



Parshat Noach: A Paradigm for Environmental Consciousness

by Shimshon Stüart Siegel

The Sefer of Bereishis is dedicated in memory of Jacob Cohen by Marilyn and Herbert Smilowitz and family.

While still in the Garden of Eden, humans, animals and plants lived in harmony, according to G-d's desire for the world. After the Fall, maintaining this harmony became a great toil: the earth outside the Garden was thorny and tough; man and beast became adversaries. After a few generations all life on the planet had “corrupted (*hishchis*) its way on the earth.”^[1] In our Torah portion (parsha), G-d decided to wash the slate clean and begin creation over from scratch: “I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created... for I regret that I made them.”^[2] But one man's righteousness compelled G-d to spare a small sector of life: “But Noah [Noah] found favor with the Lord.”^[3]

Although environmental issues are not directly expressed in the parsha, when we take a deeper look at Noah, seeing him through the eyes of the Midrashim and various rabbinic commentaries, we can discover a portrait of a man who spent his life innovating a lifestyle of environmental harmony and Divine awareness. Environmental awareness is an aspect of the mitzvah known as *Bal Tashchit*- Do Not Destroy. Noah, the one man who had not corrupted (*hishchis*) the world, became the pioneer of *Bal Tashchis* in the world when he built the ark, the vessel that would preserve the planet's animal life in the face of the total destruction of the environment. Noah and his family faced incredible hardship and challenge as they fought the tide of destruction. A fresh look at the life of Noah can provide us many lessons as we strive to bring our world back to a state of holy balance. What can we learn from Noah's efforts?

The Patient Educator

Caring about the environment requires patience and forethought. The Midrash says that, 120 years before the Flood, Noah actually planted the trees from which he would take the wood for the ark (no old-growth logging here)!^[4] Aware of the massive resources that his project would demand, Noah tried to be as self-sustaining as possible.

Noah hoped that his example could help inspire others to live more conscious and righteous lives. According to one opinion, Noah spent 52 years building, deliberately working slowly so that the people would take note, repent of their destructive ways and prevent the coming catastrophe.^[5]

Hands-on Dirty Work

Protecting Hashem's world requires hard, sometimes unpleasant work. Noah didn't just load up the ark and sail worry-free-- he worked without rest during the entire year of the Flood. For



example, according to the Midrash Tanhuma, “throughout those twelve months, Noach and his sons did not sleep, because they had to feed the animals, beasts and birds.”^[6]

But feeding thousands of animals was the cushy job. As the Talmud explains, the ark had three levels, one for Noach and his family, one for the animals, and one for the waste-- tons upon tons of animal droppings.^[7] The rabbinic sources debate the layout of the ark and the design of Noach's waste-management system, but one thing remains clear-- Noach's family spent a lot of their time shoveling manure.^[8] Whether they systematically removed it from the ark, stored it in a designated waste facility or found practical use for it, we see that Noach toiled to maintain the cleanliness of the ark. While such work is not always enjoyable, Noach's lesson teaches that the benefits of a clean, healthy living space over a filthy, foul-smelling environment are certainly worth the effort.

We all Share the Same Lifeboat (or Ark)

Another lesson we can learn from Noach is that it helps to see the world as a closed, integrated system. Noach and his eight-person crew maintained a sort of proto-BioDome inside the ark, struggling to preserve a functional level of ecological balance in the most challenging of situations.^[9] Within such a system, every action has a significant impact and ramification, and individual elements can be aligned so as to strengthen and assist one another. For example, composting food waste reduces landfill volume and then creates rich soil for home-grown, organic vegetables. Using public transportation in congested areas reduces pollution while cutting down on frustrating traffic. Less traffic, cleaner air and time to relax on the bus or train all contribute to less personal stress. Riding a bicycle to work does all these as well as significantly improving health.

Partnership with the Land

Noach's construction of a giant, floating ecosystem was proof enough of his excellence as an environmental innovator. After the Flood, he reinvented himself again as an agricultural pioneer. At his birth, Noach's father predicted that Noach would relieve mankind from the curse on the land that came with Adam and Eve's expulsion.^[10] Genesis says that “Noach began to be a man of the soil” after he left the ark.^[11] The Midrash Aggadah explains that Noach revolutionized farming techniques to soften the backbreaking toil that had been the way of the land since the Fall. Noach may have used the massive stores of dung on the ark to compost and revitalize the land, which had lost its top 12 inches of topsoil in the Flood.^[12] By thus easing the burdens of man and the soil, he truly earned his name, “rest.”^[13] Overall, Noach's relationship with the land was harmonious and productive, not adversarial or injurious to the planet or to his own well-being.

