** Build your future on high ground.
- 7** For safety sake, travel in pairs.
- 8** Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.
- 9** When you're stressed, float a while.
- 10** Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals.
- 11** No matter the storm, when you are with God, there's always a rainbow waiting..