

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Noah

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Elie Wiesel:

Let us begin at the end. I mean at what would have been the end, not of a story but of history itself, for if ever the ultimate apocalypse seemed a quasi-certainty, if ever the universe came close to being totally, irrevocably silent, it was then, right at the beginning. It was as though God was choosing to tell a strange, surrealistic tale, a tale in which the epilogue and the prologue almost touched, leaving nothing in between. Remember, at this particular point in Scripture creation seems to come to a standstill. God speaks of *ketz kol basar*. [00:01:00] He mentions the end, the mystical end. And the term he uses, *ketz*, is something special, something unique. End means *sof* or *siyum*. In this case it is *ketz*, a brutal termination, a breakdown of all systems, a *denouement*, an ultimate closing of a spectacle that has barely opened to poor notices, one might say.

Thus we enter the story with unmitigated fear and trembling. The fate of mankind is at stake. Its future salvation is in the balance. God has invented all things and created all man, and [00:02:00] now he is about to destroy them all in one fell

swoop. Why? We know why. We are told why. We are given the indictment almost point by point. It seems creation has broken away from its Creator. No wonder that He is disappointed. It's understandable. He had hoped to create something unique, a masterwork of purity and ecstasy, a grandiose project with endless possibilities. And then came the letdown. He had been mistaken, deceived. Deceived by His favorite and most privileged actor, by His most favorite creature, His associate, deceived by man, who appeared unworthy of God's trust and kindness.

The relationship could have been [00:03:00] so gratifying. It wasn't. Because of whom? Because of man, who in his foolishness, his pettiness, his selfishness destroyed it all. He had received from God a certain power, and he abused it. God therefore decided better put an end to it right there and then. And suddenly we understand the word *ketz*. *Ketz* -- (laughter) *ketz*, as you know, is related to *l'hakitz*, to wake up. So *ketz* may very well be the awakening, that God decided to awaken from his own dream, and the awakening could have been brutal.

What did He want? He wanted to start all over again.

[00:04:00] We are told in the Talmud more than once that our world, our planet is not the first, that God had tried other

worlds before. But He didn't like them. In one source we even find that He was disgusted by the world that He created, so He threw them away. Why He likes ours, I don't know. (laughter)
But does He?

In Scripture, the disillusionment of God reverberates throughout the story, one of the saddest and most oppressive stories in the Bible. Everything in it is clear, concise, overwhelmingly hostile, implacable. Destiny has been set in motion and will not be stopped by anything or anyone except God, who clearly has no intention of stopping it. Having Himself issued the order, who [00:05:00] could interfere with its execution? But what about repentance? What if man everywhere, all of a sudden opened their eyes and their hearts and decided to mend their ways? Improbable, inconceivable. The text says so. God decided to annihilate the world because it had gone beyond redemption. Its corruption was total.

Sodom later might have produced 10 just men but didn't. The same is true of the world which Noah knew. Noah is the exception, just as Abraham would be the exception in Sodom. Noah's world then was like Sodom, only larger than a city, larger than a country, larger than a nation. Imagine Sodom conquering the entire world and you might conceive of society in

the time of Noah. The difference, Sodom was punished by [00:06:00] fire, Noah's world by water. Furthermore, Abraham was not a citizen of Sodom whereas Noah was of his land and his time.

The world was rotten. Man was corrupt and life polluted. It announced the end of the world, and there was nothing man could do about it. God had willed it that way, and God's will would prevail. Hence the peculiarly disquieting tone of the narration. It is that of a prophecy that will come to pass at any cost, at any price. Nineveh would be saved, the world would not.

Jonah's horror vision would remain pure hallucination, not so Noah's. His was about to turn into reality. Read the story, and you will be [00:07:00] struck by its realism, dates, figures, measurements. One might take it for a scientific report, the size of the ark, the duration of the floods, the ethnic and social composition of the survivors, their alternating moods from passive despair to hope, what they eat, what they think. The text has the flavor of a television newscast, a futurologist's projection, a survivor's testimony. The text is about a total event, and therefore it is in itself a total description encompassing the universe in its entirety.

That is why we read the passage with the strange sensation of witnessing not the past but the future. But we must ask the obvious question: why? Why this collective punishment?

[00:08:00] Why this almost total extinction of the human species? Why those floods that swept away to the abyss all that countless men and women had conceived and achieved, feared and hoped, built and rebuilt in many lands and throughout many generations, why?

The text offers no clear answer, at least none that is either real or satisfying. The explanation we are given vaguely informs us that mankind has sinned. We shall speak about it later. But we are not made privy to the nature of the sins. What crimes has mankind committed, where, and when? We do not know. We are not supposed to know. Why not? After all, if punishment is meant to fit the crime, I would like to know what crime could have provoked such [00:09:00] punishment.

Shouldn't we be told, if only to prevent another catastrophe? Cain killed. He was guilty and was punished. Pharaoh was inhuman. He too was punished. But the society that saw Noah's birth and growth, was it guilty? Yes, but of what?

Furthermore, can an entire society be found totally guilty? Can

an entire people, an entire community be repudiated and exterminated? Should we not at least know why?

We intend tonight to explore some of these questions simply by studying, as always we do, the text before us. But as always, before doing so, a few preliminary remarks may be in order.

