



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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Bereishit > Noah > 21st Century Flood

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ABSTRACT

The story of the Great Flood in this week’s Torah reading is relevant today more than ever. Look around. People everywhere feel submerged in a flood of anxiety and the deluge shows no sign of abating.

We are anxious about our finances, our safety, our future, our country, our families, our children. And though we live in the Information Age, the latest technology only floods us with choices, but provides few solutions.

How can we prevent these raging waters from overwhelming us? How can we find shelter from the storm? How can we build an ark of refuge for the 21st century flood?

At this uncertain and stressful time, we read the Torah story of Noah’s ark with its many provocative questions and equally provocative answers for today. Among them:

- Why did God choose water – the symbol of life, cleansing, blessings and knowledge – as the means of destruction? Why not fire?
- What is so harmful about knowledge without integration?
- What secret did Maimonides know that Rousseau and Russell could not grasp?
- The rain did not need to turn into a flood; it could have been a rain that waters the fields. But no one listened. Are we listening today?
- How can we find an ark of refuge from the modern-day flood of anxiety?
- Once fortified by Torah’s guidance, how can we build a better world?

TO BUILD AN ARK OF REFUGE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY FLOOD

1. Noah, the Greatest Financier

Q: Who was the greatest financier in the Bible?

A: Noah – he was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation.

How can we be like Noah?

That is our subject today – how can we build an ark of refuge amid a flood of financial anxiety that we are experiencing today?

And we are anxious not just about our finances. We are anxious about so many other things – our safety, our future, our country, our families, our children.

But, at this uncertain and stressful time, we read the Torah story of Noah’s ark with its many lessons for today.

For example: When you’re stressed, float a while.

All kidding aside, let us examine the story of Noah and mine it for the counsel it offers us.

2. Why By Water? Why Not By Fire?

As the story begins we learn that the world has become utterly corrupt, and God – saddened by the degradation of the human race – has decided to destroy it. Only Noah and his family are to be saved from the great flood that will obliterate all. To that end, Noah is told to build an ark of refuge for himself, his family and selected creatures.

The first question that occurs to us is: Why by water – why not by fire? Why did God choose water – the symbol of life, cleansing, blessings and knowledge – as the means of destruction? Fire – which later consumed

the twin sin-cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – would seem so much more appropriate.

But the flood was not so much a punishment as it was a *consequence*. In the Torah, reward and punishment are really cause and effect, like bruising yourself when you fall. The flood was a natural and inevitable result of many years of corruption. When people are corrupt and self-indulgent, they inevitably end up destroying themselves.

This is because when you harm another person you are also harming yourself, since you and the person you harmed are part of one universe under one God.

The person who loves God also loves whom God loves, and God loves His children. The flood was the inescapable result of people hating and killing each other.

Water was the way the world was purified from its own *self*-destruction. Like a *mikveh*, the ritual pool which contains 40 measures of water, the flood raged for 40 days and renewed the earth.

If the people hated and harmed each other out of ignorance of their common bond, then water is a metaphor for the opposite of *ignorance* – for *knowledge*. Not just plain knowledge but divine knowledge. As Isaiah prophesied, “They will not hurt or destroy... for the world will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the seabed.”¹

Only when water or knowledge is divine does it prevent hurt and destruction. When it is just ordinary water or knowledge, it can become a flood or a curse lacking focus and integration.

¹ Isaiah 11:9. Contrast the language with the Genesis 6:13 description of the world’s corruption prior to the flood: “The world filled with crime.”

3. Knowledge Without Integration

What is so harmful about knowledge without integration?

It leads to a fragmented and compartmentalized world:

- We see our behavior as separate from our own thoughts and principles, and we act without integrity.
- We see ourselves as separated from one another, and we hurt others, even those we claim to love.
- And, worst of all, we see ourselves as separate from God, and we think nobody is watching what we do.

How bad does this human compartmentalization get? The eminent historian, Paul Johnson, in his work *The Intellectuals*, documented the contrast between the professed ideals and actions of key humanist thinkers of the Enlightenment – a period known also as the Age of Reason. Take, for example, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the author of *The Social Contract*. His lofty ideals did not stop him from impregnating his young laundress five times. And then forcing her, on each occasion, to drop the newborns – his children! – on the doorstep of a Paris orphanage (Hopital des Enfants Trouves). This orphanage he himself had written about, noting that two thirds of the babies die there within the first year, most others by age seven, and the few that survive become homeless beggars.²

How could such a degree of disconnect exist?

Bertrand Russell gave this explanation: When asked how he, as a professor of ethics, could behave unethically, Russell said, “I am also a teacher of mathematics but I am not a triangle.”

Like Russell, academics often take pride in their detachment. They say: “I can be completely knowledgeable of a given topic, and it does not affect my behavior.”

² *The Intellectuals* by Paul Johnson, pp. 21-22.

