



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Noach

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October 17, 2015

Noach

Lessons from Procrastination



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

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ABSTRACT

Israel is on our minds and in our hearts. This week of floods and arks comes when a deluge of hatred is trying to drown out the pure and peaceful ark that is Israel.

What do you do when you are inundated by a surge of raging floodwaters? By waves of violent attacks against innocent people? How do you protect yourself?

You build an ark. Both a physical and spiritual one.

But it's not that simple. Building an ark takes time. And yet, that itself teaches us an invaluable lesson.

Why do all the important things in life seem to take forever to accomplish?

Finding love? So complex. Finding purpose and meaning? Impossibly difficult. Building a family? Immensely challenging.

Why can't it be easier? Why can't it take less time?

It took Noah 120 years to build the ark. What does that teach us?

That he was no expert builder, for one. Imagine if you hired him to build your house – it would probably be ready for your great grandkids. Couldn't God find a better contractor?

But perhaps the point is not swift completion but what can be accomplished through the *process* of building. Perhaps the only way to teach the world how to be stormier than the storm, deeper than the flood, is to teach the world how to build an ark.

And perhaps the only way to teach the world how to build an ark is to show them how to build it.

Maybe, just maybe, that's why the most important and essential things in life take time.

And the lesson tells us what we must do today when we are under attack by murderous butchers in the Middle East.

TAKING YOUR TIME: LESSONS FROM PROCRASTINATION

1. Israel Is Our Heart and In Our Hearts

Our hearts and prayers go out to our brothers and sisters in the holy land of Israel, as a ubiquitous and insidious enemy wantonly attacks the "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," innocent people, simply for one reason: Because they are Jewish.

A cloud of fear has descended on our brethren in Israel as everyone everywhere has become a target for brutal violence.

What can we do to help support, strengthen and protect our people?

In addition to the obvious need to crack down, with a zero tolerance attitude, on this reign of terror, and the need for all of us to support Israel more than ever in these trying times -- our holy teachers and sacred sages teach that we also need to fortify and fight the spiritual battle.

Here are some things we all can do:

- Wage a spiritual war against all forces of moral apathy and ignorance. Take a firm and unwavering stand against any atrocity.

- Strengthen the three pillars which hold up the world – both personal and global: Torah, Prayer, and Kind deeds.
- Intensify your commitment to Torah study – study a new text, and designate additional time to your study.
- Say additional prayers and psalms for the safety of people facing danger, especially for the Israeli police and Defense Forces.
- Give additional amounts of charity. Charity has a special energy to counter perilous situations.
- Engage your family and friends in meaningful dialogue. Reach out to your sphere of influence and inspire them with spiritual awareness. Encourage everyone to increase in Torah study and add a new mitzvah – a good deed. The Bible tells us that through Torah study and performance of mitzvahs G-d promises: “You will dwell securely in your land. I will provide peace in the land. You will sleep without fear” (Leviticus 26:5-6)
- Initiate a gathering in your home or office, promoting additional goodness and kindness, especially in this year of Hakhel.
- Jewish men should be encouraged to put on Tefillin each week-day morning. Tefillin has faculties that drive fear into our enemies.
- Women and girls should be encouraged to light Shabbat and Holiday candles, 18 minutes before sundown leading into Shabbat or the Holiday. It is also customary to give some charity before lighting the candles.
- Encourage children to say holy verses and prayers and add in charitable and kind deeds. Children play a particular role in time of crisis. As the verse states, “out of the mouths of babes and sucklings You have established the strength...to destroy an enemy and avenger” (Psalms 8:3).

In addition to the above, we look into our holy Torah, and derive a lesson from Noah’s ark – how to protect ourselves from a surge of raging floodwaters and violent attacks against innocent people. We protect ourselves by building an ark. Both a physical and spiritual one.

And we can also learn a lesson from how Noah built the ark, and the fact that it took him a very long time to build. A lesson which strengthens our resolve and reminds us of our purpose here on earth.

And why people attack us for it.

2. Overtime (Joke)

A man walks by a construction project in downtown. And he sees something quite strange upon the steel beams, cranes and cement mixers. All of the workers have long flowing beards. It looks like a Chassidic convention!

The man asks a passer-by if this is indeed a Chassidic building crew. The local responds:

“No, not all.”

“So why all the beards?”

“Oh, you see, the project has run overtime. When the builders started the project they were all clean-shaven.”

3. Time To Build

‘Tis indeed a long construction project! Truth be told, however, some very famous construction projects have taken a short time to build.

