

B'reishit 5780
Hope on a Raft
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Our Torah reading starts out with such high hopes. God creates a world and makes human beings its stewards. The humans then proceed to get into all sorts of trouble. By the end of our *parashah*, 10 generations have passed.

And then, we encounter *this* freakish little piece of Torah:

The human population begins to increase. The men start having daughters. Some sort of Divine beings we've never heard of before, called "*B'nei Elokim*," see that human women are beautiful. The *B'nei Elokim* take wives from among the women they like best, and offspring are born. The Nephilim appear on earth. They are "the heroes of old, the men of renown." God says, "People cannot live forever. I will give them a lifespan of 120 years.

The next thing we know, God will God will decide to destroy all the people and animals except for Noah and his floating zoo.

Who *are* these guys, the *Nephilim*? The definite article used to name them-- "***the Nephilim***"-- indicates familiarity, as if they were once well-known heroes. Yet, despite their being known as "men of repute," most interpreters view the *Nephilim* negatively based on their placement just before the Flood narrative. They imagine a link between the appearance of the *Nephilim* and the wickedness that eventually brings on the flood. They find support for that theory in God's decision to shorten human life at the time the *Nephilim* emerge.

We know that the ancient world held many myths and legends about relationships and sexual unions between gods and mortals and the consequences of those matings. Typically, the offspring of such unions live forever, or are nearly immortal. Our Nephilim, by contrast, are mortals. Whatever the origin of the *Nephilim* narrative, now that it has landed in our Torah, the classical commentators categorically reject the notion of a semi-divine race born of the sexual union of mortals and divine beings. They squirm around the language of the text, offering explanations that override its plain language. Rashi offers two possibilities: either the fathers of the *Nephilim* are *human* lords and judges and *not* divine beings, or, the fathers of the *Nephilim* are divine, but they are angels, or messengers, of God, and not beings with their own agency. Both explanations fly in the face of the plain sense of the text.

For what it's worth, the commentators also wonder about the women involved. They theorize that the women have been made beautiful for their upcoming weddings to regular humans, when they are taken by force by the *B'nei Elokim* (See Rashi, *B'reishit Rabbah* 26:5, and Be'er Yitzchak, referenced in Scherman and Zlotowitz, p. 58).

All of these inferences come because crucial details are missing. Something murky is going on with these Nephilim. In fact, a close reading of the text creates the possibility that the *Nephilim* are *not even* the *product* of the *B'nei Elokim*-human couplings, but rather, as James Kugel suggests, the *Nephilim* "merely were around when this mating took place" (Kugel, p. 110). If the latter, their origin and their relevance are even more mysterious.

In either case, the text reads as if it is mulling over the presence of big, somehow glorious and at the same time potentially bad beings in the world. And, in either case, the *Nephilim* are anomalous in the context of the Torah's understanding of the nature of human beings, its understanding of the cosmic power dynamic, in which humans play a decisive role, and they are anomalous with the Torah's insistence on God's control of all aspects of pregnancy and childbirth, which the Bible underscores many times. There is no room in the biblical mindset for heavenly beings to come down and spawn giants.

And yet, here they are. If you want to know how I think they got here, I would argue that the *Nephilim* are an external tradition that got woven into our Torah narrative. There is evidence for that. But that is less interesting than what we might make of their presence now that we've got 'em.

It seems to me too simplistic, and also irresponsible, to say that the Nephilim arrive only to explain how human morality degenerated, leading to the Flood. First of all, there is really no evidence for that, since we are not told anything about the character of the Nephilim, and the Torah text itself calls them heroes. Secondly, there is little evidence that human morality was all that great to begin with; from their creation, humans seem to have a hard time figuring out how to act.

And thirdly, the *Nephilim* reappear later, so an attempt to understand what we might make of them must consider their narrative arc as a whole. In the Book of *B'midbar*, in the Incident of the Spies, ten of the twelve spies who scout out Canaan bring back a tonally frantic and emotionally fearful, but factual, positive report...up to a point. And *then*, they say: "The country that we...scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; **we saw the Nephilim there!** And we

looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them!” (B’midbar 13: 32-33, JPS translation).

