

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

NOAH, the hero's name in Torah's flood epic, is explained by his father, who named him Noah, saying (Gen. 5:29): "This one will provide us *relief*." This verse is a poetic *midrash*, based on the similarity in sound between Noah and *nehama* -- which means relief and consolation following disaster -- forecasting Noah's role in restoring life after the flood. Linguistically, however, Noah stems from *menuha* -- meaning rest and relaxation.

Why does Torah relate the hero's name to *nehama* (relief), and not to *menuha* (rest)? *Menuha* involves inaction and idleness; *nehama*, action and initiative. Rest is valuable as prelude to activity and creativity; relief has intrinsic value. Humanity survived after the flood because Noah was not passive, but active; he engaged in dynamic deeds. Noah had no *rest*, but he provided *relief*.

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MURDER is the ultimate crime, deserving capital punishment. This idea is expressed in a threefold rhythmic verse in Genesis (9:6):

*Whoever sheds the blood of THE HUMAN (person)--
BY THE HUMAN (court) shall his own blood be shed;
For in God's image, He made THE HUMAN (species).*

The first and third lines end with the same phrase, "THE HUMAN" (*ha-adam*); the middle line starts with "BY THE HUMAN" (*ba-adam*) – all underlying the divinely distinctive quality of each and every human being. Hurting a human being is a direct offense against God. The pagan and Christian concept of "Deicide" has no place in Judaism, which adheres to the One God who is ever-living, and can never be "killed." Homicide is the most heinous act: The killing of any man or woman is considered in Judaism as the only true form of Deicide.

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NOAH was (Gen. 6:9) “a righteous man, faultless in his generation.” What does “in his generation” imply? R. Yohanan says it reduces Noah’s praise: He was righteous *only* by standards of his wicked generation; not of others. R. Lakish says it enhances Noah’s praise: He remained righteous *despite* the impact of his wicked generation; he would have been more so in others.

All agree on Noah: In a wicked society, his righteousness *stood out* by contemporary standards; and, also, *withstood* corruptive pressure. But, heroic as it is to be non-conformist amidst wickedness, it is more advantageous to live in, and be influenced by, a righteous environment!

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

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ARE WE HUMANS BASICALLY EVIL? Torah states, prior to the flood event (Genesis 6:5), that God realized that, regrettably, “great was the evilness of humankind on earth, and that every impulse (*yetzer*, inclination, tendency) of a person’s innermost thoughts (*mahashavot*, fantasies, schemes) was only for evil all day long.” This verse comes to justify the initial Divine decree to bring about the cosmic catastrophic flood.

A similar verse appears in Torah after the flood stating that God reconsidered and resolved: “Never again shall I condemn the *adama* (soil, land) on account of the *adam* (human species, humankind). Based on the new, post-flood

covenant, God will deal with us as humans, and no more punish the natural order because of our misconduct. “I will never again strike down all living beings as I have done.”

We humans are, indeed, innately flawed, yet we have the capacity and duty for continual self-improvement. We are encouraged by Torah to actualize our human potential.

Ultimately, however, it is by the power of our free will that we can employ our *yetzer*, our creative energy, either constructively, for good and beneficial purposes, or destructively, for evil and futile goals. The virtuous ones rule over their *yetzer*; the corrupt ones let their *yetzer* rule over them.

NOAH: Genesis 6:9-11:32; Numbers 23:9-15

HAFTARAH: Isaiah 66

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

THE STORY OF THE TOWER OF BABEL (Gen. 11:1-9) shows appreciation for the diversity of human culture. The initial stage of one homogeneous society -- "the whole world speaking one language and sharing the same ideas" -- failed catastrophically. True human progress is assured by developing multiple trends and outlooks, not by striving for uniformity and conformity. Torah teaches us to respect and cherish the uniqueness of each individual and each group.

Thought of the Week

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MAN'S INNATE INNOCENCE is fundamental in Judaism (TB Ber. 60b): "My God, the soul you have implanted within me is pure." True, man is gravely disposed to wickedness and failure (Gen. 8:21): "For the contrivings of man's heart ('yetzer lev ha-adam') are evil from his infancy." But, moral corruption is not the inborn quality of man; it is the perversion of his inherent goodness (Kohelet 7:29): "God made mankind straight; people themselves ask for their countless complexities." Torah's morality is conducive to, and congruent with, real human nature, guiding man to cherish and refine his natural qualities, to guard and unfold his basic humanity, his decency and integrity. Torah is an elaborate design of enlightenment for living human beings, and not an instant device of salvation for the supposedly "doomed." No one is inherently condemned or depraved: Every person has a share in "olam ha-ba" – the promised, redeemed world – unless he deprives himself of it, by misguided attitudes and deeds. This outlook on man's intrinsic purity and divinity is reflected (according to Mishnah, Sanh. 10:1) in Isaiah's vision, in which God, turning to restored Zion, reveals His delight in man, crown of Creation (60:23): "Your people, all righteous, forever flourishing in their land; bud of My planting, My handiwork – to be of glory."