It only took 410 days to build the Empire State Building, and four years to erect the Golden Gate Bridge. The Pentagon took two years to finish, and the Alaska Highway just nine months...¹

¹ <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/19/opinion/la-oe-goldberg-nobuild-20101019>

And yet, we just read in this week's Torah portion about a yacht – more precisely, an ark – that took more than a century to build!

Imagine if you hired a contractor to build you a boat and, 119 years later, the contractor said that it'll be ready in a year.

It took Noah 120 years to build the ark. That's a pretty long time for a relatively small construction project – a boat, not some skyscraper or mega mall. If you hired Noah to build your house, it would probably be ready for your great grandkids. Couldn't God find a better contractor? One who did not suffer from procrastination?

4. Things Take Time

Now it's true that many things worthwhile doing take time. And we've all experienced it.

How often does a project you are working on seem to take forever? You are building something – a house, a relationship, a career – and it's taking you way longer than you'd projected.

Why is it so difficult to find purpose in life? Why is it so hard to find your soul mate? Why is it so tough to build a family? Why is finding meaning and truth such a challenge? Why do you have to spend your entire life figuring out life itself?

Is there a lesson to be found here? Yes! And that lesson is found in this week's Torah reading.

5. First Documented Construction Project in History

In this week's portion – Parshat Noah – we read how the first documented construction project in the history of the world (the one that took forever) came about.

It seems that the world was awash in sin and corruption:

God saw the earth and beheld that it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth.² And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth has become full of violence³ because of them, and behold I am destroying them from the earth.”⁴

Some one thousand years after creation, the world had degenerated into a place without rules, where one took what one desired, ignoring all moral, ethical, or even civil standards.

The world was a few short years from self-destructing. Before all was lost, the Creator took action. He decided to bathe the world, washing away the grime, revealing the forgotten pure core beneath. Such a bath, the world knows as a flood, but what for all intents and purposes, was really a cosmic spa, a global car wash, a complete world-body makeover.

God reached out to a fine fellow named Noah, revealing His plan and telling him to build an ark to save himself and his family as well as selected creatures.

But here’s where things got interesting.

Let us focus on the period of time from when God first commits to cleaning the world until He actually brings down the flood – the period of time that it takes Noah to build the ark.

6. The Midrash

The Midrash explains why it took so long:

For 120 years God warned the generation, hoping they would atone. Because they did not atone, God instructed Noah: *“Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood.”*⁵ Noah stood up and atoned,

² Even cattle, beasts, and fowl would mate with those who were not of their own species. Rashi ad loc quoting Midrash Tanchuma Noah 12. See also Sanhedrin 108a.

³ According to Sanhedrin 108a, this refers to robbery.

⁴ Genesis 6:12-13.

⁵ Genesis 6:14.

and he planted cedar trees. The people asked him what the cedars were for. Noah told them that the Master of the Universe decided to flood the earth and instructed him to build an ark to save his family and himself. The people laughed at him, mocking his words. Noah watered the cedars and they grew. Again the people asked him what he was doing. Again Noah told them. And again they ridiculed him. Toward the end of the 120 years, Noah chopped down the cedars and planed them. Once again the people asked what he was doing, and once again Noah told them what was going to happen, warning them to atone. When they did not atone, did the Master of the Universe brought the flood, as [the Book of Genesis] says,⁶ *And it blotted out all beings.*⁷

Now we better understand why it took so long. Because the time span includes the entire process from scratch. Noah started from scratch – literally. He began by planting cedar saplings, watering and tending them until they grew into full mature trees. Anyone who has ever planted a tree knows that it does not mature overnight. Trees take years to develop – especially hefty trees like cedars.

After cultivating a forest, Noah harvested the wood, turning the trees into beams and planks. Logging is no simple exercise. It is time consuming, labor-intensive and complex.

And Noah was working alone. His ark was tailor-made; it was a yacht handcrafted and handmade to Godly specifications.

The obvious question is: Why? Why go through all the hassle to build an ark from scratch? Couldn't he have just visited the local lumber yard for his supplies? Or, if not, couldn't the omnipotent God have found a way to make all this easier for Noah?

I mean, there had to be an infinite amount of ways in which God could have saved Noah and his family (and the animals) from the flood.

⁶Genesis 7:23.

⁷ Tanchuma Noah 5.

He could have flooded everything but one patch of land big enough for those worthy of saving. He could have taught those worthy of saving to live under water. Or He could have caused an ark to miraculously materialize instantaneously.

Why did God want Noah to build an ark from scratch, taking 120 years to do so?

7. Time to Atonement

As the Midrash explains, God wanted to provide a fair opportunity for the generation of the flood to atone and return back to their origins of purity and sanctity. As such, God orchestrated that the process be stretched out as long as possible.