[00:10:00]

The first is I want to thank you for studying together with me. This is the sixteenth and perhaps the last year of our meetings at the Y. And it was a difficult year. The year seems to have gone by so fast since we met here last that it hurts. It was probably one of the most difficult years we had, I had, since 1945 for all kinds of reasons. There are too many signs, and I wish we had the skill to decipher them. Something is happening in history. I don't know what it is. What I do know is that it isn't good.

As a Jew, of course, I'm terribly concerned with the fear that has [00:11:00] permeated our lives. Whatever I say about now could have been said about Noah's times. All the words are applicable to him as they are to us. Why we should live in fear today is beyond me, but we do. You read the newspapers, you hear television, radio, the Jews are afraid in some countries to

go out in the street with their Magen David. In other places they remove the mezuzah from the door. To go to the synagogue today is really *mesirat nefesh*. It's dangerous. To send children to cheder, to yeshiva, to Jewish schools is dangerous, and I want to know why. Why should it be dangerous?

Forty years after the greatest catastrophe since Noah's we should live in fear? [00:12:00] How does one explain the rebirth of anti-Semitism on so many levels? I don't know, but I'm terribly concerned. Not only because of us, because in a strange way we are immune. What else can the world do to us that it hasn't done already? I am concerned with the world itself. Anti-Semitism is a microbe. It always reveals the sickness in the society where it grows. And today there is no society without it, in the East, in the West, in Poland without Jews, anti-Semitism without Jews, or even in China. In certain places in Europe they refuse to serve Jews. In other places they refuse Israelis' aircrafts to land.

Something's terribly wrong. [00:13:00] You want to tell me, or some of you may say, it's the result of Lebanon. It cannot be. Oh, I know. The Lebanese tragedy affected me and I'm sure affected all of us. It's a tragedy, and we are sad, and we should be. I think it was a turning point in our history.

Something happened there, and I hope that when the investigation will be over we will know more, but it's sad. However, the reaction to it in Israel was beautiful, but the reaction to it abroad is disgusting. The response of the world to what happened in the Middle East is unforgiveable. It's not because of the exaggerations only, it's the relish with which they said what they said. Suddenly everybody was happy that they could say some things about Jews [00:14:00] that before couldn't have been said.

So I'm worried. We shall talk about it next week and the week after, in three weeks. Today we speak about Noah. Noah, in a way, is out of place. We should have studied him years ago after Cain and Abel and before Abraham and Isaac. I chose not to because, well, why not admit it, I must tell you, I didn't like him. Granted, he was a survivor, and I'm always prejudiced towards all survivors. But he was a different kind of survivor. I didn't like him. And it took me years to try to understand him. And today we shall try together.

Until now we used to study personalities. This year we shall also study [00:15:00] events. The emphasis will be on events and the topic of power somehow related to the event.

Then above all we must remember what we tried to achieve here. We are trying to study. There is nothing that fills me with more passion than study. "Tzē u'l'mad" is one of the most fascinating commandments in our tradition, to study, to unravel words, to take one layer after another, and to meet people that live in us, but we suddenly meet them on paper in the words and underneath the words.

The study of ancient texts is, to me, one of the most exciting endeavors in life. Few things fill me with more fervor and gratitude. [00:16:00] As I reread Noah and the commentaries on Noah I see myself as a child younger than my son, in a cheder somewhere in the shadows of the Carpathian Mountains leaning over an old torn Chumash under the watchful eye of the teacher. I see myself in the world before the other deluge, the one my generation had to endure.

I read and reread the story of Noah and experience a joy and anguish which are not just my own. We have repeated certain sentences so often in 4,000 years that they have become immortal. And that is the profound beauty of Scripture. Its characters are not mythical. Their adventures are not imaginary for we enact them again and again. They vibrate with [00:17:00] life, our life, and thus compel us to approach them, to enter

their vision and search for a common meaning. Somewhere Cain is still looking for his brother in order to murder him. Somewhere Isaac is still sensing death challenging his father. And somewhere Noah, as in a bad dream, still feels that the end of the world is near.

The time of this play could very well be the present. But our study of the past helps us understand the present. It sharpens our awareness. It enhances our consciousness. So with your permission, my friends, I suggest we follow Grandfather Noah into his ark. Beware, this is our last chance. He is about to shut the doors. So what are we waiting for? (laughter) We are more [00:18:00] generous that our doors be open.

Darash Rabbi Akiva bamabul, lo bachu. Rabbi Akiva one day decided to give a lecture on the floods. Nobody cried. *Darash b'Iyov.* Next time he gave a lecture on Job. Everybody cried. Was Iyov, was Job more important than Noah? No. [00:19:00] The difference? The floods were statistics, Job a human being, as was Noah.

Noah, we are told in the Bible, was a just man. In fact, he was the just man of his generation, or rather, remember the text because it's important to see the small detail in every word, he

was a just man or the just man of his generations *bedorotav*. We are told to believe that, and we gladly hold to that belief, but as we shall see later, it is not always easy. When we analyze the man, when we observe him from different angles, he seems less appealing, unless of course we accept the notion the just man must be unappealing.

