

A NEW COVENANT

***Rosh Ha-Shanah* Morning, 5781**

September 19, 2020

Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple

Suppose someone had come to you this time last year to tell you that something bad was coming: something earth-shaking, something so cataclysmic that people all over the world, in its wake, would come to understand *time itself* as riven in two: Before. And After.

Suppose, further, that this someone had told you that all hope was not yet lost; that, yes, there was no stopping the disaster—that fate already having been sealed—but that *you* still had a choice: to save life—your own and others’—that you had, what’s more, a *responsibility*: to warn others, to bring them on board, or, disregarding the warning, to be swept up in the undertow.

Suppose all this, and you may have an inkling of what it felt like to be Noah.

And yet Noah endured all manner of ridicule. For 120 years, *midrash* speculates, he planted and felled trees, over and over, planting and chopping, planting and chopping. When people asked him what he planned to do with all that gopher wood, Noah told them that he was building an Ark, to escape catastrophe. But the people ignored him. They mocked him. They hurled obscenities at him. They even resorted to violence.

Noah, undaunted, kept at it.

For fifty-two years, *midrash* tells us, Noah assembled the Ark, taking his sweet time, the Rabbis reason, so that the people would see him hard at work, repent of their foolishness, and get on board. But they did not repent, and—needless to say—they did not get on board.¹

The day came. The terror arrived with such blinding force that, before long, the waters had covered the tallest mountains, and “all flesh that stirred upon the earth perished: birds, cattle, beasts, all the creatures that swarmed over the land, and all humankind. The breath of life was squeezed out

¹ *Aggadah* (Jewish folklore) records these traditions in various locations. See Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 108a-b; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 22; *Genesis Rabbah* 30:7; *Leviticus Rabbah* 27:5; and *Sefer Ha-Yashar*.

of every nostril... All existence was blotted out... so that only Noah was left, together with the creatures inside the ark.”²

There’s a meme circulating the internet depicting Noah’s tempest-tossed Ark, with the caption, “World’s First Quarantined Family.”

Imagine the scene, as perhaps, only now, you can: The Bible tells us that, in addition to Noah and Mrs. Noah, their three grown children, and all their spouses, all boarded the ark. Forget the animals; how did Noah’s *family* get along?

Further, consider this: When you examine the timeline of the Noah story, a striking detail emerges. Noah and his crew stayed cooped up in that ark for a whole lot longer than “forty days and forty nights”; that was just the period of *rainfall*. The actual time aboard the Ark would tally a year and ten days, all told, and as weeks turned to months, Noah had no idea when it would be safe to disembark.

So he devised a testing protocol: he sent out a bird—a raven—which flitted about to and fro but still found no place to land.

² Genesis 7:22.

Seven more days and a second bird, this time, a dove:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה מֵאֵתוֹ לִרְאוֹת הַקָּלוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

He sent forth a dove from himself, to see if the waters had receded from the face of the earth.³

Still no place for the bird to land. So it flew back, perching on Noah's outstretched hand. And then:

וַיַּחַל עוֹד שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אַחֲרָיִם וַיִּסֹּף שִׁלַּח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה מִן־הַתֵּבָה:

He waited another seven days, and once again, sent forth the dove from the ark.⁴

This time, success! The dove came back that same evening, an olive branch in its beak, signifying that the water had come down, at least to the treetops. It had now been nearly ten months since the start of the flood.

And still Noah played it safe. Once more he sent out the dove; this time it did not return. Noah looked around and saw the

³ Genesis 8:8.

⁴ Genesis 8:10.

surface of the earth drying. And finally, finally—one year and ten days from the first raindrops—Noah, his family, and the remaining survivors of life on earth, took their first cautious steps on *terra firma*. In the sky above, a rainbow, and the Voice of God:

“I have set my bow in the clouds; it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”⁵

To this day, whenever a rainbow appears, we say this blessing: *Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, Zocheir Ha-B'rit*. Blessed are You, Sovereign of Creation, who Remembers the Covenant.