Now, contrast this attitude with the words of Maimonides – the 12th century Jewish philosopher, doctor to the royal family of Egypt, who wrote primarily (surprise, surprise) in Arabic. Maimonides writes³ that a true scholar is recognized by how he walks his talk – “through his actions: in his eating, drinking, intimate relations... in his speech, manner of walking and dress, in the management of his finances, and in his business dealings” – how he orders every aspect of his life in a seamless flow between his knowledge, his principles based on his knowledge, and his actions.

To have knowledge affect you this way requires a certain amount of abrogation of the ego – called *bittul* in Hebrew – or put another way, it requires a total immersion in the pure waters of knowledge. True knowledge is not about the self or the ego, it is about the divine truth that informs knowledge. And this requires a humble recognition that we are a transparent channel for this knowledge – like fish submerged in water who are always connected and aware that their entire sustenance comes from the water.

4. Tree of Knowledge

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge – that is, of the knowledge of good and evil – they began to sense themselves as separate entities from God and their divine mission. They unleashed knowledge upon the world that is divorced from its higher purpose.

Ten generations later in the time of Noah this dichotomy evolved into total corruption, with one person turning on another.

The waters of the flood came to remind the world and purify it with a total immersion. This was reminiscent of the world as it was at the beginning of creation, completely submerged in water, the source of life. This was a foretaste of the world that will one day be “filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the seabed” – a knowledge that transforms the person into a divine vehicle, preventing hurt and destruction.

³ Mishne Torah, Laws of De’ot (Personal Development), Chapter 5:1

And mind you, the flood began as regular rainfall, as a warning and reminder to the people to wake up and correct their ways. First came a taste of what's ahead – an attempt to remind everyone that it was time to act. But when no one paid attention, the rain came. And it became a flood.

The rain did not need to turn into a flood; it could have been a rain that waters the fields.

But no one listened. Are we listening today?

Perhaps we are, but if so, we are listening to the wrong message or the wrong messengers.

5. A Flood of Information

They tell us that we are living in revolutionary times – the so-called Information Age. They tell us that we have never been so powerful, never so free, that we now have the unprecedented ability to access any information anytime, anywhere. But are we feeling freer today? With all the information at our fingertips, are we happier people, more fulfilled, less fearful, making better decisions? Has the Information Revolution informed us or inundated us?

Indeed, the argument can be made that our unprecedented access to information and slew of options has also brought on unparalleled misery. We are drowning in a flood of information – addicted as we are to the constant flow of television or internet news. We spend hours upon hours watching all manner of experts and pundits, or reading internet bloggers who spew forth their opinions (informed or not). This, in itself, is more destructive to our individual and collective nervous systems than we can imagine.

A nation obsessed with watching movies and one that had no better metaphor for the World Trade Center attack than “it looked just like a movie,” has fallen victim to watching our lives played out on the screen...

This flood of information, with its assault on our psyche, is in many ways worse than any physical flood. When you go to sleep after watching the news – bringing you horrors from the world over – how can you sleep peacefully? And when after a fitful sleep, how else can you begin the next morning but full of anxiety? And then, of course, you fall out of bed and start the cycle all over again.

The morning news is where they begin with “Good morning,” and then proceed to tell you why it isn't.

Yet, within the curse lies the cure.

This flood of information alerts us to the dangers of knowledge without focus, to the dangers of information without integration. And it reminds us that we must embrace divine knowledge – knowledge that uplifts and empowers us to be proactive and take control of circumstances. Divine knowledge is not just information that turns us into robotic observers and victims, that demoralizes us and paralyzes us with fear and anxiety.

6. Refuge from the Flood

What can we do to find refuge from the modern-day flood of anxiety?

Like Noah, we must build an ark.

Q: In a stormy sea, who can you trust more – an amateur or a professional?

A: Remember that the Titanic was built by professionals, the ark by an amateur.

Noting that in Hebrew the word for ark – *teivah* – also means “word,” the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov advised:

Build yourself an ark of refuge from the words of Torah. They will protect you from the raging floodwaters – be their personal or financial anx-

ieties, fears for the stability of your home and family, or well-founded concerns for the safety of your community or nation.

At first glance, this advice may seem counter-intuitive. For example, if you are suffering financially, it may be more practical to intensify your efforts to find supplemental income – a new job or new types of investments. When money is lost it seems that the most logical thing to do is to become more aggressive in your pursuit of money, not to escape behind spiritual walls.

7. True Security

But think again. From where do we derive ultimate security? Can a structure rest comfortably on a shifting foundation? Who can feel safe being embraced by a transient lover? Can a child build confidence with absentee parents? Can anyone ever be made to feel secure by something that is fundamentally insecure?

True security can only come from something that is not temporary. Safety and trust can only be built on that which is solid and permanent.

But everything in this material universe is intrinsically impermanent. We are mortals living in an ever-changing and ever-aging world. Everything physical erodes and eventually dies. Everything that has a beginning has an end. Our looks, our youth, our food, our belongings, and yes – our money – all get depleted.

