



## **Noach 2023**

### **Lift As You Climb**

3 minute read | Straightforward

As the Torah begins the Flood story, the Torah introduces Noach as the righteous man of his time, a famously ambiguous description.

It might be a straightforward compliment that Noach was one of the greats, or it might be a backhanded compliment with the faint inference that his generation was so awful that being the best of them isn't especially praiseworthy.

Noach is a significant figure and the protagonist of an important story. In isolation, the negative characterization might seem a little harsh.

But in the context of the Torah's story, it matters that we notice who Noach was, and what he did and did not do. The Rambam notes that the Torah leads us through the early trajectory of human history; and how people just couldn't get it right until eventually, someone did – Avraham.

The Midrash teaches that after God told Noach to start prepping for the Flood, Noach would tell everyone what he was doing and preach to them to abandon their corruption and lawlessness to embrace ethics and morality. His pleas fell on deaf ears, and the world was lost.

In a sense, this reinforces the question. The most humans can do is try in the hope that God helps. We control our efforts only and not the outcome.

Why do we hold Noach's failure against him?

R' Yitzchak Berkowitz teaches that Noach's failing wasn't in his efforts; it was his methods.

Noach didn't attempt to understand his society; he separated himself from it. He insulated his family to the extent he couldn't understand the people around him, and he couldn't get through. His name literally means "easy" – the easy way out.

We need to ask if we could consider ourselves righteous if we detach entirely from humanity and society. How strong is our belief system truly if we don't think it could withstand the slightest scrutiny?

The issues of Noah's day weren't ideological or philosophical because paganism isn't a philosophy – it's ad hoc. The problems of that day were lust, desire, greed, and selfishness.

The tragedy of Noah was that for all his efforts and personal righteousness, he didn't put in the effort to understand the people around him.

Arguing with people rarely succeeds – and anyone who's had a significant dispute will tell you that it rarely matters that you're right.

In stark contrast, Avraham is lauded as someone who was very in tune with how to win the hearts and minds of his society. He fed people and washed them, caring for all people with genuine love and kindness. Pagans were not a threat to him because his beliefs and practices were strong enough to survive contact with them. The Raavad notes how we herald Shem, Ever, and others as righteous, yet they don't feature in our pantheon of greats because they never went out into the world.

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that righteous people are not scholars in ivory towers; they actively drive positive change in their communities by living out the Torah's teachings – בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה בָּעִיר.

Noah, the best man his generation could muster, failed:

וַיִּשְׁאַר אֶדְ-נֹחַ – Only Noah was left... (7:23)

Instead of saying that Noah survived – וַיִּשְׁאַר נֹחַ, the Torah emphasizes that “only” Noah survived, underscoring the utter devastation and loss in the story. R' Meir Schapiro highlights that this is the moment Noah understood the cost of his failure, abandoning his peers to their fates without doing all he humanly could.

R' Josh Joseph notes that we highlight Noah's failure despite his efforts because the image of Noah alone is terrifying, which leads him to see his remaining days in the depths of alcoholism and depression. R' Shlomo Farhi notes that Noah's defining feature was that there was nothing wrong with him – תָּמִים – which is to say that Noah was perfectly adequate, and yet that wasn't enough.

R' Jonathan Sacks contrasts this broken figure of Noah, who couldn't save anyone, with the bold and staunch figure of Avraham, who tried to save everyone. When God informed Avraham that He intended to destroy Sodom, Avraham passionately advocated for Sodom's survival – a civilization that stood for everything Avraham stood against!

As R' Yisrael Yehoshua Tronk of Kutno observes, Noah walks with God, which suggests the exclusion of others, whereas we see Avraham as someone who went before God; over, above and beyond הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי / אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ-נֹחַ.



We need to dig very deep to have a shot at saving others, lifting as we climb, so it resonates with us that Noah could have done more. Perhaps we recognize that's what it takes in order to live with ourselves.

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## **Religious Risk**

3 minute read | Straightforward

No one knows the future.

As a result, we organize our lives around taking more or less risk; risk is inextricably linked to navigating the unknown, which is the reason the future is unknown. There is risk in our career path, who we marry, where we live, how we invest, what we consume, and how active we choose to be. The entire financial industry, insurance industry, and arguably the entire religious world are organized around risk; we live our lives in the specter of the consequences of wickedness and wrongdoing.

Is it a good time or a bad time to buy a house or invest? People have been saying it's one or the other for a long time, and they'll be right eventually. There is an inherent risk factor in an informed decision, and you'd be foolish to ignore it.

