



**Parashat Noach**  
**Apres le Deluge: Moi**

by Michael Sarid on Saturday October 28, 2006  
6 Cheshvan 5767  
Genesis 6:9 - 11:32, Shabbat

Apres le Deluge: Moi

Imagine that you are alone in the world. A monumental calamity has destroyed life as you knew it. Your friends and community? Gone. Your home and possessions? Gone. Your frames of reference, your very identity? Gone or, at least, forever transformed.

How do you go on? How do you reconstruct a life for yourself? Is there no one to help or guide you? To comfort you when your nightmares of the devastation become unbearable? Why did you survive when so many others perished? Your sense of loss is so overwhelming that you feel paralyzed. You may even feel, perhaps subconsciously, responsible for the destruction.

While the Torah provides scant evidence of the emotional lives of most of its characters, I imagine that Noah must have experienced these feelings after the Great Flood, which wiped out the world as Noah knew it. We can allow ourselves to relate to Noah's experience, as devastating loss is of course a continuing reality in our world. My thoughts naturally turn to my father, one of the few members of his extended family to survive the Nazi death camps; like many Holocaust survivors, he still bears the scars of his losses 61 years later. I think of myself and my own urban LGBT community during the early years of the AIDS crisis, a time when suffering, death and loss seemed absolute and unrelenting. And I think of my friends who have lived with AIDS and other life-threatening illnesses, and their succession of harsh losses: daily routines, bodily functions, hopes for the future.

How did Noah's enormous personal losses affect his life after the flood? The Torah tells a brief but strange tale (Gen. 9:20-26) that has challenged commentators for centuries, but which I feel can only be properly understood from the perspective of a man who has lost everything. After the waters recede, God creates a rainbow as a symbolic promise to humanity and all of creation never to destroy it again. Noah beholds this hopeful, beautiful sight, but does he draw reassurance or inspiration from it? No; to the contrary, he responds by cultivating the world's



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first vineyard, drinking the world's first wine, and, upon drinking himself into oblivion, becoming the world's first substance abuser.

It was only in rabbinic times that wine became a symbol of joy. The biblical view of wine, by contrast, is decidedly mixed; drunkenness is viewed with particular disfavor. Examples abound. When Abraham's nephew Lot gets drunk, his daughters' incestuous advances result in the birth of two nations that become enemies of Israel. (Gen. 19:33-38) Eli the priest mistakes Hannah's sincere, silent prayer for public drunkenness, and judges her harshly before realizing his error. (1 Sam. 1:13-15) King David causes Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, to become drunk as part of a scheme to cover up David's own adulterous crime. (2 Sam. 11:13)

So how is it that Noah, whose innate virtue is the reason he and his family are singled out for survival in the first place, engages in such a disgraceful activity, in the biblical worldview? Traditional commentators have used Noah's drunkenness to cast aspersions on his supposed virtue, pointing out that Noah is never described as righteous in an absolute sense, but merely "the most righteous of his generation" (Gen. 6:9), a generation whose overall corruption warranted destruction.

I have a different view: Noah was self-medicating. Perhaps God, in creating the rainbow, was attempting to respond to Noah's personal anguish – essentially, trying to cheer him up. The problem with good cheer, as we know, is that it often backfires, especially when the recipient is in the throes of overwhelming grief. Unintentionally, God's rainbow may have served to intensify Noah's pain. For the same reason that my father avoids Yom Ha-Shoah observances, a promise of "never again" is also an implicit reminder that it happened once before.

Alcohol can numb our pain. Paradoxically, it can also cause us to let down our defenses, to make ourselves naked and vulnerable to further pain. As a physical manifestation of Noah's emotional state, he takes off his clothes and falls to the floor. It is at this point that I imagine Noah's tent as a scene of chaos and despair. A smashed jug of wine, rotting half-eaten food and human filth are strewn everywhere. Insects are swarming. An old man reeking of alcohol and vomit, unshaved and unbathed, lies naked and alone on the dirt floor. Noah is human degradation personified.

Enter, Noah's son Ham, who witnesses his father in this sorry state. Ham's first instinct is to flee the scene in disgust. He alerts his brothers Shem and Japheth, who tend to their father by covering him up while averting their eyes. Later, when Noah sobers up and learns what has happened, he furiously sputters out a curse on Ham's son Canaan: "The lowest of slaves shall you be to your brothers!"



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What, exactly, was Ham's sin? Was it witnessing his father's nakedness? Was it failing to cover Noah? Was it mentioning what he saw to his brothers? What was so terrible in Ham's behavior that warranted such a vitriolic curse?

Again, I believe the answer lies in Noah's anguish. When we are suffering unbearable grief, it can seem outrageous to us that others do not share our misery, and are in fact carrying on their normal lives as though nothing were happening. A small number of American Jews pleaded with President Roosevelt to bomb the death camps when our military had the opportunity, and it was horrifying to those activists that the U.S. government knew what was happening but failed to act, as the evidence now shows. As one of many ACT-UP demonstrators in the 1980's, the rage that fueled my activism was based in the complacency, the absence of horror I perceived in the non-queer community. How *dare* people fail to be outraged by what felt like the collapse of the world I inhabited?

If Ham had been more of a *mensch*, he would have understood that his father was in great pain. The fact that Ham entered Noah's tent at all was insensitive. But it was downright cruel, once Ham bore witness to his father's degradation, to fail to react. Ham could have comforted his father, or at least cleaned him up and covered him with a blanket. He could have taken any of many possible actions to help restore Noah's dignity in some way. But Ham did none of those things. He simply passed on through, leaving Noah in his tent in the same state in which he found him. Of *course* Noah was outraged! His curse is vicious, but in the biblical perspective, it restores moral balance. By failing to treat his father with a shred of dignity, the future of Ham's offspring will be defined by slavery, the ultimate in human degradation.

If we can learn anything from Noah's life after the flood, it is to recognize loss for what it is, even when it is not expressed in words. Despair cannot be simply cheered up out of existence with a promise, no matter how brightly colored the symbol. And to witness human suffering and do nothing to alleviate it is indeed a moral outrage, in both the biblical world and our own.

*Ken y'hi ratzon.*



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