I always found it ironic that those financial vehicles – which are inherently temporal and fraught with risk (as very prospectus legally reminds us) – are called “securities.”

With all material things being so transitory, how can we expect to find security in them? Yet we turn to them again and again. Is it because we have become addicted, or because we don't know of any other alternatives?

The mere fact that in times of financial anxiety most of us would gravitate back to more aggressive money pursuits is the clearest demonstration how addicted we have become to money, and how we feel that it is the only panacea to relieve our anxiety.

However, the rule is that anything that brings you anxiety can never relieve your anxiety. But this is a rule of logic, not of emotions. As much as it may make sense that a “drug” will not solve your problems, the addict returns to the drug again and again. Why? Because our lives are not generally ruled by common sense. Most of our decisions are emotional ones in the first place.

As one drunk said to another: “You drink to drown your problems. Then you find out that problems float...”

8. Simple but Brilliant Advice

And thus comes the simple but brilliant advice of this week’s Torah reading: “Build yourself an ark ... come into the ark together with your family.”

When the floodwaters of financial pressures and other anxieties are raging and threaten to drown you, build a protective “ark” and enter into it with your family. Surround yourself with sacred words, insulate yourself with spiritual values and ideas.

Take time each day, each week, on weekends – designate any time that works – gather your family together, study some Torah, read a spiritual thought together.

This is not escapism. This is being pragmatic and empowering. It is acknowledging that when the storm is raging, when the rain waters are lashing against your windows, and when the winds threaten to rip your house from its foundations, you have the power to create an ark of refuge – a protective womb – that lifts you and your loved ones to an eternal place, which shelters you from the storm.

I am not speaking about just any shelter that avoids danger, but a space that brings permanent comfort. For it connects you to what is immortal. So that even when you “leave the ark” and return to the material world you are somewhat immunized, no longer so vulnerable to the inherent insecurities of everything material.

Build yourself an ark. Enter into it. Feel nurtured.

A simple piece of advice. But one that can change your life forever.

9. Build a Better World

Once we are fortified by Torah’s guidance, we can then confidently build a better world. For a defensive response is not sufficient. Yes, we need to protect ourselves from the flood, but our ultimate goal must be to transform the world into a place where we need not fear a destructive flood.

Just as Noah was commanded after the flood⁴ to leave the ark and build a new world,⁵ so, too, must we.

And here comes another lesson from the story of Noah.

After seeing the earth self-destructing due to human corruption, Noah was terrified of setting foot on dry land and beginning anew. He actually had to be commanded by God to start afresh (“to leave the ark”⁴) and to build a new home to raise his family (“be fruitful and multiply”⁶). Though Adam was previously given this command,⁷ it had to be repeated to Noah after the flood. Because after the human race had abused its contract with God and forfeited its right to exist, the contract had to be renewed.

⁴ Genesis 8:16.

⁵ See Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 30:8: Noah saw a new world.

⁶ 9:1.

⁷ 1:28

10. The Raven and the Dove

This also explains the mysterious episode following the flood. Noah first sent out the raven to check out if the land had dried. He then sent a dove – once, twice, three times – until the dove no longer returned, indicating that it had found a dry resting place.⁸

What does that mean?

According to Kabbalah, the raven is a symbol of *gevurah* – severity, judgment and discipline. The dove represents *chesed* – love, sensitivity and compassion.

Noah first sent the raven because he felt that, after the people had abused God's gifts and corrupted the entire world, the only way to start fresh was with the program of law and order – severity and discipline. Since it is was clear to him that “the inclination of man's heart is toward evil,”⁹ the predominant counter-force has to be aggressive administration of justice and strictly-enforced discipline.

But Noah was wrong. It was not the aggressive raven but the compassionate dove that discovered the dry land. It was the dove that first returned with an olive branch in its beak, and then became the first creature to return to dry land.

In so doing, the dove showed us that, even after the great crimes of the flood generation, there is hope for the human race. Even after destruction, we should not become bitter and hardened. Yes, we are humbled, but we still recognize that the primary driving force in life must be love and compassion. Discipline is necessary, but only as a sub-set of love.

⁸ Genesis 8:7-12.

⁹ Genesis 8:21.

11. Call to Action

So, the next time you face a dilemma, a challenge, the next time you encounter a disappointment – the next time you witness the pettiness, greed and corruption around you and wonder whether we can ever overcome this challenge – know that, like the dove, you will find a dry land to begin building a new, better world. And when you do – do it with love.

Using the guidance of the Torah – which teaches us how to love God and each other – let us leave our anxieties behind, roll up our sleeves and start the hard work of tackling the challenges of today. Let us begin by turning the flood of anxiety into a flood of torrential goodness and kindness. And let us create a world flooded with divine knowledge “as the waters cover the seabed.” Nothing less than a spiritual deluge will do.

That is our life’s mission. Let’s start today.