Risk is what's left over when you think you've thought of everything. It can be counterintuitive and easy to ignore, especially when no one else has noticed it either. These can be more or less obvious at different times in our lives – but they're always there. The riskiest stuff is always what you don't see coming, and you won't see anything coming if your eyes are wide shut.

The Flood story highlights another kind of risk – religious risk.

Our typical analysis of the flood story often focuses on Noah, the protagonist, and what he did or didn't do. On occasion, we talk about what the antagonists did so wrong to corrupt their world so irredeemably.

But let's consider something Noah's audience notably did not do. They didn't listen, and the world was lost.

The Midrash suggests that for the hundred and twenty years he spent building the Ark, people would ask Noah what he was doing, and he would reply that God had informed him that God was bringing a great flood, and they would laugh him off as some crazy old man.

Imagine sitting next to a heart surgeon on a long flight, and after getting to know you a little, watching you eat and drink the entire flight, he suggests that your habits predispose you to a greater risk of heart disease if you don't tighten up your diet and develop a good exercise habit. How arrogant and stupid would you need to be to ignore the doctor and carry on just the same?

The very least you should do is get checked up and consider the gravity of the man on the plane's word and the severity of the consequences of doing nothing. What if there's a chance he's right? That alone should get you to pay more attention.

But Noah's world did nothing.

On the back of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we have considered the importance and urgency of Teshuva. We read the story of Jonah, whom God instructs to go to the corrupt city of Nineveh, and the entire Assyrian empire falls in line and makes amends on the back of just one sentence, and the star of Nineveh shines once more.

In sharp contrast, we read this story, and Noah couldn't get even one person to see the error in their ways.

God promised not to flood the world ever again when the world wouldn't listen, but that's just what God did. Humans didn't change, they stayed the same! We are the same species of human, and humans are endowed with the property of not listening, and you ought to sit up a little and wonder what your important thing might be ignoring.

There have always been incidences of tragedy – that's the nature of risk. Who it happens to, and how it happens, is a question of destiny, fate, and providence. But we live in a connected world – there are no local tragedies anymore, and we remember them longer and more clearly. How many times have you seen the World Trade Center footage?

It's easy and tempting for leaders to blame whatever is culturally in vogue to attack – on a lack of cohesion and unity, on talking in shul, or on women.

And the truth is far scarier.

It's that we simply have no idea.

And in the face of that shocking truth, we ought to face the world with a little more humility. As the Mesilas Yesharim explains, self-assessment requires us to accurately gauge where we are and scrutinize where we are going – **יִפְשְׁפֹשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו וַיִּמְשְׁמֶשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו**. If you can't do that, or worse, think you can but are mistaken, you have a real problem.



We need to be tuned in to ourselves and our environments, and even in the best case, it's ideal to have friends and mentors to help guide us along the way – עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רֵב, וְקִנְיָה לְךָ חֵבֵר.

We're probably not a society of corrupt and wicked sinners, and you probably don't need to listen too closely to anyone with that message. But we can do without excessive pride or self-confidence, and we can always dig a little deeper because what if there's something we could have done better?

So with good reason, the Rambam's universal prescription for bad things and hard times is Teshuva; it's always a good time to make amends and resolve to do better and be better – just in case!

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## **Regulations Redux**

4 minute read | Intermediate

Speed limits, traffic lights, parking meters, building codes, dress codes... it's easy to see rules as restrictive forces in our lives, reducing individual freedom and personal choice.

The Torah is brimming with laws and rules, so it's a critique one can aim at Judaism with some merit and one that has long been raised by seekers.

There are so many rules, and they stack up fast! Eat now, fast then, do this, don't do that, and it goes on.

Why can't we just do what we want?

The opening story of Creation about the dawn of humanity centers around the imposition of a rule – don't eat from this tree, and humanity's unwillingness to follow the rule – they did it anyway.

There's a plausible reading here where God is cruel and tantalizing, teasing His creatures by pointing at the beautiful tree they are forbidden to enjoy; the language of prohibition and denial is right there, and it identifies God as the maker and enforcer of a system with arbitrary rules that humans are destined to fail.

But the story that follows about Noah and the Flood is a story about what happens in a world with no rules – total anarchy and chaos, and ultimately, the collapse of civilization. When everyone pillages and plunders, you have barbaric savages. Noah and the Flood, we see a world without rules, which leads to chaos and the collapse of civilization.