As mentioned, the denizens of the world were utterly corrupt; there was no way they were going to change their ways overnight. Thus God allowed for the maximum possible time for this corrupt world to return to goodness. He instructed Noah to build an ark from scratch and in public – planting trees, cultivating and farming them – so that after each step the people would ask, “Hey, Brother Noah, what are you doing? Do you work for the Jewish National Fund, why are you planting all these trees?”

To which Noah would respond: “Corrupt people of the world, don’t you know that the Master of the Universe is planning a universal forty-day, forty-night downpour, submerging everything in the pure waters of cleanliness. I have returned to God, and He has instructed me to build an ark to ride the upcoming waves. This is why I am planting trees. You, too, should repent and return to God.”

But the people, far removed from any Godly notions and cynical beyond belief, laughed in Noah’s face, mocking his words, ridiculing him.

A few years later the people of the world walked by and saw that the saplings had planted had now bloomed into massive cedars.

When they came upon Noah tending his forest, once again they asked him what he was doing (as was God’s plan they should). And once again Noah reminded them of the pending flood, telling them to repent, showing them how there is time to return to God and change their ways, instead of behaving like animals, or worse.

And once again the people laughed hysterically at, what was in their mind, the “crazy” Noah. Imagine it: the whole world acts one way, feasting upon every gluttonous and carnal pleasure, and but one *meshuganer* is building an ark, talking to God, speaking of returning and atoning and repenting! No wonder Noah’s neighbors thought he was a raving lunatic.

And then again, a few years later, they saw their wacky neighbor cutting down his beloved trees, sawing them, measuring them, sanding them, polishing them and painting them, and once again they asked him what he was doing.

And Noah said, “I’m building an ark, because a flood is coming.” The people shrugged off his behavior as persistent craziness and they went about their usual ways.

Once the ark was complete, after more than 120 years of Noah’s unheeded pleas for change, the flood commenced and all the corruption in the world was washed away.

8. Curious Story or Timeless Lesson

Is this a curious story from time gone by? Or a timeless lesson as profound today as back then?

Truth, by definition, is eternal. (If something is true for a moment only, has it really ever been true?) And the Torah is the embodiment of truth. The Torah is thus eternal. If the Torah was only true once upon a time and not today, then something would be fundamentally wrong.

Since the Torah is as true as ever, the lesson of the flood story is as true today as it was some 4,700 years ago. And we need to ask: What message is contained for us in the fact that it took Noah 120 years to build the ark? What is the significance of 120?

The classic Jewish blessing, typically uttered on one's birthday, is: "May you live to 120!"

Thus 120 years is seen today⁸ as a full and complete life. Moses himself lived to be 120 years of age.

In life, the length of our projects – especially the projects that are inherently important, such as building our families, discovering our purpose here on earth, etching out our unique divine niches – often frustrates us to no end. It is not uncommon to wish that we could just figure it all out instantaneously. Why is it so difficult to learn how to ride the waves of life? Why is it so hard to discover how to stay afloat in life's raging storms? Why is it so complex to swim against the tide?

Says the Torah: Do not get frustrated. It is divine intention that we, like Noah, build an ark from scratch. The Hebrew word for ark is *teivah*, which also means "word." Explains the Baal Shem Tov: We all are instructed to build a *teivah*, an ark – referring to the holy words (*teiva*, *teivot*) of Torah and tefillah, prayer, which lifts us above and protects us from the raging floodwaters that threaten to inundate us.

And the process of doing so is as important as the very ark itself. We were sent to this earth, a material world that can consume us in its seductive tentacles, a dangerous world where murderous butchers can attack innocent Jews, in order to build an ark – by sanctifying our lives and insulating ourselves with the holy words of Torah and tefillah.

Our entire lives are charged with this mission, to build this ark from scratch: To plant trees, water them, tend them, cultivate them, and then, in the right time, harvest them, log them, saw them into planks and beams, sand them and polish them. And, at the end of this effort,

⁸ See Ibn Ezra to Genesis 6:3 and other commentaries.

that we use them to build the perfect ark in order to overcome any challenge and elevate us above any storm.

But why, you may ask, must we go through this complex process?

Perhaps it is so that we may inspire the world to build as well. Maybe, just maybe, when the world sees us planting in our youth, it may ask us what we are doing. And we will tell them. Then, when the world sees us watering our trees in our adult years, it might once again inquire why. And we will tell them. Then, as we harvest the wood of our trees in our middle age, the world will once again ask us what we are doing. And once again we will tell them.

In other words, as we build our families, have children, raise up generations, the world will ask us what we are doing. And we will tell them.

When we are in the twilight of our lives, gluing together life's panels, putting the moldings on our lives, crowning our structures with fine nuances so that the whole picture – the ark – comes together, we can always be happy to share our vision with them.

