

NOAH: OPTIMISM VERSUS HOPE

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- The decree was sealed because of Chamas. How eerily it mirrors what Hamas is doing today. Noah's response after the flood - to build. Rabbi Sacks pointed out there is no Hebrew word for optimism. Instead, we use the word hope. For optimism requires no action. Hope is based on action.

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You've heard of poetic license - let me teach you something about "rabbinic license." Rabbinic license means - allow me to digress even before I begin.

Here's the story. Last week - the world in all its complexity and resplendence was created. Rather quickly, G-d decides that the world is in need of reshaping. Enters Noach, and this week's flood story. I find eerily haunting the reason that the Torah gives for the world's destruction. And, by the way, for the last several years when this week's Torah reading is publicly read - my mind invariably leaps to this almost grotesque connection. Here's how the parasha begins.

"These are the offspring of Noach -Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noach walked with G-d. Noach had begotten three sons; Shem, Cham, and Yafet. Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d; and the earth had become filled with violence (translated according to Hertz) (the JPS translates: lawlessness, and Art Scroll - in accord with Rashi translates as, robbery) God said to Noach: The end of all flesh has become before me, for the earth is filled with violence through them...Make for yourself an Ark..."

We really need to hear the Hebrew word in the text. What was the world filled with which elicited this response from G-d?

The word in the verse is, "chamas." A word we are all too familiar with.

"Vatimaley HaAretz Chamas" - the earth was filled with violence. [I do know that the modern-day terrorist group, chamas is an acronym...but, eerie nonetheless] "Chamas" means, violence. In fact, the rabbis go so far as to demonstrate that the word can mean, murder. (Midrash -B'reisheet Raba 31:6 s.v. Amar R. Levi...) Chamas in the Jewish context is a rupture of humanity.

We, too, pray - that G-d will send an ark of hope and peace and reconciliation.

Let's move from an eerie, foreboding thought - to an empowering one. After the flood - which according to the Talmudic Sages lasted 365 days - Noah's response is quite interesting, and ultimately instructive. The waters subside, the earth is now habitable and Noah and his family - and everything with him on this Ark - goes out.

The very first response of Noah - the very first thing that he did was, "Va'veven Noah -"he built." Think about it in context. The world as he knew it was destroyed. Noah himself, we are

taught, did not sleep one complete night during this time period. We know of other family tragedies that occurred on board - and yet. The first response was not doleful or mournful -it was not bitterness or vindictiveness - it was, 'let's build.'

I'm reminded of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comment: There is no word in Hebrew for "optimism." But we do have a word for "hope." Why? Because optimism requires no action, it requires no courage. One merely sits back and says: "It will be good." Hope, on the other hand, as understood in the Jewish sources, requires our active participation. It asks of us to roll up our sleeves and work in partnership with the Divine to make this world better.

Shabbat Shalom

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)