The same is true [00:20:00] of the other protagonists in this story, barring none. As they appear before us in the text and its various commentaries, some enchanting and other disturbing, we are confronted by their duality, their ambiguity. We shall see that the good may be less good than we or they think they are and that the wicked may very well not be as bad as all that. In other words, read and reread the sources and you shall see that beneath each story there is another story. Underneath each mask there are other masks. Nothing is as simple as the simplistic approach to life and language outlined in the episode. But then nothing is superficial in man's relation to his fellow man and their common creator. Every figure must be observed from more than one viewpoint, every argument weighed according to more than one principle. [00:21:00]

To study means therefore to desire and obtain keys to more than one gate. In the beginning Noah is good, a positive figure.

His appearance on stage is greeted with applause. His name means consolation and promise. It is in the text. At the age of 182, Lamech has a son whom he calls Noah for, and I quote, "zeh yinaḥāmēnū mimaššēnū u'maiitzbon yāqênū min-hā'āqāmāh" which means that Lamech knew Hebrew well enough to make a connection between Noah and *nechama*. Noah will bring *nechama*, Noah will give us comfort and consolation. But it also means that Lamech, expressing [00:22:00] himself as a manic depressive, was indeed very melancholy. Why?

He does us the favor of speaking freely and openly. He links his sadness to the earth. He dislikes work. Is he against labor? No. The Bible has always been union oriented.

(laughter) We know that when Jews sin together, more specifically, when Jews get together, when they organize themselves in order to sin, they are forgiven more easily than when they sin individually. (laughter) God, after all, did not destroy them for worshipping the golden calf or for erecting the Tower of Babel. Why not? Because each time they had done their sinning enjoying it as a group project. (laughter) [00:23:00]

Lamech spoke of sadness for a different reason. Man found work too hard, too tiresome. Well, this concerns all man, and all are unhappy. We learn that also from Lamech, who uses the

plural tense. True, the man-earth relationship is individual, but man's fate is collective. All mankind is affected. But what wrong was actually committed? There is nothing in the text to inform us. No mention is made of transgressions or even mistakes.

All we are told is that the people are sad and depressed. Did they need a flood for that? A psychiatrist would have done the job. But then perhaps they were sad because of their [00:24:00] ancestors Adam and Eve, who had moved God to curse the earth. But then if Adam and Eve sinned, why should their descendants suffer on their account. They shouldn't, but they do. And that is why they are depressed.

Said Lamech, "My son is the answer to that curse and to our sadness. He will change things. He will reconcile man with his work." Were it only a question of man's melancholy Noah might have known how to deal with it. But it wasn't limited to man alone. It is written in the text. When you read it you are struck by the lucidity of the text because it is written with painful and striking clarity. Man's personal predicament but reflected God's cosmic sadness for by then, we are told, men and women [00:25:00] had reproduced themselves and multiplied. They had born many children and done many things, so much so that

they must have aroused curiosity all around them and even above them. Sons of God, the *b'nai elohim*, fell in love with daughters of man and married them. A strange story with tragic consequences.

Now we know that up there in heaven this love story was not appreciated. And so in view of this *mésalliance*, or call it intermarriage, God, the heavenly father of both the grooms and the brides decided that he had made a mistake. He should not have created the world, and above all, he surely should not have entrusted its fate and continuity to a creature as unstable and erratic as the human being.

And so [00:26:00] with the obvious divine logic, he determined that drastic measures must be taken to correct the mistake. He will erase everything. All that lives will cease to live. Human beings and birds and animals and plants and flowers, all must disappear. God, apparently, loved radical solutions.

And then in the text, abruptly, the story halts and takes a sharp, different turn. Without the slightest transition or preparation we are told that the Almighty's mood has changed: Ve-Noah matza khi beeinei Hashem, and Noah found grace in the

eyes of God. There is no transition. There is no passage to suggest any link between the two, nothing. [00:27:00]

In the previous episode, in the previous sentence God regrets having yielded to his own illusions. He regrets have being naïve with regard to man, and suddenly he likes Noah. And he summons him and puts him squarely center stage as the only man whose life and deeds could possibly please him.

Tell me, where was Noah until then? What had he done until then? What was so exceptional about him that he instantly became God's chosen, God's favorite? From that moment on mankind was split in two, on the one side all those despicable human beings, on the other one man, Noah, God's comfort and joy.

From the literary structure of the narration it becomes clear that [00:28:00] God himself is somewhat troubled by his own story, by the non sequitur, for the text, in yet another abrupt move, invents its own flashback for the first time in history. And the text shows Noah in the context of history: "Ele toldot Noah - Noah ish Tzaddik haya bedorotav," which means here is the story of Noah who was throughout his lifetime untouched by evil and a just man.

Having emerged from the depths of mankind's collective memory, he is destined to come to its rescue. Noah, son of Lamech, grandson of Methuselah, Noah, father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah, God's witness and spokesman, Noah, a unique human being who has witnessed a unique event, an event unequaled in the annals of human justice and inhuman punishment. God takes [00:29:00] him into his confidence. I have endured enough, he says. I have been patient enough, charitable enough. People are wicked, and I intend to punish them. I am telling you all this so as to give you time to prepare. Build yourself an ark quickly. Do not waste time. Start now. (laughter)

I almost read it from the text, and Noah obeys. He follows the divine instructions to the letter. Whatever God wants him to do and say he says and does. Faithful to his mission, he fulfills it to the end. Thanks to him, mankind will survive. It will survive through him. In other words, the world will go down, but Noah will have saved it nevertheless. The floods will come and go, and thanks to Noah, mankind will begin again to live, to work, to hope, to sin, to repent. In short, it will remain human.

