

Noah 5781  
Better than Right  
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When I taught middle schoolers, there were times when a student would make a point in class that showed they had misperceived information, inferred incorrectly, or made a deductive error. Once in a while, a significant teachable moment would surface, and I would reward the student with something called a “*te’udat sh’giah*,” a “mistake certificate,” that celebrated the learning opportunity that would not have opened up before us were it not for the student’s error.

It did not always go over well, and over time, I dropped the practice. It was too radical for some kids to put aside their disappointment in not being right, in a culture where achievement was measured in quantities of correct answers. But the more I have learned about anything, the more I am convinced that being right is not all that it’s cracked up to be, and more importantly, that resting on a perception of correctness works against our best interest. The self-satisfied feeling leads to hubris and risks shutting down further inquiry. We may think, if a problem has been solved correctly, why pursue the matter further? I wish we could re-create our lexicon and replace the word “mistake” with “learning opportunity,” the word “right” with “heading somewhere that seems to make sense,” and mark achievement by increments of conceptual understanding and the ability to ask the next generative question.

It is so easy and yet so limiting to sit contentedly where we believe we are right. When I studied our *parashah* this week, I was struck by a subtext about being right, that felt extra relatable, with election politics and Beth Israel Center planning fresh on my mind.

“Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9), we read today. In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 108a), Rabbi Yochanan interprets this to mean that Noah was righteous and wholehearted relative to others of his generation, but not relative to those of other generations.” In other words, he was the best among bad options. Reish Lakish responds: “In his generation, Noah was righteous and wholehearted despite being surrounded by bad influences; all the more so would he have been considered righteous and wholehearted in other nations.” Rashi adds that Noah needed God’s support to uphold him in righteousness, as opposed to Abraham, who draws his moral strength from within. That is why, say Rashi, the text says that Noah walked with God. It’s not that they were partners, but rather that God steered Noah in the right direction.

We will never know what the author had in mind regarding Noah’s character, but a more interesting question to me is this: What does Noah believe about his own righteousness?

God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark...” (Gen. 6:13-14). Then God gets more specific: “I am about to bring the Flood...to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark” (Gen. 6;17).

If you were Noah, how would you feel about that? Would you worry for a second about whether you really deserved to be saved? Would you worry that God might discover that you, too, were flawed? Would you wonder what was so bad about everyone else, so that you could measure yourself against it? If I were Noah, I have a feeling that I’d be dealing with a major case of impostor syndrome. Maybe that’s why the first thing he does when it’s all over is get drunk. The burden of being the only right person on earth must have been impossible to bear.

Because the thing is, the entire human race seems to think it's doing fine. "The earth became corrupt before God" (Gen 6:11). Our sages interpret this to mean that God deemed their behavior corrupt, but they themselves saw nothing wrong with it (*Etz Hayim*, p. 41). It is entirely plausible to imagine that Noah doesn't know what is so terrible about them, either. What *are* they doing, that causes God to rule against them, when they don't even know they are on trial?

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: The Torah speaks of corruption. Anywhere that the term "corruption" is stated, it refers to nothing other than licentiousness and idol worship (Sanhedrin 57a). So, apparently God did not approve of their sexual behavior, and God saw that they were following after ideas, principles, and values that drew them away from God's enduring truth and goodness. Rashi adds that when the Torah says the earth was filled with violence, it means, specifically robbery. Given that the earth was "filled" with it, a broad reading suggests that people trod recklessly and globally on one another's privacy, security, and boundaries of all kinds and took what they wanted unfairly and greedily.

Don't we, sometimes, chase after the wrong gods? Don't we, sometimes, fail to see more life-giving and compassionate paths to getting what we want than the ones we choose? Don't we, sometimes, tread on others' territory, and say hurtful things because we are so sure that they should give us what we seek?

Thank Goodness for that rainbow, I guess, coming to reassure us all that God will never again destroy the whole world by flood, or wipe out all life on earth, for God comes to understand that we are bound to make grievous mistakes. We never really know if we've got things right. Blindness to what we do not know is part of the human condition. I'd like to think it's the part that inspires curiosity and a constant process of questioning and refinement, and that believing that there is a right toward which to aspire, makes the effort meaningful.

There are more useful ways to be than simply, or God forbid, smugly, “right.” **The real point of knowing there is a “right” out there is the striving for deeper and better ways to redeem ourselves and our world.** Being curious like that demands a large measure of humility, and a willingness to see what we thought we knew, from a completely different perspective.

And that is precisely what God eventually models for us. God learns the injustice of ruling a world in which people are bound to get lost, on penalty of annihilation. God says, from this time forward, I will take a different approach. I will accept that people will stumble, and **I will find their choices so objectionable that I will want to remove my presence from them entirely, but I won’t do it. Instead, I will see something else: humanity’s capacity to learn and to redeem itself.** We see the result of God’s learning in the story of Jonah, when God, faced with the same evidence of human weakness and temptation, says to the people of Nineveh: Ya know, I’d really like to destroy you, but I’ll give you 40 days. Not 40 days of rain, this time, but 40 days of for you to consider what you’re doing. Because you matter to me, and I hope that I also matter to you. Nineveh repents, king and cattle together, and God chooses mercy over destruction.

**The question never has to be “who is right?” but rather, “how can we best dignify our existence by thoughtfully exercising our free will on a constantly developing moral and intellectual foundation?”**

The current pandemic, like the flood, has taken a great deal from us. But perhaps it has made us more aware of the importance of exercising our free will responsibly, humbly, and earnestly. I hope so. May that be our will, and God’s, too.

