

I have learned the story of Noah's Ark since childhood, have heard it told over and over, have returned to this parasha as it comes up around this time year after year and always I have wondered, *how* could God have destroyed the entire world, how is that right, how is that fair, isn't that just mass collective punishment, is this the God I want to worship, is this the God who is full of compassion and slow to anger, etc, etc...

Only now, perhaps prompted by current events, have I truly paused to wonder the reverse. *Why* after the flood, does God promise *not* to wipe out humanity again should we fill the earth with our evil? Why has God has that change of heart? What has changed in God or in us?

And I want to be clear: I do not disagree with God here. I still do affirm that the God I serve, the Divine in this world I recognize is full of compassion, who loves humanity, God's children, each of whom is imprinted with God's image. I certainly have not changed my mind.

I just wonder why God has.

I have found two different explanations, and, I'll be blunt, neither of them come close to satisfying me, both drawing on what God says before God promises not to destroy the earth again: כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְעוּרָיו

For the urges of a human's heart are evil from the time of youth.

One explanation re-translates this to say, "for the urges of the human heart are *worse* than they had been from the time of youth." The sixteenth century commentator Sforno says that this means that the time of the youth of humanity was before the flood and now, apparently despite God's best efforts, we're even worse now. But now God understands it's not our fault that we're full of the evil inclination! We can't help it! So God will no longer punish us for it.

The other explanation re-translates this verse to say, "for the urges of the human heart are evil *in* the time of youth." Also assuming that youth means the generations before the flood, these commentators assume that humanity is just truly *better* since the flood. So much better, perhaps, that God would never truly be tempted to destroy us all again.

Both explanations, at their base, posit a complete breakage in human nature before and after the flood, a complete breakage, perhaps, in what it means to be human. This, I don't accept.

And the first explanation sounds patronizing at best and truly disheartening at worst. And the second explanation, when we know the extent of human violence on this earth, just doesn't ring true. More importantly, perhaps it turns God's gracious and powerful oath to never destroy us again to something hollow. God's only promising this because it's easy, God only won't destroy the world because God *likes* the world.

I've been seeing this quote attributed to Golda Meir going around lately. It says "you cannot negotiate peace with someone who comes to kill you." But people who come to kill you are the *only* people you can make peace with.

You don't go up to your friends, shake their hands, and declare peace. That gesture is meaningless. As meaningless as it would be for God to declare, "see this rainbow I have set in the clouds, this will serve as a reminder that I will never again destroy the earth... because I don't want to, because you're all very nice and, in fact, the sort of people I came to destroy aren't around anymore any ways."

Now certainly, and we all know this, it is not possible to make peace with everyone. I might amend Golda Meir's statement to say, "you cannot negotiate peace with someone who doesn't *want* peace." Who doesn't care for the safety and security and justice and wellbeing that peace brings. Who may even be profiting off long term violence and instability because it suits them.

But there are many times when the person coming to kill does also want peace. We have prayed for the wellbeing of the soldiers in the IDF. Well, I know that that my friend Etai who has been called up from the reserves want peace. I know that my friend's nineteen year old daughter who is serving in a combat unit now wants peace. I know how possible it is that someone taking up arms can really and truly want peace.

The choice to take up arms does not mean the refusal of all efforts at peace. It might be as temporary as the flood, even if it may be as destructive.

And it is because that we know how destructive the flood was that we must be exhausting ourselves to find opportunities for peace. And I don't mean just politically - I'm speaking interpersonally as well, I'm talking about the sort of communal, domestic, and local disputes that ruin lives and break hearts.

As human beings, we are familiar with those. As human beings there are never any shortages of people that we resist holding out our hands to, setting aside grudges, making ourselves vulnerable before, because there are never any shortage of people who, through the clumsy way we have of living our lives, we hurt or who hurt us.

In fact, the vast majority of the midrashim and commentary I could find do not take the view that it is because we are a magically better species that God promises not to flood us over again.

Most of them, in fact, don't seem to be all that interested in why God would change God's mind on this at all.

The commentators and midrashim seem far more interested in the rainbow itself. What it is doing. When it shows up. And most of them say that when we see a rainbow in the sky, yes, we should be reassured that God remembers the covenant with all of humanity that we are all protected from God's anger.