And that is the subject of the story for that is the story, [00:30:00] the crumbling of a society and its values on one

hand, and on the other the survival of one family and its values. And it all reads like a play. There is a before and an after. We watch Noah and his preparations. We witness his drama, his tragedy. We see the consequences, the fallout. Step by step we follow the events from the beginning to the end. In fact, we follow Noah right into his ark, otherwise we wouldn't be here tonight to tell the tale. (laughter)

The setting: all the continents under the sun, the whole universe, and time, time itself becomes a protagonist in the play. All creation is implicated. The cast all things and creatures in existence. And they are all [00:31:00] about to vanish, about to drown into nothingness. The cast of characters is indeed glorious, with Noah getting star billing. He's involved in every act. He dominates every scene. His protagonist not one person or group but all people. And they all remain nameless.

And what about God? God is his ally and protector. God is the supreme stage director who manipulates events through words. God decides when to raise the curtain and when to bring it down. He orders death to withdraw. Whatever is done must bear witness to His power and to His anger. At first glance, the logic of the situation seems tangible and even irrefutable. Society is

evil, hence it is doomed. Noah is not, and therefore he will be saved. [00:32:00] As for God, he is just. He means no harm to his creatures, quite the contrary. He wishes to help them acquire a sense of justice. How is he to rule over the universe without chastising the wicked and rewarding the good?

Everything is simple, a fairytale for children who dislike confusion and hesitation. Noah is all that others are not, therefore his fate must be different, better than theirs. They will die. He will live. Let it be known, therefore, that God has chosen that way, that good deeds bring life and that bad deeds provoke death. Clear? Yes and no. Yes in Scripture but no in the commentaries.

The Talmudic interpretation of Noah's story is a little bit more [00:33:00] complex. Let's look at it again. One fact seems to have been taken for granted, namely that all men were indeed wicked and therefore deserved death. But what made them wicked? What did they do? Lamech speaks of sadness, God of corruption. We must believe God. Corruption is the key word in the story, or rather in the preparation of the story, corruption of the flesh, of the senses, of the population, corruption of the land.

And corruption begets *chamas*, theft, violence, hatred, in other words, total disdain for one's fellow man. Explains the Talmud, in Noah's times people indulged themselves in every [00:34:00] possible way. Concerned only by a desire to satisfy their vilest instincts, wealth, sexual promiscuity, and idolatry, were their three principal preoccupations and occupations.

But we may ask the question, so what? Is our society of today different? Has any society ever been different? Is there a society, has there been a society less sex oriented or sex motivated? Can anyone convince us today that Noah's fellow men were more dominated by sex symbols than our own? They didn't have television, but --

The same is true of idolatry or of money. Does anyone believe that people today are less interested in money or that today's computers command less respect [00:35:00] than the idols of long ago? If at least the biblical sources had been more precise in their accusations and cited individual cases to prove their point, who did what to whom, but we are not given one name, one crime, one victim, one case. But since when do we allow statistics or Gallup polls to pervade in matters of jurisprudence or theology? Surely there were, there must have been wicked people around, more wicked than others, which also

means that there must have been some who were less wicked than others.

All the texts emphasize the people's human frailties and failures in the context of social relations, all right. God did not resent their lack of religious faith as much he resented their lack of respect for one another. All right. They were guilty cheating, of stealing, of insulting one [00:36:00] another. They were guilty offending, shaming, and victimizing their fellow man, but that implies that there were both victimizers and victims. Were the victims guilty as the victimizers, as guilty? And if not, why were they punished? Or at least why did they receive the same punishment. Granted the world was unjust, but what about the children? Were they unjust?

On the other hand, let's examine the question from another angle. What if Noah's contemporaries were in fact less evil than they appear in the story? Rashi's commentary is a case in point. Remember it. *"Nōaḥ ish Tzaddik haya bedorotav*, says Rashi. And Noah was the just man of his generations, meaning perhaps had he lived in other times he might not have received that title. And he gives the [00:37:00] examples, Samuel and Yiftach. Both were leaders, moral leaders, as measured against

their contemporaries, yet in Shmuel's time, Yiftach would not have attained moral leadership.

However, being both French and Jewish, Rashi also offers another interpretation. (laughter) Had Noah lived in better times, he says, in a healthier society, he would have been even greater. Whether you accept the first hypothesis or the second, one thing is clear, Noah may have been great or not so great, but his contemporaries were small. The proof? Noah. Look at their moral leader. Look at their tzaddik. Had they been worthier they would have deserved a better one. Noah was lucky to have them around, lucky to be compared to them. (laughter)

But then still another question arises. [00:38:00] If he was not so much better than they, why was he spared? Since he's constantly in the limelight, let's scrutinize him further. Who is Noah? In the biblical narrative he appears to be passive but good and above all pious and faithful. He submits to God's will but takes no initiative. Whatever God wants him to do he does but nothing more and nothing else.

And what if God had not chosen to talk to him? And what if God had chosen to talk to someone else? Could the others not have said to God, listen, master of the universe, You are unfair? If

you wanted us to behave differently, why didn't You say so to us in person, not through an emissary?

