A Few Thoughts on Parashah Noach (Genesis 6:9 - 11:32; Isaiah 54:1-10) October 24. 2025

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The stories in the Book of Genesis offer deep insight into human nature in all its complexity, with the overarching realization that we humans are slow, stubborn learners, prone to repeating the same mistakes over and over again. Indeed, it seems that our position at the top of the earthly food chain has turned us into congenital troublemakers, with the attribute of speech at the root of most of our troubles. As soon as there are 2 human beings on the earth, verbal communication begins to upset the beautiful balance of HaShem's creation. The power of speech includes the power of persuasion, and we humans are very easily persuaded. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil activated our instinct for discernment, but sadly, we often let our desires override our better judgement. In Noach's era, all flesh had become corrupt, even the animals, over whom humans had been given dominion. So, putting it in modern terms, HaShem saves a few files and then engages the Divine Reset Button, only to learn that this action is futile. The system we call creation contains a bug that is capable of disabling the power of discernment when freedom of choice encounters the power of persuasion, and because humanity has freedom of choice, there is no bugfix. The only mitigating updates are our mitzvot, but at this juncture most of them are still far in the future. The long list of generations between Adam and Noah in last week's parashah and the list of generations between Noah and Abraham this week point out that all humankind arose from a common source. Despite our vastly differing cultures and appearances, we are all genus Homo, species Sapiens. But no human is born with the ability to make wise, healthy choices. If we are fortunate, we learn this as children and gradually develop the tools to become responsible adults. But as anyone who remembers their own childhood or has ever raised a child can attest, growing up is full of blunders and fraught with confusion. Like Adam and Eve, we have all played the blame game, dodging responsibility for a multitude of reasons ranging from fear to hubris. Like Cain, we all have had to learn, sometimes painfully, to accept moral responsibility for our actions. It is all too tempting to take the easy path and indulge in subterfuge to further our own interests. Like Noah, we have all been silent when we should have spoken up, and like the builders of the Tower of Babel, we have all disrespected boundaries and caused undue harm to ourselves and others. These shortcomings are simply part of the human condition. It is noteworthy that strikingly similar stories about corruption, divine judgment followed by flood and cosmic reset can be found all over the world. And it is encouraging that these archetypes indicate that despite innate imperfection, humanity is essentially redeemable. In nearly all of these myths, a small group is spared to generate a new, better world, not because they are perfect, but because they represent moral potential. The deluge in our parashah is not HaShem's attempt to engineer perfection. If that were the case, it would have been a colossal failure. After the flood and in the wake of HaShem's new covenant, Noach plants a vineyard and becomes drunk, culminating in the disturbing episode with his sons. Instead, the deluge marks a paradigm shift in the relationship between HaShem and humanity. Having learned that there is no bugfix for human imperfection, HaShem offers a covenantal relationship to work with humanity rather than attempting to perfect it. Genesis Rabbah discusses HaShem's ambivalence at the end of last week's parashah: "And God was <u>comforted</u> that He created humanity as earthly beings. In His heart [He] was <u>pained/grieved</u>." (6:6) The sages imagine HaShem saying: "There was regret before Me that I created him below [on the earth], for had I created him on High, he never would have rebelled against me. … I take solace in the fact that I created him below, for had I created him on High, just as he incited the lower beings to rebel against Me, so he would have incited the supernal beings to rebel against Me. … There was regret before Me that I created an evil inclination in him, as had I not done so, he would not have rebelled against Me. … I take solace in the fact that I made him so that he would be placed in the earth." In other words, the covenant is HaShem's way of turning this ambivalence into a relationship. This initial covenant, symbolized by the rainbow and defined in the 7 Noachide Laws, outlines a basic ethical framework for all of humanity. We are all created *b'tzelem elohim* – in the divine image, and rather than continuing to pursue the elusive goal of perfection, HaShem chooses to work with us despite our imperfection. In essence, the Noachide covenant is the first instance of divine *teshuvah*, calling on humanity to do likewise. Indeed, our Torah and midrashim portray HaShem as a responsive, evolving Presence modeling the attributes of reconsideration, compassion, and change. Twice Moses persuades HaShem not to destroy the Israelites, and the daughters of Zelophechad and their tribal kinsmen convince HaShem to enact a new law and to later amend it. Parashah Noach marks the beginning of a new and phase in human development, introducing moral boundaries, ritual awareness, and covenantal relationship. It sets the stage for the next step – from a universal covenant to a deeper covenantal relationship with one particular family, and finally, with us. It is not about perfection; it is about responsibility. The flood did not create perfection. It created a unique, eternal and evolving partnership defined by love, growth, and potential. We have often faltered, and we will never be perfect, but we can learn, however slowly. And *teshuvah* is always possible.

Shabbat shalom!