

Noah 5779  
Rabbi Betsy Forester  
On Being Righteous

In today's parashah, God brings a flood because the earth has been corrupted by humankind's' lawlessness: "The Lord saw how great was human wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his heart was nothing but evil all the time." God regrets having created us and wants to start over with the one righteous man God can find, and that man's family. After the flood and Noah's sacrifice, God decides "never again to destroy every living being." And what is the reason? The same reason for which God destroyed it in the first place! "Since the devisings of the human heart are evil from our youth." Not from birth, but apparently from the time we can be influenced to make choices that affect the order of things we are so vulnerable that we are all but hopeless from making the wrong ones. God destroys the world because of human wickedness, and God vows never to do so again, again because of human wickedness. What gives?

It is possible to read God's new promise as "Never again will I doom the earth because of humans, ALTHOUGH the devisings of the human heart are evil from their youth," that does not resolve the issue, because our propensity for evil remains. What has changed is God's response. No longer will God execute justice on all of the earth. God has developed the capacity for mercy. From that point forward, mercy will temper judgement. The very traits for which we might be condemned will become a source of divine compassion.

God learns and re-learns that lesson at various points as the biblical narrative evolves. Most famously, after the sin of the Golden Calf, God wants to destroy the nation for being "stiff necked" and then shows mercy after Moshe says, "come on, God, you KNOW that they are a stiff-necked people; therefore, do not destroy them."

Why? Why be compassionate when God could just destroy? What does God gain from privileging mercy over justice? Some say that God is committed to God's creation, and God's grace and generosity overcome God's more destructive urges. Mmmm, yes, we can find evidence of that, but I'm not sold. Too much evidence to the contrary.

I wonder if God has learned that it's better to be curious about what human beings can do with the free will invested in us. It's more interesting, potentially more productive, and ultimately, if we're lucky, more gratifying for all involved.

So perhaps the question is not "how good are we supposed to be," but rather, "how can we best exercise our free will so that we can dignify our existence, not relying on compassion alone? How can we make ourselves righteous, and therefore worthy of being saved, like Noah?" And I want us to think about this not only in terms of God's response to us, but in terms of how we respond to the complex natures of other human beings. Because whatever you or I may think about how God responds to our behavior, as human beings we often find ourselves on the front lines of delivering justice or compassion.

So I want to suggest some ways of thinking about how we make ourselves righteous.

Noah is described first as a tzaddik tamim, which means that he is completely righteous, without an iota of blemish. But then, the biblical text seems to qualify Noah's righteousness, saying that he he righteous in his generation. The 11th century commentator, Rashi, notes that a tzadik tamim, an unblemished tzaddik, clearly is better than just a plain tzaddik.

The Chasidic master Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman HaLevi Epstein of Krakov, also known as the Ma'or VaShamesh, takes the point further. He teaches

that there are two different types of righteous people. The tzaddik tamim, the unblemished type, lives a cloistered life. That's the kind of tzaddik Noah was. Noah walks with God, yes, but with other people, not so much. God tells him three times that the world will be destroyed, and Noah saves himself without a thought of redeeming others. Their fate is not his problem. The shtetl term for a tzadik like that is a "tzaddik in pelz," a "righteous person in a fur coat." He's pure and holy, but he is content in his fur coat and does not notice when people around him are freezing. That is a tzaddik tamim, according to the Ma'or Va'Shamesh. And it's okay--but it's not the better kind. In his view, it is better to be a person who is involved with others, who is involved in the world and not afraid that coming into contact with people who may be inferior in some way will contaminate him. He feels compassion and connection. What comes from all of this is the suggestion that we can be righteous by sharing our humanity with others. That may mean many things, and fortunately, in another teaching the Ma'Or HaShamesh gets more specific.

Who, he asks, is the ultimate tzaddik? Not a person others revere for their piety. That is between a person and God. Rather, a tzaddik is a person who, when they speak, everyone who hears them feels as if they are being addressed personally. A tzaddik deeply understands the needs of the people in the room, is fully present for them, and shares wisdom with wise intuition so that people feel like their deepest questions are being answered. We strive to be like that kind of tzaddik when we speak from one heart to another, wanting only to serve and help, without ego or pretension.

Here is another perspective, from the Berliner Rebbe, also known as the Netziv: He teaches that a tzadik is a person like our patriarchs, who treats all people with respect. He notes that In the Talmud (Avodah Zara 25a), the book of Genesis is called "ספר הישר - *Sefer HaYashar*," the Book of the Upright, because our patriarchs and matriarchs uphold the Creation by treating all people with respect. Although they disagree with others, they love humanity and want the best for all people. People who are "*yashar*"

never undermine Creation by promoting themselves at the expense of others. Even if they think others are wrong, they separate judgement of behavior from a fundamental love of Creation. While he does not use the word “tzaddik,” the word “yashar” often goes with it--the phrase “tzaddik v’yashar” is a common term for a person who is righteous and upright.” The idea that “you don’t have to be wrong in order for me to be right” may push us toward a more pluralistic outlook, a “heart of many rooms,” rather than the polarization we currently face.

The last perspective I want to share comes from Dena Weiss, the Rosh Beit Midrash at the Hadar Institute. Basing herself on a teaching from the Tosefta, she suggests that we see ourselves as hanging in the balance between being guilty and being righteous, that we see ourselves as average people who constantly encounter opportunities to do good or to sin (Tosefta Kiddushin 1:11). Weiss teaches that we should be like Noah, in the sense that the same Noah who is righteous and walks with God also shows himself to be weak and indecent. When Noah steps up to do what he is called to do, he is a great man. Each time he does so, he tips the balance toward being a tzadik. If we humble ourselves and live with no delusions of grandeur, and at the same with no excuses for our choices, then each good deed we do will keep us on the side of righteousness. One choice at a time, and we can all be both average and tzadikim at the same time.

For my part, I am always curious and optimistic about the potential of human beings to make ourselves better. I love that God learns compassion in this week’s parashah and I hope that we can be curious about how extending compassion to others gives them space in which to grow.

In our tradition we have a notion of “lamed vavniks.” You’ve probably heard of them. These are 36 tzadikim, 36 righteous people in the world in each generation. Nobody knows who they are, including themselves, but their compassion for humanity sustains the entire world. God models the life-saving power of compassion when God decides to love us as we are

and hope for the best. I pray that we will make ourselves worthy of the opportunity life gives us to strive for righteousness.