So, here we are, this first day of a new year, we Americans more or less exactly half a year into the Great Pandemic of 2020, or, in Noah-terms, perhaps, about halfway through the ordeal. Who knows? Maybe it's more, maybe less. Even Noah seemed to have a more reliable testing protocol for knowing when it was safe to leave the Ark.

Today I want to reflect with you on what wisdom Judaism offers for living in a world forever changed by the deluge, and

⁵ Genesis 9:13.

propose that this moment calls for a New Covenant between ourselves and the world.

Like the howl of the shofar piercing the dawn, the period of massive upheaval through which we are living is a cry of alarm, a wake-up call, a hard reset. It declares: We need to do *so much better* at taking care of each other. Because we're all on this little Ark together.

We learn much by studying the Noah story, and, in particular, from the details surrounding the birds that Noah sent forth to survey the waterlogged world. The raven went to and fro but found no place to land. Noah then sent out a dove; it returned empty-beaked. Noah waited another week and sent out the dove a second time. Only then did the dove's mission meet with success. What made the difference?

The first time, the text says וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה מֵאֵתוֹ, that Noah “sent forth the dove *me'ito*,” literally, “from himself.” It was Noah's personal bird, on a personal mission. Some have even interpreted the dove as Noah's pet, distinguished from all the other animals. When Noah sent out the dove *me'ito*, from himself, the dove came back, and, indeed, came to rest on Noah's very own, outstretched hand.

But the second mission is different, by a factor of one Hebrew word: instead of *me'ito*, “from himself,” this time Noah sends out the dove *min ha-teivah*, from the Ark. The dove now has a greater mission: not to serve one man, but to serve the entire, fragile, floating ship. Only when carrying the responsibility for all life, together, does the dove’s mission meet with success, the olive branch in its beak a sign of hope, for all life.

These months we’ve spent cooped up in the Ark have cast in high relief both the greatness of generosity, the nobility of human beings striving for the collective good, *and* the pettiness of egocentrism, the meanness of human beings striving out of naked self-interest, heedless of the needs of the collective.

My heart has swelled with appreciation and hope, these months, as heroes in our midst—both lauded and unsung—have exemplified the truest measure of sacrifice, the selflessness that animates true holiness.

Today we sound a shofar of thanksgiving to all of our healthcare workers, both those on the frontlines of the crisis, who have, day after day, and night after night, for days and

nights on end, donned whatever personal protective equipment available at the time, and ministered to the sick, the dying, the lonely, the scared. At the end of March, our congregant Darlene LeFrancois, doctor of internal medicine at Montefiore in the Bronx, wrote:

“The best we can often do is hold a patient’s hand for the minute they pass, as they lie there alone. Maybe we can ask about a family member we can call before they die. Acknowledge them by saying their name aloud, and keeping silent for 5 seconds before moving on to the next patient. When the patient in the next bed dies, you see the terror in the roommate’s eyes. They know they’re next, and we do too. Many of these patients have never been sick before, or even ever in a hospital before.”

Let that shofar sound for all the doctors who continued to practice telemedicine, all the nurses, and aides, and ambulance drivers; the hospital custodians, and clinic workers, and medical technicians swabbing anxious patients’ noses, the phlebotomists and lab techs, and equipment suppliers; all the therapists and social workers who will be tending to broken hearts and despondent thoughts, for a long time to come.

Let that shofar sound for all the delivery drivers, and the grocery workers, the mail carriers and the childcare providers, the bakers and chefs, the teachers and construction workers and mask-makers and manufacturers of hand sanitizer.

And, oh!, for all the plumbers and electricians! (Kelly and I went through two fridge repairs and one dishwasher replacement in the first three months of quarantine and we're still putting our kitchen through more abuse than ever.)

For all of you who have sent forth a dove of hope and help on behalf of this whole rickety Ark: thank you.

