

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Noach)

Clearly, I had been stood up; today I would have just sent him a text, but this was back in the days before cell phones, when a meeting over a cup of coffee was just two people with no distractions, and I had no way of reaching him nor could I be sure he might not still arrive so I ordered the grilled cheese sandwich and decided to wait a bit longer. There was a fellow sitting at the table next to mine with his back to me, telling a funny story and I could not help laughing, causing him to turn and smile in my direction. The fellow he was sitting with was getting up to leave but he himself seemed to be in no hurry so we started a conversation which seemed entirely ordinary, until he asked me a rather odd question: 'Is the sun setting?'

Which was when I realized he was blind. It was indeed a beautiful sunset, and it pained me that he could not see it, so I asked him if he would like me to describe it, but then how could I describe colors to a blind man? As it turned out, he had not always been blind, which made me wonder: was the fact that he could still remember sight, a blessing or a curse? What was the value of the gift of sight if he was always meant to lose it? Perhaps better to know only the darkness?

This week we read the portion of *Noach*. When the land is filled with violence, G-d decides it would be better not to have a world at all than to allow a world to be filled with violence, so with a great flood, he pretty much destroys everything.

Which makes us wonder: what was the point of a world that was destined to be destroyed?

This is a question we see often in the Torah:

G-d places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden only to expel them once they eat from the forbidden fruit. And since G-d is omnipotent and knows all, G-d must know that man will be kicked out of the garden so...G-d places us in the garden merely to expel us? Why bother placing man in the garden at all?

And when Moshe breaks the tablets (*Shemot* 34) and G-d commands him to fashion new ones, the Talmud (*Baba Batra* 14b) tells us that the broken (first) tablets are placed in the Ark alongside the newly fashioned second Tablets; why? What was the point of G-d fashioning the first tablets only to see them broken? What is the value of that which does not last, or which is inevitably destroyed?

Why do we need the first world of Adam? Why not just begin with the second world, reborn in the time of Noach?

A careful look at the world of Noach actually suggests a pattern connecting the new world to its destroyed predecessor.

When Hashem creates the world, “...*ruach Elokim merachefet al p’nei hamayim*”; “the spirit of G-d ‘hovers’ above the water” (Genesis 1:2).

Later, Noah’s ark as well will be described as “...above the waters (“...*al pnei hamayim*” (ibid. 7:18)

G-d creates the birds and animals to fill the earth each according to its species (1:20-24) and Noah brings the birds and animals into the ark, each according to its species (ibid. 7:14).

When Adam and Eve sin, they recognize their nakedness and G-d clothes them with (possibly) animal skins (ibid. 3:21) and when Noah sins by getting drunk in the vineyard he planted, his sons cover him with clothing as well (ibid. 9:23).

G-d plants the garden of Eden (2:8); Noah plants a vineyard (9:19).

The Torah takes pains to tell us that Noah is recreating the world; Noah is Creation part two. But there is one noticeable difference: In *Bereishit*, G-d is the one doing all the heavy lifting, planting the garden, clothing man, creating the animals....

Noah’s world, however, must be made by man.

It is Noah who cares for the animals, ensuring their survival or recreation; Noah who builds the Ark, analogous to creating the world, mankind who clothes man, and man who plants the vineyard. Indeed, in the first creation, G-d hovers above the world, because His creation is truly not of this world. The Garden of Eden is perfection, which is why we cannot stay there once we sin and are imperfect; perfection is the ideal, but it is not reality, and we are not meant to live in a perfect world; we are given an imperfect world and are meant to be partners in making it better.

The first Tablets are fashioned by G-d Himself which is why they cannot last in this world; they are perfection, and this world is anything but perfect; and so they will be broken. But the broken pieces are placed in the Ark alongside the new Tablets fashioned by man (Moshe) perhaps to remind us of the ideal we strive for.

Sometimes it seems life is so perfect... until it isn’t, and we often struggle with why things so often seem to fall apart. But the first Tablets were always meant to be broken, just like Adam’s world and the Garden of Eden could not last. Yet, the knowledge, even if only in our mind’s eye, of what a perfect world could be, is beautiful nonetheless, because it drives us to make our imperfect reality better, each and every day.

We should spend more time reveling in the gift of the broken tablets and planted imperfections which allow us to be partners in creating a better world in each and every moment.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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