That is the liminal moment when the newly liberated Israelites lose their nerve and their verve. Hearing that the *Nephilim* are in the Land, the nation that was never truly ready to carry out its mission in Canaan explicitly rejects it. Their fear overcomes their faith, and their entire generation is doomed to die in the wilderness. I would submit that the *Nephilim* appear in *B’reishit* so that they can be recalled in *B’midbar*, precisely because they are red herrings and not real. Not real, yet quite powerful in the minds of people.

I am suggesting that the anomaly of the *Nephilim* is their message. The *Nephilim* represent, to me, the demons we create in our minds to which we give godlike power to limit our own potential.

In the Midrash, before the first humans are created, the angels are dismayed that God has such an idea. They argue that humans will be full of foibles and inconsistencies, and they will upset the perfection of God’s newly created world. As they bring forth their arguments, God interrupts them and says, “Cut it out already! It’s done. I’ve just created the human.” The schools of Hillel and Shammai argued over whether it would have been better for humans not to have been created at all. The school of Hillel says we should have been created, and the school of Shammai says we should not have been. Finally, they agree that the world might have been better off without us, because of our propensity to mess things up--but now that we are here, we should live with intention and examine our behavior carefully.

There are no Nephilim. It’s just we humans here, in this incredible world, with the rest of Creation. And the fact is that despite our intelligence and ingenuity, there are times when life feels hard. Living in a world with other people is complicated, intricate, and sometimes fraught. Living with *our* own needs, capabilities, and challenges sometimes can be overwhelming. I have learned that we often grow most from those times of difficulty.

It is a cop-out to blame *Nephilim*--*whether our Nephilim* are departmental policy, difficult colleagues, the personality quirks of people we love, politics, or whatever we think holds us back from manifesting our potential. Sometimes it is just hard to do what we are called to do in this world, in our relationships and in our professional lives.

Our rabbis teach that every person should say, “for me, the entire world was created.” It is not hubris to believe that we matter and that our lives are worth the struggles that grip

us. In a world in which we can accomplish so much in seconds by pushing buttons on a keyboard or a tiny smartphone, it can feel like something is wrong with us when we find ourselves struggling to find the best way to flourish in our own uniqueness. We can become demoralized by the challenges of being human, of being at once extraordinarily capable and limited, insightful and lacking insight, perceptive and lacking perception, morally conscious and ethically vulnerable, wanting love and fearing intimacy.

We do not need to fear the reality that life will be hard, and we do not need to cast blame when it *is* hard. Our job is to move through the storms that come, even if we get lost in them, as we sometimes, inevitably, do.

The generation of the Flood can not rightfully blame their wickedness on the emergence of *Nephilim*. The Israelites in the desert can not blame their lack of faith on fake giants who will devour them.

The Wisdom of Solomon, an ancient text that was aware of the *Nephilim* legend, says: “Even in the beginning, when arrogant giants were perishing, the hope of the world took refuge on a raft” (Ibid pp. 110-111). That poetic reference to the Flood’s wiping out the nefarious influence of the *Nephilim* comes to teach us, I think, that the hope of goodness can survive terrible circumstances, if we hold onto it.

In our own lives, there are times when we must wrap our hopes tight around ourselves and take refuge on a raft. I hope that we can be people who have the courage to climb onto a raft with our highest hopes for this world and the contributions we have to offer, and I pray we will be people who offer compassion and support to others who are trying to do the same.

Our Torah shows us a world of infinite potential and a God Who wants us to thrive in it. I’m glad that the *Nephilim* don’t take over the narrative. I don’t want us to blame our problems on mythological demons. In the weeks ahead, our Torah narratives will bring us a series of imperfect people with messy family lives--**our** biblical family’s messy lives--and we will be reminded that **the times when we feel like we are hanging on for dear life sometimes turn out to be the times when we are learning how to best serve our purpose in this world.**

May we float with our faces to the wind.

Selected Bibliography in addition to works cited above

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