

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



POLITICS AFTER THE FLOOD

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

G-d destroys the world via the Flood, then promises never to do so again. Why? What has changed?

Let's assume that G-d's promise is a meaningful commitment not to destroy the world by any means, despite the warning in midrash and spiritual that "it's the fire next time". Let's bracket the question of whether this promise entails a commitment to prevent the destruction of the world by human beings or space aliens. Let's however be open to the midrashic suggestion that G-d destroyed many worlds before making this promise to ours.

The late scholar Byron Sherwin captured one approach to this problem in his essay "Portrait of G-d as a Young Artist". An immature artist destroys their work in anger when it fails to achieve the ideal they are working toward. The idea is that G-d *k'b'yakbol* matures and comes to recognize that the existence of imperfect beings has value, even though He – and we – should continue striving toward perfection. This approach can be framed in terms of G-d realizing the need for His Attribute of Mercy to partner with His Attribute of Justice in Creation for anything durable to emerge.

Rabbi David Forhman, in an Aleph Beta dialogue with SBM alum Rivky Stern (h/t Ron Truxton), suggests a different organizing metaphor. He frames the Sotah ritual as an inversion of the Flood; G-d permits/mandates the dishonor of having His Name dissolved in water rather than dissolving the world in water for the honor of His Name. The idea is that G-d at the Flood played the part of a jealous husband triggering a round of tit-for-tat escalations ending inevitably in tragedy; now He provides such husbands with a way to salvage their marital relationship. If He had only *k'b'yakbol* learned of this possibility before the Flood!

Both these approaches require saying "*k'b'yakbol*" = "as if it were possible" to avoid attributing change to G-d.

The simplest alternative is to say that Noach was the first human being to "find *chein*" in the eyes of G-d. If we define *chein* as some form of grace, then it seems oxymoronic to say that Noach was the first person to deserve it; but simply translating *chein* as "favor" rather than "grace" largely solves that problem.

Or we might suggest that one or more previous worlds also contained one person who found *chein* in G-d's eyes, but ours was the first in which that person emerged from the ark alive and sane, with their family likewise. (Granting that even Noach went on a drunk soon after. The point is that G-d would only make the promise to a competent and worthy audience.)

Another framework may emerge from the postscript to the Oven of Akhnai story on Bava Metzia 59b. After the Sages rule against Rabbi Eliezer despite the miracles and Heavenly Voice apparently supporting his halakhic position,

אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו, אמר ליה:
מאי עביד קודשא בריך הוא בההיא שעתא?

אמר ליה:

קא חייד ואמר:

"נצחוני בני, נצחוני בני."

Rabbi Natan found Eliyahu. He said to him:

"What was The Holy Blessed One doing at that time?"

He said to him:

(The Holy Blessed One) was smiling and saying:

"My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated me!"

Rabbeinu Chananel cited by Shitah Mekubetzet cross-references Pesachim 119a:

אמר רב כהנא משום רבי ישמעאל ברבי יוסי:

מאי דכתיב למנצה מזמור לדוד.

זמרו למי שנוצחין אותו ושמה.

בא וראה שלא כמדת הקדוש ברוך הוא מדת בשר ודם.

בשר ודם מנצחין אותו - ועצב.

אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא - נוצחין אותו ושמה

שנאמר:

ויאמר להשמידם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו.

Said Rav Kehana in the name of Rabbi Yishmael beRabbi

Yosay:

What is the meaning of *lamnatzeiach mizmor l'David*?

Sing to the One whom they defeat = *menatzchin oto* and He rejoices.

Come see that the characteristic of The Holy Blessed One is not like that of flesh-and-blood.

Flesh-and-blood – they defeat him, and he is saddened,

But The Holy Blessed One – they defeat Him and He

rejoices,

as Scripture says:

He spoke to destroy them

had it not been for Mosheh His chosen standing in the breach before Him.

The moral of that aggadic statement is made more explicit in Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim 627:

למנצח
למי שהוא מבקש להנצח,
אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא
כשאני נוצח - אני מפסיד,
נצחתי בדור המבול בדור הפלגה בסדומיים - ואבדתי,
משה נצחו - ונשתכר כל אותם אוכלוסיין:
"Lamnatzeiach" -

To the One who seeks to be defeated,
Said the Holy Blessed One:
When I triumph/notzeiach – I lose out;
I triumphed at the Flood Generation, the Split Generation,
and the Sodomites – and I lost:
Mosheh defeated Him – and He gained all those citizens.

(It is not clear to me which chapter(s) of Tehillim opening with למנצח this derashah is based on. Cf. also Pesikta Rabbati 9, which grounds this idea in Isaiah 57:16: כִּי לֹא לִנְצַח אֲרִיב = I will not quarrel for *netzach*, with *netzach* translated as "victory" rather than "eternity")

Thus understood, Pesachim 119a suggests that our world survived because human beings stood in the breach before G-d and prevented Him from destroying it, and that He rejoiced at the development of just that sort of restraint on His destructive capacity. (This may be an interpretation of the Rabbinic dictum that "G-d desires the prayers of the righteous".)

Rabbeinu Chananel may cross-reference Pesachim 119a simply as another instance in which G-d accepts defeat with a smile. But it would be neater if his implicit claim is that the fate of the world was in the balance when the Sages overruled Rabbi Eliezer, and that ruling against him allowed G-d's Attribute of Mercy to remain a partner in Creation.

Why would that be? In the Oven of Akhnai story, the Sages overrule Rabbi Eliezer on the basis of the principle that "majority rules". If the majority does not rule, then power can only be legitimated by force. A world that cannot get past this stage will at some point destroy itself.

Yet the Talmud does not fetishize majority rule. The Akhnai sugya recognizes that tyranny of the majority is an evil. When the Sages go on to excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer, G-d devastates the world so that for example a third of the wheat crop is blasted. That's terrible, although not yet a universal Flood.

The political perspective of the Founding Fathers was that human greed could be channeled into socially constructive channels, so that we benefit together as a human society from our individual drives for success. One can read this as an explanation of why G-d promises not to destroy our world despite realizing that "*the inclination of humanity is evil from its youth*".

Here again, it is vital to understand that Chazal are not advocating for greed as an individual moral virtue, nor do they think that a society of human beings driven exclusively by greed will long survive. Nor did the Founding Fathers. But they all acknowledge that self-interest is ineluctably a factor in human decisionmaking, so that a wise politics must find ways for it to be expressed-in-action constructively.

Here I must admit that I cannot find a way to make Noah a per se symbol of democracy, or even of republicanism. Nothing about his actions before or after the Flood relate to politics, and reducing human society to a single nuclear family can be understood as a method of preventing politics from developing.

On the other hand, G-d intervenes in the Tower of Babel story (as understood by Netziv) in order to prevent a human monoculture. Perhaps His intended point was that democracy must begin from a shared identity. A core challenge of politics is to prevent that shared identity from becoming an oppressive force that stifles individuality and subgroup identities.

I think Torah drives us to acknowledge that G-d's approach failed. Human societies devolved into tyrannies of minorities and majorities. So He starts over again with Avraham.

Yet it is vital that while Avraham is in a sense on an ark – "Avraham was on one side, and everyone else on the other" – his story differs from Noah's radically in that G-d does not destroy everyone else. Choosing Avraham was/is instead an effort to redeem and actualize the value inherent in every *tzelem Elokim*, even if in the moment many human beings and human societies seem bent on recreating the worst of all past sins.

Shabbat shalom!

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