

Parshat Noach
Kol Sasson
October 25, 2014

Shabbat Shalom.

This week's Parsha has two stories in it. We start with the tragic decline of human morality into a society characterized by greed and selfishness going well past the point of no return. The result, of course, is the flood, with G-d deciding that our only hope was to start over again.

The end of the Parsha tells another story: it talks about Migdal Bavel, and a time when everyone spoke the same language, and the people band together to wage war with G-d. The result was G-d creating a variety of languages.

What do these two stories have in common?

Let's start at the beginning of the parsha where we learn that "Noah was a righteous man, perfect or blameless in his generation." Of course, the key here is the phrase "in his generation."

Rashi notes that some rabbis judge Noah favorably. They say he was a good man who would have been even greater had he lived in a generation of righteous people. Other rabbaim judge Noah unfavorably, saying that only in his very corrupt generation was he righteous.

As enjoyable as these hypothetical discussions can be, the fact remains that Noah lived in his own time, obviously not in a generation of righteous people. So why bother talking about it?

I think the reason we bother has nothing to do with Noach directly. The rabbaim are actually asking a much larger question: How could an entire generation of people—an entire society—have such disregard for one another that Noach was able to shine like a tsaddik, and G-d feels the need to start over?

Migdal Bavel teaches roughly the same lesson but from another direction. The sin here again is the devaluation of human life. But, instead of a complete restart, G-d caused mankind to learn and speak different languages precisely so that every person would have to struggle to learn about his neighbor. This way, in order to communicate, we would be forced to invest and appreciate one another's differences.

I am delivering the D'var Torah this week in the tradition of using Parshat Noach to speak about the chesed organization that I am so lucky to spend my days supporting, The ARK. The ARK is an institution dedicated to supporting and maintaining the dignity of Chicagoland Jews and to value human lives. I'm not going to talk about the breadth of services that we offer at The ARK. This isn't an appropriate forum for that sort of thing. Instead, I want to speak just for a couple minutes about the individuals who we serve at The ARK.

I think that just as in the time of Noach and Bavel, we tend to consider ARK clients as the "other." We are grateful that we're donors to The ARK, not clients of The ARK. I've become very sensitive to the fact that no matter who I talk to about The ARK, they think that our clients come from the other side of the community. If they are in Chicago, they think we serve on the suburbs. If they are suburban, they think we only serve the Orthodox. Some think we serve only New Americans, people with mental illness, the elderly, the homeless, all of these things... but never people like me.

Well, guess what? We do help all of those categories of people, but we also have clients in the opposite categories as well. Sure we have clients from Anshe Motele and Ezras Yisrael. But we also have them from Am Shalom in Glencoe, Beth El in Highland Park, and Kol Sasson in Skokie.

In 2011, The ARK opened an office right next to Solomon Schechter in Northbrook on Dundee Road. We now see over 700 clients in that office. Every week, 1 to 3 families walk through our doors asking for help for the first time. I promise you that before they opened that door, they too thought of themselves as donors to The ARK, not clients.

We have an entire cohort of men in their 40s and 50s who sit in our Northbrook office speaking with one of our case managers on the verge of tears, and sometimes not just on the verge. They tell us that they were doing great until just recently at their jobs in real estate or banking or finance or middle management or sales. But their job disappeared and their unemployment and COBRA benefits are running out. Their families are used to a certain lifestyle that they just can't afford it without a job, and they need help. Some of them come to us right away, others put it off until their home is on the verge of foreclosure.

And we help them. We get them registered for federal programs like SNAP (food stamps), SSI, the ACA. We make mortgage and utility payments. We let them into our pantry every month, fill their medical prescriptions, and get them vocational support. We help them downsize their homes.

We are finding that our support for families in the suburbs is lasting about 1.5 to 2 years and then they are back on their feet. These are actually in some ways our luckiest clients. Their need is acute but temporary. We have another set of clients that I'm not going to talk about whose conditions are chronic; and who really are going to rely on The ARK as their safety net until they age into another serve catchment.

Here's another story. There was a terrible car accident this past summer. The father was killed immediately and the mom is, as far as we know, on permanent life support. The two sets of grandparents are both thankfully in town but are themselves living only on Social Security and are financially and otherwise unable to take on two small children.

Their rabbi was wise enough to refer them to The ARK for help. We are able to quickly get them money for rent and school supplies for the kids. We got the kids into grief counseling and helped find the right lawyers to help the grandparents through the maze of temporary guardianship. We're providing new services to this family almost every week.

Emergencies can happen to anyone and with most people living paycheck to paycheck, it doesn't take long for "them" to become "us."

I will conclude with Mishna in Sanhedrin 4:5 that says that G-d created Adam HaRishon alone to demonstrate that it is worth creating an entire world to support just one person.

The Gur points out that the mishna says "...one who supports a single soul (nefesh) of Israel is as though he supports the entire world."

We live in a great generation that values human life above everything else. Community supported institutions like The ARK, Ezra, Shalva, and many, many others enable us to not just save the person, but also to save the nefesh.

Shabbat Shalom.