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DEALING WITH THE FLOOD

THERE ARE A VARIETY OF STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH difficult situations, both in the life of an individual and also in that of the community. The story of Noah's Ark in this week's Sedra¹ helps us evaluate these. The Flood came as G-d's response to the abyss of evil into which humanity had fallen, with every kind of violence and licentiousness. First came a Divine warning to Noah that the Flood would take place. Then he began building the Ark. The Sages tell us that for a hundred and twenty years he worked on this project. During this long time, it might be hoped, he would convince other people to change their ways. In this way, he would prevent the Flood from coming, he would save the world².

However, although Noah was dedicated to his task, he did not save anyone outside his own family. We could say that the fact that he saved his three sons and their wives was itself an achievement. And of course, his Ark was a refuge for thousands of species of animal and bird. Indeed, although many people mocked him, Noah was not deterred. However, he was not able to help the rest of humanity. We do not even see him making an attempt to do so.

The rain began to fall. According to the Sages, it began gently. If the people of his generation would have repented, the rain would have been rain of blessing³. Unfortunately, they did not repent. The rain became stronger. Noah and his family went into the Ark, together

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with the stream of animals and birds which came to it of their own accord⁴. The torrential rain became the Flood, destroying everything. Noah and his family were saved, and as a result, the line of humanity and of animal life continued through the millennia. But had Noah really succeeded? According to the Sages: No. He did what he was told, he saved himself and his immediate loved ones; but he did not try to save everyone else⁵.

When there are serious problems one response is to build an Ark and hide oneself away in it. One takes refuge from a hostile world. This can be a very spiritual refuge, it can even be deeply holy, like Noah's Ark. This itself is an important step, and is a skill one needs to learn. The word 'Ark' in Hebrew is *teyvah* which also means 'word'. There are beautiful words of Torah study and of prayer. One can take refuge in them in a secluded environment and transcend all problems.

But this is not the final goal. The true aim is to change the world. To try to make sure that no Flood will come, for anyone. Or at least, to make the attempt. The Sages comment that Noah could have prayed to G-d on behalf of everyone else, he could have communicated directly with others and sought to transform the society around him. He should not have given up. They compare him unfavourably with Abraham, who *did* try to change people and the world. When G-d told him that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed, Abraham argued with G-d on their behalf, trying to save them⁶. He did not give up on humanity: instead he taught it Monotheism, a vital element in world civilization.

The different approaches of Noah and Abraham are relevant to our lives as the Jewish people, and as individuals. On the one hand, we have to be able to stand up for what is right, even when all around us are doing wrong, and create our own positive and healthy environment. But at the same time we need to realise that we have the power to affect others for the better, to change their direction, especially after our unique empowerment at Sinai when we received the Torah. Ultimately, every individual can change the world⁷.

1. Genesis 6:9-11:32. 2. Rashi, Gen.6:14. 3. Rashi, Gen. 7:12. 4. Rashi, Gen.6:20. 5. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.2 p.452, citing Zohar III 15a, referring to Isaiah 54:9 calling the Flood 'the waters of Noah', as if he were responsible for it. 6. Zohar I 106a. 7. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 3:4.

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SEDRA NOAH

IS YOUR NAME NOAH?

It was 9:00pm on 12th September, 2008. Michael, who lived in Galvestone, Texas, was preparing for bed. His mother had heard that everybody should leave their houses because of Hurricane Ike which was approaching their area. But Michael's father said not to worry, he had heard that it would miss their town. Still his mother looked very worried.

Michael went downstairs to the ground floor where his bedroom was, and put a bowl with a cup of water by his bed, to wash his hands in the morning. He said the Shema and got into bed, and soon fell asleep.

Suddenly Michael woke up. There were loud claps of thunder and a terrible howling from the wind. He said Modeh Ani, and washed his hands. He was fully awake and frightened. He turned on the light. His watch said 2:10am. He could hear things crashing around outside in the howling, shrieking wind, and windows smashing. He opened the door to the hallway. Then the lights went out, now Michael was petrified. But then he saw a flashlight and heard his father calling him, he ran into his father's arms and he was carried upstairs. His mother was there too. Suddenly they heard a rush of water break through their front door downstairs. In the light of the flashlight they could see water flowing all over the ground floor. Michael started to cry softly.

The water rose the whole night, until it was just half way up the stairs. But by 8:00am the hurricane had moved on.

Now they were all waiting in his parents' bedroom on the first floor. It was soaked from rain which had come in through the broken windows. Outside there was water where there was

supposed to be a garden and a street, and all kinds of things were floating, like a big dustbin and an uprooted tree. They were waiting to be rescued.

“Listen”, said his mother, drawing him close to her, “I want to tell you a story, a bit similar to ours. About four and a half thousand years ago was a man by the name of Noah, and he lived in a time when there were a lot of people who did terrible things. They would murder and steal. So G-d told Noah that He is going to bring a Flood to the world and destroy everybody on it, unless they return to the correct path.”

“Does that mean that G-d brought this flood because we are bad?” interrupted Michael. “I am sure there are plenty of good people who are suffering, why should they suffer?”

“You are right,” answered his mother, “I am sure there are plenty of good people who are suffering because of this hurricane. So I don’t know why G-d sent this hurricane, you see Michael, I am not G-d, and so I don’t know why it happened.”

Michael was frightened. “Mom, do you think we will ever get saved?” he asked. His father went to the window to look out for help.

Meanwhile, his mother continued the story. “So G-d told Noah that he should build an Ark in which he could save his family, and every type of animal and bird. Then the Flood started and went on for forty days, and when it was finished, he had to wait until the land dried....”

Suddenly Michael’s father shouted with joy “I can see a boat with rescuers”!

Michael ran to the window, and there was a big boat which already had quite a few people in it. Michael jumped with joy shouted “Noah’s Ark!”.

The boat came towards their window, and the lifeguard called out and said children first, so Michael climbed out of the window, held by his father, who then lowered him down and passed him to the tall lifeguard who held him tight.

Michael turned to the lifeguard and said “is your name Noah...?”

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