

## SERMON NOACH -- THE EXILE OF WORDS

While the concept that human activities and industry can cause climate change and global warming seems shockingly new to so many people, Judaism has held a belief that our actions impact our environment since the very beginning.

The second paragraph of the Shema, a key part of a traditional service and something found in our mezuzahs – reads:

*If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul,*

*I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—*

*I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill.*

*Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them.*

*For the LORD's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.*

Now in Reform synagogues, we don't normally read that because the idea that drought and famine are somehow God's wrath for our actions is not what we believe about how God works.

But in this week's Torah portion, we read about another dramatic climate change incident – Noah and The Flood.

In this week's *parasha*, God says to Noah:

*"I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.*

The Flood was seen as a direct consequence of our actions and our choices.

\*\*\*

This past week, with the UN Report on Climate Change saying that by 2040 there will be very significant loss of coastal cities due to rising sea levels, with as many as a billion climate refugees –

And with the images from Hurricane Michael –

It seems that the threat of a great flood caused by humans is once again a possibility, and while I would never say these changes are God’s punishment for our sins, it certainly is possible to say that our “lawlessness”, our failure to create laws and regulations that prevent catastrophic climate change is once again upon us. Noah has not been this relevant since, well, Noah.

And while I do plan to work with the board and the congregation to find ways Temple Sinai can move to a lower carbon footprint, be more sustainable, and to make environmental stewardship central in the values we teach to the children in our Hebrew School, that is not what I want to speak about tonight.

There are other aspects of this Torah portion and of Noah that I want to explore a bit with you.

When we read the story of Noah, it doesn’t at first pop out that Noah never says anything – not a single word.

- God tells him he is going to destroy the earth and everyone in it, and Noah is silent.
- God tells him to bring all the animals in, and Noah is silent.
- God shuts Noah and his family in the ark to be tossed about by the waters, and Noah is silent.
- The waters subside and they leave the ark, and Noah is silent.
- Noah makes sacrifices to thank God for his survival, but he doesn’t say a word.

Indeed, it is only when Noah grows grapes, makes the first wine, and gets drunk, that he finally blows up and starts talking, cursing a son who humiliated him while he was drunk.

Noah’s silence is striking. But then, so is ours.

Think of the many things these days about which people are talking and protesting and marching. Think of how much of the news time is taken up with

what Trump said, or how he said it, or about what the NFL should do about players kneeling during the national anthem, or about emails and Russian meddling, and what new offensive or infuriating political issue is coming across our screens. On television, there was more coverage of Taylor Swift asking people to register to vote than there was the UN climate report.

Yes, there is endless coverage of disastrous storms and fire, but there seems to be a noticeable silence about just how severe and dangerous the coming climate changes will be, on us, and so much more on our children and grandchildren.

If I were Moses, and God said “I am going to destroy everyone next week,” you couldn’t shut me up. I would be running around squawking like Henny Penny, “The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling.”

But while the news talked about the UN report for climate change, and that the US pulled out of the Paris Climate Accords, and that the fires are much much worse, and the storms are worse – despite all this, we seem as a nation to just shrug and go about our business as usual.

Indeed, our current EPA seems to be moving in the opposite direction.

What is this collective shrug, this noticeable quietness on what is to be sure the biggest issue we are or will ever face.

Torah scholar Aviva Zornberg talks about Noah’s silence and introduces the Zohar’s comments about it. The Zohar is one of the foundational works of Kabbalah, an extensive mystical commentary of the Torah, particularly Genesis.

In the Zohar, it brings up Noah’s silence, and the silence of everyone around him, and connects this to the concept of Galut ha-Dibbur. Galut ha Dibur means the “Exile of the Word”, and describes those times when we literally can’t understand what one another is saying, and we lose our ability to put our own thoughts into words, and God’s word also seems distant. This form of exile, the exile of language, the breakdown of communication.

And as humans, everything we do requires words. We can’t think without words. We can’t do any of the things humans do without words, so the Exile of the Word is a particularly devastating form of exile.

As I was reading her comments on Noah, it occurred to me that we are living through our own Galut haDibbur. It is as if two people using the same words mean something completely different. When we use the word, “victim” we mean something different. When we use the word ‘radical’ we mean completely different things. When we use the word ‘violence’, or ‘harassment’ or ‘assault’ we mean different things. Isn’t this a form of the Exile of the Word?

And discussions about global warming and climate change also seem to be caught up in this exile. Scientists tell us what is going to happen, and it is as if we can’t really hear what they are saying, or that we can’t wrap our minds around the possibility that what they are saying is actually true.

Our current denial seems to me to be a form of Galut haDibbur.

Indeed, so many of our problems today seem to be rooted in the ways communications and words have become twisted and exiled from their own meanings, and we have become twisted and exiled with them.

It is interesting that the first real event after the flood is the Tower of Babel, where humans manage to all work together on a massive scale to build a tower that will reach to heaven. The Torah tells us:

*The LORD came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the LORD said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another’s speech.”*

The Tower of Babel is the most clear example of Galut ha-Dibbur. In Noah’s time, men couldn’t work together, but five generations after the flood, they worked so well together they were violating the laws of nature with the size of their buildings.

It seems to me that in our current situation we have a bit of both. We are managing to work on projects so massive that they are changing the very world we live in.

Yet, when it comes to trying to prevent climate catastrophe, we can’t hear one another or get much accomplished, despite what this is going to do to our

foreseeable descendants.

We know that after the flood, God made a new covenant with humanity – The Covenant of the Rainbow. God tells us that whenever we see a rainbow in the sky, it should remind us that God will never again destroy the earth with floods.

It seems that we need to fulfill our part of that Rainbow Covenant, so that whenever we see a rainbow, we remember that in our modern time, it is up to us to take action to prevent that flood.

It is not enough for us to build an ark to save ourselves, whether that ark is a bunker, or a gated community on stilts, or a ship to Mars.

We have been trusted with the earth as its stewards,

and as we drive around a look at the leaves this fall here in Vermont,

or as we sit and look at the waves on the Lake or on the ocean when we are in Florida,

or when we see our children and grandchildren playing outside and enjoying the thrill of discovering nature –

It is we who need to renew our part in the covenant made so long ago. It is, as the prayer we are about to say teaches us, “ALEINU” - It is on us now, and the day of peace we dream of and work toward will not be possible until will take on that Aleinu.