

Friday Night Shabbat Sermon – June 14, 2024

Rabbi Dara Frimmer

## What We Learn From Noah

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One of the interesting outcomes of scheduling a sabbatical two years in advance is that you never know what will happen right before you leave. From November 1st to February 1st of this past year, I was away from Isaiah.

I did not check my email. I did not make phone calls related to work. I did not give a sermon or write an article.

All of which allowed me space and permission to be in the moment - to feel what I was feeling without a rush to contain or compartmentalize, as clergy so often need to do.

I would read or watch or listen to a report from Israel and I could sit and notice - without judgment - what was happening inside me.

And that is what I did on May 22, on the walk home from Overland Elementary School, after dropping off my kids and checking my phone for the news while waiting for the light to change at the intersection.

And it was revelatory and disturbing to see what feelings emerged.

May 22 was the day the Hostages and Missing Families Forum released footage showing Hamas' violent abduction of five female soldiers from the Nahal Oz army base.

I looked at these girls and immediately felt a wave of protection, love, and loyalty. And then came my first noticeable thought: *These could have been my daughters.*

And in that moment, as the devastation and despair began to overwhelm me...I thought about Noah.

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The biblical story of Noah, as many of you know, introduces a world filled with such incredible violence (in Hebrew, the word they use is Hamas, albeit a different spelling and meaning than the terrorist group) that God decides to wipe out humanity save for Noah and his family.

And the rabbis, over many generations, wondered “what could have been so bad, that God could not witness another day of God’s people?”

The answer seems to be rooted in the **scope** - the rabbis comment it was linked to “the totality of evil in which the world had engulfed itself” – and, also, the **specifics**. According to the

midrash, the evil was defined by rape, theft, and “the arrogant disregard for the sanctity and inviolability of human life.” (JPS commentary)

In other words, the people had reached such a level of depravity and barbarism, and it was so widespread, that the only response was to start over. To try again. This time with one family whose patriarch was known to be the most righteous man in his generation - *which, as we’ve often commented, is not the highest praise when your generation is about to be wiped out.*

And, so the story progresses, God deems humanity irredeemable and wipes out the evil with a flood, rebuilding humanity from a single family led by Noah.

Of note: We are officially SIX chapters into the Torah, and we now have TWO failed experiments in humanity - the Garden of Eden and the Flood - only 10 generations apart - with God choosing *expulsion and then eradication* to clean up the mess.

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So, here is the revelatory and disturbing moment at the traffic light...and I want to prepare you, *this does not make me look good.* But, I’m going to tell you anyway.

I looked at the faces of the young women on the Times of Israel website and I thought to myself, “I get it.”

I get why God wanted to start over.

I get how the story of Noah still resonates - and it’s not because of the cute animals hopping and slithering onto the ark, two by two.

I get the desire to label pure evil, and to execute swift and resolute punishment.

I get that while it will be devastating to witness that much destruction - the promise at the end of it all is **that there will be peace**. That there will be a taste of perfection like we had in the Garden of Eden. That we can **finally exhale** the existential fear and **breathe in** new possibilities for what life could be:

That we will never again have to see our daughters bound and held captive.

That we will stop running scenarios through our heads of who will hide us.

And I walked with that feeling back home - embarrassed and angry and heartbroken. At least, I surmised, I was in good company. After all, no story in the Torah was placed there by accident. No story is preserved from one generation to the next without the next generation continuing to find resonance and relevance in its message.

And rather than numb the pain, I sat with it, for quite some time. I got used to its dimensions. I didn’t blog. I didn’t post. I didn’t even call a friend. I just sat with the feelings:

The desperation to set things right.

The rush of adrenaline at the thought that there might be a way to keep future generations safe.

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And then, in the way that perhaps only rabbi-brains work, I thought about Yom Kippur and our tradition of seeking forgiveness and practicing atonement **every year**. *In other words, there is a different way to deal with sin and transgression.*

And I reflected on the daily prayer practice of Tachanun that I have not done in years, which asks God for forgiveness **every day**. Said differently: *Why wait a year when today requires attunement and attention?*

And the tradition of Yom Kippur Katan - a small or tiny Yom Kippur that we celebrate **each month** on the day before the new moon; and the **evening ritual** of reciting the Bedtime Shema which includes paragraphs asking for, and granting forgiveness, for protection and, also, for the possibility *"to awaken to the light of a new day"*.

**And I realized, none of these prayerful moments include references to Noah or the flood.**

None of them ask for God's sweeping judgment to wipe out the wicked...instead, they focus on the individual's **capacity** and **responsibility** to live in a world of brokenness and injury and offense. To seek teshuvah. To believe that change is possible: not just from one year to the next, but from one day to the next.

And here is the radical pivot - the promise of change is anchored to humanity, not to God. The very same humans that failed the test of the Garden and were wiped away in the Flood are now the guarantors.

Over time, our tradition offers another way to confront evil and the possibility of living in a world of transgression: **We believe that humans, while fallible and at times barbaric, are not without the capacity to change and grow.** If one takes the proper steps towards acknowledgment, acceptance of responsibility, atonement and apology...it is possible to begin a New Year, a New Month, or even a New Day, with a clean slate.

**No flood needed.**

We have replaced a history and theology of Divine *expulsion and eradication* with one of human atonement. If we want to start over, we're going to have to do it the hard, human way.

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When my kids were in preschool at Isaiah, one of their brilliant teachers trained them on the practice of apologizing.

You grabbed a toy, "I'm sorry!"

You hit a friend, "I'm sorry!"

They ALSO taught them how to *accept* an apology, which feels as important, if not more so, and the chosen phrase was: "That's okay!"

(Ideally said with as chipper a voice as possible.)

