

A PLACE FOR GOD ON EARTH

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Life after the flood?

After all, is life ever the same after a major disaster? Are we ever the same?

And we might ask that question of the Torah—given that in *parasha* (Torah reading) Noah, all that had contained the breath of life in it, with the exception of Noah and his family and the animals he had brought on board the ark, was blotted out, dissolved. (Genesis 6:9-11:32)

We might ask: What now? How *does* God want us to be? And to what *end*?

We can find answers to these questions in three different places in *parasha* Noah. The answer to the first question—How are we to be?—comes to us before the flood is actually over. While waters still cover parts of the earth, Noah sends out a dove, for the second time. And when the dove finally comes back to Noah, it is with an *alei zayit taraf b'fha* (עלה-זית טרף בפייה)—with an olive leaf it had torn in her mouth. (Genesis 8:11) The word used to describe the leaf, *taraf* (טרף), means torn.

The rabbis ask: What do we learn from this word *taraf*?

The word, says Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), means food seized by oneself. Thus, what an animal in a free condition takes independently for food is called *taraf*.

Now, for a whole year the dove had been fed, but had not enjoyed *taraf*, food that is gained independently. And now she arrives with an olive leaf in her beak—something that she does not normally eat! The rabbis take this bitter olive leaf in the mouth of the dove to teach us that bitter food, eaten in freedom and independence, is sweeter than the sweetest food in a dependent condition. And so, we may understand this torn olive leaf to be a symbol of the value of our independence and freedom.

The message that we are to be free is also the message of God's promise to Noah. For God promises that even if people should behave in a way that is wicked from their youth, which is not normally the case—it is us older folks, says Rabbi Hirsch, who are more inclined to be set in evil ways and to be clever in disguising our wrongdoing—God says even then I will not again destroy the world. (Genesis 8:21)

Why not?

One reason the rabbis cite is that the conditions of the world have changed, making it no longer necessary. For example, people will no longer live to 950 years, as did Noah. In their shorter life spans, they will be less able to corrupt the world in the ways that they did when they lived for nearly a thousand years.

But Rabbi Hirsch says there is another reason. The very free will of humankind that led to the bad choices that filled the world with violence before the flood, the very obstinacy of youth which can lead to rebellion, is to be preserved, because it also results in independence. After all, it is said that the Torah was offered to Israel not because it was compliant, but precisely because it was *kashe oref* (קשה ערף), the most stiff-necked. (Exodus Rabbah 42:9)

And why should the Torah be given to one who is stiff-necked?

Because once this obstinacy and independence of spirit had been directed into use for good purposes, then those qualities would be used to stick to the good and the right. In the same way, says Rabbi Hirsch, for the sake of firmness in goodness and virtue, God has implanted the principle of independence in the heart of every person.

So there you have it. Even when we are most stubborn, our independence is not to be drowned out of us, but rather preserved. We are to be free.

But then comes the question, free for what? To what end?

We believe that the answer comes to us in the verses that contain Noah's prophesy of the fate of his sons Cham, Yafet, and Sheim. The scripture tells us that Cham, through his son Canaan, will be cursed. Canaan will be a servant of servants. And the scripture then says that God will be blessed, and God will dwell in the tents of Sheim. (Genesis 9:25-27)

Why should Noah's son Cham be cursed?

In order to answer that question, it is necessary to backtrack. When Noah came off the ark, the first thing that he did was to plant a vineyard. And when the vines produced fruit, he made wine. And then he got drunk. And in his drunken state he staggered into his wife's tent and fell down naked on her bed.

At this point, Noah's son Cham, relishing the opportunity to spy on his father's weakness, enters the tent. Taking advantage of his father's drunken state, he sodomizes him, and then he steps outside to relate the details to his brothers.

When Sheim heard Cham's ridicule of their father, Sheim proposed to his brother Yafet that they attempt to preserve what was left of their father's dignity by covering his nakedness with a blanket, which they did. With their heads turned *achoranit* (אחורנית), backwards, they made sure they would not see their father's nakedness.

So Noah wakes up and, when he realizes what has happened to him, he prophesies that the descendants of Cham will be cursed.

If Cham is cursed, shouldn't Sheim and Yafet be blessed?

The scripture doesn't say so. Instead the verses say: God will be blessed and God will dwell in the tents of Sheim.

Why? What does it take for God to be blessed and dwell in our tents?

This is also an important question for us, because the word that signifies blessed, the word *baruch* (ברוך), and the word referring to God dwelling among us, the word *shochein* (שוכן), appear so often in our prayers. And often the understanding of the word *baruch* has been confused. People have taken this word to mean that we can bless God in the same way that God blesses us.

But what need does God have of our blessing?

It doesn't make any sense. Unless when we say *baruch atah Adonai* we express the vow to God to dedicate all our forces to the fulfillment of God's will. Unless we understand that God made the fulfillment of God's will on earth dependent on our free will, on our free decision to do good. And in that moment God said to us: bless Me, that is, realize My will, bless My work, the achievement of which on earth I have laid in your hands.

And here, in this Torah reading, we find this word blessed in the speech of the oldest ancestor of the new world.

When we say *baruch*, we are carrying on the work which here is said to be expected at the beginning and at the end of humanity, and we are using the oldest word which is known to have been spoken to express the relation of humankind to God.

And the word referring to the presence of God in this verse is *v'yishcon* (וישבן—He will dwell). Judaism teaches that God wishes primarily to dwell on earth with humankind. The scripture says, "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them." (Exodus 25:8)

And that is the goal of the Torah, to teach us what we have to do so that God comes to us in this world.

But although the conception of the *Shechinah* does teach the most intimate connection of humankind to God in this world, in the word itself there is the greatest protection against all fanaticism and extravagance of fancy. For peculiarly, the word *shochein* means to dwell and it also means to be a neighbor. The Jew who takes a place on earth to be a dwelling-place must at the same time concede space to another for a similar dwelling-place. The Divine is the neighbor of humankind, and humankind of the Divine, but neither becomes completely absorbed by the other.

While Judaism does teach us the most intimate nearness of God to humankind, it wants to keep us to the clearest, most comprehensible—we would say, sober—way of contemplating that nearness. Not by a fanatic gushing over into the Divine, says Rabbi Hirsch, not by a so-called absorption into God, do we become the servants of God, not by finally coming to lose all freedom of self-decision, feeling that all we do is really God doing in us and through us,

Only in using the mind and free will that God has given us—with clarity of insight and faithful to what will make us a better neighbor—do we approach the highest human perfection in the realm that God has created for us. When we do so our life on earth gains the holiness that makes it worthy of being a dwelling place for God.

So, regarding the question, what are we here for?—we answer: to be free. And what is our freedom for? That which we are made free for is that which is blessed.

Thus we are to become a blessing, become a neighbor, and become a place for God to dwell on earth.

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