NOAH: Genesis 6:9-11:32

HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:1-55:5

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

• “ALL WEAPONS forged against you shall fail; all tongues accusing you in judgment you shall refute!” (Isaiah 54:17). This is a prophetic promise to Israel that has sustained the people during constant ages of tumult and travail; it continues to compel our fascination. Two threats are mentioned, the military and the diplomatic. Both the accumulation of enemy weaponry and the escalation of hostile demagoguery – insists the prophet – must not shake the people’s faith, resolve and integrity. Nor ought they lead to apathy. The promise of prophecy is a call for action: the critical events must strengthen the people’s determination to continue to build and to grow – to move ahead stronger than ever, undistracted by futile fears and inspired by Divine ideals and vision. The real threats must indeed be counteracted and challenged by you: “You shall refute!” Thus, the promise comes with an urgent call (2-4): “Enlarge the site of your tents; spread wide the hangings of your dwellings, spare not; lengthen the ropes, strengthen the pegs; spread out to the south and the north — fear not, and you will not be put to shame; cringe not, and you will not be led to disgrace.” It is the people’s ability to overcome momentary confusion and despair and to act with confidence – inspired by the timeless lesson of prophecy – that will assure creative survival.

Candlelight time: 5:06 P.M. ... Sabbath Ends at 5:58

Scriptural reading for tomorrow morning:

NOAH: Genesis 6:9-11:32

HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:1-55:5

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: *The two themes of the sidrah — ha-mabool (the Flood; Noah's Ark) and ha-p'laga (the disunity and Tower of Babel) — are intrinsically related. Both elucidate how man's transgressions lead to God's retribution. But, behold the difference. The mabool was a global catastrophe, annihilating all but a few. Conversely, the generation who built the tower, in defiance of God, were divided and dispersed, but not destroyed. The Rabbis explained: True, the mabool generation did not plot against God; but, they robbed and fought each other, indulging in violence, defying social justice — they did not survive. But, the builders of the tower did maintain social integrity, treating each other with love and comradeship — they were saved. "You should learn from this how detestable is strife and how great is peace" (Rashi Gen. 11:9; Midrash BR. 38*

by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

NOAH: Genesis 6:9-11:32
HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:1-55:5

Thought of the Week

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THE NOACHIAN CODE: After the flood a universal code of conduct was revealed to Noah (Gen. 9:1-8), comprised of seven precepts. Six are prohibitions: idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, robbery, cruelty to animals and defilement of family life. The seventh is the duty to establish in each society a system of law and justice, based on equity and reason, in defense of human rights. This pre-Mosaic Code represents Torah's universal ethics. The Torah does not call upon all men to convert to Judaism or adhere to any theological creed, but rather to behave in a civilized manner. Humaneness is man's salvation.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

NATURE'S CONSISTENCY is Divinely ordained (Gen. 8:22): "The days of the earth shall proceed: Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night,--none shall cease!" The constant, ongoing and orderly process of creation is poetically viewed in Scripture as expressing a viable, unbreakable covenant (brit) between the Creator and His created universe. Biblical man marveled at the constancy, stability and firmness of the Divine rules revealed in nature. Unlike the Pagans who viewed seeming violation and suspension of nature as miracles or terrifying omens, illustrating the tyranny and caprice of the gods, the Biblical man saw rather in the regular operation of nature, in its steadfast lawfulness, the greatest wonders--a living testimony to God's absolute dominion and nature's orderly obedience. The Almighty is ever competent to carry out His plans within His own established rules, and is never compelled to divert them. The Psalmist sings of all nature's forces as God's agents (malachim), praising Him (148:6-7): "For He decreed and they all came into being; He established them for all time. The rules He issued--never to be violated."