And yet.

And yet, my heart, which has swelled with admiration at the best of humanity on display, has also—in just a half a year—shrunk in revulsion at some of humanity's worst, meanest, stupidest, most ignorant, most entitled, most selfish behavior.

The sound of our shofar has been muted as close to 200,000 American voices have fallen silent in death, an outcome made

more horrific, more tragic, because tens--if not hundreds--of thousands of lives could have been saved, potentially millions of deaths across the world, prevented.

And still we fail to buckle down and make the necessary sacrifices to bring the spread of the virus under control: keep your quarantine and wear a mask in public. I wear my mask to protect you. You wear your mask to protect me. Why is this so hard? You can blame foreign countries; you can blame our leaders; but when it all comes down to it, the responsibility for getting this disease under control—and the blame for failing to do so—rests squarely with us.

The Talmud includes a best-seller, a small handbook of Rabbinic aphorisms called *Pirkei Avot*, which includes this teaching: “A person who says, ‘what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours’ is an average person, but also a Sodomite,” referencing the doomed Biblical city known for its avarice and cruelty.⁶

“What’s mine is mine; what’s yours is yours”: Mind your own business. Keep to your own lane. Or, as Billy Joel put it: “I don’t care anymore what you say, this is my life; go ahead with

⁶ *Mishna, Avot*, 5:13.

your own life, leave me alone.” It’s a perspective deeply embedded in the American psyche.

It’s also deeply un-Jewish. In Judaism we have, “your business is my business,” which, if you’ve ever had Jewish in-laws, you already know. And yet, if we ever hope to prevail—as a country, as a collective, as a human family—we need to understand what these six months have been telling us all along: that we are all interconnected. What I do affects you. What you do affects me.

“Globalism” is not a political choice anymore; it’s a fact: what happens over there affects me over here, and vice versa. The virus does not heed its hosts’ political preferences or nationality. It preys with special ferocity on those with underlying health conditions or who have the misfortune to be born poor, or Black, or Brown, or Indigenous, without access to the kind of health care, nutrition, education, and social services that our community takes for granted.

And if that isn’t our collective problem, and our collective responsibility, then whose is it?

When Noah sent out the dove *me'ito*, “from himself,” the world remained underwater. Self-interest will drown us. When Noah sent out a dove *min ha-teivah*, for the benefit of the whole Ark, in the interest of the collective, the mission succeeded. Remember the Hindu proverb: “Help your brother’s boat across, and lo! Your own has reached the shore.”

The societal model envisioned by the Torah places the welfare of the collective above the success of the individual. Those who work in agriculture must leave behind the fallen fruit for the poor and the stranger, must leave the corners of fields unharvested and of vineyards, unpicked. Shepherds must sacrifice of the flock; ranchers of the herd; every laborer must contribute tithes and offerings; no one was exempt from giving. Again and again the Torah exhorts us to help the poor, the stranger, the orphan, the widow—the unseen, the neglected—to give without hesitation or reservation, recognizing, in language that Noah himself might have understood, that “a rising tide lifts all boats.”

Most boldly, the Torah provides its own “hard reset” for when accumulated wealth and property and power began to privilege the very few over the very many. With words now

famously engraved on the Liberty Bell, the Torah announces: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.”⁷ Every fifty years, with this very pronouncement, the Torah declares a *Yovel*, a Jubilee year: a rebalancing of the scales of economic justice, during which slaves would go free, debts would be forgiven, and so-called “landowners” would be reminded that their relationship with property was nothing more than a lease, and the land would be redistributed to its ancestral tribes.

The word Jubilee, *Yovel* in Hebrew, is a Biblical word referring to the blast of the shofar. The wake up call. The sound we need to hear *today*, after our own fifty years and more of unchecked accumulation by the few at the expense of the many. Throw in a vicious pandemic which has exposed the human face of inequality, and you see what happens to society. “What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours” paves the way to Sodom. The dove of hope circles overhead with no safe place to land, and returns defeated. The suffering mounts.

