



Evaluating Noah's Righteousness: Static or Dynamic?

Rabbi Dara Frimmer – Shabbat Sermon 5779/10.12.18

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. (Genesis 6:9)

On the movie-review website, Rotten Tomatoes, the 2014 blockbuster movie *Noah*, featuring Russell Crowe, was awarded 76% on the Tomatometer. Critics applauded its musical score, expansive imagery and masterful resurrection of ancient themes cast in modern light.

Meanwhile, audience reviews amounted to a measly 41% and garnered such descriptors as the movie being an 'overblown epic' and 'grandiose film-making'.

Interestingly, rabbinic commentary on Parashat Noach is not so far off in "posting" their own mixed reviews. Understandably, the rabbinic focus was less on the scope of production and more on the protagonist: the flawless, albeit limited and perhaps fanatical hero after whom this week's Torah portion is named.

The rabbis *were* thankful that Noah was righteous in the midst of corruption and deceit. They lauded his efforts to schlep on the animals 2 by 2. To endure close to a year sealed up in the ark until dry land appeared. To care for animals with compassion. And, to worship God with sacrifice and gratitude upon egress.

But the rabbis are also quick to judge: *Was* he that great? Why did he not try to save others before boarding the boat? Look at Abraham who chose to argue with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah!

Rashi, an 11th century Torah commentator, lays out the two sides of the Noah debate: *There are those among the sages who view Noah positively. And, certainly, had he been living in a generation of just individuals, he would have been more just. And, yet, others view him negatively. Had he been living in the generation of Abraham, he would have been considered worthless.*

One approach speaks to context and the power of community; the other, to a belief that a person contains a fixed amount of righteousness that s/he is able or willing to practice regardless of time and place.

To the positive: Noah was good, and he might have been even better had he felt the positive influence of friends, family and neighbors. Many of us know this to be true -- when we surround ourselves with good and righteous people, we get better.

This is why we belong to Temple. This is why we pay for gym memberships. This is why we like book groups. Community creates accountability. Simply put, we are better when we are together.

This rabbinic approach also identifies a dynamic quality or characteristic within Noah, and likely, within all human beings. It says that we CAN grow and change. We are not fixed entities. Our capacity for righteousness is not preset or predetermined.

On the other hand, there are those who doubt Noah's capacity to learn and grow and lead, even when surrounded by great leaders like Abraham. Even if Noah had lived next door to Abraham...oy! The comparison would be brutal. Noah's righteousness would be deemed worthless. *Tamim hayah b'dorotav* – blameless in his generation, sure, but *tamim* also means simple and impotent - like the *Tam* from Passover when we recount the 3rd of 4 Children.

And, there's truth to this claim: If we look closer at the Torah we see there's no record of his efforts to engage the community in *teshuvah*. Even Jonah who ran away on a boat, still finds his way back to Ninevah to help the community avert God's decree. Noah does no harm, but he also does no good. *Consequently, the value of his righteousness depreciates by the time of Abraham and there is no opportunity to rebuild its worth.*

So, which feels true to you: to be born with a fixed amount of righteousness and the capacity to express it, or, to have potential without limit?

Noah was a righteous man. It says so in my opening quote from Genesis. Yet, our tradition sits uneasily with this simple reading of the text. Perhaps, it is because when we pull back from our focus on this one line, and the debate that ensues, or from the charming image of animals marching, slithering or hopping onto the ark we see the broader picture of destruction, an absence of Divine mercy, unnecessary cruelty, and fanaticism. Perhaps it is not just this one line, but the entire portion that gives us pause and make us simultaneously repelled and drawn to examine it even more carefully.

Richard Brody, in reviewing the movie for The New Yorker in 2014, notes that Director Darren Aronofsky was obsessed with this story beginning at age 13, and never grew out of his intense, formative relationship with this origin myth. It's understandable. As Brody writes, "The story of Noah is, first of all, a near-apocalypse in which God kills off almost everybody, and the terrifying

scale of divine wrath, along with the awesome burden of the few remaining people who confront it, must have had a shattering effect on the young Aronofsky.”¹

“The awesome burden of the few remaining people who confront it...” It couldn’t have been easy for Noah, though, we’d never know it from the simple reading of the text. God said, “Build the boat, the flood’s a-comin’...” and Noah agreed. We have no backstory. No late-night conversations caught on tape. At least with Abraham we have a midrash about his childhood - the young protege who smashed his father’s idols.