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

THE RAINBOW is a natural phenomenon. Impressive and extraordinary, it is based on clearly defined laws of physics: it shows the manifold colors of the spectrum which appears when the sun shines through water droplets. Often appearing after a brief thundershower while the sun's rays peer through the vanishing clouds, the rainbow aptly became a symbol of Divine reconciliation and promise: behold, the storm is over; the sun is shining again; there will be no more a flood to destroy the world. In God's words to Noah (Gen. 9:13): "My bow I set in the cloud to be a sign of the covenant between Me and Earth." Nachmanides (Spain, 1194-c.1270) remarks that the rainbow was established since creation; but for the generations following the Great Flood it serves as a reminder of God's decision to spare the world: A natural cosmologic feature becomes also a dramatic theological symbol. On observing a rainbow in the clouds, one recites a blessing to God, "who remembers the covenant, who is trusted in His promise and who exists in His word." (TB Berachot 59b).

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

THE EVIL IMPULSE is in all of us (Gen. 8:21): "The 'yetzer' of man's heart is evil from his youth." What is "yetzer?" It is variably rendered as imagination, inclination, intent, contrivance, or devisings. Its root "yatzer," points to the idea of creativity (as in "yetzira"). "Yetzer" is the creative ferment, the assertive drive within every person, which in itself is neutral; it leads to evil if it is not controlled, to good if it is. What is the difference between the wicked and the virtuous, since both harbor a "yetzer" (passion)? It is between one who is ruled by it and one who rules it. The current cult of "self" with its dubious slogans: "anything goes" or "do your own thing" – advocating the legitimacy and even the supremacy of the instinctive, primitive and impulsive elements of human nature – is disastrous: It unleashes and inflates the evil "yetzer" in man. In order to curb and refine his compelling urges and desires, turning them into creative forces, man must apply a higher source of authority. Man cannot be trusted to remain himself the ultimate judge of what is right and wrong; arbiter of his own conduct, man is tempted by his "yetzer" to perpetrate evil. When is man's "yetzer" sublimated into "yetzira" (creativity)? When his sense of morality is inspired and directed in light of higher, divine law.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

..WHAT IS IN THE NAME "BABEL?" The original meaning of this name (in Akkadian, "Babbu-Illu") for the ancient capital of Shinar (in Mesopotamia on the Euphrates, c. 2100 B.C.E; now Iraq) is "Gate of God" ("bab" is "gate" in most Semitic languages). The city was built around a "ziggurat" - a temple tower of Sumerian origin, pyramidal in form, consisting of a number of stories, each smaller than the one below, with surrounding steps leading to the open sky - a "gate" to heaven, for God to ascend and for men to ascend; hence "Babel." The biblical account, in ridicule of this simplistic pagan scheme, offers, however, another edifying etymology for the name, based on its similarity in sound to the Hebrew "balol." "Balol" is an onomatopoetic root word meaning confusion ("bilbul") and blending ("belila"). Ironically, then, the name "Babel," rather than indicating success of the plan - a "gate" to heaven - now bespeaks its failure (Gen. 11:9): "For there God confounded ("balal"- "bilbel," made a "babble" of) the language of the whole earth; and from there God scattered ("balal"- "bilel," made a "mixture" of) them over the whole earth." The true meaning of a name is determined not by its original claim but by its ultimate result.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SAVING LIFE is the compelling theme of the Flood (Gen. 6:9-7:19). Facing the impending catastrophe, Noah prepares and furnishes a sturdy boat ("tevah") with adequate accommodations in order to rescue at least his own family and also preserve all other species of life. Moved by divine orders, Noah's ingenuity and efforts saved the world: A new humanity emerged from his descendents; and the animal kingdom was assured continuity. The biblical Flood story conveys a message of hope and persistence: In face of disaster, do not despair. Do all you can to save all you can.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

TWO TYPES OF RELIGIOUS MATURITY are represented by Noah and Abraham. Noah advanced himself "with" God (Gen. 6:9); Abraham advanced himself "before" God (24:40). What is the difference? Noah needed God as a crutch to support him; only "with" Him, totally relying on Him, could he stride forward in the way of righteousness. Abraham was more independent. Drawing his moral fortitude from within himself, Abraham walked righteously on his own accord; firm enough in his moral integrity he advanced himself in God's presence—"before" Him (Rashi). Abraham's way—progressing "before" God, rather than "with" God—is considered in rabbinic tradition more virtuous and meritorious. Relating to God with human vigor and initiative, rather than with weakness and dependency, affords the faithful the power not only to follow and obey, but also to confront and challenge Him.