As beneficiaries of the earth's produce and descendants of Noach, we should ensure that the world's agricultural workers are supported by both modern technologies *and* modern social values. Like Noach, modern farmers can promote agricultural techniques that keep the land viable for future generations. We must not fill our breadbasket via the suffering of those less



fortunate than ourselves, or at the expense of a healthy, fruitful future. The fact that we *can* eat meat does not necessarily mean that we *must*, and certainly does not mean that we must eat it every day! Exploring the fruits and vegetables of the land, like Noach, can be exciting and creative while promoting our own health. When we *do* eat meat, it should be from farms that share our concerns for a healthy world and that respect God's creatures, all of whom live under the sign of the rainbow.

Faith in Humanity

While Noach strove for a gentle environmental harmony, the people of the earth arrogantly saw themselves engaged in a battle with God and the forces of nature. When they saw him building the ark, the people told Noach, "if God brings the Flood up from the earth, we have iron plates with which we can cover the earth!"^[14] In spite of such skepticism, Noach stayed the course, and even maintained faith in humanity. We see from the Torah that he did not board the ark until after the Flood had already begun, hoping that people would change their ways and thus prevent the destruction.^[15]

For Noach, the ark was an unfortunate but necessary solution to a global crisis. Even when all signs were grim, he maintained his faith, greeting every challenge with further innovation. So too must we continue to strive for a better tomorrow, educate others about environmental issues, and believe that our actions, on every level, can make a difference. When we step outside after a rainstorm and see the rainbow in the sky, we remember God's promise to Noach, and we know that we are not alone in our efforts.

Suggested Action Items:

- We've eaten plenty of meat over the last month. This week, consider changing one meal that would have consisted of meat to one that does not include meat. Try a new fruit or vegetable, or prepare it in a new way, to "explore the fruits of the land."
- Noach's hard work paid off for future generations (us). Identify an action that you could take in your life that would make a difference for your children or future generations (whether environmental, educational, or otherwise).
- If you are not ready to commit today to that change, identify a time in the future when you will commit to it, and mark that time on your personal calendar so you will remember it when it comes.

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- [1] Genesis 6:12 (all Biblical translations are JPS)
- [2] Genesis 6:7
- [3] Genesis 6:8
- [4] *Genesis Rabbah* 30:7
- [5] *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer* 22
- [6] *Midrash Tanhuma* 58:9. emphasis by the author
- [7] *Sanhedrin* 108b
- [8] This interpretation, like much of this drash, relies on a very literal reading of the Biblical text. Alternatively, the Ramban explains on Genesis 6:19 that, according to reason, we know that it would be impossible for any human being to construct a vessel large enough to contain two of all species of animals. He asserts that it is a hidden miracle that enabled this unrealistic feat to occur. Along the same lines, it would not be possible for Noach and his sons to keep up with all the feeding and waste management of the ark. If we can then expand on the Ramban, perhaps Noach and his sons did all they can and were assisted from Heaven to complete the rest.
- [9] The fascinating question of food on the ark, especially food for carnivores, is beyond the scope of this drash. Some have theorized that he kept the carnivores satiated with cow's milk. Another theory suggests that large carnivores may have hibernated for the year.
- [10] Genesis 3:17-19, 5:29
- [11] Many translations say "Noach, the man of the earth, debased himself." While this is a possible reading, connected to ensuing events, the simple translation is as we have given it.
- [12] Rashi on Genesis 6:13
- [13] *Midrash Aggadah*, v. 29 (as cited by JewishEncyclopedia.com - <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=318&letter=N&search=noah>.)
- [14] *Sanhedrin* 108b
- [15] This unique interpretation of Genesis 7:7 (also, v.11-13) is in contradiction to the major Midrashic tradition, which states that Noach delayed boarding the ark because he doubted that God would make a Flood (as seen in *Genesis Rabbah* 32:6). It was told by Rav Zev Rosen in the name of the Gaon of Vilna, and by Reb Yitzhak, the Vorker Rebbe as well (see *Maayanah Shel Torah*).