

DROWNING

(Parasha Noach – October 28th, 2011)

Once upon a time, God told a man named Noach that soon there would be a flood and that the flood would cover the whole earth and kill everything. God told Noach to build an ark. God gave specifics about who and what to put in the ark and how to build it. Then the flood came and, sure enough, it wiped everything away. After a number of weeks, months even, the waters subsided and God told Noach he was allowed to leave the ark and go about his business.

For most of us, this is a familiar story. Even if we don't pore over the text of the Torah frequently, Noach and his ark are pretty famous, fascinating even. There is something riveting about the image of a massive flood, something incomprehensible about the idea of a catastrophe so large that it wipes out an entire world full of living things. The story of the flood is so hard to imagine that it has become quite entertaining for authors and artists to hypothesize about who was left behind when the ark sailed off into the distance. Many might remember Shel Silverstein's poem and the subsequent song by the Irish Rovers about the real reason for the extinction of the unicorn. More recently, a great online cartoon (I actually first saw it in an email from Stan and Louise) showed two kinda dopey-looking T-Rexes sitting on a small piece of land surrounded by water with Noach's Ark in the distance. One dinosaur is saying to the other "Oh...was that today?"

But the humor is ironic, because the real story is a little tragic. In the end, these mythical creatures drowned, along with everything on the earth at the time. The ground became waterlogged, basements flooded, reservoir levels rose past their safe point. Dams broke, people moved to higher ground, water rushed over the levies. Eventually there was nowhere to move to, and people began to die. And it continued, relentlessly, until everything was gone, until there was no life left on earth aside from the life preserved in the little boat, bobbing along in an ocean as big as the world, captained by Noach.

In all of this fascination and wondering about the physical act of a flood that is able to clear an entire globe, it is easy to miss the metaphor. It is not just the unicorn and the dinosaur, it is not just humanity that drowns in this early tale of the world – God is drowning. Noach is drowning.

One day, God looks around and the violence is overwhelming, the chaos is out of hand. People think of nothing but evil day in and day out.

God is drowning in the wickedness of his creations.

So he looks to the only sane person he can find, the diamond in the rough, Noah. God instructs Noah and Noah obeys. He builds an ark according to God's specifications, and painstakingly fills it according to God's instructions. He enters the ark when God tells him to, and after the flood he leaves only after God gives him the 'okay'.

Throughout it all, he watches as everything perishes. He hears the dying cry of every single creature, every single man, woman and child.

Noah is drowning in sorrow.

Once the waters recede and Noah's family is given the 'go ahead' to repopulate the earth, God realizes his mistake. In chapter 8, verse 21 God admits: **"yetzer lev ha-adam ra min-u-rav"** – the inclination of the heart of man is 'evil from youth-hood'. A suggestion made by the editors of the Women's Commentary points out that the act of the flood doesn't really change humanity – rather, the flood changes God and God's relationship with humanity. When God realizes that humanity struggles with the difference between right and wrong, he announces new rules and boundaries. It is almost as if the flood was like that good long cry that you need sometimes in order to move forward after a big setback.

Unfortunately, Noah is incapable of releasing his pent-up sorrow, and so he literally drowns in wine, drinking himself into an indecent stupor.

We all have our drowning moments.

Being overwhelmed almost seems like a human trait, as natural as common as joy and anger. Some of us are drowning in sorrow like Noah, weighed down by the injustices of the world, or the grief of losing someone we love. Others are drowning in paperwork, lost in piles and piles of files with big red sticky-notes that scream: "IMPORTANT! DUE TOMORROW!" Still more are drowning in commitments, flustered by the number of appointments on our calendars and worried that we are neglecting the people we love.

And it can be lonely, this drowning. People never drown together. They drown by themselves; they drown because no one can get to them to save them, because it's too late to get to where they are.

So perhaps the lesson here isn't to simply emulate God, Noah, or our good friend the unicorn, but rather to learn from both what they did, and also what they failed to do.

- From God's choice to flood the earth, we can learn to pay closer attention to the looming danger of increasing violence (or that teetering pile of paperwork on the edge of the desk) before it becomes so large that it seems mass extinction is the only way out.
- From God's later solution to create rules for his ever-unruly creations, we too can learn to set boundaries, to create a line for ourselves between enough and too much.
- From Noah's silent sorrow we can learn to speak up, to make sure we know what we're getting into.
- And from the unicorn, we can learn to "get on board" – to pay attention when the ark comes our way and to ask for a lift.