We are here on this Planet Earth to build arks, sanctuaries, safe-havens, warm cocoons, places of peace and tranquility – we are here for 120 years (God willing) to turn life's storms, floods and deluges into divine waters of purity and wisdom.

And maybe, just maybe, when the world sees us doing it, the world will be inspired to do the same.

This, my dear friends, is why it takes 120 years – a lifetime – to build an ark.

9. Israel At War

This too sheds light on the threat that Israel is facing.

We must build arks – both physical and spiritual – to protect ourselves from the raging forces flooding the streets of Israel and the Middle East.

Noah was the only divine voice in a raging sea of degenerate humanity, immoral, unethical, slaughtering whom they wanted and when they wanted to.

God, disgusted at what His world had become, was ready to call it quits, to hit the restart button. In His infinite divine mercy, God gave one last 120-year window for people to change their ways, to look at Noah as a template for what it means to build and not destroy, for what it means to calm a storm not create one, for what it means to take matter and construct it into spirit.

Then, the world did not heed and all, save Noah and his family, were destroyed.

Today, the narrative is no different. Israel, like Noah, is the sole divine voice in a raging sea of degenerate haters, enemies who see a holy nation building the world, planting trees and turning them into tranquil arks. Instead of following Israel's lead, these corrupt, angry people try to destroy everything, try to cut, and chop, and stab a holy people, and its holy project.

The Creator of the Universe looks at what He has created, He looks at His Holy Land and He cannot fathom how it has possibly devolved into this: How can human beings, created in the Divine image, attack a people hand-picked by God to teach divinity to the world? It doesn't make any sense!

The Creator must feel today as the Creator felt back then, when the people laughed at Noah and mocked his very existence.

Well, there are only two ways this story can end: 1) The world watches Israel, the modern day Noah, the modern day builder constructing an Ark upon the raging storm that is the Middle East (and, really, the world), and the world learns from Israel, from Noah, and it commits to building an ark as well. 2) The second option is a flood; if we all in the world don't do everything in our power to stop the horrors that are going on in Israel and the greater Middle East, sooner or later those waves of destruction will wash up on all the world's shores, and stemming a full-force flood is a lot more difficult than nipping it at its trickling bud.

10. Personal Carpentry (Story)

An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He told his employer of his plans to leave the house-building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife, enjoying his extended family. He would miss his paycheck, of course, but he needed to retire. They would get by.

The employer was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter said yes but, in time, it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end his career.

When the employer came to inspect the house, he handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said, "my gift to you."

What a shock! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently. Now he had to live in the home that was shoddily built.

So it is with us. We build our lives in a distracted way, reacting rather than acting, willing to put up less than the best. At important points, we do not give the job our best effort. Then, with a shock, we look at the situation we have created and find that we are now living in the house we have built. If we had realized, we would have done it differently.

Think of yourself as the carpenter. Think that whatever you are building is your house. Remember this each day as you hammer a nail, place a board, or erect a wall. Build wisely. It is the only life you will ever build. Even if you live it for only one day more, that day deserves to be lived graciously and with dignity.

Life is a do-it-yourself project.

Your life today is the result of your attitudes and choices in the past. Your life tomorrow will be the result of your attitudes and the choices you make today.

Build your life. Build your ark. Build it with words – sacred and eternal words of Torah and tefillah. Only these eternal words allow you to build an eternal edifice, and immortal and invincible home that can withstand all the mortal and impermanent forces of material life, all the temporary pain of violence and destruction.

11. Ride the Storm (Conclusion)

The Hebrew month we are currently in – the month of *Cheshvan* – is traditionally a rainy month. This is true literally but it also is true figuratively.

After the High Holiday season of the month of *Tishrei* comes to a close, we immerse ourselves in work, in our careers, in earning a livelihood and supporting our families. Again we ride the storm.

How do we prevent it from flooding our lives?

By always building our ark. By always planting cedars, materials for building. By always realizing that life's materials have but one purpose: to reveal the spiritual.

Matter is what builds spirit's ark.

When we dedicate our time here on earth, all 120 of our years, to building our personal arks, surely our actions will inspire the world around us to do the same. And then, surely, what the Prophet Isaiah predicted will come true: *The world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.*⁹

These waters will never pull us down but lift us up. These waters will never drown us but bathe us in redemptive glory.

⁹ Isaiah 11:9.

May these divine waters cause the world's "cup to runneth over" immediately with clarity and purity.

May Hashem protect our brothers and sisters in the holy land, and thwart any evil plots and conspiracies. And may Israel – and the entire world – reach complete and permanent peace. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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