



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 2: Parshat Noah: On Consequences and Destruction

Text: Genesis 7

בְּרֵאשִׁית ז'יז נִהְיָ הַמַּבּוּל אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיִּרְבוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת הַתְּבֵה וַתָּרֶם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ. יח וַיִּגְבְּרוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּרְבוּ מֵאֵד עַל הָאָרֶץ וַתִּלָּךְ הַתְּבֵה עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם. יט וְהַמַּיִם גָּבְרוּ מֵאֵד מֵאֵד עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיִּכְסּוּ כָּל הַהָרִים הַגְּבוֹהִים הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר תַּחַת כָּל הַשָּׁמַיִם. כ חָמֵשׁ עָשָׂרָה אַמָּה מִלְּמַעְלָה גָּבְרוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּכְסּוּ הַהָרִים. כא וַיִּגָּעוּ כָּל בְּשַׁר הַרְמֵשׁ עַל הָאָרֶץ בַּעוֹף וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל הַשָּׂרֵץ הַשָּׂרֵץ עַל הָאָרֶץ וְכֹל הָאָדָם. כב כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמַת רוּחַ חַיִּים בְּאַפָּיו מִכֹּל אֲשֶׁר בָּהֲרָבָה מֵתוּ. כג וַיִּמַּח אֶת כָּל הַיְקוּמֹם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד בְּהֵמָה עַד רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּמָּחוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׂאָר אַחַד נֹחַ וְאַשֶּׁר אִתּוֹ בַּתְּבֵה. כד וַיִּגְבְּרוּ הַמַּיִם עַל הָאָרֶץ חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֵת יוֹם.

17 The Flood continued forty days on the earth, and the waters increased and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth. 18 The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters. 19 When the waters had swelled much more upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered. 20 Fifteen cubits higher did the waters swell, as the mountains were covered. 21 And all flesh that stirred on earth perished — birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all mankind. 22 All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died. 23 All existence on earth was blotted out — man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

Context & Issues

In an unusually candid moment, God regrets having created humanity, for all had fallen into corruption and lawlessness. She privately reveals to Noah the plan to flood the earth, and instructs him to build a ship to save himself, his family, and a pair of every kind of creature. The massive boat weathers the storm, and life begins anew on the land from the seeds of Noah's family and the animals. With the rainbow, God seals a covenant never to destroy again on account of the errors of human beings, and to abide by the seasons of nature.

Finally on dry land, Noah takes up wine-making. He gets drunk and goes to bed naked. One son, Ham, embarrasses him, while the others, Shem and Yapheth cover him discreetly. From these children descend all of the nations of the earth.

Some people undertake to build a brick city and tower that will reach to heaven and make their name known. Displeased with the project, God intervenes and confuses their language so that



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they cannot understand one another, and scatters them all over the world. Meanwhile, everyone is busy having children. The last verses of our parsha focus on one family, the family of Avram. Avram's father sets out from his homeland Ur with his two sons, their spouses, and his nephew and heads off toward Canaan.

Explorations

By contrast with the divine creation, parshat Noach deals in divine destruction. In parshat Bereishit, the world-building project unfolds step-by-step, developing gradually toward the mammals and people. In our parasha, the destruction comes in a flood, unleashing the tremendous pent-up energy of water. From the deep tehom and the heavens above, water pours into fragile airways. The very same creatures into whose noses God had breathed life, God drowns with water, "All in whose nostrils was the animating breath of life, all that was on dry land, died" (Genesis 7:22). The fluid from which life comes washes life away.

The text is not clear exactly what evil brings on such a terrible response from God. Traditional commentators try to solve this problem. [Rashi](#) claims that the sin is sexual immorality and idol worship; the lawlessness is theft. Why theft?--because theft is such an obvious sin to everyone; one needs no special training to know that stealing is wrong, according to Rashi. [Ramban](#) claims that even the beasts and the birds preyed on one another. Ramban also explains the sexual sin; he describes humans having forbidden relationships and all creatures wasting their seed. A passage in the Talmud, Sanhedrin 57a, speaks similarly. Such behavior goes against a divine commandment to all creatures--to be fruitful and multiply (Bereishit 1:22 and 28).