We know nothing about Noah. We don’t have a sense of his marriage. His wife doesn’t even have a name - she’s simply referred to as *eshet-Noach*, the wife of Noah. We rely on midrash to identify her as Na’amah. We don’t know what it was like to parent young children in a corrupt world, to provide for his family...we don’t even know when his community slid into evil and exploitation. Did he watch it slowly disintegrate day by day, or, was this the only reality he knew?

Pirke Avot teaches us that, “*In a place where there are no righteous people, you STRUGGLE to be a righteous person.*” (Pirke Avot 2:5) Note the language: You struggle. It takes effort to be righteous when no one else seems interested. When it feels too intimidating to speak out. When the easier path is to blend in with the masses.

If you thought last week’s news cycle was hard, now we have to make space for this week’s lead story: “A landmark report from the United Nations’ scientific panel on climate change paints a far more dire picture of the immediate consequences of climate change than previously thought and says that avoiding the damage requires transforming the world economy at a speed and scale that has ‘no documented historic precedent.’”²

It’s an eerie week in the Jewish calendar to receive predictions of global devastation in the secular press: food shortages, wildfires, inundated coastlines and intensified droughts and poverty.

And still, all this we know. All this we’ve heard before. But right in front of us is the easier path - avoid, defer, demur, and, at times, deny. We wouldn’t be alone. So many people struggle to understand the impact of climate change and what individuals can do, let alone what corporations and countries must change in order to make a difference.

In a place where there are no righteous people, YOU struggle to be a righteous person. YOU. Frankly, it doesn’t matter what other people do. You are expected to act differently. To aspire to be something more, even if there are no role models and no obvious reward. Even when you are not sure you are ready.

Nachshon, the hero of midrash who walked into the Red Sea until the waters parted, could have only taken so many classes on the likelihood of Divine Intervention at the Shores of a Sea before

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/darren-aronofskys-bible-studies>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-climate-report-2040.html?module=inline>

realizing it was now or never. Was he *inherently* brave? Was it easier for him to walk into the water than for others who, perhaps, were limited by their fixed capacity to take risks? Or, was Nachshon strengthened and emboldened by his unique context and the community that surrounded him?

In a place where there are no righteous people, you struggle to be a RIGHTEOUS PERSON.

Like most children, I remember trying to win arguments with my mother by telling her what the other kids in school were allowed to do. They watched TV during the week. They ate Doritos. They cursed, played spin the bottle and rode bikes without a helmet.

It didn't matter. She said the same thing you might have told your own kids, "This is how we do things in our home." On our terms.

While I thought the "lesson" to be learned was about obedience or adherence to family rules, in the long run, it may have also been a lesson in how to endure. How to persevere. How to reach for righteousness out of the muck and mire of everyday life. How to stand up even if everyone else remains seated. How to be confident and strong. How not to wither in the face of mockery or peer pressure. How not to despair. And how to bear the grief of loneliness when you choose to stand apart.

In addition to obedience, these, too, are valuable lessons. And, I wonder, when in our adult lives do we learn (or relearn) these lessons? When do we make time for our "endurance, strength and power training" (to borrow a term from Orangetheory Fitness) so we have what it takes, in the moment, to stand alone -- to pull away from the masses and to endure the feelings of fear and yearning?

This week, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, announced her resignation. Pundits on the left said she was *better than most actors in the administration*, maybe even the best of the bunch. It's hard not to hear the rabbinic critique of Noah in these backhanded compliments. He, too, was the best of the bunch, which isn't saying much in a generation that practiced illicit sex and idolatry as the national pastime.

Two weeks ago, as U.S. Senators looked to be voting along party lines in favor of confirming Judge Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court, Senator Jeff Flake set himself apart by asking for a delay so that the FBI could further investigate the allegations of sexual assault. Many of us held our breath, wondering if this could be the start of a new conversation - a bipartisan effort in support of Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony and others who had begun to come forward with their stories. As Sen. Flake indicated, this process was ripping our country apart, and a new path was necessary if we hoped to move forward together.