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THE FLOOD STORY (Genesis 6:9-9:17) illustrates a human approach to natural disaster; it tells of human efforts to provide rescue and survival and insure the continuity of all living beings. Noah, the hero of the narrative, is not a tragic figure. He is inspired by God to face the impending catastrophe with constructive action, not with hopeless resignation; he builds a huge vessel, assembles male and female of all endangered species, and prepares food and other necessities. This is done in order to shelter and save himself, his family, and insure the continuity of all living beings. In contrast to other similar stories in antiquity, the Biblical flood-story does not convey a sense of fatalism and doom, but rather celebrates human responsibility and ingenuity. Even in face of a devastating flood, we must devise means of survival and continuity.

Candlelight time 6:36 Sabbath ends 7:27

Scriptural reading for Saturday morning, Oct. 11:

NOAH: Genesis 6:9-11:32; Numbers 28:9-15

HAFTARAH: Isaiah 66

Rosh Hodes Heshvan Saturday, Oct. 11

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

ECOLOGICAL SURVIVAL is a striking theme of the story of the Flood in Genesis. In face of an impending disaster, a global deluge with the potential of wiping all life from the face of the earth, Noah is divinely encouraged and instructed to prepare for rescue and continuity. Noah is far from the tragic hero of ancient Mesopotamian or Greek drama who, struggle as he may, remains a helpless victim of capricious fate. Noah, heeding God's will, copes with tragedy by applying his human energy, resourcefulness, initiative and labor. He succeeds, if not in averting the flood, certainly in saving a viable remnant. The story which starts with a curse and a threat ends with divine blessing and promise: Survival of universal life.

NOAH

October 19, 1990

TEMPLES SERVE HUMAN NEEDS. God needs no temples; the whole universe is His shrine; so says Isaiah in God's name (66:1):

The heavens, My throne;

The earth, My footstool.

Where is the house you can build for Me?

Where, the place for My rest?

So wonders Solomon in his prayer at the Temple's dedication (I Kings 8:27):

Will God truly reside on earth?

Behold the heavens and the heavens above heavens

Will not contain You,

How much less this house which I have built?!

Yet this profound awareness of God's supremacy and human inadequacy does not curb our persistent urge to build glorious temples, ostensibly in adoration of God.

These temples truly serve our own needs, not God's. Moreover, we mostly build them to enhance our own glory, not God's!

NOAH

Thought One

THE FLOOD AND THE TOWER OF BABEL -- the two consecutive narratives -- are related. Both share one theme: The biblical idea of universal justice -- that human transgression leads to Divine retribution. Each story, however, demonstrates a different form of divine reaction. The Flood (mabul) was a global catastrophe, annihilating all living save a few remnants. In contrast, the Disunity Generation (dor-hapalaga), that built the Tower in defiance of God, were dispersed all over, but not sweepingly destroyed. Why so?

The Rabbis explain (Midrash BR 38; Rashi on Gen. 11:9): The Mabul Generation although they did not "plot" against God, nonetheless they robbed and fought each other, indulging in violence and defying social justice. They did not survive. Conversely, the Palagah Generation did maintain social integrity, they lived together in solidarity and comradeship. They were spared. The lesson: "How detestable is disunity, how noble peace!"

NOAH

Thought Two

THE SEVEN NOAHIAN PRECEPTS: According to Rabbinic tradition, a universal code of conduct, known as the Noahian, was revealed to Noah after the Flood (Genesis 9:1-8). It comprises seven precepts. Six of them are prohibitions against:

1. Idolatry;
2. Sexual defilement (adultery & incest);
3. Bloodshed;
4. Eating part of a living animal;
5. Blasphemy;
6. Robbery.

The Seventh precept entails the duty to establish in each society a system of law and justice, based on equity and reason, in defence of human rights.

This pre-Mosaic Code represents Torah's perception of essential, indispensable, and universal ethics. The Seven Noahian Precepts are the basic prescription for human civility.

Torah does not call upon all people, nor expects them, to fully convert to Judaism, to follow all or part of its precepts, or adhere to any of its theological views. Torah, however, demands that all people behave in a humane, civilized manner. Humaneness is humankind's salvation.

NOAH

Thought Three

THE TOWER OF BABEL NARRATIVE (Genesis 11:1-9) shows appreciation for the diversity of human culture. The initial stage of one homogeneous society, the whole universe being one entity, safa-ehat udevarim-ahadim, namely "speaking one language and sharing the same ideas" -- catastrophically failed.

True human progress is assured by developing multiple trends and outlooks, not by striving for uniformity and conformity. A monolithic culture is doomed; only a pluralistic society can survive and grow. Torah teaches to respect and cherish the uniqueness of each individual and each group.

NOAH

Thought Four

JEWISH SURVIVAL in face of adversity is depicted by Isaiah in poignant imagery (54:17):

All weapons forged against you,
Shall fail;
All tongues accusing you in judgement,
You shall refute.

