A Plan to End Evil

Shabbat Noach 5787

October 16, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

When the United States and Israel began to bomb Iran in February, well over ninety percent of Israelis supported the effort, which stands to reason, since Iran's nuclear weapons program is designed to annihilate them first. I was ambivalent, because I was not convinced the plan would work, but not because I thought it unworthy, and not only because of the threat to Israel and other American allies in the region. The primary victims of the Iranian regime's evil are the Iranian people, and empowering their movement to depose the cruel regime would be laudable if it succeeded.

It did not, however, succeed. Instead, the brutal regime has dug in, and America from the President on down seems to have little appetite to broaden the war effort, which would likely lead to the deaths of many more American troops and might get America stuck again in a "forever war" that does not provide the hoped-for result in the end. The consequences of this effort to wipe out evil are, to

date, miserable. Iran's nuclear capacity might have been reduced for now, but the regime is demonstrating its considerable capacity to punish the entire world.

It turns out that wiping out evil is difficult. Perhaps it's impossible. That may even be the point of this week's Torah portion, Noah and the flood.

The flood is a failure. Yes, it rains—more than that, the floodgates of heaven and earth open, and God successfully destroys all animal life except Noah, his family, and the animals tucked away in the ark with them. Failure, though, is evident as soon as Noah emerges from the ark. God says, "'Never again will I bring doom upon the world on account of what people do, since the human mind inclines to evil from youth onward; never again will I destroy all living beings, as I have [just] done. As long as the world exists, / planting and harvesting, / cold and heat/summer and winter, / day and night / will never end."[i]

Noah's sons and their wives will reproduce, there will be future generations, and therefore evil will continue. The flood has not achieved its goal. As if to put an exclamation point on the failure, Noah's Torah portion ends generations later, when his descendants wickedly presume to build a tower that can reach God in the

heavens. God will punish them, but this time only with a consequence that fits the crime. Killing them would not end human evil.

Last week, I began my sermon by telling you that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "The Bible is primarily not [hu]man[ity]'s vision of God but God's vision of [hu]man[ity]. The Bible is not [humans'] theology but God's anthropology."[ii] In the case of Noah's flood, the anthropology lesson is complicated, because God is playing the role of humanity. By the end of the portion, we learn that God knows that evil cannot be wiped out by killing every evildoer. God being God—which is to say omniscient, all knowing—God must have known that all along—that is, before apparently trying to do just that with the flood. If it's an anthropology lesson, though, God is modeling futile **human** behavior. God wants to demonstrate to humanity that, no matter how many people we kill, we cannot wipe evil from the face of the earth.

We have not learned the lesson. Instead, we live in an era of total solutions to the problem of evil. We in the Jewish world have witnessed that up close and personal since October 7. Anti-Zionists' message is clear: The very existence of the

State of Israel is evil. Like the descendants of European settlers in South Africa, Jews in the eyes of anti-Zionists have colonized Palestine, stolen another people's land, and oppressed the indigenous population. A significant minority of Israelis and their supporters have simultaneously concluded that evil such as that unleashed on Israel on October 7 will continue unless and until the Jewish conquest of the ancient Land of Israel is complete, every last Palestinian driven from the land.

Neither genocide nor ethnic cleansing is rare in human history, nor is their failure. Whatever wickedness antisemites imagine Jews to bring into the world was not wiped out in the Holocaust any more than the Israeli war effort in Gaza with extensive collateral damage to civilians has ended Hamas's reign of terror.

Humanity, though, is not powerless. God provides the model—in this Torah portion, ironically. Last week, God prescribed a vegan diet for the first humans,[iii] but now, after the flood, God permits them to eat meat. God does set a condition, though: They must slaughter the animal first, not merely cut off one of its limbs to eat it.[iv] Apparently, prior to the flood, craving forbidden meat had led people to tear limbs from living animals for meat. Pinpointing a specific issue, God has more

success. On a larger scale, at the end of this week's Torah portion, in the Tower of Babel story, God finds that humans who all share the same language can perpetrate great evil, so God solves the problem by giving them a variety of languages.[v] Put another way, God addresses the perils of groupthink by imposing diversity.

The twentieth century offers positive examples as well. In the First Gulf War, the first President Bush did not seek to wipe out all evil or even all the wickedness perpetrated by Saddam Hussein. Instead, he sought to reverse Iraq's violent takeover of Kuwait and thereby to end the Iraqi leader's dream of controlling the region through military conquest. President Bush executed a limited but successful military action with the humility not even to try to destroy all evil.

A more complicated but ultimately positive example is World War II. Yes, the Allies insisted on unconditional surrender as they combatted the evils of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Firebombing in Germany and atomic bombs dropped on Japan were human-generated "floods" of biblical proportions. There was real evil, and it had to be destroyed. War criminals were tried, and some were put to death, after the war. But that's not all that happened after the war. The United

States government under President Truman and the leadership of General George Marshall carried out a plan to rebuild Europe, including Germany, as well as Japan, and to integrate both into the world's economy and society. Eighty years and counting of Germany and Japan moving largely in peaceful and cooperative directions was worth the price. Jews have been immigrating **to** Germany in significant numbers for several decades now.

The difficulty in destroying evil is evident not only on the geopolitical scale, but also for each of us as individuals. Only a month ago, we gathered here to confess our wrongdoing, pledge to change our ways, and seek forgiveness. We may successfully improve our behavior, but we also know that we will need to be back next Yom Kippur. We will not have fully uprooted evil from our lives. Even on Yom Kippur, we did not have a plan to end evil.

In פרקי אבות, Sayings of our Sages, Rabbi Azzai teaches: מצוה גוררת מצוה ואברה גוררת אברה, "One mitzvah leads to another, and one sin leads to another."[vi] The rabbi is suggesting that we start small, the individual version of President Bush's modest goal in the First Gulf War. When we begin coming to services

regularly, for example, we habituate ourselves to practicing Judaism consistently, and we stop considering it a burden. If we give to the needy on a regular basis, we will not end poverty, but we will continue to make the lives of the least fortunate gentler. If we see ourselves as works in progress, in need of repair, we will not expunge evil from our lives, but God has demonstrated definitively: No flood will rid the world of wickedness. Only we can do that, one mitzvah at a time.

Amen.

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[i] Genesis 8:21-22.
[ii] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 1956.
[iii] Genesis 1:29-30.
[iv] Genesis 9:4 and commentary to that verse.
[v] Genesis 11:6-7.
[vi] Pirkei Avot 4:2.