

**Parshat Noah
October 19, 2001**

**Beth Chayim Chadashim
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For a while I forsook you,
But with vast love will bring you back

In slight anger, for a moment,
I hid my face from you;
But with kindness everlasting I will take you back in love,
--said God your redeemer.

For this to me is like the waters of Noah;
As I swore that the waters of Noah
Nevermore would flood the earth,
So I swear that I will not
Be angry with you or rebuke you.

For the mountain may move
And the hills be shaken,
But my loyalty shall never move from you,
Nor my covenant of friendship be shaken
--said God, who takes you back in love

So tells Isaiah his people, and thereby provides a lyrical link between this week's Torah portion Noah, and the Haftarah from Isaiah.

Shabbat Shalom. Quite a night of celebrations and life events, and a parshat that reinforces the responsibilities of humankind, the fragility of life, and the importance of time and communication. We are told that "Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God." So, imagine the consternation he must have felt when God divulged the plan – "For My part, I am about to bring the Flood – waters upon the earth – to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish." Wouldn't you think that Noah's first response would be one of confusion. Imagine how the initial conversation might have gone: Noah (looking upward to the heavens) - Adonai, creator of the universe, please forgive a poor and humble man for asking, but this seems a somewhat drastic measure. Couldn't you just talk to the people and help them to understand the mistakes they are making? Also, I have never made a boat. And animals, I have terrible allergies and my wife doesn't like to be near the farm stock."

Midrash tells us that God instructed Noah to build the ark well before the onslaught of the flood actually began. That God hoped the spectacle of Noah constructing a massive ark would attract the attention of humanity and that the CHAMAS which was so rampant would cease. CHAMAS is translated as lawlessness or violence, and yet there are various explanations for what this term implies. In Midrash there is some explanation that it was unbounded affluence that led people to act licentiously and for which God became angry. Elsewhere, we are told that God did not punish the people for severe crimes but for the crime of stealing when they were not in want. One midrash tells us of a man walking into the market place with a bowl, full of a green vegetable on his head, and that by the time he left the marketplace all of the vegetable was gone, because every person had taken one. However, most scholars agree that CHAMAS is the manifestation of a social disease and not its cause.

Although we are told initially that Noah is a righteous man and because of this his life, and the lives of his family, are to be preserved – some interpretations have Noah paying for his sins by practicing the animal husbandry that was required to care for all of the animals on the ark. Being a scientist I have always been fascinated by the concept of the ark, Noah and all those animals. Was Noah an ancient Dr. Doolittle? In fact, the irony is greater still as we later find out that Noah is a tiller of the soil.

After the ark is completed (a mammoth undertaking) God instructs Noah to round up pairs of animal species – with explicit instructions with respect to clean and unclean animals. “Of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs of males and their mates, and of every animal which is not clean, two, a male and its mate; of the birds of the sky also, seven pairs male and female, to keep seed alive upon the earth.” Did the animals themselves choose which would live and which would die? Animals that live on land and in the sky are the focus of Noah’s endeavors, so I have always assumed that God planned for the marine life to survive the flood without human intervention. How difficult it must have been to feed all of the animals. What about the carnivores among the animals – what did they eat? How were the animals separated? What did Noah’s family eat? Did Noah bring extras of the animals further down the food chain onto the ark, or did the rabbits set the example for all of the animals? Aside from the food issues and general cohabitation challenges, the picture of seasick pachyderms and primates is almost overwhelming.

There must have been a great deal of cooperation during those 40 days of deluge and then the weeks and months spent waiting for the waters to recede. Waiting for the time to release a raven to search for dry land. A bird which flies over the persistent waters and returns to the ark because there is no safe place for it to land. Then, for three consecutive weeks Noah releases a dove. Initially it returns just as the raven did because there is no place for it to perch. Next, the dove brings an olive leaf, which must have provided considerable hope to Noah. And finally the dove leaves and presumably finds a new safe haven for itself.

When I read Parshat Noah it is almost impossible not to think about the importance of time and communication and likewise difficult not to notice the number 40 - a number that has a somewhat special significance for me today – and not just because my ancestors wandered in the desert for 40 years. There it is that number. Do you remember what you were doing 40 years ago today? My mother certainly does. My parents had 9 months to wait, looking forward to the outcome (I hope), although probably somewhat nervous. They had some idea of what to expect – after all, they had been children once. But how could they know the details of the next 40 years for themselves, let alone for their first born.

So I grew up learning the importance of spending time participating in worthwhile endeavors, including religious observance, social action and the time spent with family and friends. I remember living in Botswana as a Peace Corps Volunteer and traveling to the northern part of the country with a group of my students shortly after their graduation from junior high school. They had worked very hard to organize the trip, prompted by the desire to see the majesty of animals that they had only ever seen in pictures, and which were to be found in their own country. We traveled over 1,000 kilometers in the backs of open trucks – a convoy of excited students and their teachers. We carried bags of mabelle and rice, and drums of water. For many of the students this was their first experience away from home, outside of the small village in which they were born.

The students were awed by the size and grace of the elephants and giraffe, and the ferocity of the Cape buffalo and lions. They gaped at soaring eagles, watched the antics of baboons and stayed away from the water when crocodiles glided by. Most of the students had grown up in very arid areas of the country and were not familiar with a view of water that spread to the horizon. Shortly after we returned to Otse one of the students told me that he now had a better idea of what the flood must have been like and asked me how all of the animals were able to get onto the ark. In a later section of parshat Noah we learn of humans deprived of verbal communication as their words turned to strange tongues at Babel. Did humans give up on trying to communicate? Did they despair, or did they rise to meet the challenge? Did they realize that despite speaking different languages that if they tried hard enough, that by truly listening, they would still have been able to understand each other. Perhaps if we knew the answer to how people coped we could learn from their experience.

Time and communication. Can we in this world today live our lives without being aware of the importance of time – treasuring the joys and enduring the sorrows. Trying to do those things that are important so that we do not spend our precious time in regret. This week brought important news for the LGB community. AB25 sponsored by Carol Migden was signed into law by Governor Gray Davis on Sunday. This new law will allow couples registered in a domestic partnership to make medical decisions for each other, to sue for wrongful death, to adopt a partner's child, to use sick leave to care for an incapacitated partner, to act as a conservator and to relocate without forfeiting unemployment benefits. These are among the benefits and protections that married

people take for granted. As a physician I have seen the pain that lovers experience when they are precluded from being with their partner because family members will not allow it. The difficulty taking time off from work to care for an ill partner. And the challenges and heartaches friends have faced in the adoption process.

However, although this is good news in California, there is a Constitutional Amendment being proposed that will ultimately ban homosexual marriages/civil unions and possibly domestic partner benefits in the future. It is being pushed through Congress quickly so as to make as little noise as possible. So, it continues to be important to spend the time and communicate to people why we all deserve the same rights. We are living in a time where methods of communication have speeded up our ability to transfer information. It used to take 6 to 9 months for a letter to travel from New York to California by ship before the Panama canal was built and transcontinental railroads crisscrossed the country. More recently airplanes have transported letters in a matter of days, while the development and implementation of the internet means that we can participate in almost instantaneous written communication. Does this really mean that we are communicating – really listening to each other?

The events of September in New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania are reminders about time and communication. We all mourn the thousands of people who were killed, and appreciate that there could have been tens of thousands more if people had not been willing to help each other and to communicate. My thoughts for Shari and Noelle at their aufruf and for my birthday are to make the time to communicate, and to ask yourself what and who you would bring onto your own ark. Shabbat Shalom.