Noah was obedient. Of course he was. Who wouldn't be if one had the honor of being reminded or [00:39:00] even reprimanded by God himself? In Talmudic literature Noah is treated rather curiously. The assessment shows more nuances. Many legends are told about him, and many judgments are offered. All the same, it's clear our sages and storytellers were intrigued by the man. Was he worthy of his destiny, of his election, of his mission? The first impulsive answer is probably affirmative. Yes, Noah was kind and just and did indeed deserve fame, glory, and praise, not only because of what he himself achieved but also because of what was done to him and because of him.

In other words, by his very existence he made a difference. During the 10 generations separating Adam and Noah we are told creation had evolved in total disorder. As a result of Adams' sin, animals and [00:40:00] beasts had begun to openly despise him and refused to bow to his will. Man was no longer their sovereign. Once he had fallen from grace he no longer had any power over his surroundings.

He recaptured it only with the advent of Noah, birds and beasts *nachu*, calmed down, thanks to him whose name means calm.

Because of who he was or what he was they once again accepted man as their superior and master. Legend has it that also, thanks to Noah, nature recovered its regular cycle, which it had lost in the aftermath of Adam's disgrace. Before Noah, people would plant one thing and harvest another. There was no longer a relation between man's effort and its fruit.

Another symptom [00:41:00] of the universal breakdown of that time, human beings were born old. They came into the world at the age of 50 or 60 and knew nothing of the innocence or pleasures of childhood. Whose fault was that? Adam's and Eve's. Then, ten generations later, once again there were children and adolescents to be seen in the world. Whose doing was that? Noah's.

Noah was not only just, he was also practical, we are told. Who do you think invented working tools? Noah. Who invented the plow? Noah. Benefactor of the working class, Noah also defended the interests of the peasant and the seaman. In short, Noah was the supreme friend of man and mankind, so much so that magicians and sorcerers feared him, according to the Midrash. When he was born, his father Lamech went to his father, the old

Methuselah, to tell him the good news [00:42:00] of his birth.
You see, Lamech was still young, only 182 years old. (laughter)

Said Methuselah, "My son, do not name your child Noah for the wicked ones will kill him." "What shall I call him?" asked the young father. "Call him Menachem, the consoler," said Methuselah. And from this episode we learn several things. One, parents already then loved to offer unsolicited advice. (laughter) Two, children already then could live without it. (laughter) And three, nothing has changed. (laughter) Nothing ever does.

The Midrash, with its flight of fancy, added more details in praise of Noah. He was born circumcised, precocious, intelligent, brilliant. He understood the tongues of all man and all creatures. He even understood sign language. Believe it or not, he began to study. [00:43:00] What? You won't guess. Medicine, naturally. (laughter) He even wrote his dissertation on medicine. But there the truth must be told. He did get himself a ghostwriter, the angel Raphael, the same one who had lent him his book on ship building when Noah had to start thinking of making an ark. (laughter)

Perhaps that's why Noah was not a vain person, for a good reason. He stayed modest, humble, and simple. The Midrash insists on the fact that he himself took care of his father Lamech and his grandfather Methuselah. Instead of setting them up in an old age home, he kept them in his own house.

(laughter)

A saintly man, he is ranked in the Talmud at the top together with Adam and Abraham. For what he achieved? No, for what he [00:44:00] endured. Chosen to be an instrument of history, he was shaped by its omnipotent Author who engineered the scheme and the plot from the beginning to the end. Poor Noah. He was in fact the object of his own story rather than its subject.

But then why did God choose him even to be object, vehicle, messenger? Because, well, he must have been in some way different from his fellow man. Perhaps he did have special merits that God knew, that God alone knew. At this point you may have guessed it already. If not, it's time to say aloud what has only been whispered in the Talmud: Noah did not obtain the unanimous acclaim of our sages. He got mixed reviews.

There are those who reproach him his lack of confidence and faith. Noah, who was the only one to show [00:45:00] faith in

God's warnings, nevertheless, was later accused of complacency. One commentator maintains that Noah did not take God's word seriously, that he did not believe in the deluge. Listen to this description in the Talmud, and I quote, "Noah went on living as before, business as usual, even after the rains came. He waited for the waters to reach his ankles before he tore himself away from his home and boarded the ark."

Rabbi Hanina, son of Pappa, may be exaggerating. But let us listen to his version of Noah. "Noah," he said flatly, "did not deserve to be saved. But without him there would have been no Moses, and God wanted Moses. So had it [00:46:00] not been for Moses, Noah would have been a nobody." (laughter)

Other commentators blame him for the opposite reasons, naturally. They are angry with him for not having been angry enough with heaven. They accuse him of having been too obedient, too submissive, and even too selfish. Look at the difference, says one Talmudic sage. When God intends to annihilate his people and says to Moses not to worry for he will give him another people larger in numbers, more powerful, wealthier than the first, Moses answers I do not wish to lead another people. It is not a personal matter. Whether I am leader or not is irrelevant. I demand that you allow these

Jewish people to live. *Vayechal Moshe*, says Scripture.

[00:47:00] Moses in fear began to pray, to implore heaven to annul the decree.

Says the sage in the Talmud, did Noah do the same? Did he ever argue with God as Abraham did? Did he ever implore him for mercy? Did he ever but utter one word of protest or prayer? Did he ever but try to intercede with God on behalf of the countless human beings who were already doomed and dead but didn't know it? As soon as he learned that he himself was not in danger he stopped asking questions. He stopped worrying altogether. Before, during, and after the catastrophe he seems to have been at peace with himself and with God to the point that God had to scold him and remind him of his obligations to humanity. It was God who in the Talmud had to [00:48:00] incite him to protest on behalf of humanity.

