

Parashat Noah: Humanity's Depravity and Potential

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1. Noah After the Flood

Bereishit 9:1 and 9:7	
וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ וְאֶת-בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ... וְאַתֶּם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ שִׂרְצוּ בָאָרֶץ וּרְבוּ-בָהּ:	God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth"...[God said to Noah again] "Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it."
Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 34:6	
כָּךְ נֹחַ, צָא מִן הַתֵּבָה, וְלֹא קִבֵּל עָלָיו לְצֵאתָ, אָמַר אֵצֶא וְאֶהְיֶה פֶּרֶה וְרֵבָה לְמֵאֲרָה, עַד שֶׁנִּשְׁבַּע לוֹ הַמֶּקוֹם שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְבִיא מַבּוּל לְעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יִשְׁעִיָּה נד, ט): כִּי מִי נֹחַ זֹאת לִי אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעַבְרֵי מִי נֹחַ.	[God told Noah:] "Go out of the ark," but he did not accept upon himself [the command] to go out. He said: 'Shall I go out [and resume normal life,] and procreate, [only to bring my children] into a curse?' [He maintained this attitude] until the Omnipresent swore to him that He will never again bring a flood, as it is stated: "For, this is for Me like the waters of Noah; as I took an oath that the waters of Noah would no longer pass [over the earth]" (Isaiah 54:9).
Judy Klitsner, <i>Subversive Sequels in the Bible</i> , 8	
...God twice exhorts Noah to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 9:1,7), though this command was given only once to humanity's first couple. God's insistence points to Noah's unspoken hesitation. Perhaps the trauma of witnessing destruction has led to deep reservations about beginning life anew...the act of procreation, with the physical pleasure and optimism for the future it represents, seems impossible.	
Bereishit 9:20-22	
וַיִּחַל נֹחַ אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטַּע כֶּרֶם: וַיִּשְׁתַּי מִן-הַיַּיִן וַיִּשְׁכָּר וַיִּתְגַּל בְּתוֹךְ אֶהְלָה: וַיֵּרָא חָם אָבִי כְנָעַן אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וַיַּגֵּד לְשְׁנֵי-אֶחָיו בַּחוּץ:	Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside.
Judy Klitsner, <i>Subversive Sequels in the Bible</i> , 9	
In addition to his unexpected pain, perhaps Noah feels guilt at his own survival, compounded by the knowledge that as God's prophet and confidante, he had held the potential to avert the wholesale suffering. It is possible that in failing to defend his guilty generation, Noah now shares with it a bond of guilt...God had wanted to spare the prophet from the Flood, but in a sense Noah, like all those around him, drowns. It is not God, but Noah, who	

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

extinguishes his own breath of life by inundating his body with liquid. Noah may have been spared initially because of his relative righteousness, but he ultimately meets a fate very similar to the rest of his generation.

2. Jonah After Nineveh

Jonah 3:10	
וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדֶּרֶךְ הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:	God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment that had been planned for them, and did not carry it out.

Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, 10

Noah's story reverses that of Jonah in its approach to destruction. In the Noah narrative, humanity's annihilation was neither negotiable nor avoidable; God and His prophet were united in viewing death as inevitable. The inverted details of the Book of Jonah will lead us away from destruction as a narrative necessity. They will point instead toward a more generous view of humanity adopted by God and by humanity itself.

Jonah 4:3	
וַעֲתָה יְהוָה קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֲהִיטֵב תָּרָה לָךְ:	Please, ETERNAL One, take my life, for I would rather die than live." GOD replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?"

Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, 17

The Book of Jonah questions the inevitability of Noah's end. It asks not only if a failed society can be rehabilitated, but if a failed prophet can be reformed as well. This time God refuses to let the prophet ignore his responsibility to the world, to allow in his own self-destructive feelings, and to die...by striking a more compassionate stance toward the rest of humanity, this time the prophet might find forgiveness within himself as well, thereby avoiding the tragic fate of Noah.

3. Humanity's Depravity and Potential

Michael L. Morgan, <i>Interim Judaism: Jewish Thought in a Century of Crisis</i> , 83-84
Human self-reliance has waxed and waned according to the fluctuations in our confidence in God and our skepticism about human capabilities...What remains of liberal ideals and aspirations, our commitments to justice, dignity, and freedom from oppression and domination, has been seriously eroded by our recognition of the atrocities that humankind is fully capable of performing.

Ian Buruma, <i>Stay Alive: Berlin, 1939-1945</i> , 342
The memorial has had its critics. One famous German novelist called it the "monumentalization of shame," whereupon one of his opponents asked whether the genocide had not been monumental enough. Others felt that a gesture of mourning the victims was out of place in the capital of their killers. People worried that the steles would be desecrated with antisemitic slogans (they were not). I know some visitors to Berlin who find the many marks of murderous history dispiriting, even morbid. But I think the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is a sign of Berlin's special importance. Looking history in the face without flinching is an essential condition for redemption. This has to be done without wallowing in guilt, which can become a sign of unearned and sickly pride. I believe that Berlin has succeeded. The city itself is a monument, not only to man's blackest depravity, but to its capacity to be reborn and live again.