And in the week leading up to the vote, there were those who debated: Was he truly righteous, or, was it the *appearance of righteousness* only when compared to others in his generation - to his peers in the Senate?

Just like our ancestors' close analysis of Noah, we've spent hours examining the actions of our leaders. We try to decide if they are dynamic in their practice of righteousness, if they are able to give more, or, if their behavior is but a momentary flash of righteousness that appears luminous given a corrupt and deceitful system.

Drawing on the wisdom of our tradition, I have to say, I'm not sure debate about the depth and value of anyone's righteousness advances conversation and responsiveness to world crises. You know them well: climate change, a pervasive culture of sexual harassment and violence against women, ongoing discrimination against LGBTQIA individuals and families, the denigration of immigrants and refugee/asylum seekers...and, the list goes on -

On this Shabbat of Parashat Noach, we need to refocus the Story of Noah on the struggle each one of us encounters as we reach for righteousness, and not waste time on the question of whether we started out inherently virtuous. On this Shabbat, let us look to the possibility of newfound strength and capacity that can be discovered in community, rather than engage in the comparison and competition of who reaches higher.

Questions that can guide us refocus and reframe include 'how do each of us maintain the struggle to reach for righteousness when the easier path lies before us?' And, 'how do we bear the burden of setting ourselves apart when it triggers fear and loneliness?'

And once we begin to think about what will inspire each one of us to overcome those obstacles and to reach for righteousness, then let us ask: What will help our elected leaders to reach for righteousness alongside of us, and not take the easier, more predictable, politically safe path?

What is true for Noah, is true for each one of us. This is hard work and our desire to reach for what is hard means we need a fierce and enduring commitment to remain uncertain and uncomfortable. That commitment is best held in community.

Bryan Stevenson, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, often reminds people that the pathways to justice, the pathways to doing the hard, hard work of building a more just and equitable world, require getting uncomfortable, and doing what is inconvenient.

"There is no way to change the world if we aren't willing to confront the pain and the brokenness of human beings, and the injustices that have been inflicted on so many. We have to get out of our comfort zones and take a risk to move beyond what is safe for us."³

That's the work no one wants to do, but it's the work that's required if we hope to see the system change "at a speed and scale that has no documented historic precedent."

³ Summary of Bryan Stevenson's talk shared by Rabbi Felicia Sol in the weekly B'nai Jeshurun email on 10.12.18

Like our ancestors, we are trying to understand the struggle to be righteous and fair and good and just in an age when it is easier to be lazy, unengaged or to simply be counted as one of the masses. There's almost an irony here, for, in so many ways, being part of the masses allows you NOT to be counted. Not to be seen. Not to be held accountable.

We hope Temple Isaiah is different. Here you are held and cherished and welcomed but not released from responsibility. Here you learn the skills to act together. Here you learn how to reach for righteousness alongside of others.

Tonight, we reach for righteousness together as we learn about the propositions on the November ballot thanks to the League of Women Voters and allow ourselves to become more informed voters.

Perhaps tonight is the night you decide to hold a ballot party of your own before Election Day, helping to build knowledge, confidence and capacity through community.

Tonight, we reach for righteousness as we consider again the pathways to justice we might pursue this fall: support for SOVA and PATH, for mentoring students at University High School, for strategizing next steps to stand by immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. For joining the Green Team, on November 2nd, following Shabbat services, when Jessica Dabney and Jim Winett discuss their learnings from Al Gore's climate change conference.

*"At a time in our world, and particularly in our country, when there is so much despair and outrage, and the values and institutions of our democracy that we hold dear seem so much under assault, there are ways to make positive change in the world."*⁴

It begins with a story of struggle – to reach for righteousness even when the preferred path is corruption and crime.

It begins with a belief in our capacity to grow and change and not to surrender our stewardship to zero-sum rationale.

And, most importantly, as Rashi indicated in the 11th century, positive change bets on the power of community to hold us accountable and lift us even higher.

Here at Temple Isaiah, may this be the story we tell on this Shabbat, and on every Shabbat.

Shabbat Shalom.

⁴ Rabbi Felicia Sol