

Shabbat Shalom

I understand very well with the High Holy Days and their important themes and the events in the world the last few times that I have spoken they have been pretty heavy and I dealt with some very painful issues.

This morning we are reading Parshat Noach. Noah and the flood story, as you know, it often reads like a child's story. But it is also about a very heavy issue and that's the destruction of the world. The conversation that I heard a few times in my nearly 55 years, I remember the Cuban Missile Crisis and the bomb shelters that were built. I remember the nuclear issues of the 70s and the anti-nuclear movement. Again, there are great fears being expressed about destruction...Global climate issues, a nuclear Iran....

The flood story actually comes to us to teach something about destruction and before I examine some of those things what I would like to do on a lighter note is give you twelve lessons that I learned from Rabbi Riemer about the flood to help us enjoy this moment a little more.

Here are the twelve lessons of the flood:

1. Try not to miss the boat. If you do, you will be sorry.
2. Remember that we are all in this same boat, so we have to try to get along.
3. Always plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah started to build the ark.
4. Stay in shape. Noah was 600 years old when the call came to him. You can never tell when you will be asked to do something big and important.
5. Don't pay attention to your critics. In this case, they turned out to be all wet. Just get on with what you have to do and know that no matter what you do when you are dealing with people, there are going to be critics.
6. Build your future on the high ground.
7. For safety sake, don't travel alone. Always travel in pairs.
8. Speed is not necessarily an advantage. The snails managed to get on board just as the deer did.
9. If you are very stressed, float awhile.
10. Remember the ark was built by amateurs and the Titanic was built by professionals.
11. No matter how stormy your trip is remember there is a rainbow waiting at the end.
12. Finally, is God tells you to make sure that the animals are aboard the ark and your ark is made of wood, double check and make sure that God wants you to bring the woodpeckers and the termites.

Now let's get a little more serious. I want to focus on a lesson from another colleague about the flood and the ark and what happened afterwards. The Torah teaches us that Noah and his wife, their sons and their wives came off the ark. If you read carefully you will notice that they went into the ark in the following order. Noah and his sons and his wife and his daughter-in-laws. They came of the ark Noah and his wife and their sons

and their wives. Why did they enter the ark in one order and come out in a different order. Well, perhaps they were Orthodox when they went in and they came out as Conservative Jews – just joking...

The Sages explain it this way. When they went in and while they were on board, they stayed separate for how could they have had pleasure when all of the world was drowning. But when they were leaving the ark, they came out in couples because the future of the world now depended on them. Their's was the task of reproducing so that the world would go on.

I always remember my teacher, colleague, friend, Donniel Hartman, speaking the day before the war broke out in Israel a year ago this past summer 2006. The title of his talk is "There is no existential threat to Israel." The next day, of course, the war broke out and the existential threats begin to reemerge. This year when we went out I mentioned to him that I'll never forget his talk and he laughed. He said, you know there are different ways of looking at every situation. The truth is there are Oy Vey Jews. There are Jews who always think that Jewish life will become extinct. Then there are those of us who look at our survival and live with a passion for what we do and what we have and a realization of our strength and look forward to tomorrow. I try to live that way also, although, at times it is difficult and certainly these are difficult times.

What I want to do is look a little bit of what happened after Noah and his family came out of the ark. The Torah says that they came out into dry land and Noah planted a vineyard and he harvested grapes and he caught roaring drunk – really farsnickered, as my son says. Then it tells us about all sorts of lewd and lascivious behavior, which I won't go into now and I know by saying that, many of you will take home the Bible and thumbing through it.

The question then is why did Noah get drunk? A number of different reasons have been given for this. The first traditional response: he didn't realize how powerful the drink really was. Poor guy. He never tasted wine before and so this notion of only drinking in moderation was not one that he had. Another notion contained in the idea that Noah is the first survivor. When he came out of the ark he saw that every single person he knew except for his immediate family had been killed. He saw all the destruction and he despaired. He saw every house and every tree and everything that was familiar to him were wiped out. A concentration survivor once said to me that there was nothing for me to do, but to turn to drink after the Holocaust. So, that's a possibility in the face of so much destruction there maybe no other response.

Another colleague from Jerusalem, Rabbi Daniel Gordis, offers a very different explanation. Noah didn't get drunk because he couldn't handle the failure and destruction, but rather he got drunk because he couldn't handle the success. What he meant by that was that Noah got involved with the project and all these people said that he was a fool, so many people made fun of him and he saw that he was right. He actually had saved the world and he was the focus of the universe. His mission was accomplished. He did great things. He was on an incredible high and when he came off

the ark, he now had to involve himself in the mundane and the regular work of creating life. That was very, very difficult for him.

Rabbi Gordis refers to it as the “Noah Syndrome.” It is not a syndrome in the psychiatric literature, but it is one that we are familiar with. We see it with great stars, everywhere from boxers to Rabbis. We often wonder why so many people who experience great success and fame end up destroying their own lives. It has to do with the fact that success and attention can be intoxicating. It is a phenomenal feeling for a performer to be in front of hundreds, if not thousands of people and receive acclaim from so many. But I think it is very dangerous. I think bio-chemically it probably releases something in the brain and then when it is all done there is a sense of emptiness and a question as to what is there to do now and what is left. That’s why so many performers beg for attention, they can’t get enough attention. They become rather detestable as a function of it. And this is true with the completion of any great task. For all of us it is also true the day after the event we plan so hard for and have such high expectations for and all of you know that experience. It may have been your children’s B’nai Mitzvah or a wedding or an anniversary party or a vacation where we so look forward to something and we plan hard and our expectations are high and we have a grand time and then it is over and we feel so alone. Life can feel so empty.

How else do you explain the great athletes and entertainers and performers and politicians and the numbers and their rapid fall from grace? Maybe Noah was the first one like this. He raised the question, what do you do after you have done it all? What do you do after you achieved life’s work? What lies ahead after you have made it? What does IT mean? Noah got drunk and from there things just got worse.

It is a different way of looking at the story, isn’t it? It is the opposite of the way it is typically looked at. It was a way of coping with despair. So, what’s the answer to the “Noah Syndrome?” What do we do after we make it, after we succeed? I think it has to do with what IT is. What does it mean to make it and what success is all about. I think it has to do with finding purpose in our lives that’s part of the process and not part of a single moment. I think it is about having a goal that you work with your entire life. It is part of the way you are in the world. It is about your posture. I don’t mean that in a physical sense. It’s about the way you relate to people around you and the realization that that’s what defines you and it is not a grade, not a paycheck, it’s not a bank account and it is not a performance. I think it is about devoting our lives to higher causes. Not to our own success, as it were, but to devoting our lives to holiness; devoting our lives to goodness; devoting our lives to God. Really wise people understand what making is about and those people understand that it is all part of a process.

So the Noah story is a warning then. It teaches us that just as there is a danger in failing, perhaps there is a greater danger in succeeding. We need to have big broad goals in life and those goals are way beyond ourselves. Those goals start with our families and our communities and our societies and our countries and our world and all of humanity.

The poet Browning had it right when he said, “A man’s reach must exceed his grasp or what is heaven for.” So, the sad day in life is when you say, I have done all I can do. No, we each can do more and that’s the Divine inspiration that can come from this story.

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