

Gabby Eisenberg-Edidin

D'var Torah

NOACH

Let's say you had a project for school or work that involved creating a piece of art or writing a story. Let's also say you wanted to put everything you had into this project, and you worked for weeks on it. When you were done you thought it was horrible. What would you do? Would you just destroy it? Would you rip it up and start from scratch after you had worked on it for so long?

That is what I do with almost every one of my own projects. I like it while I am making it, but when I'm done, I find that I've drawn a line slanted or colored something wrong, and I rip it up and start over. I can't stand even the smallest mistakes.

That is also what God does in my Torah portion, Noah. He creates the earth and everything on it in a week of God-days, which translates into millions of our years. Then, just a little ways into the history of humankind, things aren't going well and He decides to start again.

As God tells Noah, the one faultless man: "The end of all flesh has come before me. The world is filled with man's crime. I will therefore destroy them with a huge flood that will demolish the earth." God instructs Noah to build a huge wooden ark to hold his family and a pair of every animal in the world. When the work is done, Noah and his family board with the animals. Then it rains for 40 days and 40 nights, causing the Great Flood. Even the mountains are covered in water. Noah and his family wait on the ark for 370 days before stepping back out onto dry land to repopulate the earth.

Many hundreds of years later, Noah's descendants have built a large city. They have grown arrogant and think that they are greater than God and can challenge Him. They begin to construct a huge tower that will reach the heavens. The tower becomes so tall that it takes a year to get to the top. God sees this and becomes very angry. He scatters the people of Babel, as God calls the city, over the entire world and gives them different languages so that they won't be able to understand each other. It is another case of God destroying His work when He doesn't feel it is good, even though the destruction this time is cultural, not physical.

After reading my portion, the main thought that popped into my head was: how could God do these things? According to the Torah, God is almighty. If He had the power to handle things however he wanted, why did he have to go to such extremes? Couldn't he have found better, more constructive solutions? I think he could have.

In the story of Noah's ark, God destroyed the whole world, killing every living thing except Noah, his family, and the pairs of animals they managed to get on the ark. Even if everyone besides Noah was wicked, why was it necessary to *kill* them all? Couldn't God have sent a prophet to warn people, as He does in so many other Bible stories?

In the story of Jonah and the whale, for example, God sends Jonah to warn Ninevah to repent or be destroyed. Jonah is reluctant to take the assignment and runs away on a ship, but God finds him in the middle of the ocean and makes a huge storm come. The sailors fear that someone on the ship is causing the storm so they draw lots. Jonah loses and he goes overboard. God makes a huge whale swallow him and then the storm stops. After realizing that he cannot run away from God, Jonah is released and goes to Ninevah to tell them to repent, which they do. If God went to all this trouble just to save one city, he should have done 100 times more to save the world.

But I wonder if it was really possible that Noah was faultless and everyone else was wicked. In my experience, most people are neither wholly good nor bad. They are in between. Didn't God have a special responsibility to warn those in-between people?

And even if everyone other than Noah really was bad, wasn't that God's fault? When He created humans, He made them intelligent and gave them the power to choose to be good or evil. If everyone chose evil, shouldn't God have shown them why the choice was wrong, rather than simply wipe them out? Otherwise, why give them the choice in the first place?

Finally, what about the way God treated Noah? Initially God helped Noah -- sort of -- by warning him of the flood and telling him to build an ark. But where was God after the flood? He didn't tell Noah when to get off the ark, and left Noah and his family to fend for themselves when they did, giving them the daunting task of repopulating the earth. Then, a few generations later, God reappeared at Babel and scattered Noah's descendents across the world.

Rashi, the famous rabbi and Torah commentator, had a similar question. Why would God choose to burden Noah with the building of the ark when He could have saved Noah in so many different ways? Rashi's answer was that it took Noah and his sons 150 years to build the ark, and God hoped that in that time people would see Noah building it and either build their own boat, or repent. I don't see how this would have worked. If the people built an ark and saved themselves, what would have kept them from continuing their wickedness once they'd returned to land?

After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah, swearing that he would never cause such devastation again. This seems to show that even God had doubts about whether destroying the earth was the right thing to do.

Though God would later destroy the city of Sodom and Gomorrah and the firstborn of Egypt, He did honor the covenant for the most part, never again destroying the whole world. Maybe this explains why so many awful things have happened through history, such as the Holocaust. No matter how evil people like the Nazis have been, they are still humans, and God promised never to destroy humankind again.

So, I guess that while the covenant is a good thing because it has prevented further catastrophes like the flood, it is bad in another way because it has stopped God from intervening when things *really* go wrong. We are living with the consequences.

In today's world, since we can't rely on God to destroy our adversaries and make everything right, that becomes our job.

As a teenager, I don't have many opportunities to right wrongs on a grand scale, but I can do the right thing in my own life. There have been many times when I've been with a group of kids that are making fun of a person and ganging up on him. I often don't do anything about it -- which I feel awful about afterwards -- because it's hard to go against a group to protect one person, especially if you know the group will turn on you if you do. It takes courage, and I don't always have enough of that. But I find that if I focus on the feelings of the person being picked on, it's much easier to stick up for him.

Though sticking up for a person is a small act, it's also a big deal. As the rabbis have taught us, if you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world. They meant that each person is like a world, because each human is unique, and infinitely complex. We are all different in our own ways, even if the different part is bad.

The rabbis may have meant something else as well -- that the only way to save the world and make it a better place, is to open our hearts and help each other. If you help one person, even in a minor way, you could drastically change his or her life for all you know. Then that person could help another person, and so on. This is like the butterfly effect— the idea that if a butterfly flaps its wings somewhere on one side of the world, that little eddy of wind could ultimately create a tornado on the other through an almost infinite chain of reactions.

Similarly, by helping one person, you might start a chain of events that contributes something important to humanity as a whole. You might do this just by giving someone a push in the right

direction. Even the greatest people sometimes need a push. Albert Einstein, for example, was an inquisitive boy who failed almost every class he took in middle school and high school, although he grew up to be what many people consider the smartest man ever. His push came from his uncle, who bought him a set of geometry blocks, and sent him money when he needed it in college.

So if we can all think like this, and lend someone a helping hand when they need it, I believe we could make the world a much better place.

* * *

In preparing for my bar mitzvah, and in my life generally, there have been many helping hands.

First off, there's my bar-mitzvah tutor, Shira, without whom I couldn't have done any of this today. I thoroughly enjoyed our talks about my Torah portion throughout the year and am grateful for all the patience she showed me. Even when I didn't practice the way I should have, she never got mad. She would just run through the material again, offering help where I needed it.

I want to thank all of my Hebrew School teachers, especially Orly and Deekla, who are in Israel now. Also, Amy for helping to create and maintain our wonderful shul, Niles for his interesting services, and Melanie and Ellen for their beautiful singing. (Ellen, I still think you should make a CD).

Most of all, I want to acknowledge my family. It is very small and I am very close to my grandparents and other relatives. Thanks especially to my sister Sophie, for helping me through the hard times and watching out for me at school. To my Dad for always being there for me. Though now I generally hang out with friends on the weekend, in earlier days, when I had nothing to do, he would take me to movies, play baseball with me, and do whatever it took to keep me happy. To my Mom for everything! For being loving and caring and explaining every obscure homework assignment until I knew 10 times as much I needed.

Everyone here today is important to me. Thank you for coming and sharing the day with me.