We need a New Covenant. One that begins and ends with the recognition that everything is connected. The great teachers,

⁷ Leviticus 25:10.

in every religion and every philosophy, all arrived at this same, fundamental truth: **There is only one thing and we are all it.**

Listen to Albert Einstein who understood the nature of existence better than, well, anyone:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.⁸

Einstein was talking about a New Covenant, a covenant with all life, a covenant with the Cosmos.

Of all the things that break my heart these days, the politicization of ethical stewardship for the world, the

⁸ Excerpted from a letter that Einstein wrote in 1950 to an ordained rabbi, Norman Salit, who was seeking in vain to comfort his 19-year-old daughter over the death of her 16-year-old sister.

politicization of environmentalism, perhaps ranks highest of all. It didn't have to be this way. We get one planet, one Ark, on which we all have to live together. And yet we continue to treat our home like an AirBnB that's someone else's problem to clean up after we leave, expending and discarding with little heed to the suffering we are already inflicting, in a way, that, once again, injures with special ferocity the world's most vulnerable people, creatures, and habitats.

I echo the Biblical Amos who said, "I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet."⁹ And yet I find in all the great Israelite Prophets a refreshing disregard for saying the popular thing and instead speaking the truth. And the truth is this: whether the "point of no return" for the climate crisis is now, or twelve years from now—as the more alarming models suggest—or as much as seventy years from now, who really cares? Why would we gamble with the risk so staggeringly high? Why would we treat even a 70-year window as anything other than a blunt wake-up call, today? Why waste even a minute, while our own West Coast burns?

⁹ Amos 7:14.

And yet, we continue to act *me'ito*, each person for him and herself, instead of *min ha-teivah*, each one of us acting for the good of the whole Ark.

On this first morning of a new year, here is the only “prophecy” worth considering:

Schools will come back.

In-person services at the temple will come back.

Football will come back.

Theatre will come back.

Concerts will come back.

Restaurants will come back.

Travel will come back.

Dating and romance and falling in love and all that jazz will come back.

The economy will come back.

And none of it will matter unless we come back to our senses and stop acting as if “what’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is yours.”

CODA

One evening after a refreshing spring rain, Kelly and I took to one of the new practices we adopted during quarantine, a “daily constitutional,” a long neighborhood walk. It’s good for the body, the mind, the soul, and the connection between homebound people. These walks have been just lovely, an opening of all the senses.

Without cars barreling up and down Soundview Avenue, we could hear a cacophony of rival birds—no ravens or doves, alas, but the shriek of a hawk, the song of warblers—and leaves rustling in the breeze, chipmunks scampering and all of it suddenly punctuated by the squeal of a boy being chased across the lawn by his big sister.

Without exhaust glutting the air, we could distinguish individual scents: each flower with its own aroma, the smell of freshly-cut grass, from this backyard the smell of a charcoal grill, from that patio, a propane grill; underneath it all, wet moss and rich soil, and bags of slowly decomposing branches and twigs. The hydrangeas bloomed electric blue and neon magenta, as if finally allowed to attend the debutante’s ball, coming out in all their splendor.

And everywhere we walked, the dance of living things: earthworms crawling out of the saturated ground, and squirrels trying their darndest to raid our vegetable garden, rabbits holding court on every lawn. We came back from our walk, sat on our back deck, and I swear that we heard the throaty grumble of a coyote padding around underneath the floorboards, just days after learning of a family of black bears encroaching on nearby streets. All around us the world was re-wilding, Nature asserting herself, inevitably, inexorably, reminding us that we are just visitors, lessees, tenants in God's world. Reminding us that there's only one thing and we are all it.

Up above, I could have sworn I saw a rainbow.

Baruch Ata Adonai, Zocheir Ha-Brit. Blessed is the One who remembers the covenant.