



Torah Reflections on Parashat Noah

Genesis 6:9-11:32 – 6:8

Rosh Hodesh Heshvan 5772

October 29, 2011

This week's Torah portion includes the narrative of Noah and the ark. Noah being the wisest man in his time hears the voice of God who told him to build an ark so that he could save himself, his family and the animals. Noah was a simple man who had the courage to stand up to the evils around him. We see many representations of the ark with the animals teeming all over and marvel at the concept of one man being able to save so many. Then at the end of the flood we find Noah not yet convinced that it is safe to go outside until the dove comes back with the olive branch. The olive branch has become the symbol of negotiating peace amongst friend and foe. It is the symbol of harmony and good will and it stands as a reminder that in all of us there is the ability and the opportunity of offering a hand towards understanding and friendship.

Following the scenes of Noah and the ark, the Torah tells us of Noah's descendants and the name they make for themselves. The last verse of the accounting of these families states that Noah's descendants were grouped according to their origins, by their nations and from these nations they branched out all over the earth.

In the midst of this accounting we are told that everyone on earth spoke the same language. We are told that the people were so arrogant and proud of their abilities to build awe-inspiring monuments that they decided to build a sky-scraper that could reach up into the heavens. It is known as the Tower of Babel, the tower where babble could be heard instead of words of piety and wisdom. God responds to the arrogance of humanity and seeks to limit it by "confounding their speech", by making it impossible for everyone to understand one another's speech. By so doing, God has humbled humanity and thus confounded their ability to build a tower that reaches the heavens.

The thought of confounding speech is not only a lesson in humility, but also an injunction for us to become aware and sensitive to the differences in the people we meet. It is easy to associate with people who share our values, who speak the same language who have the same or very similar traditions as our own. When we move to a new community, we try to connect with people who are similar to us, who know our families and our friends, whose life-styles are close to ours. We often choose to live in neighborhoods that mirror our cultural preferences, choose to send our children to schools that reflect our connection to a particular community or to our educational values, and choose to associate with institutions that reflect our attitudes toward society, to volunteerism, to a variety of causes that we support.

However, the challenge truly is for us to learn a new language, to become accepting of the differences, to understand new cultures, to avoid the pitfalls of prejudices and biases, and to educate our children to be open-minded and accepting. In the book Ethics of the Fathers (*Pirke Avot* 4:1) it is taught, "Who is wise? The person who learns from everyone." Each person whom we meet can teach us something new, a wisdom that we had not learned before, a skill we have not mastered. We grow from new experiences. By meeting people who do not speak our language we can learn new insights into for our own lives, we can experience new and different traditions, we can incorporate new *minhagim* (customs) to our holiday observances.

If we allow ourselves to be open to the healing power of friendship, support, comfort, and connection from the many people who come into our lives we will be enriched. Illness often

isolates us from our friends and families. Illness and treatment can bring many encounters with people who were previously strangers. These moments can sometimes confound us and heighten our sense of separation. Sometimes they also present opportunities for different kinds of nurturance. The new visitors who come to our homes or hospital rooms can bring us new tools and avenues for healing and comfort. The friend who brings music to listen or sing with us, the acquaintance who reads poetry or cartoons or silly stories may also offer comfort.

We can find comfort not only in the connections we make with our friends and family, but also from support groups that are made up of people we didn't know before. Others' insights, their traditions, their support help us to heal, to feel less lonely and isolated; they enrich our lives and our healing with their touch and companionship.

As we move into a new year, let us be open to the healing touch of new friends, let us be comforted by new traditions and insights along with the familiar, let us be encircled with warmth and support from the new acquaintances and friends. And in return let us be open to someone who needs our love as well.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Chaplain Gila Katz



This Torah Reflection was written by Chaplain Gila Katz, Executive Director, Klein Chaplaincy Service of the South Bay, Redondo Beach, California, and a Red Cross Disaster Chaplain. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties



The Bay Area Jewish Healing Center provides Jewish spiritual care for people coping with illness, loss and dying, regardless of affiliation or ability to pay.

Our services include:

- Rabbinic care, chaplaincy, counseling and spiritual direction—at home or in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes or other care facilities
- Spiritual support groups for patients, caregivers, and the bereaved
- Healing and memorial services, and specialized rituals

Whether through prayer, study materials, or simply a listening presence, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center is here to support you during difficult times.
