

# **NOAH: From Covenant and Conversation, by Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks**

- Chief Rabbi Sacks gives a clear connection between all the Bereshit stories, which deal with various phases and aspects of responsibility.

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## *Noach*

### A Drama in Four Acts

Between the creation of the universe and the call to Abraham the Torah tells four stories: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the generation of the flood, and the tower of Babel. Is there any connection between these stories? Are they there merely because they happened? Or is there a deeper underlying logic? As we will see, there is.

The first is about Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. Once they have eaten, and discovered shame, G-d asks them what they have done. This is the conversation that ensues:

And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the Lord G-d said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

The man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent. Both deny personal responsibility: it wasn't me; it wasn't my fault. This is the birth of what today is called the victim culture.

The second drama is about Cain and Abel. Both bring offerings. Abel's is accepted, Cain's not (why this is so is not relevant here). In his anger, Cain kills Abel. Again there is an exchange between a human being and G-d:

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."

Once again the theme is responsibility, but in a different sense. Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me." He denies moral responsibility. "I am not my brother's keeper." I am not responsible for his safety. Yes, I did it because I felt like it. Cain has not yet learned the difference between "I can" and "I may."

The third is the story of Noah. Noah is a righteous man but not a hero. He is born to great expectations. "He will comfort us," says his father Lamech, giving him his name. Yet Noah does not save humanity. He only saves himself, his family and the animals he takes with him in the

ark. The Zohar contrasts him unfavorably with Moses (and Abraham): Moses prayed for his generation, Noah did not. In the last scene we see him drunk: in the words of the Midrash, “he profaned himself and became profaned.” You cannot be a sole survivor and still survive. *Sauve-qui-peut* (“let everyone who can, save himself”) is not a principle of Judaism. We have to do what we can to save others, not just ourselves. Noah failed the test of collective responsibility.

The fourth is the story of the Tower of Babel. What was the sin of its builders? There are two key words in the text. It begins and ends with the phrase *kol ha’arets*, “the whole earth.” In between, there is a series of similar sounding words: *sham* (there), *shem* (name), and *shamayim* (heaven). The story of Babel is a drama about the two key words of the first sentence of the Torah: “In the beginning G-d created heaven and earth.” Heaven is the domain of G-d; earth is the domain of man. By attempting to build a tower that would “reach heaven,” the builders of Babel were men trying to be like gods.

What does this have to do with responsibility? Not accidentally does the word responsibility suggest response-ability. The Hebrew equivalent, *achrayut*, comes from the word *acher*, meaning “an other.” Responsibility is always a response to something or someone. In Judaism, it means response to the command of G-d. By attempting to reach heaven, the builders of Babel were in effect saying: we are going to take the place of G-d. We are not going to respond to His law or respect His boundaries. We are going to create an environment where we rule, not G-d. Babel is the failure of ontological responsibility – the idea that something beyond us makes a call on us.

What we see in Bereishith 1-11 is an exceptionally tightly constructed four-act drama on the theme of responsibility and moral development. The first thing we learn as a child is that our acts are under our control (personal responsibility). The next is that not everything we can do may we do (moral responsibility). The next stage is the realization that we have a duty not just to ourselves but to those on whom we have an influence (collective responsibility). Ultimately we learn that morality is not a mere human convention, but is written into the structure of existence. There is an Author of being, therefore there is an Authority beyond mankind (ontological responsibility).

This is developmental psychology as we have come to know it through the work of Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg and Abraham Maslow. Never underestimate the subtlety and depth of the Torah. It was the first, and is still the greatest, text on the human condition and our psychological growth from instinct to conscience, from “dust of the earth” to the morally responsible agent the Torah calls “the image of G-d.”

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)