I'm sorry.

That's okay!

The limits of this pedagogy became clear when I overheard the twins fighting at home one day and one of them smacked the other but then quickly remembered the script and said with great gravitas, but also enthusiasm: "I'm sorry. That's okay!"

Clearly determining in her mind that taking on BOTH parts of the interchange would be a much simpler and more effective way to expedite forgiveness.

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The story of the flood may have been written with a similar urgency to name the problem and the solution as quickly as possible.

The earth was corrupt.

God saw how bad it was;

and God told Noah: "I'm destroying the world because it's so bad."

That's all we get.

The rest is architecture, animals, and a rainbow.

Three verses express clarity, certainty and swift action that is ultimately successful in reaching its goal: *Bad is out. Good is in.*

The flood ends and Noah leaves the ark with his family.

He plants a beautiful vineyard.

**But then he gets drunk and exposes himself.** And a generational rift arises between Noah and his sons, and he curses his son Ham for seeing him in his nakedness.

And soon after, as the world repopulates, God's people unite to build a tower to reach the Heavens and establish themselves in notoriety. In response, God garbles their language and disperses them across the Earth, thus providing us with an origin story for division and misunderstanding.

And then we're onto Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Esau...and all of their lovely but dysfunctional families.

**All of which is to say: The flood works...until it doesn't.**

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In our retelling of Noah and the ark, we tend to focus on the first part right up through the rainbow, but not the second which shows how quickly a purified world can return to debased action and hate.

*But, what if the second part is actually more important than the first?*

The second part tells us: Hold on, that may have been the end of a chapter, but this story's not over yet.

The second part tells us, *if we're willing to listen*: **The clean slate is only temporary.**

If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping for a different outcome, I would suggest there's only so many times we can tell ourselves a story that pretends to make everything okay by wiping the slate clean, only to have it return to chaos, **before we have to start telling a different story.** Which is essentially what the rest of the Torah does.

And while we are not meant to anthropomorphize God, perhaps we can see an evolution in God's thinking by the time we reach the book of Exodus.

**"Here is a Torah," says God, "As you might remember, I'm not sending another flood...but... we still have a problem with humans making poor choices."** (Also, says God, I'm introducing you to euphemism and sarcasm. Keep up.)

And then God continues: **"The flood didn't work but here's something YOU can do.**

This time, I'm giving you a code of ethics and ritual practices that will help you reach towards righteousness even as the world spins towards evil. I'm not wiping the slate clean.

**You're going to have to figure out how to live with one another.**

This time, I'm giving you the **Holiness Code** so that you might learn to make choices that push back against the very real and predictable human desires to seek revenge, to tear down and destroy.

This time, I'm hoping you'll see that **Yom Kippur** is not just about fasting. It's about choosing, with intention, to create moments of forgiveness and renewal. Moments that can lead to both individual and societal transformation. A reminder that change is possible.

And, nu, why not try it every day of the year, not just on the 10th of Tishrei?"

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It's not every day that we try to bring in the High Holy Days, as we are doing tonight, but these days are far from ordinary. And perhaps this IS the right moment to turn our Friday night into a space to ask our most important questions.

Often, since October 7, we have asked ourselves: When is this going to end? What's it going to take to make it end? How are we supposed to live in the midst of such violent antisemitism and radical polarization?

Many of you have asked me, "How do we prepare our kids to grow up in a world that hates them?" What do we tell them? How do we protect them?

**According to our Torah and tradition, this is what we say:**

The journey is long. And the path is not direct. And it would be much faster and easier to phone in a flood - at least so we could see a clean slate before we die - but, it turns out, that's not the Jewish way.

We are the inheritors of the **Holiness Code**. We have agency and capacity to change and we will not hide from a world of evil and chaos. We will find a way to build something holy within it.

Now, it's up to us.

We want our children to see a model for how we live IN the world, not how we destroy it.

*And so we will be resourceful* - if we need to build in the midst of destruction, then we will start with the remnants and rubble.

We will let the next generation see us struggle to make sense of it all and not give up, even when the work feels endless and the rewards are deferred or delayed.

*We will be resilient.* If we fail the first time, we will regroup and try again. And we will keep our eyes on the horizon in front of us: a vision of how the world could be.

“Judaism is not naive or Pollyannaish about who and what we are; it knows how often we go astray, embracing the expedient and the self-serving instead of the right and the good, choosing hate or indifference over love. The Jewish tradition is not optimistic about human nature but it is stubbornly, insistently *possibilistic*. **Its deeply held conviction is not that we will choose the good but that we *can* do so.**” (Rabbi Shai Held, Judaism is About Love)

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The pathway forward is not about expulsion, excommunication, or eradication.

It’s about living together and finding a particular kind of holiness in co-existence.

A holiness that is human-centered and sustainable,

And also flawed and fragile.

*We cannot be certain that Jewish life will always be protected - but we can know for certain that we are committed to living, creating and ensuring that Jewish life continues, guided by the **Holiness Code...***

AND that we can create and recreate ourselves and our practices to meet the moment - and when the moment changes, we’ll do it again.

*We cannot be certain that every good action will return immediate reward - but we can nurture our faith in the long game, and in the collective effort, to move ourselves and our world towards goodness and blessing. If not for us, then for the next generation.*

*We can be certain that we have a code to live by, believing, with fierce hope, and faith anchored in tradition, that we are not stuck or fixed or pre-determined. That there is movement, even when we feel the most entrenched. And that in moments of uncertainty, we can reach for one another, to draw in the strength needed that we might wake tomorrow *to the light of a new day...just the way our ancestors have taught us to do.* Not just on one day of the year, but on each and every day.*

Let us begin together, tonight.

Shabbat Shalom.