No serious person believes that radical anarchy would be sustainable, a total free for all where Darwinist principles of survival of the fittest govern the day. Doing anything you want isn't a utopian dream; it's a dystopian nightmare. Every human society at all times in all places has understood that humans need rules and norms; ancient and primitive societies had rules and norms we might object to, but they had rules and norms just the same. The existence of rules and norms is a foundation of human society – no one gets to do whatever they want.

Rules form boundaries that enable and facilitate safe human relations by asserting how to interact, preventing infringement on others or abuse or depletion of a thing. Rules are a basic civic requirement.

Beyond the philosophical, this extends to the essential nature of reality; our universe is a universe of rules, built and run according to rules, the laws of physics that govern energy and matter.

The religious aspect of doing whatever we want is based on the notion that observant Jews are missing out. Sure, there are many things observant Jews can't do or enjoy – bacon, cheeseburgers, lobster, and pepperoni are allegedly some of the big ones.

Yet the Midrash teaches that it is wrong to believe that the Creator denies or prohibits us from the joys of life in any way. Rather, the Torah asks us just to regulate our instincts and stop them from running wild in order to maintain balance in our lives, from greed, hunger, and revenge, to tribal loyalty and sexuality.

Humans break when overindulged – people everywhere abuse and hurt, cheat and steal, get obese and sick, and tirelessly waste years of life on sexual pursuits. These negative impacts aren't the product of liberty; they're different forms of addiction and brokenness.

Like all cultures and societies, the Torah has lots of rules. And like all cultures and societies, some make more sense than others.

But like all rules and laws, they keep us safe and stop us from getting out of control. They help regulate our enjoyment of life; they enable everything else.

The laws of sexuality regulate that family relationships are inappropriate if combined with sexuality.

The laws of Shabbos are endless; you learn something new every time you learn the laws of Shabbos. But the existence of Shabbos changes and elevates how we experience time – it's not Saturday, a day off work, it's Shabbos! Moreover, Shabbos has kept generations of families and Jewish communities eating, singing, and praying together for life.

The Torah permits a carnivorous diet, which could reasonably be construed as unethical; it asks us to limit our diet to animals with certain features that must be slaughtered humanely. If the Creator is the



gatekeeper of Creation, it's not obvious that we should be able to eat living creatures at all! But otherwise, the Torah allows us to enjoy the vast majority of human cuisine prepared in accordance with our culture.

What's more, when taken together, the rules of kosher keep the Jewish People distinct and separate from the world. They elevate the most basic instinct to consume into a religious act, saturated with meaning and purpose. As the Chasam Sofer notes, the kosher laws open with what Jews can eat, the permission, not the prohibition.

As the Meshech Chochma notes, the Creation story isn't about a negative restriction on a tree; it's about a positive command to eat literally everything else in Creation and fill the world with people, broad and permissive, perhaps even indulgent and hedonistic, with one caveat.

The Creator sanctifies human desire with the very first command – the directive to eat and procreate suggests that even our most basic instincts serve God's purposes. Although there's a caveat, even several, the Torah's claim is that God is the gatekeeper of that permission; that's what "Creator" means. If we accept the premise of a Creator, why would we feel entitled to the entire universe?

Beyond the aspect of a legal obligation, the fact that Jews observe a rule or practice makes it a cultural norm, unspoken but socially agreed on, and therefore sanctified by the collective consciousness of all Jewish People.

The Torah has lots of rules and laws. But those laws come from the Creator of Genesis; the God who creates life, loves life, commands life to thrive, and wants that life to love and enjoy.

We do this thing, we don't do that thing. No one gets to do whatever they want, that's not how the world works. We live in societies built on the rule of law, in a rule-based universe.

Rules aren't so terrible.

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## **Language Redux**

4 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands of species and trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human



being left alone in the woods from birth to death kept separate and alive, would be not much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – מְדַבֵּר.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage in forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.

With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים, יְהִי אֹר; וַיְהִי-אֹר – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (1:3)

The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – דָּבָר / דְּבָר. R' Moshe Shapiro notes that for God – and people of integrity! – there is no distinction; giving your word creates a new reality, and a word becomes a thing. R' Shlomo Farhi points out the obvious destruction that ensues from saying one thing but meaning and doing something else entirely.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn't there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it's God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism. We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident



where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah's choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אשר לא טהרה הוא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”

The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create – שהכל נהיה בדברו – so must we – אני ה'. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.

The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, one of which is the language of repentance. Words have the power to activate a force that predates Creation; Moshe intercedes on behalf of the Jewish People for the calamitous Golden Calf, and God forgives them specifically because Moshe asked – סליחתי כדברך –

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and



there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לא תעמוד על-דם רעך.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli

**PS** - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.