

Parshat Noah
“The Education of Man...and God”
By Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
October 24, 2009

If I were to ask you whether or not Judaism was an optimistic religion, most of you would probably respond that it was. And you could point to a whole host of proofs to bolster that claim – God creates the world and pronounces it “very good!” There is no “original sin” and “the fall of man” in our reading of the early chapters of creation, we read those events very differently than our Christian friends do. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with its emphasis on *teshuvah*, and the promise that God will forgive our sins – is very optimistic. The whole concept of the messiah and an “end of days” that will return us to a state of perfection and total peace, no matter how far from that perfection our contemporary world may be, that is a very optimistic worldview.

So it might surprise you if I were to respond to the question of whether or not Judaism is an optimistic religion with a very qualified: yes but....

And the “but,” comes from my close reading of today’s *parasha* of Noah.

I actually want to challenge two widely held assumptions about what we Jews believe – and I’ll get to the second one in just a second but first this notion that Jewish religion in general and the Bible in particular are optimistic.

I am going to struggle not to destroy that belief completely – but I want to make sure that you understand that whatever optimism Judaism claims and whatever optimism the Bible contains is hard won and the result of a long and arduous struggle with a reality that all but defeats it.

Let me show you what I mean. If we read the first two *sedras* of the torah, they are not optimistic at all. The torah starts out with the creation of the universe and it says: God looked at all that He has made, and He said it is very good, but then God makes man, and from that point on, things go straight down hill: Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, Cain and Abel fight and murder is introduced to the world; the next 10 generations sin – in fact they are so sinful and so corrupt that God comes to the conclusion that there is no alternative but to destroy the entire world and start over with Noah. Not exactly: “and they lived happily ever after...”

That is not a story I would call optimistic. That’s like saying that Hamlet is a comedy, because you only read the first scene, and don’t read the rest of the play. In fact if you think about it, it is more than a little sad that in less than six chapters we go from ‘God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good... to: ‘And God said: I will blot out the man whom I have created from off the face of the earth, both man and beast and every creeping and the fowl of the air, *ki’ nichamti*, for I regret that I created them.’

In less than six chapters, we go from a God, who is delighted with the world that He has made, to a God who is so turned off by the world that He has made, that He decides to wipe it out, lock stock and barrel. If that’s optimism, I would hate to read what you call a pessimistic story.

But that is only the first of my challenges for this morning. The second thesis, which I would like to challenge today, is the belief that the torah is the story of how God educates man. Again I think that is a definite yes, but... I think that's true, but I think that it is only half the truth. If you ask the average person what the Torah is, they will tell you that it is God's book, by which He strives to teach people how to live. And that is true, but I think there is much more than that going on in the Bible. So let me offer you another possibility, that the torah can be understood not only as God's effort to educate man, but also as man's effort to educate God. And in some ways, this second aspect of the Bible is even more fascinating than the first.

Allow me to explain.

The God who created Adam and Eve thought that He could control them by threatening them and telling them that if they didn't listen to Him, and didn't stay away from the Tree of Knowledge, as He commanded, they would become mortal. How did that work out? It didn't, Not at all. Because God found out that human beings would rather die than be without knowledge. And then God tries to educate Cain and Abel to share the world and even though they have the whole planet to share between the two of them, it does not turn out to be big enough, they can't divide it equitably, so they fight and one gets killed. And then God goes through 10 generations, from Adam to Noah, each one worse than the one before until finally God says in exasperation at the very end of last week's torah portion (and I quote): *vayar adonai ki rabah r'at haadam ba'aretz, v'chol yeytzer machshevot libo rak ra kol hayom, va'yinachem adonai ki asah et haadam ba'aretz, vayitazteyv el libo. Vayomer adonai emcheh et ha'adam asher barati may'al p'nay ha'adamah* "The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by him was nothing but evil all the time and the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created..."

Can you feel the pathos in that line? Can you feel the sense of disappointment? Look what we are being told about God: "The Lord *regretted* that He had made man, and His heart was *saddened*." That is so sad.

God makes a world and then looks at it and has to conclude that it just isn't working? You can feel the heartache in that verse. God sounds like a parent who had such high hopes for his children and then had to confront bitter disappointment. Imagine Bernie Madoff's parents realizing that their hopes and dreams for their son were not going to work out the way they had hoped for. Thank God, I don't think they are alive. A parent should not know such disappointment.

God sounds like every dreamer, who started out with noble plans and sees his dream destroyed. God had never created a world before and God had never been involved in a relationship with human beings before - this was a whole new bewildering experience for God, having to deal with human beings. Up until the creation of the world, God was alone or at most all He had to deal with were angels and angels have no free will, they just do what they are told - so, before the creation of man God never ever had to deal with disappointment before. And here we are at the beginning of our torah portion for today and we have a God who is disappointed, disillusioned, and heartsick. The world was not going according to plan. Certainly not according to His plan.

What then did God learn from this experience? How was God different *after* the flood from *before* the flood?

