

NOACH (GENESIS 6:9-11:32)

An Ounce of Prevention...

2025 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The world was evil.

How evil? I don't know. But it was bad enough for G-d to regret having created mankind.

It was time for a reset.

Last week we read that ...*G-d saw that the evil of Man was great upon the earth...and G-d reconsidered making Man... and G-d said, "I will erase Man whom I created..."* (Genesis 6:6-7)

G-d determined that all of mankind needed to be wiped out. Only a small remnant, a righteous remnant, was to remain, to be rebuilt into a Better Mankind.

Noah was different. He was ... *a righteous man, perfect in his generations* (ibid. verse 9)

G-d assigned Noah, his 3 sons, and their wives to build that brave new world.

But He was still willing to give the current occupants of the planet an opportunity to get their acts together. He appointed a one-man construction crew (i.e., Noah) to spend the next 120 years putting together the escape vessel that would allow Noah's family and the selected animals to survive the Flood. The century-plus project would give society the chance to see what G-d's plan was and encourage them to change their ways.

It didn't help. They continued to act the way they had been acting before G-d decided to destroy the world. They ridiculed Noah, and even threatened to destroy the Ark.

Time's up!

G-d told Noah that Mankind could not be saved. They were beyond saving. Too evil.

He told Noah to take two of each non-Kosher animal – male and female, and seven – some say seven pairs, and some say 7 total – and load them into the Ark.

And then came the rains. The Ark rose with the tide, and the rains covered the highest mountains. The whole planet was not just submerged, it was devastated. The seasons stopped, day and night were interrupted, the universe simply ceased to function.

Noah spent the next year catering to the needs of all those animals, many of whom were carnivores, now forced to tolerate living on vegetarian fare. It wasn't easy. He ended up with a limp, compliments of an impatient lion. And what about the smell!!!!

Finally, it was over.

G-d gave the order; it was time to disembark. The entire human population of the planet, all eight of them, came out of the Ark, along with 2 of each non-Kosher animal, and 7 (or 14) of each Kosher animal, with a Divine Blessing, and an assignment to repopulate the earth. To be a better earth, an earth that G-d sees as deserving to continue to live.

But how do you do that? They were wicked before, and G-d destroyed them. Will they be wicked again and be destroyed again?

Noah had an idea. "What was G-d thinking? Why did He tell me to bring so many cows, sheep, goats and pigeons? If all we need are 2 lions and tigers and bears to refill the earth, why do we need so many chickens and giraffes? We don't need that many for population building!"

Noah built an altar to G-d and took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. G-d smelled the pleasing aroma and ... said, "I will not continue to curse the ground again because of Man... nor will I again continue to strike every living being, as I have done." (8:20-22)

So that's it?! That's all it takes to prevent a future flood??!! Roast a couple of lambs, deer and giraffes on the Altar and save the world?!

Don't get me wrong, animal offerings were part of the daily service in the Temple, and we pray every day for their return. And these offerings are a very holy statement of our recognition that our food and possessions really belong to G-d.

But if the earth was so evil that it needed to be eliminated, why would a few hundred Divine barbeques forestall that elimination?

If it's such a great idea, what didn't he do it BEFORE the flood and prevent it from happening in the first place?

Because it wouldn't have helped.

It's all about accumulation.

Rabbi Elazar Shach pointed out the statement of the Talmud (Kiddushun 40b) that every person should view oneself, as well as the whole world, as being exactly half guilty and half innocent. With that calculation, one Mitzvah, even a small one, would tip the scales and cause the entire world to be viewed

as righteous.

Noah, whom the Torah identified as a *righteous man, perfect in his generations*, even BEFORE his Save-the-World project, toiled in the Service of G-d for 120 years building His Ark, and trying to convince the masses to change their ways so that G-d would spare them. And then he spent a year waiting on the animals hand-and-foot, getting injured in the process. All these Mitzvas, observes Rabbi Shach, were not enough to extract a promise from G-d to never again destroy the world. There was so much evil, and potential for even more evil in the world, that all those Mitzvos performed by that holy man were still not enough to tip the scales.

So what was it? It was the sacrifices.

Those additional Mitzvahs, bringing offerings before G-d, finally tipped the scales. Had he done it before the Flood, it wouldn't have helped. There were still more Mitzvahs that needed to be done.

Did you ever go shopping, and suddenly realize that you didn't withdraw enough cash from the ATM? You start reaching into every pocket, trying to find one more dollar, another quarter, just a little bit more, so you can buy what you need.

Sometimes you make it, sometimes you don't. And you never know for sure how much you are going to need.

G-d sends us as babies into the world, and commands us to be righteous. How righteous? How righteous is enough?

He doesn't tell us. And that's a good thing.

If we knew exactly how many good deeds we needed, and how many bad deeds we needed to avoid in order to be considered O.K. in G-d's eyes, we'd be tempted to settle for mediocrity. Why should I work hard like Noah? I'll be a middle-of-the-road guy. But if we're not sure...

And let's remember, it's not just about us individually; it's about the world. It's about being responsible for each other.

A month ago we went through Rosh Hashanah, when G-d judges the entire world. If I view myself as 50/50 and I view the whole world as 50/50, I have an internationally essential task. If I do that one Mitzvah, that one tiny little Mitzvah that I never really viewed as particularly important, G-d will view the entire world as 51/49 and judge the world positively. But I also have the opportunity of saying, "well what's one little sin? I'll just pilfer that one grape from the produce section. I'll just make one tiny little nasty remark about someone. No big deal, right?"

Wrong. You just moved the entire world into 49/51 to be judged negatively.

Of course, we don't know what the real numbers are. So be smart. Do a Mitzvah. Even a little one. Then do another.

You may just save the world.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

© 2025 Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.