There is a beautiful Midrashic text which I would like to quote for you. "When Noah finally left the ark," says the Midrash, "and realized the scope and the magnitude of the universal desolation all around him he turned towards God and asked, 'Master of the Universe, we call you *Rachum*, the merciful one, the charitable one, the compassionate one. Where is thy mercy, thy charity? Where is thy compassion?' And God put him right

back in his place. 'You are nothing but a stupid shepherd,' said the Almighty. 'Now you are asking me these questions? When it is too late, when it is over? Why didn't you say anything before? [00:49:00] Really, Noah, when I told you to your face, "*ki otcha raiti tzaddik l'fanai*" that I considered you a tzaddik, a just man. Why did you think I said that, to pay you a compliment? I said it for one reason only, to move you to become aware of your mission, to force you to intercede on behalf of mankind. Why else would I have called you a tzaddik? I wanted you to assume the mantle of moral leadership and speak up for my intended victims. But you kept quiet. From the moment you heard me reassuring you that you would be saved you said nothing. You were satisfied. You chose to become my accomplice rather than humanity's friend, and this is when you begin to speak up, now?'" [00:50:00]

But then the question arises. If Noah is indeed such as the Talmud views him and God views him, why was he called tzaddik? A man without human passion, without warmth, without generosity, imagination, a man without the slightest sense of involvement with society let alone history, one who thinks only of himself, of his own pleasure and security, what made our tradition treat him as a tzaddik? Because he helped others in their everyday activities? Why didn't he try to save them from certain death?

At the same time, let's be fair with Noah. There are indications in the text that he did change afterwards. Having witnessed destruction, he grew sensitive to its significance and had the courage to address questions to God, however belatedly, better later than never. In other words, maybe he was [00:51:00] no tzaddik before, but later on he became one by understanding what God did. He may have been transformed, perhaps transfixed by the experience. He had to. No one can see so much death without being changed. But then all of a sudden maybe he was no longer the same man, the same person, the same character.

And this metamorphosis is illustrated in the Talmudic literature as follows: Before the catastrophe he was a good son, but nothing is said of his being a good father. It's as though he thought that children were out of place in man's wicked and corrupt society. Later he turns into a good father, and they become bad sons. He reaches out to his neighbors. He becomes *ish adamah*, a land laborer, a worker, a person seeking to develop himself by working with his fellow human beings, someone trying desperately [00:52:00] to rebuild a future kingdom on the ruin of adventures that had ended in blood and water.

As far as Noah is concerned, all is well that ends well, right? Wrong. Because the image we just gave of him as a kind of *baal teshuva tzaddik*, of a repentant, a penitent, is unfortunately misleading. It is with sadness that we take notice of a negative transformation that Noah is to have undergone later in his life. And that maybe disturbs us as much as the other things about him in his earlier periods.

Let's study the text once more, and we shall see that on his long journey Noah loses two of his adjectives, of his attributes. In the beginning before the deluge he is called *ish tzaddik v'tamim*. He's a total man, just, [00:53:00] unblemished. Later, when God speaks to him, he deprives him first of the word *tamim*, and then of the word *tzaddik*. He has taken away both titles. What remains, the name, the man, Noah, which means a quiet person, a person who has no worries, no bad dreams, no ill feelings, perhaps not even bad memories. Noah means *noach labriot*, someone who gets along with people, something a just man never does.

Study the sequence of events following the deluge and you will have a clearer picture of Noah the man. What is the first thing he does after he leaves the ark? He builds an altar and offers a sacrifice to God. It's logical. It's normal. It's the

proper thing to do. After all, he owes God his survival and his family's. But then [00:54:00] what does Noah do next? He listens to God, who promises him never again. Never again will he punish mankind that way. And God concludes the covenant with Noah and gives him a solemn pledge that there will be no other deluge ever.

And then God suddenly begins to lecture him on the importance of life. God is celebrating life and condemning murder and suicide as never before or since, and I confess to you that that does sound somewhat absurd. God had just condemned mankind to doom. Mankind died, and now one breath later he raises his voice in praise of life? How could he? [00:55:00] At that point Noah at last does something touching, something unrelated to history or God, something purely personal, private, something futile, foolish, childish, but pleasant and voluptuous. He plants a vineyard. Listen, not an orange tree, not an apple tree, not a cherry tree, a vineyard.

Comments the Midrash, everything occurred during the same day, the act of planting, of drinking, and of falling into debauchery. You know, biblical time being accelerated, Noah did everything fast. (laughter) In one day he went through phases that normally would last seasons and years. Almost straight off

the ark he drank, fell asleep, and crawled into his tent, only to be discovered [00:56:00] by his son Ham in his nakedness. Is this characteristic of a tzaddik? To renew history by getting drunk?

