



When Illness Refocuses our Relationships: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Noah*

Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

The Torah narrative of Noah calls to mind the image of a fragile ark, refuge for the entire living future of our planet, floating without apparent direction on endless seas.

Times of transition and trial may call forth similar images and feelings for us: feelings of uncertainty, loss of what is familiar in our world, fear, vulnerability.

Try stepping into Noah's sandals for a moment. Picture yourself with a few loved ones and a menagerie of animal life entering a cavernous sea vessel and an unknown future. What farewells and prayers need uttering? What regrets and unfinished work need leaving? What tears and questions need expression? What do you imagine Noah might have felt and thought about after being closed up in the ark a few days? What were some of his worst fears? What did he dare hope for? How might he have found or sustained the peace and presence of mind he and his charges needed during those dark and stormy times?

As you think about Noah's journey, and your own journey through times of trial and uncertainty, what are the places of refuge? Where do the opportunities for rest and renewal lie?

Another question for discussion or reflection: One could imagine a contemporary staging of the flood story beginning with an ark scene. Noah, at sea but not yet used to the rocking motion of the water, looks like a harried and inexperienced sailor-zookeeper on a cramped transport ship. His hands are up in the air, or reaching out for balance. He asks himself, repeatedly, "Why me? How did I end up being responsible for all this? Who am I to tend to such cargo, and how am I supposed to navigate such an uncharted voyage?"

The exact same scene—even the same monologue—has a very different feel to it when preceded by the earlier scenes of prophetic revelation, of determined ark-building and animal-shepherding, of global flooding and destruction. Noah's task, his experience, his very life are transformed by having an overarching sense of urgency and sacred service, by the larger context in which he toils, and by the obvious importance and preciousness of his life-preserving mission. Are there ways that a sense of mission or purpose have transformed periods of your life? How might this period of trial and transition be seen the larger context of your life, or in the context of the communities and generations of which you are a part?

There is a beautiful Shabbat melody, *Yom Shabbaton* ("Sabbath Day of Rest", attributed to the Medieval poet Yehudah Halevi), that takes its inspiration from this week's Torah reading. Here is an excerpt:

Day of rest, unforgettable,
Its legacy like pleasing fragrance;
There the dove found a resting place,
Where the weary may take repose.

...Blessed is the Giver of strength to the weary;
There the dove found a resting place,
Where the weary may take repose.

...Gird yourself, let your courage be strengthened;
There the dove found a resting place,
Where the weary may take repose.

...Remember the covenant
...Promised after the waters of Noah;
There the dove found a resting place,
Where the weary may take repose.

May this period of challenge and reflection bring you opportunities for rest and rededication, for blessing and healing transformation, for life and for *shalom*.

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