But... it also is a sign that something is wrong. That if the rainbow shows up, it still means that God *won't* destroy us... but it does mean God is tempted to.

Yes, according to much of Jewish tradition, the rainbow is not so much a joyous symbol as it is a passive aggressive one.

Or maybe not - maybe it is not passive aggressive but a symbol of *cessation* of all *aggressiveness*. The word for rainbow, קשת, means not only rainbow, but just bow as well, as in bow-and-arrow.

The commentator Chizkuni, echoing many, says that a bow turned upside down with its "feet," its ends on the ground is a symbol of peace. That if enemies want to signal that they are not interested in a fight, they turn their bows over so it is clear they are not taking aim at one another.

It is pointed out that the “feet” of a rainbow are never visible. Rather they dissipate into the horizon or into the ground.

We pray for swords to be beaten into farming implements, but this vision still has the weapon recognizable as weapon but disregarded as one all the same. It is an image of someone who goes, though I still have the ability and even the inclination to destroy, I am *choosing not to*.

The bow is a sign of a covenant between formerly opposing forces: between a version of humanity that chose corruption and violence and a version of God who chose eradication.

It is a covenant between two enemies who did seek to harm one another, to break each other, to render each other wrecked and irrelevant - but who, in the end, chose reconciliation.

And that makes the rainbow a far more powerful symbol than had it been a reminder of anything else.

One last note about the rainbow - one of my favorite sorts of commentary that came up many times over as I was studying this parasha, were the scientific notes. Sages two thousand years ago and sages two hundred years ago felt the need to acknowledge that the rainbow is not only a mythical phenomenon, but a natural one as well.

In case their students and their readers didn't know - the rainbow, they explained, is what happens when sunlight shines through the rain.

Some of them understood the prismatic effect. Some of them didn't. But most agreed that if the rainbow hadn't shown up before Noah, it wasn't because rainbows didn't have the potential to exist. It must have because if the sun had not yet been out at the same time rain was falling.

They didn't take that any further. But I would. I would say it all goes back decommissioned weapon, the rainbow as two hands up, not in sign of easy friendship, and not in a sign of fear and surrender, but simply to show that one is no longer interested in a fight.

It is the sun peeking through the rain, the mixture and overlap of light and water, deluge and the hope of quiet.

The beginning of the story of Noah does not admit of moral nuance, of shades of gray, of the discomfort of being conflicted. There is only evil, which must be wiped out, and good, which must be preserved in an ark that is only big enough for one small family of people.

But the end of the story of Noah, of God and humanity, and the sign of the rainbow - the end of the story of Noah where a weapon becomes a symbol of hope, where humanity remains sinful but God chooses, through a covenant, to remain forever willing to offer a second chance, and then a third, and then a fourth, rather than wiping us out...

That ending is more expansive than an ark. It is encompassing of all of us, our failures and our wonderful deeds.

We see a rainbow in the sky and we know that we could be doing better. We know that sometimes we are wrong, sometimes tragically so. But just as the sun shines through the rain to produce something vibrant and beautiful, we also must be reminded that we have a God who models a presumption of forgiveness, not punishment. A God that sees something wrong and doesn't draw a divine bow and aim to destroy but rather one who sets it on its side.

And acknowledges, that we must, that the world is not divided into good and evil but rather something quite complicated. And so we get another chance. And another. And another.

And maybe we even grow. And maybe we even learn. Maybe even if our hearts are inclined towards something wrong at first, we learned to make the same decision that God does. Give ourselves more chances. Give others more chances.

Not every peace is possible in every moment, but every peace is worth searching for at every moment, even when we have weapons in our hands. And when the moment comes when it is possible, when we have exhausted ourselves looking for it and we think we have even the chance at making it, we must turn our own most harmful

behaviors, our own most violent responses, and our weapons on their sides. We must become rainbows, contorting ourselves to demonstrate that the time of the flood is over and the light of our eyes is shining through our tears.

The time must come for us to reconcile. Reconcile with God, reconcile with others, and - and sometimes this is hardest - reconcile with ourselves.