Most Talmudic interpreters have judged this incident severely. And listen to a story in the Talmud. I quote, "On that memorable day Satan saw Noah as he was planting his vineyard. 'Would you take me as your associate?' he asked. 'Yes,' said Noah, 'Gladly.' So using his newly acquired privileges, Satan brought a lamb, a lion, a pig, and a monkey and buried them all under the vineyard, and so their blood mixed with wine. That is why," says the Talmud, "if you drink one glass you become sweet as a lamb. Drink two and you will be strong as a lion, three, ridiculous as a monkey, [00:57:00] and four disgusting as a pig." (laughter)

Is this our hero and savior, Noah, the business associate of Satan? Just imagine, he had witnessed and lived through a human and cosmic drama without equal. He had survived a catastrophe that cost the lives of practically an entire population, uncles, aunts, cousins, and all he could think of doing was to establish wine cellars and cabarets, and get drunk to boot. (laughter)

Had the event left no mark on him, no impact on his sensitivity?

Had he not learned anything from it? Is it conceivable that the annihilation of mankind as a whole with its cities and villages, its schools and factories, its homes and playgrounds could find its climax in the grotesque spectacle of a drunken father humiliated by his sons? [00:58:00]

To raise the question a more brutal form, even if Noah was not a just man before the deluge, is it possible that he did not become one afterwards? How could he have not become a just man afterwards? He had to repent and study and look for meaning somewhere. Why didn't he resort to other things, to building, to study, to learn poetry, drama, philosophy? Disappointing, Noah. As a character he leaves much to be desired. He never acts, he only reacts. He never aspires to grandeur. He only wallows in routine.

The average citizen he was before the deluge remains just that after the deluge. To paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, he took great events and reduced them to small circumstances. But then, why the uniqueness about [00:59:00] him? Well, I will tell you. Let's not be too harsh on him. If Scripture took Noah, and if God chose Noah, they had their reason. Let's find the reason. And I think that the reason has to do not with before or after but during. We have discussed what he did before. We have

discussed what he did after. And we forgot, conveniently, to remember what he did during the catastrophe.

During the catastrophe, during the floods he was superb.

Tenacious, obstinate, stubborn, Noah and his sons are alone when they are working on the ark, alone against those in power, alone against power. Mocked by the inhabitants, they nevertheless continued their work. Perhaps that was the major sin of his contemporaries, they humiliated Noah by laughing at him. That they were skeptics [01:00:00] was their business. Still, they had no right to ridicule him.

For the Midrash insists on the fact that Noah worked on his project in public on God's orders so as to attract attention and to incite all neighbors and passersby to repentance. The preparations lasted 50 years, according to one Talmudic source, to give the sinners plenty of time to mend their ways. Fifty years of mockery, that's a long time, you must admit, to be the target and the victim of immoral majority, to be attacked and vilified day after day but by people who think they know everything.

Well, that's not easy. Did Noah respond? Did he show anger, bitterness, regret, perhaps? No, he kept quiet. He made

neither speeches nor demands, presented no excuses and claimed no special privileges. All he wanted was to serve as a living example. It was enough to see him to [01:01:00] know that he had heard God's warnings as others must have, only he decided to act and be ready. What was special about him was that he turned awareness into action.

And so as the threat grew more serious, more real, Noah obeyed the heavenly instructions scrupulously. The ark was ready. The skies were cloudy and dark. When would the tragedy begin? Soon. And who shall live and who shall die, the decision was not Noah's but God's.

The images in the text are striking, all those animals and beasts and birds arriving in twos and going aboard. We see them. We hear them. We follow them. They are alive and pathetic. We feel sorry for them for becoming uprooted, but we envy them for remaining alive. And this phase of the story has inspired numerous anecdotes, some terribly funny, in the Midrash.

Listen: "As the various animals marched past Noah he suddenly noticed a weird one [01:02:00] all alone. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'I am *sheker*. I am falsehood,' came the answer. 'You

came alone? Sorry," said Noah, 'singles are not admitted aboard.' (laughter) 'We are not that kind of club.'" (laughter)

So falsehood desperately tried to find a mate and succeeded, and another strange solitary animal named schlimazel, or mishap, was also looking for a mate. And together they formed an ideal couple. (laughter) Says the Talmud, "Whatever one gets through falsehood will be lost through mishap." (laughter)

Anyway, Noah and his family take care of them, as they do of all their passengers. The Talmud insists on that too. During 40 days and 40 nights Noah and his children attended the wild beasts and the animals, bringing them food and calming their anxiety. The description of the deluge is pure literature, the rains, [01:03:00] the rains that come relentlessly, the waves, the tempests, the darkness, the thunder above all the uncertainty. When will it all end? Will it ever end?

It is then that Noah is at his best. Those are his finest hours, selfless, devoted, tireless, he is everywhere looking after every living creature. He knows whom to feed when. Some eat standing, others lying down. Some have to be fed in the morning, others in the evening. Noah forgets no one, no one except, well, once he forgot the lion, who left him a reminder

of his error. Noah was hurt in the leg and limped to the end of his life.

Except for this incident, the journey is flawless. Nothing goes wrong. Noah as captain of the ship knows his task and performs it with vigor. He never shows signs of panic. He never manifests doubts or anxiety. He heeds his small, floating kingdom, and he brings it to safe haven. Add to it, of course, that God is on his side. This is not always pleasant, [01:04:00] but it certainly is useful. (laughter)

Noah's manager God tells him when to board the ark, when to open the windows, when to send scouts. The language is amazingly clear and precise. Say, I say, do this, say that, count the days, count the hours, and the Talmud, incidentally, criticizes Noah for having obeyed the divine orders too closely. God told Noah to leave the ark, and Noah left. Commented Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Eli, "If I had been there in his place, I would have been less patient, less docile. As soon as I would have seen the waters recede and the land dry, I would have broken the ark and jumped ashore. Not Noah."

