

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong

SHABBAT SHALOM

23 - 24 October, 2009

8 Cheshvan 5770

Parashat Noach
(Genesis 6:9-11:32)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

Last Hanukkah I gave Rabbi Martha a Chinese Folk Art style Noah's Ark as a gift. The junk-like ark with its carved animals is charming. As such, it is a perfect physical representation of the conventional understanding of the story of Noah. We treat "Noah and the Ark" as a kind of Biblical fairy-tale, a suitable motif for toys and for depiction in pop-up books. In reality the story of the Flood is something much deeper and much darker.

The true nature of the Flood narrative is masked by the English translation. It is not the tale of a flood, but The Flood — the *Mabbul*. As Nachum Sarna tells us in his commentary on Genesis, this word is used only once in the Bible outside of the story of Noah. This is significant, Sarna says, as "the extraordinary term Mabbul indicates the unparalleled cataclysmic nature of the event." As far as the Torah is concerned, nothing remotely comparable to the Mabbul occurred before nor will ever occur after. This is because the Mabbul is not just an inundation. It is uncreation.

To properly understand this story, we have to keep in mind the ancient Near Eastern conception of the structure of the earth, a view shared by Biblical Israelites. The inhabited world is a plane that exists only because the ocean of the heavens is held back by the dome of the sky and the underworld ocean is prevented from welling up through the earth. In the Torah, this structure is the result of the work of the second and third days of creation, when the *Tehom*, the primordial chaos ocean, is divided and confined. When God brings the Mabbul, these early acts of creation are reversed:

All the fountains of the deep burst apart and flood gates of the sky burst open.

Chaos returns. This is no fairy-tale. It is a horror story.

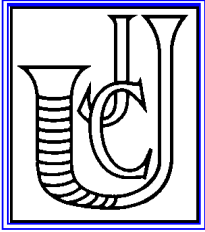
But of course this is not only a story of destruction. It ends with new hope, symbolized by the rainbow. When the Order of Creation is restored, God says:

So long as earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

In the ancient world, this assurance of the stability of the natural order must have been seen as a guarantee as eternal as the God who gave it. Today these words can no longer be read with the same certainty. This is not because God broke the promise made to Noah. Rather, we have upset the *Seder Bereishit*, the Order of Creation. Our actions threaten to render the Covenant of Noah void.

In this time of global climate crisis, this parasha of Noah and the world-destroying Flood has a frightening new relevance. The Mabbul, which God promised never to unleash again, may yet return, not through the loosing of cosmic oceans, but through the more insidious rise of sea levels around the world. The regularity of seedtime and harvest are disrupted. "The cold" is ceasing to be cold as ice caps shrink and glaciers recede. "The heat" is mutating from an incubator of life to a bringer of desiccation and drought. But this time there is no Ark to bear us away from calamity.

..../Page 2



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Page 2

The cause of the first Mabbul is clearly spelled out in Genesis:
The earth became corrupt before God, the earth was filled with lawlessness.

It is much the same this time around, but the rebellion against God has taken the form of violence directed against Creation. As the poet and activist Gary Snyder writes: "What is happening now to nature worldwide, plant life and wildlife, ocean, grassland, forest, savannah, desert—all spaces and habitat—the non-human realm of watersheds and ecosystems with all their members, can be likened to a war against nature."

In the midst of this war, Parashat Noah comes to demand that the lawless vandalism of the earth must cease. The Torah calls on us to stop following the ways of the heedless generation of the Flood and start being Noah — to act on behalf of the Creator to preserve the Creation.

It is fitting that this Shabbat has been designated "Climate Healing Shabbat." This project began as an initiative of Rabbi Arthur Waskow's Shalom Center and has been endorsed by the Religious Action Center of the Union for Reform Judaism, among other Jewish religious organizations. This Shabbat, Jews around the world will be studying the wisdom Torah offers the world community in its effort to turn away from lawlessness and corruption and toward the promise of the rainbow. I invite you to join this critical conversation. This Friday night, come and learn with us as we reconnect with the very green roots of our tradition. Come and study some truly inconvenient Torah and help spread its wisdom to the world. Help make these words of Torah true again:

So long as earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
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22nd October, 2009