

DROWNING IN A LACK OF HEAVEN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The Talmud says that Noach was also included in the decree of destruction and would have drowned in the Great Flood with the rest of his generation had he not found *chayn*—favor—in the eyes of God (Sanhedrin 108a). The question is, if Noach had *chayn* from the beginning, as his name, the mirror image of *chayn*, seems to imply, and the Torah's account of his life seems to say, then why was he ever included in the decree of mass destruction of mankind?

It's a good question, but the more important one at this time is probably how *chayn* saves a person from Divine destruction, especially another flood. "Another flood?" you ask. "Didn't God promise never to bring a flood against the world ever again?"

Yes and no. He promised never to destroy the world by a flood of water again. He never promised not to drown a single nation in water, as Pharaoh learned the hard way at the sea, or part of the world by a flood of a different type, as we too may learn the hard way (Zevachim 116a).

From the following midrash it is clear that "drowning" has different connotations:

Rabbah bar Bar Chanah said: Once I was on a boat and saw a fish upon whose back grass was growing. We thought it was an island. We alighted, baked, and cooked upon it. When the back of the fish became hot it turned over, and had the ship not been so close, we would have drowned. (Bava Basra 73b)

Rabbeinu Ya'akov explained: Rabbah bar Bar Channah saw with Ruach Hakodesh— Holy Spirit—that in the End-of-Days the Jewish nation will rule over a people. They will assume that this people has no hope of ever overcoming them and will therefore subjugate them. When the people have suffered much they will "turn the plate over on its mouth" and resist the Jewish nation. If Moshiach is not close at hand, the Jewish people will "drown" from the many problems that will arise. (Tuvcha Yabiyu, Parashas Balak)

Thus "drowning" is a euphemism for any situation that overwhelms a person, and is often used in this manner. People "drown" in debt. They "drown" in work assignments. They "drown" from a lack of *shalom bayis*, or peace in the home. And now we are worried if we will "drown" from Ebola, or from ISIS and its destructive brutality, God forbid. There is already a sense of being overwhelmed by both.

To some this may sound melodramatic. I know that many do not like to read ancient prophecy into

current events, even when they seem like a good fit. I am not going to do that. Rather I am going to invoke another idea from the Torah, one that we are commanded to follow even if we do not like it:

Remember the days of old; reflect upon the years of [other] generations. (Devarim 32:7)

Remember the days of old: what God did to past generations who provoked Him to anger. Reflect upon the years of [other] generations: [i.e.,] the generation of Enosh, whom [God] inundated with the waters of the ocean, and the generation of the Flood that [God] washed away. Another explanation is: [If] you have not set your attention to the past, then "reflect upon the years of generations," i.e., to recognize the future, that He has the power to bestow good upon you and to give you as an inheritance the days of Moshiach and the World-to-Come (Sifrei 32:6). (Rashi)

This implies that history is patterned. It says that as random as events may appear to man they are not, and if they are similar to events from the past about which we know something we should, or rather we are obligated, to make the comparison. What we have been told is supposed to help us with what we have not been told, even at this very late stage in history.

It has always been difficult for disbelievers to take Divine Providence seriously. Noach had to contend with this every day he worked on the ark, a full 120 years. They came to scoff and to mock him, never thinking for one moment that signs of impending doom were in fact signs of impending doom. They were probably people who still thought, after the doom was upon them, that it too would pass and allow life to return to their idea of "normal."

If they did that back then, long before science and technology came along to demystify life, how much more likely is this to happen today? Now people can listen to scientists who brag that their greatest contribution to mankind is that they are able to show how God, if He exists at all, did not have to be involved in the Creation process.

The "simple" technology available to everyone today would have made us look like gods in the eyes of the ancients. Our lives are "magical," empowering just about everyone to have control over his or her life. Even "believers" who use such technology have to make an effort to keep God in the proper place in their belief system.

In the meantime, Ebola is spreading. Projections are being made and there is reason for great concern. With all of our genius, and all of our resources, and all of our technological knowhow we have yet to find a way to contain it. We have sent men into space and confronted the harshest of conditions but are being slayed by a deadly microbe. It's humbling.

On another level, ISIS is doing on a human scale what Ebola is doing on a microscopic one. This Islamic extremist group is also proving to be deadly and difficult to contain, and can easily multiply their threat if they can get their people into foreign countries with intent to cause mass destruction.