Noah, a shadow of God's shadow, he follows God and only God. With regard to other beings, he has changed. He has improved.

He has become [01:05:00] involved in their affairs, in their needs, in their lives. With regard to God, he has remained the same as before. Is that a sign of strength or weakness? It is neither or both. It surely a sign of self-preservation. In extreme situations one leans on one's past to stay above water, so to speak. When one is faced with obscure perils one needs to draw on one's life experience to continue to function normally in an abnormal situation.

If Noah had altered his relations with God he would have lost his balance. Had he wept once, only once he could not have stopped ever. Yet something did happen to him at the end of the ordeal, says the Zohar. Noah left the ark a different person, in a different state of mind. He was confused. That's only natural. Imagine what he must [01:06:00] have felt as he walked ashore and discovered the empty, devastated land. He must have looked for familiar grounds, vantage points, cities of light and life, dwelling places and their sounds. He knew that they had vanished. Still he went on looking for them.

And then he was confronted by a choice: anger or gratitude. He chose gratitude. He offered thanks to heaven for having been spared, for having survived. As a survivor, the first, he chose gratitude rather than bitterness. And that has remained true.

No one is as grateful as a survivor. He or she knows that every moment means grace for he or she could have been in another's place, another who is gone.

But there is something else. There always is. In Noah's case it must have been his guilt feeling [01:07:00] when he discovered his own impenetrable solitude. All survivors are haunted, if not plagued by such feelings at one time or another. At one point, Noah must have wondered, why me? Surely he did not think he was chosen because he was a better person? He couldn't have been so vain as to think that. Because he had a better position in society? Others had held higher positions.

Noah must have asked himself this painful question, why me, over and over. Granted he had saved his wife and their children, but what about his relatives, his neighbors, his friends dead, all dead, and only he is alive, and his family is with him. Here is Noah, the ultimate man of power, master of the world, why not? There is no one left to challenge his power. Master and ruler of contemporary history, [01:08:00] he will confer onto it a new meaning. *Eyleh toldot Noach*, the human story will start all over again with Noah, your ancestor and mine. No one ever had his possibilities. No one ever shared his power, his triumph. And no one ever felt such anguish.

And therefore, after the first gesture of gratitude, after his first offering, he needed a glass of wine. (laughter)

Especially since he must have had some premonitions about the future. What had happened once could surely happen again.

True, God has pledged to him that no flood would ever again devastate the earth. Have you seen the text in Scripture? God speaks only of *hamabul*, of flood. But what about all the other means of destruction?

Noah [01:09:00] must have sensed that people never learn enough from their collective memories, that men remain human, therefore weak and vulnerable. Remember, hardly have they left the story of the deluge when they already jump into another tale of horror. They promptly embark on an adventure building a gigantic tower to allow them to go into space, or heaven, to dethrone its master and take his place. Remember, while the Tower of Babel is being constructed, Noah is still alive. He sees and hears it all. And he knows how it will end. Does he warn his contemporaries not to repeat past mistakes? If so, no one listens. No one ever noticed. He speaks, and his words are lost in indifference. Poor Noah.

Having [01:10:00] survived cosmic tragedy, he is not happy. How could he be? Hounded by his memories, he escapes into sleep. He drinks and sleeps. Is this his response to other people's suffering? Of course not. He maintains his good relations with God. He has faith in his word, in his promise. He is glad that from now on creation and creator are to be linked by promises rather than threats. God speaks to him, meditates with him, through him. Says God, according to the Midrash, to Noah, "You are sad, Noah, so am I. You think that I enjoy winning battles? When I win, I lose. When I lose, I win. Did I not lose when I won the argument with your generation? Did I not lose [01:11:00] a world I myself created?"

In conclusion, we must end with hope and say no, God will not permit another disaster. He will not provoke, nor will he be provoked. Still, what has changed? Noah is anguished. He trusts God, but he knows people. What God will not do, they very well might. God would not destroy them, but they could do it for him. The covenant binds him, not them. Noah is sad. His son Ham is a source of disappointment to him. Shem is better because he went to a yeshiva to study Torah. Japheth goes to college. In general, his children are moving in the right direction. [01:12:00] Bound by seven commandments, they

respect them. At home things are run more or less smoothly. But outside the home the picture is far from encouraging.

During the catastrophe, Noah was the protagonist. Now he has become a witness, and there, more than before, I feel profoundly sorry for him. Was he in fact a just man? Who cares? He was a human being, a human being who, having gone to the end of night and suffering, knew that he was condemned to be free. Having reached the limits of despair, he felt himself duty bound to justify hope. I imagine him under his tent telling his children and grandchildren stories of his own childhood when he was only 100 years old. He speaks of the past so as to shape the future. And *tzaddik bedorotav* means he wants future generations to justify [01:13:00] his existential choice.

Is it an accident? The parsha of Noah, the weekly section which we are going to read next week, next Shabbat, ends with Abraham arriving on stage. And his story is also part of our memory. Noah makes you sad. Abraham will make you proud. Noah is quiet. Abraham is not. Noah knows nothing of Jewishness. Abraham is Judaism. What do they have in common? Both experienced suffering. Was Sodom something of the past? Its destruction by fire suggests the future, lest we remember, lest we remember. (applause) [01:14:00]

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