

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Noach)

What went wrong?

Thirteen years old; Bar Mitzvah age; boys with their entire lives ahead of them. One must have recently celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. He was riding his bicycle on a beautiful Monday afternoon, because, that's what thirteen year olds do. Life is not so complicated....

On Monday afternoon this Jewish Bar Mitzvah boy riding his bike met another thirteen year old having fun, which should be part of a normal day for a thirteen year old; Two boys getting together to have some fun on a Monday afternoon. Only the second boy, a thirteen year old Arab from East Jerusalem wasn't riding a bike, he was carrying a knife. And he used it, along with his fifteen year old cousin to repeatedly stab the Jewish Bar Mitzvah boy on his bicycle. The Jewish boy, who remains in critical condition, is fighting for his life as of this writing.

What is going on? How are thirteen year old boys becoming murders? Yet again, we find ourselves in the midst of an intense campaign of hatred and violence pouring out of the Arab world; will it never end?

This Shabbat we will read the portion of Noach which describes the great flood that destroyed the world, which was only just created in last week's portion Bereishit! What happened?

One minute we were strolling in the Garden of Eden, and the next, the world is being destroyed, leaving us wondering how it came to this?

The Torah tells us that world was filled with Hamas (Genesis 6:11) which Jewish tradition generally seems to indicate relates to violence. Rashi (Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki; 1040-1105) explains this to be referring to "Gezel" or robbery. And the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 31:4) suggests that while there is *Himmus mammon* (violent behavior regarding money) there is also *Himmus Devarim* or violent behavior entailing 'robbery', regarding words.

So one way of explaining what destroyed the world in the time of Noah, was literally: 'violent words'. Sound eerily familiar?

Generally, the assumption is that men of stature were expressing themselves in a violent manner, inciting people towards violence, which fueled the violent behavior that ultimately destroyed the world.

But I wonder if there is also another possibility.

This week's portion, which tells the story of the great flood which destroyed the world, seems to have an unlikely hero. Noach is a personality who does not seem to have much personality. At his birth his father *Lemech* names him *Noach* because, (5:29):

"Zeh yinachameinu mi'ma'aseinu, ve'itzvon yadeinu"

"...this one will comfort us from the travail of our hands"

i.e. Noach will allow us to desist from what we do. Rashi explains this to mean that Noach invented farming tools such as the plough, allowing man to literally 'rest' (nach) his hands and work the field. So the root of

Noach's name is to rest. Which is interesting given that what is being described (such as the invention of the plough) is something that allows man to *do*.

At his root, Noach is a passive personality. He will build the ark according to G-d's command, but will not voice an opinion of his own.

In hearing that the world will be destroyed, Noach will do what he is asked, but he will say nothing.

Told he must build an ark for a hundred and twenty years, a daunting task, Noach gets to work, but says... nothing.

And when he is told to collect all the animals from all of creation, certainly a monumental task, Noach simply does, but says nary a word.

In direct contrast to Avraham, who will argue with G-d Himself over the destruction of wicked Sodom, Noach says nothing. He is a man of faith, even a man of action, but he has no words.

As the Torah tells us (6:22):

“And Noach did; according to all he was commanded by G-d, so he did.”

Incredibly, throughout the story of the deluge and its aftermath, Noach never says a word. When Noach and his family exit the ark after the flood he builds an altar of thanksgiving (8:20), but never utters single word of praise!

In fact, in the biblical narrative, it is G-d who does all the talking. G-d speaks (8:21), and even blesses (9:1) while Noach remains eerily ... silent. The newly created seven laws of Noach by which mankind will now function are given, and Noach just listens. Even when G-d lays out a new covenant for man in the aftermath of the flood (9:8-17) it is G-d doing all the talking. One would expect Noach to respond, but again, he is silent. Noach remains a man of action; he builds an altar (8:20), and later plants a vineyard (9:20), but still, he has no words.

Interestingly, Avraham, who will become the first Jew, begins his journey in much the same way: G-d tells Avraham (12:1) to leave his home and journey to the land of Canaan and Avraham follows G-d's command, with no words, he simply... does. And when he arrives in Canaan, he too builds an altar. But then, presented with his first real challenge (12:10: a famine in the land) he speaks. He tells Sarah how to hopefully avert the violent and dangerous environment they will soon find themselves in. And as we watch the progression of Avraham, Avraham becomes a man of words, and actions. Culminating in the story of Sodom (18:20-33), Avraham wages a war of words with G-d! ; Avraham takes a stand.

Perhaps this is part of why Avraham, as opposed to Noach is the first Jew, and maybe this is what the Rabbis in the Midrash were referring to in citing the cause of the destruction of the world as the land being filled with *Himmus Devarim* or violent words.

In 1867 the British philosopher and political theorist John Stuart Mill in an inaugural address at the University of St. Andrews said:

*Let not any one pacify his conscience by the delusion that he can do no harm if he takes no part, and forms no opinion. **Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.***

A similar quote, attributed to Edmund Burke, is prominently exhibited at Yad Vashem.

This war of knives and bullets we are experiencing on the streets of Israel, and for that matter Paris, Amsterdam, New York and Kansas, is actually part of a much broader war of words taking place all over the world, of which there are two complicit parties: those who speak evil, and those who say nothing.

People will die and peace will remain ever more elusive every time men spew forth hatred and violence and the world says nothing.

When an Iranian religious (and I use the term loosely) leader suggests the Jewish nation will be annihilated within twenty five years and Washington, busy negotiating, says nothing, there will be terrorism.

When the president of the Palestinian Authority says “filthy Jewish feet are defiling the Temple Mount”, and the U.N. says nothing, there will be violence.

And when Arab Imams preach hatred in mosques and Arab children are taught hatred in elementary schools and the world says and does nothing, then there will be Arab children using guns knives and meat cleavers to commit murder. This week as we read the portion of Noach, perhaps we need to consider how a world came to be destroyed, and what we can do to stop any more thirteen year old worlds from being lost.

Along with all the practical suggestions and implementations to increase security and even finding a way to take over and change what Arab children are being taught in their schools, we should also pay heed to the power of words. Noach lost a world for his silence. Hashem (G-d) created the world through words, and it can be destroyed just easily, through words.

This would be a good time at the very least be filling the world with words and acts of love and kindness.

Our thoughts are with the wounded and bereaved and our hearts go out to the families of those in pain everywhere this Shabbat.

Wishing the wounded a refuah shleimah (full and speedy recovery)

And comfort (nechama) to those who have lost loved ones,

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman