

The Promise of the Rainbow

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I must have been in elementary school, when my father first told me that he didn't believe that the stories in the Torah literally happened the way they were written. Specifically, my parents didn't endorse the story of the flood as history. My rabbis and Religious School teachers seemed to agree. Perhaps Noah didn't even exist. Nevertheless, both at home and at the Temple, I was taught that each biblical narrative, whether historical or not, conveys a deep meaning, from which we can all learn.

I'm almost as skeptical as my dad. God knows, I'm no fundamentalist, so I don't feel compelled to defend the literal accuracy of the biblical text. I am rarely persuaded by those who claim to offer evidence of Bible stories as historical events. At the same time, I see no particular reason to go around insisting that such things never happened. Whether the flood took place or not, whether such a person as Noah ever lived, we are blessed with this story, replete with symbolism, captivating to children, and offering morals that offer meaning to our lives.

Let's first look at Noah himself. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Noah is described as "blameless in his generation." The Rabbis disagree over whether this designation is intended to Noah's credit or to his discredit. On the one hand, being righteous in an age of rampant sin is a great virtue, as one must stand apart from one's peers and not behave like everybody else. On the other hand, even a person of mediocre morals could be considered worthy in a generation of scoundrels.

The lesson is powerful in our own generation. "Everybody" defrauds the government. From waiters to taxi drivers, we all "know" that workers evade taxes by underreporting tips. Household employers often pay their housekeepers and nannies under the table to avoid taxes. If a person scrupulously reports every penny earned, is she particularly righteous? Alternatively, we may say that a person who makes a point of paying social security taxes for domestic employees isn't especially praiseworthy, but is merely following the minimum standards of the law.

If we say that Noah is faintly praised as the only acceptable man in a wicked generation, we must recognize that God nevertheless chooses him for divine partnership and sacred tasks. We recall the story of Reb Zusya, whose students see him bereft, crying, as the High Holy Days approach. His students ask him why

he is so distraught. He explains that he knows that he is not as great as Moses, which God doesn't expect. Zusya's real concern is not that God will expect him to have been as righteous as Moses, but that God will demand to know why Zusya was not as great as Zusya could have been! Just as Noah is God's chosen one, for doing the best he could in his environment, Zusya's goal is to be the best that he could be. That goal should be one we all adopt, whatever our circumstances.

The ancient Rabbis are tough on Noah. They remind us that he is not nearly so great as Abraham, patriarch of the Jewish people. Specifically, we may consider Abraham's response, when God tells him of the divine plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham argues with God, trying to convince God not to destroy the cities, even if only a few righteous people can be found there. By contrast, when God tells Noah of the plan to destroy all life with the flood, Noah doesn't raise even the slightest concern. He doesn't warn his neighbors, urge them to repent, or tell them that they should get into ship-building. Noah simply builds an ark. He is obedient, to be sure, but he does not take the leadership stance that we find later, in Abraham.

The story, and the comparison, are relevant to us, even if they never took place. We often wonder whether we should stand up to authority. We teach our children to do what their teachers tell them to do, and yet, there are times when even children should behave more like Abraham, challenging a teacher or administrator, rather than like Noah, who is unquestioningly obedient.

The same issue raises itself in more consequential arenas for adults. When we are at work, we owe a duty of loyalty to our employers. And yet, corporate scandals have reminded us that occasions arise when some have no ethical choice other than to bring illegal or immoral information to light, even in defiance of company policy. Corporate and government whistle-blowers, when they behave appropriately, do a great service to us all. Obedience, like Noah's, has its important place, for adults as for children. Questioning and even resisting authority is sometimes absolutely required, in the tradition of Abraham. The stories remain very much alive.

The rainbow is the ultimate symbol of the story of the flood. God offers the rainbow as the sign of the covenant God makes with humanity, the promise never again to destroy the world with the waters of a flood.

Even this hopeful message, with its magnificent symbol, is dismissed as a pale promise by some cynics. Noting that God only promises not to destroy with a

flood, they insist that God is pointedly reserving the option of utilizing fire, nuclear weapons, or some other malevolent force to reverse creation. They will ask us to read our science books, teaching that neither the Earth nor its sun will last forever. Without disputing science, we may yet affirm that the rainbow is unquestionably intended as a sign of God's grace.

God knows that humans will never cease to sin. Indeed, the promise of the rainbow does not come with any condition. God does not say that, as long as humans are righteous, life will continue. God promises everlasting love for life, even in the presence of evil.

Some say that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a God of strict justice, even of vengeance. Yes, God is just, but God is also merciful. The rainbow reminds us that, much as God wants us to do what is right, God will be here for us, even when we fail. The rainbow teaches us that, in the darkest moments of life, when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, God is our friend, the One in Whom we may place our eternal trust. The rainbow is God's promise of tomorrow: When clouds cover our lives, we may yet look toward a brighter future, in this world, in the world to come, in the Messianic Age. An array of magnificent color awaits us when we emerge from the darkness. This spiritual message remains potent for us, whether or not we take literally the story of the rainbow's origin.

The word "Torah" means teaching. Torah is our people's record of every Jewish generation's attempt to understand what God wants us to learn. Millennia ago, our ancestors told the story of the flood. Ultimately, they wrote it down. They have passed this tremendous narrative to us, a legacy of God's love from those who came before us. Skeptics we may be, when we consider the historical accuracy of any particular story, but may we never become cynics, imagining that the Torah is merely a collection of fairy tales. Instead, let us always embrace the words of Torah, looking for meaning, and finding it, in each and every one.

Tonight, we begin to celebrate the Shabbat of Thomas's becoming a Bar Mitzvah. This Shabbat is all about the future. Tomorrow, Heather and David will transmit the Torah to Tommy, with the faith and hope that he will carry our Tradition into the future. Parents will pass to the next generation their hope that the future will be bright – in their own family, for our Jewish people, and for all the world. May God be our Partner to fulfill the promise of the rainbow, for Tommy and his generation, and for all the generations to come.

Amen.