I think if we read the torah carefully, we see that God learned an important lesson. God learns that in the world of perfection – He is it – period. God learns that He and He alone is the only perfect being that there is and therefore, He has to make a very difficult choice. If He wants perfection, then he will have to live alone. But if He wants relationship, if He wants companionship, if He wants friendship, if God wants to have a relationship with the people He created then He will have to learn forbearance and give up on any expectation of perfection. He will have to learn how to put up with imperfection - in large amounts. He will have to learn to live with mediocrity, whether it is intellectual mediocrity, or spiritual mediocrity, or ethical mediocrity. He will have to learn to live with disappointment. Because that is what we humans specialize in – we are masters of mediocrity, experts in imperfection, and professionals when it comes to disappointment. God thought that man could be like Him, and that by creating us He could enjoy a neat orderly universe *and* the warm wonderful companionship that He had been lacking. But, God learns that He will have to choose. A world with man will be messy and imperfect and filled with disappointment. But, a world without man will be devoid of relationship, warmth, companionship and love.

Your move God.

And here there is a dramatic pause. What will God choose? Confronted with this choice, what will God do?

Now you are prepared to read the opening lines of today's torah portion and understand the full force of their meaning. Open to page 42 in your Bibles. Please read with me Chapter 6 verse 13: "God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth."

So there it is – God seems to have made his choice. God seems to be saying that He cannot live with imperfection, that he cannot abide the mess we have made of His world, that he would rather live in a universe devoid of man and devoid of relationship than have those things and all the terrible things that come with human existence. How sad. How very very sad that this wonderful, incredible, miraculous experiment filled with such potential, filled with such possibility, started with so much hope – ends so quickly in such total, absolute failure.

What? You say the story does not end here? There is more? There is another verse, in fact you tell me there are 52 *parshiot* still to come? Well then, read on my good man – read on.

"God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. *Asey lecha teyva...* Make yourself an ark...this is how you should make it... (look over in verse 17) For my part, I am about to bring the Flood – waters upon the earth – to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. But,

(if I was printing a Bible – this but, would be printed in capital letters two feet tall – this is the most important but in the bible – if you will excuse my expression) BUT –

can you imagine Noah listening to God inform him of the destruction of the universe, of a flood that was about to wipe out ALL mankind – with each incredible description of what is about to happen, how he was to build an ark for the rest of creation – all the animals would be saved – but mankind was to be wiped out – poor Noah just gets more and more depressed and then

God says BUT – “but?” Noah says to himself – did I just hear God say but? “For my part, I am about to bring the Flood – waters upon the earth – to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. BUT, I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives. (Music swells up, storm clouds part and the sun shines through – oh glory days!!) God has made His choice. God decides that He can live with imperfection but He cannot live without relationship. And this is such a crucial moment, such a pivotal moment such an important moment in the history of our relationship with God, that God decides to do something to make sure we will remember it forever -- God wants to make sure its importance is not lost on all future generations so He gives us the rainbow as an everlasting reminder A reminder to us and to Him that He will not destroy the world ever again but that, after every flood, there will come a new beginning. Because God values His relationship with us more than anything else. And He is willing to put up with almost everything else to preserve that relationship.

Is Judaism optimistic? Well, the rainbow at the end of this story would probably support an argument of yes – but it is a hard-won victory that comes with a heaping dose of realism about the nature of man and the evil he can bring on the very wonderful world that God has created.

And as much as this is a book details what we need to learn if we are to make a go of this human endeavor, it becomes clear that we have a partner in God who has His own learning curve as well. Just as we are struggling to learn what God wants and expect of us – God has to learn patience and the limits of what He can expect from us.

And so, in the end, God’s lesson becomes our lesson was well. For we, like God have choices to make. We too, need to make a conscious choice between perfection and relationship. If we are going to demand perfection from others we are going to have to prepare ourselves to be very lonely.

Every time I do counseling – I come to the same crucial moment in our conversation. It may be a parent who is frustrated with a child, or a child who does not know how to deal with an intrusive parent. It may be a husband or wife who feels betrayed and bewildered, and will recite a long list of injustices that have been perpetrated against them. And there will come that moment that I will say to them that they are going to have to make a choice – between perfection and relationship – between justice and peace. If you want justice, you may have to give up this relationship, if you want peace, you may have to learn to live with injustice. “Why can’t I have both?” The person will inevitably ask? To which I will smile and think of God’s choice, so long ago and that if He couldn’t figure a way to establish such a world – what hope do we have. “That would be nice,” I will say, “But, I am afraid you will have to choose.”

It is not an easy choice – and sometimes, the relationship is so broken, so toxic, so hopeless that there is no other choice but to sacrifice the relationship – but, if at all possible, if there is any hope – remember what God chose – remember that he valued relationship over loneliness and was willing to endure an awful lot of disappointment to maintain that relationship.

So, is Judaism an optimistic religion? Yes, I believe it is, and ultimately I believe that today’s *parasha* of Noah makes an argument in favor of such a conclusion but – it is an optimism that comes with an enormous dose of realism. It is no Pollyannaish view of man or God. Both are capable of enormous destruction and disappointment. Both are works in progress - but if we are going to make a go if it together – we and God – we like Noah, will have to remember that moment when we were so very close to loosing it all – and whenever we see the rainbow we

should remember as did Noah – that at that crucial moment, God chose to believe in us. And maybe therein lays the real point of this story – that even more important than our faith in God, is God's faith in us.

Now kids, go out and play – and don't do anything to make God regret His decision.