

Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold

Candle Lighting Time
Fri. Evening 6:34 pm

Services
Saturday Oct. 17 9:30 am Happy Birthday, Howard

PARSHAT NOACH
WHY I DON'T LIKE NOAH

“Noah was a righteous man in his generation.” (Genesis 6:9)

Noah is one of the great heroes of Genesis. But I admit, I do not particularly care for him. It says that he was righteous in his generation. Even Rashi admits, had he lived in some other generation, he would have been a nobody.

It is not simply that Noah had a drinking problem. After leaving the ark, he plants a vineyard, makes wine, lies in a drunken stupor partially uncovered, and when his son “sees” him, he curses his grandson. This entire passage is difficult and for obvious reasons, not taught to children in religious school.

Nonetheless, my problem with Noah happens much earlier in the story. God decides to destroy all humanity (including all the animals.) God tells Noah to build an ark. He is to rescue his own family and one pair of each animal (later the Torah mentions seven clean pairs.) The problem is that Noah obeys God. He does precisely what God asks him to do. He rescues his family as God brings a great flood to destroy humanity. When I read this story I realize, perhaps there are times not to simply obey God

Compare Noah to Abraham who lived ten generations later. God chooses to destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham cries out to God, “Should the just of all the earth not do justly.” He bargains with God. Will he save the cities if fifty righteous people can be found there? What if forty-five righteous can be found? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Abraham passionately argues with God and tries to save the cities. Unfortunately, even ten righteous people could not be found there. God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, saving only Abraham’s nephew Lot and two of his daughters. (His wife looks back and turns into a pillar of salt. Sometimes wisdom teaches that we should not look backwards.)

The proper way to live is not the way of Noah but the way of Abraham. The proper way is not to passively accept God’s plan but passionately argue with it. In fact, we are called the people Israel, a word that

means “wrestles with God.” Noah should have argued with God. He should have sought to save humanity. Instead, he only saves his own family. That is the reason God eventually made his covenant with Abraham and not Noah.

There are many religions that teach passivity and acceptance in the face of God’s ordinances. But this has never been the way of the people Israel. We argue with God. Moses negotiates with God to save the people after the sin of the Golden Calf. Job calls God to a trial rather than passively accept his suffering. There is a Hasidic tale of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev who appeared before God on Yom Kippur with two lists, a short one and a long one. First, he held up the short list. “God, these are my sins against you.” Then he held up the long list. “God, these are your sins against the Jewish people. I will forgive you for your sins if you will forgive me for mine.” I cannot imagine any other religious tradition telling such a tale.

Noah was a man who accepted God’s will with passivity. But that is not the Jewish way. We are a people who never simply accept God’s decrees. We struggle with God. That is the reason that I do not care for Noah. Let us not simply accept the world with passivity. Let us struggle to make this a better world.