These days it is so easy to do so. It is also humbling.

It is certainly getting our attention, as it is intended to do. Like a person at a large gathering who wants to be heard, and is, after hitting his glass with a spoon, God is hitting His glass, so-to-speak, to get our attention as well. I do not know if this is part of the finale, but at some point in time mankind has to be humbled. It is part of the Messianic process, at the End-of-Days.

If we had continued to advance and become increasingly more empowered while maintaining a high level of awareness of God and the appropriate level of humility, then we would be able to just main the status quo and glide with dignity into the Messianic Era as the Talmud says:

Rebi Alexandri said: Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi raised the following contradiction, "It says, 'Behold like the clouds of Heaven came one like the son of man' (Daniel 7:13). It is also written, 'Lowly and riding upon a donkey' (Zechariah 9:9). If they merit it he will come with the clouds of Heaven. If they do not merit it he will come upon a donkey.'" (Sanhedrin 98a)

It does not much of an imagination to interpret this warning from the Talmud. It is describing two ways in which Moshiach can come, each very different from the other. "Like clouds of Heaven" means transitioning to the Messianic Era without war, without suffering, without any need to be humbled. "Lowly and riding upon a donkey" implies just the opposite. There are many ways in which God can arrange that.

It all comes down to levels of culpability. It is all a matter of how responsible we are for behavior that violates the purpose of Creation and undermines our reason for existence. How "innocent" is mankind today as it steps all over the gift of life and the opportunity from being made in the image of God? The answer to this question has a lot to do with how much mercy and restraint God will exercise as He brings His reality to bear on ours.

On the other hand, as we see from the Torah, sometimes the issue goes beyond innocence or guilt. Sometimes it is more of an issue how much more Creation itself can put up with decrepit human behavior. If mankind goes too far down the path of detestable behavior then a "cleansing" may be necessary regardless of the level of guilt.

I'm not saying that this is what is now going on with what is happening or what will occur, perhaps something like a worldwide financial collapse. I'm just saying that if we heed the Torah's warnings from the past, take into account the Talmud's predictions for the future, and take stock of what we are witnessing in the present, it might be wise to look for the hand of God in all of it and respond accordingly.

Recently I "happened" to see an interesting idea that I have always believed in, but never saw in print before today. It is a book about Moshiach and redemption based upon Chazal and later commentators. I only had time to see the first page so far (I was reading between aliyos on a Torah

reading day), but it was enough to have sparked my interest.

The author begins by quoting a source that asks the question, if Moshiach is not destined to arrive until a certain time, then what is the point of anticipating him in each generation?

The truth is that the Talmud asks the same question. It answers that a person receives reward for doing so even if he does not live to see Moshiach's actual arrival (Sanhedrin 97b). The answer given in this book is that when a person makes a point of anticipating the arrival of Moshiach he can actually achieve a level of person redemption even in a generation that has yet to be redeemed. It's as if God says, "For wanting redemption so much I am going to give you a portion of it even though the rest of your nation remains in exile."

The formula is simple yet dangerous. When Jews prosper they come to like exile enough to forget about redemption. When they suffer enough they learn to yearn for redemption and look for it everywhere they can. When we succeed we rarely ask why, and it is easy to forget that God is the Source of all of our good. Even the Torah warns about this.

When we fail, however, we remember God right away and blame Him for what goes wrong. That may not be right, but on the other hand God may say, "Well, at least he talks to Me now. At least he now wonders where I am, and why I am not more involved in helping him to succeed. That's better than no relationship at all!"

There is something else to keep in mind. It is important to recall that God started the world all over again with a single family. Later, He was prepared to start the Jewish people all over again with a single individual, Moshe Rabbeinu. In other words as righteous as we may seem to ourselves, and as important as we may be to others, we are expendable to God. Making the "cut" at the end of history may not be as simple as we would like to believe.

Even Torah and mitzvos have failed to save the righteous during times of strict judgment. They are guaranteed reward in the World-to-Come, but not a guarantee of Divine protection when the Damaging Angel gets permission to go out and do his thing.

Noach survived because he found chayn in the eyes of God. Throwing caution to the wind and trivializing Divine Providence is not the way to do that, especially when there are real-time threats to our well-being and survival.

Text

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