

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah - Noah

And the animals filed onto the ark two of every species, male and female. Of course, if the animal is kosher it is seven by seven. Why would there need to be fourteen of the animals fit to eat, but only two of all others? An easy answer might be that since we are going to be using them as a food source, if there were not more of them than the others, our food source would become extinct. In truth, I believe it has nothing to do with their value of food, and everything to do with their value as a paradigm. There is a subtle truth lurking behind the story line that screams to be uncovered. In this story, as written, the character of God has more faith in the animals, than in us. Kosher has as much to do with ritual purity/fitness as it does appropriateness for consumption. Noah received instructions to bring more “clean/fit” animals onto the ark than “non-clean/fit” ones. This was a big hint to Noah that he should be looking to bring more righteous folks along with him on the ark.

The late Lubavitcher Rebbe once wrote that he felt strongly that Noah had, in fact, tried to save people and make them repent. He gave it his “best,” even. In the end, no one came with him. The Rebbe was concerned that Noah had not prayed for the people; he never asked for God’s help in ... helping them change. Now, herein is the kernel of truth that I find so fascinating ... and so ... true. Wanting to do something is different than wanting to want to do something. Assuming the Rebbe’s depiction of Noah’s righteous intent (which I find suspect, at best), he knew he had to do something, but failed to be intentional in his plan, failed to seek assistance in the work, and ultimately failed to convince anyone that he had a better answer. Why did he fail? Perhaps he did not pay attention to God’s instructions. The animals that he brought on the ark were pure, not because Noah decided they were tasty, but because they were inherently clean. No judgment on Noah’s part was needed in making the decision to bring them aboard. He did not confront them with their failings and make them do t’shuvah (atonement). Rather, Noah accepted their sanctity as a given and welcomed them aboard. While God invoked Noah to do this work, Noah never invoked God in his discernment. And while I am not a traditional theist, I understand this simile to teach that Noah put himself as judge over the people, and none of them measured up to his standards. Hence, none were “converted” to his “way” and admitted on the ark. The righteousness of the animals was an unquestioned given, yet the lives of people Noah held valueless. Even where one strives to do the right thing, if done without ultimate concern and intention for a good result, there will be no good result. Ultimately, Noah’s work was more about Noah than about saving anyone else in the world.

The Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Chasidism) taught a wonderful lesson about how we look at each other. “Your fellow is your mirror. If your own face is clean, the image you perceive will also be flawless. But should you look upon your fellow man and see a blemish, it is your own imperfection that you are encountering -- you are being shown what it is that you must correct within yourself.” What an amazing gift this teaching offers to us. We sit in judgment over others, as though we are perfect and the only one so blessed. Yet, for us to see imperfection in others means that we have had to experience it in ourselves to know it and understand it. Noah’s inability to see the blessings in the folks around him was caused by his own inability to know and feel blessings. The text tells us not that he was righteous, only that he was righteous in his generation; a generation that merited the flood for its horrible behaviors and lack of compassion or consideration for anything other than their own wants and ego. Noah was a product of this world and even where he rose atop it, the standard was still pretty low. When we judge each other, even with the best of intentions, we do so with our own baggage setting the standard and providing the lens through which we see each other.

If we want our world to heal, we have to change the way we look at each other. First, though, we have to change the way in which we look at ourselves. Where we want to see the blessings in each other, we must first see our own. We all have baggage. The question is whether or not it holds us back. Where we can truly appreciate our own blessings, even while knowing we are blemished, we can turn past our egos, past the need to own the upper hand of judgment, past the need to be more right than our neighbors, and find ourselves redeeming relationships; creating bonds that bind us to each other; and building a world where we spend more time healing brokenness and less time breaking each other. As we learn from Noah, this healed world will not become real simply by wanting it. Our prayer ... our intentional focus, effort, and energy – our healed vision of ourselves and each other will make this want – real. Shabbat Shalom.