This is a prophetic promise to Israel that has sustained the people throughout continuous ages of tumult and travail. It continues to inspire and fascinate us all.

Two threats are mentioned: military and diplomatic. Both -- the accumulation of enemy weaponry and the escalation of hostile demagoguery -- must not shake the people's faith. Nor ought they lead to apathy. The promise of prophecy is a call for human action. The critical events must strengthen the people's determination to live and grow, and move forward with renewed resolve, undistracted by futile fears and inspired by divine vision. The real threats must be challenged and counteracted by the people: "You shall refute!" The prophetic promise is thus embellished with an awakening call (2-4):

Enlarge the site of your tents!
Spread wide your dwellings' hangings!
Spare not; lengthen the ropes!
Spread out to the South and the North!
Fear not, and you will not be humiliated!
Cringe not, and you will not be disgraced!

Imbued with the timeless call of prophecy, the people is equipped to overcome momentary confusion or despair, and to act with clarity and confidence. This is what will assure Jewish survival.

NOAH

Thought Six

THE TOWER OF BABEL: This biblical story (Genesis 11:1-9) touches on a number of universal themes: The variety of human languages; the diversity of nations; the global dispersion of humankind; the monstrosity of a huge and central megalopolis; the futility of human arrogance; and -- according to rabbinic insight -- the inhumanity of an overly technological and materialistic society. The Midrash relates, that when the people were building the Tower, bricks became to them more precious than human life. "When a brick slipped and fell, the people wept. But when a person fell and died, no one cared." The result was catastrophic: Universal divisiveness, dissension, confusion, disorientation, destruction.

The name Babel (bavel) is explained in the biblical narrative, by a satirical play on words, as implying disorder and incoherence. This charming and amusing explanation of the name is rather moralistic than semantic -- edifying more than informing. Originally and historically, from the natives' point of view, the name is not derogatory, but to the contrary, quite honorific. The Chaldean composite bab-illu means "Gates of the Gods." However, the similar sounds in Hebrew suggest the notion of a mix-up -- balal, balbel (hence, in English, babble).

The overriding point of the biblical story, linguistically speaking, is that Babel, intending to be, as its original name indicates, "Gates of the Gods," turned out to be -- as the name sounded to the Hebrews -- a source of colossal confusion, an enormous bilbul.

NOAH

Thought Five

THE TERM "YETZER" (inclination) is used in Genesis to describe the human propensity for wickedness: The "yetzer" of a person's mind is for evil -- "all day long" (6:5), and "from his youth" (8:21). This term stems from the verb "yatzor" (meaning to create), and refers to the individual's creative drive. More than lust, impulse, urge, or imagination -- as it is commonly translated -- "yetzer" implies rather human design and purpose.

That the human "yetzer" is, however, bent to evil is recognized in Torah's narrative both before and after the Flood. Before, acknowledgement of the human "yetzer" is given as the reason for the divine decision to obliterate humankind altogether. After that, conversely, it is offered as a mitigating factor in the divine reversal of this decision -- as a reason for forbearing and cherishing humankind, in its inherent and unchangeable fallibility. "Never again will I destroy all living things, as I have done!" is now God's resolve.

According to rabbinic outlook, the "yetzer" in itself is a positive human quality, existentially indispensable and morally neutral. By the power of his free choice a person can and must direct his "yetzer" constructively and creatively -- applying it to good and beneficial purposes.

NOAH

Thought Seven

THE RAINBOW is a natural phenomenon. Impressive and extraordinary, it operates on clearly defined laws of physics. It shows the manifold colors of the spectrum which appear when the sun shines through water droplets. Often appearing after a brief thundershower, while the sun rays peer through the vanishing clouds, the rainbow aptly became a symbol of Divine reconciliation and promise: Behold, the storm is over; the sun is shining again; there will be no more a flood to destroy the world. In Torah's style, God says to Noah (Genesis 9:13): "My bow I set in the cloud to be a sign of the covenant between Me and Earth."

Nahmanides (Spain, 1194 - c. 1270) remarks that the rainbow was established since creation; but for the generations following the Flood it serves as a reminder of God's decision to spare the world. Thus, the rainbow -- initially a natural, cosmological, feature -- becomes in addition, in a sociologically suitable context, a dramatic theological symbol.

Upon seeing a rainbow in the clouds, the Sages prescribed the following blessing to God: "Who remembers the covenant, Who is trusted in His promise, and is established by His Word."