



Noach 2022

Your Moral Compass

2 minute read | Straightforward

The book of Bereishis is about the evolution of human justice and the evolving dynamic of God's relationship with people. Avraham is considered the first prototype of the kind of person God wanted people to behave like, and it is his descendants that would go on to receive the Torah.

But Noah was righteous too; why is Noah not held up as a model of what a good person looks like?

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that our role models followed their internal moral compasses, even when it led them to the point of directly questioning God outright.

When Noah left the Ark, everything and everyone was gone. Noah took in the scale of desolation and loss, and questioned God – where was God's mercy all this time? The Zohar describes God's stunning reply to Noah – when God had told him the flood was coming and all would be lost, where was Noah's mercy for the world he had known?

In sharp contrast, when God announced that Sodom would be destroyed, Avraham questioned God's justice. When God threatened to destroy the Jewish people after they danced around the Golden Calf, Moshe questioned God's justice. Throughout history, our heroes have challenged God when something felt wrong.

Even if unsuccessful, they are still fundamentally correct. Avraham stood up for pagan barbarians, and said that if God is merciful and good, then that ought to be true even towards the wicked! Our heroes' internal moral compasses tell them that something is wrong, and they follow through.

But Noah simply accepted God's judgment that his society was corrupt and deserved annihilation. He did not attempt to affect the course of events until it was far too late.

Accepting that bad things will happen to other people isn't a feature – it's a critical flaw. Noah agreed that everything and everyone was bad, and that they deserved what was coming. R' Yisrael Salanter says that a hidden tzadik is no tzadik at all. Avraham went out into the world to show people a better way, whereas Noah just let his whole world slip into oblivion.

Maybe that's why he never seems to make the list of truly righteous people. It may also be why he planted vineyards and turned to alcohol and solitude. The magnitude of his missed opportunity was enormous.



It is a Jewish characteristic to question everything, even of God. Just because God Himself says something, does not mean we must accept it – ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה. The entire point of prophecies of doom is so that we do something different and avert disaster so that God's promise does not happen.

When something feels wrong don't just accept it. It's a challenge! Do something, say something.

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 you 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 – יִפְשֹׁפֵשׂ בְּמַעֲשָׂיו וַיִּמְשָׁמַשׂ בְּמַעֲשָׂיו. 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 – וְעָשָׂה לָּךְ רַב, וְקָנָה לָּךְ 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!

Lift As You Climb

3 minute read | Straightforward

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

It might be a straightforward compliment that Noah 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.

Noah 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 Noah 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 Noah to start prepping for the Flood, Noah 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 Noah's failure against him?

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

Noah 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 בְּעִיר.

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 – תמים – which is to say that Noah was perfectly adequate, and yet that wasn't enough.

R' Jonathan Sacks contrasts the 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 הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי / אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים הַתְּהַלֵּךְ-נֹחַ.



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

Sensitivity to All Creatures

3 minute read | Straightforward

From the dawn of humanity, people have utilized animals for all kinds of purposes, from farming and hunting to clothing, food, labor, transport, and domestication as pets. Inasmuch as the Torah permits these uses, the Torah categorically prohibits human mistreatment of animals, with a comprehensive list of laws designed to minimize animal suffering resulting from human interaction.

As it relates to food, from field to table, there is a vast corpus of rules that governs everything we put into our mouths and everything we don't; and one of the defining features of observant Judaism is the laws of kosher, in particular, the rules concerning how we obtain edible meat.

R' Avraham Yitzchak Kook suggests that, among other reasons, the Torah's laws of kosher meat consistently demonstrate an underlying principle that humans ought to respect the life and well-being of all non-human creatures.

Consider that kosher slaughter, the most obviously exploitative use of animal life, is heavily regulated; the Torah requires the blade to be razor-sharp for a smooth cut and must be concealed from the animal throughout, among many other laws that prevent unnecessary animal distress. The Midrash rhetorically asks what possible difference it could make to God whether an animal dies by a cut in the front of its neck or the back; it concludes that it doesn't make a difference to God so much as it makes a difference to the human, since a front cut is more humane, and refines the humans who observe this law.

The laws of kosher aren't just about how we treat the animal until it dies, but afterward as well. There is a little known law to conceal the blood that is spilled, almost a mini-burial ceremony:

וְשָׁפַךְ אֶת-דָּמוֹ, וְכִסְהוּ בְעָפָר – Pour out the blood, and cover it with dust. (17:13)

In the Torah's conception, blood is the vehicle for the essence and soul of identity, personality, and vitality, warranting sensitive handling and treatment; it follows that it is disrespectful and inappropriate to consume blood:

אֶךְ-בְּשָׂר, בִּנְפִשׁוֹ דָמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ – Eat only the meat; do not consume the blood... (9:4)



When we talk about the blood draining from someone's face, or the lifeblood of an organization, we're using the same kind of imagery as the Torah, where blood is the seat and symbol of life and vitality, which may help us understand why blood is a central element of all the sacrificial rituals:

כי נפש הבשר, בדם הוא, ואני נתתיו לכם על-המזבח, לכפר על-נפשתיכם: כי-הדם הוא, בנפש כפר
in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the
blood that atones because of the life. (17:11)

The Torah unambiguously permits humans to consume a carnivorous diet, but as Nechama Leibowitz points out, the Torah only reluctantly allows humans to eat meat after the Flood story. As much as humans are the apex predator on Earth, God's compassion goes far beyond humans – והאֵרֶץ נְתַן לְבַנֵי-אָדָם / טוב ה' לכל ורחמייו על כל מעשיו.

The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, purity and defilement, the sacred and the profane, is essential in Judaism. Beyond Judaism, navigating regulations is part of living and working in a civilized society. The laws of kosher elevate the simple act of eating into a reminder and religious ritual to exercise self-control over our most basic, primal instincts, even the ones to hunt and gather food.

While animals do not possess sentience to understand the notion that life is a sacred thing, humans are not like other animals, and the Torah gives us laws to remind us that there is a difference. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that the Torah's boundaries should instill sensitivity and reverence for life. Our abilities, choices, rights, strength, and power are not trump cards; just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

You don't need to become a vegan; you can still enjoy your steak and ribs. But you should recognize the Torah's concern for all creatures and not just humans, because the two are linked; someone who is cruel to animals will be cruel to people.

In a largely positive trend, our host cultures have woken up to animal cruelty in recent decades, but we have a proud tradition that is millennia older; the Torah instituted the first systematic legislation prohibiting animal cruelty and mandating humane treatment long ago.

Judaism is in constant dialogue with its surroundings, and we may have to get more familiar with our environment to navigate it properly. On the one end, the Torah's laws don't explicitly regulate intensive factory farming, but it's a product of modern business practices that raises many animal welfare issues, and the relevant parties should be receptive to calibrating how they can do better. On the other end, the tradition of kosher slaughter is in jeopardy in an increasing number of jurisdictions, labeled as backward and cruel; there are some important organizations working tirelessly to protect our tradition that deserve your support.

The Torah has regulated human interaction with animals for thousands of years; the laws of kosher teach us compassion and sensitivity to other creatures. We should be proud of our heritage.



Thought of the Week

“You are not an isolated entity, but a unique, irreplaceable part of the cosmos. Don't forget this. You are an essential piece in the puzzle of humanity.”

– Epictetus

Quote of the Week

“My idea of the modern Stoic sage is someone who transforms fear into prudence, pain into information, mistakes into initiation, and desire into undertaking.”

– Nassim Nicolas Taleb

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. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

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. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!

PPS - Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.



TorahRedux

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.