These commentators are looking for sins that would justify the destruction as a punishment. They are very concerned to show why *all* creatures suffer. Yet they do not account for the extreme harshness of the judgement--death to the whole world for theft, for masturbation, or even for idolatry! What could the entire world possibly have done such that every single creature deserved to die? And why would the Creator be so willing to wipe out Her creatures so soon after creating them?

Before offering more perspective on these troubling questions, consider how the Torah insists that this is the one and only time that God will flood the earth. After Noach and Na'amah (Rashi cites Noach's spouse's name on Bereishit 4:22) and their children leave the boat, God appoints the rainbow as the sign to Herself and all generations (Bereishit 9:8-17). If God is willing to make such a commitment to creation, then why destroy in the first place?

Telling Noach about what is to come, God uses the same root, *shachat*, to describe the acts of creature and Creator: "all flesh had destroyed its way on earth" (Bereishit 6:12), therefore God destroys all flesh. This verse appears to balance cause and effect: whatever people were doing



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wrong, from God's perspective, it was somehow equivalent to the flood. God arranges for Her creatures to experience the full consequences of their actions.

Afterwards, perhaps God appreciates that the creation cannot continue with such harsh judgement. She places the rainbow as a sign not only for the creatures of the earth, but as a reminder for Herself. Only after destruction does the Creator commit to a covenant with Her creatures.

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth (Bereishit 9:16).

Ramban interprets the rainbow as a sign of judgement, a reminder to God to restrain judgement with compassion, with loving. Ramban, as we shall see in future passages, believes deeply in the love connection between people and the Creator.

Questions for Discussion

How do we make sense of how creation requires tremendous resources, planning, preparation, time, and labor, whereas destruction is relatively quick and easy?

How can our Creator also be Destroyer?

How are these roles, creator and destroyer, expressed in human society? Are they connected or separate, and what part do justice, compassion, and caring play in fulfilling them?

We often think of God as eternal and unchanging. If so, then how do we pursue a relationship with God, since we are certainly mortal and changing? If initially God intended to hold creatures fully responsible for our actions and dispense divine justice, after the flood, She appears to commit to softening the most severe judgment. How can or ought we to understand God being affected by our experience together—does God *learn* from or with us?

Is anger part of the Noach story, or disappointment, failure etc.?

As a parent or child, how do you or do you not identify with this drama about fulfilling/ disappointing expectations between God and creation?

Study Links

For a contemporary discussion of divine judgement and mercy click [here](#) to see an excerpt from



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Judaism and Modernity: The Religious Philosophy of David Hartman, Jonathan W. Malino (ed.), pages 68 onward.

[Here](#) a young blogger reflects on Jonathan Sach's view of divine justice.

Click [here](#) to see how an Australian Christian faces the evil of the 2004 tsunami: "Waves of destruction wash away belief in God's benevolence."

The destruction of creation is an unbearable possibility that seems to be unfolding in our time--as a result of human action. For so much of humanity, water, the source of life, is a source of disease and toxic poison. See a report here on the state of world water and its use; and [here](#) to read "Forty percent of world lacks clean water, Solutions Sought."

Summary of Issues

God washes away all life that She had created. We struggle to understand the flood, what moves the Creator to destroy, and interpret the various meanings this may have for our beliefs, expectations, and lives.

Methods & Observations

Often traditional commentators state their answers without explaining the questions that prompt them. One of our jobs is to figure out what they are asking in order to make sense of what they answer. In this parasha, both Rashi and Ramban try to answer an unstated question, “why did God destroy *all* creatures?”

It is difficult to think about the divine except in human terms, for we are human. We speak of God having emotions and interpret God's actions according to human motives and ideas such as justice. Keeping in mind that our experience might not be sufficient to grasp the divine, we continue to strive for connection.

Two common literary themes in this parasha are inversion and *quid pro quo*. Creation/ destruction and life-giving/ life-taking water are examples of inversion. Human desecrations returned with desecration of humans are an example of *quid pro quo*. We return to these themes as we proceed through the Torah.

Contact

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