

Should We Remember Earth 1.0?

A number of years ago I led a group to go to the Skirball Cultural Center to see the Noah's ark exhibit. It is huge, two or three stories tall, and feels like a life-sized ark. It's cute, with stuffed animals, swings, ropes, stalls for the "animals" that we could walk around in, and the children visiting there were running around, having a great time. The exhibit is really quite magnificent. The design team, Jim Olson, Alan Maskin, Stephen Yamada-Heidner, and Meagan Zimmerman, collaborated with fabricators to design and create 186 pairs of handcrafted animals, many from repurposed and found objects, and approximately 15 animals are kinetic – puppets brought to life by visitors and staff. It is a completely interactive exhibit that is educational, inspiring, and welcoming to children and adults of all ages. It is an immersive experience into the ark of the Noah's ark story.

But I think that the story that appeals to us as children is incomplete.

The four verses leading up to parashah Noach, and the verses of what is actually happening reveals a darker side to the story.

Genesis Ch 6:5 The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.

6 And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened.

7 The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created – men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them."

8 But Noah found favor with the LORD.

God is looking down upon Creation, and the activities of humankind. Humans have freewill, a notion expressed so clearly by Eve and Adam, who eat from the tree of knowledge of tov v'ra, and who are subsequently banished from the garden of Eden. God observes what the early generations of humans are doing with their freewill and is sorry for having made human being on the earth. God then says in verse 7, chapter 6 of Genesis, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings that I created, along with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky for I am sorry that I created them." And then the text says, "But Noah found favor with the Lord."

God tells Noah what God is about to do, and what Noah is to do. 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. Make yourself an ark..."¹ Noah does as God instructs, he makes an ark, and following God's instruction brings aboard all the requisite number of animals birds and creeping things on earth plus all the food they would need. The *mabool*, the flood waters begin, and Noah and his family board the ark. The text continues: Genesis 7:21 And all flesh that stirred on earth perished -- birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all mankind.

22 All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died.

23 All existence on earth was blotted out -- man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

Two verses later, "God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided."²

God begins again with Noah and all life that has been placed in the ark.

Noah steps forth from the ark and builds an altar and offers a burnt offering to God. God smells the pleasing odor of the offering, and God promises to God's self never again to "doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done."³

This story contains the very first appearance in the Torah of the Hebrew word *zachor*, to remember, as *vayizkor*, וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ, God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark...⁴

God remembers Noah and all the remaining life. Strangely, it does not say that God remembered all that have died in the flood. The Sages teach that there is no forgetting and no remembering for God because the language of remembering comes after forgetting.⁵ God did not forget. Rather, the Torah is speaking in the language of human beings so that we will understand.

God creates a covenant with Noah, that God will never again destroy all life on earth, a covenant symbolized by the rainbow. It seems perhaps, that rather than

¹ Gen 6:13,14

² Gen 8:1

³ Gen 8:21

⁴ Gen 8:1

⁵ Radak on Genesis 8:1

embracing the notion that God is all-knowing, we learn here that God is wrestling with, observing, and learning about the nature of humanity, both our good qualities as well as our failings. After the flood God institutes law as a counteragent to human wickedness. And so God remembered Noah, and we understand that through Noah humanity now has a path forward, Noah is essential to the continuation of humanity. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l* teaches, "God remembers for the future."⁶

Vayizkor, God remembered. The word *yizkor* is likely familiar to us, as it is a traditional mourning service recited by those who have lost a parent or a close loved one. This is part of, and we are part of the continuation of humanity, and of the Jewish family. The *Yizkor* service is based on the Jewish belief in the eternity of the soul and that although a soul can no longer do good deeds after death, it can gain merit through the charity and good deeds of the living. *Yizkor* is recited as part of the prayer service four times during the year: on Yom Kippur, the last day of Passover, the second day of Shavuot and the eighth day of Sukkot. The central part of *yizkor* is a single paragraph that begins with the words *Yizkor Elohim*, "May God remember."

This notion that by our engaging in this remembering, and by our reciting prayers of remembrance, the soul of a loved one who has passed gains merit through the charity and good deeds of the living.

In addition to *yizkor* services, one of the most widely held rituals in Judaism is the commemoration of the *yahrzeit*.

Yahrzeit is a Yiddish term meaning the anniversary of a death and emphasizes faith in the immortality of the soul. The commentator Rashi notes the earliest mention of this in the Talmud, where "the anniversary of the death of a great man was established in his honor, and when that day arrives, all the scholars in the region assemble and visit his grave and hold a ceremony there."⁷ We observe a *yahrzeit* by reciting *kaddish* in synagogue and lighting a memorial candle at home. The memorial candle, a very visual ritual item, is the *yahrzeit* candle. It is lit

⁶ Koren Machzor, pg 608

⁷ BT Yevamot 122a

on the eve of the *yahrzeit* date, and the flame, which burns for that day symbolizes the verse from Proverbs, נֶר יְהוָה נְשִׁמַת אָדָם, “the soul of man is the candle of God,”⁸ which speaks to the preciousness and eternity of the soul, and eternal connection to God.

I wonder, if we live in what we might call Earth 2.0, should we remember Earth 1.0? Not just the children’s story of Noah and the ark, but the whole story. I think we *should* remember.⁹ When we remember the past, it impacts the way we act and behave in the future.¹⁰ The antediluvian world was filled with *chamas*, lawlessness and wickedness, and was therefore destroyed. God brought to the post-diluvian world the Noachide laws¹¹ for all humanity, and Torah, that humanity should strive for goodness and justice. Remembering the past is instructive if it is for blessing. Perhaps that is why we often hear the words of consolation, “May their memory be for a blessing.”

As we step into these first weeks of this year 5782, may we remember so that we can learn from the past, improve ourselves¹², and make our world a better place.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Lisa Bock

⁸ Proverbs 20:27

⁹ But not with a *yahrzeit* candle or prayers, but rather, with study.

¹⁰ From *Zichronot: Remembering Forward*, by Sara Hurwitz

¹¹ The descendants of Noah were commanded with seven precepts: to establish laws, (and the prohibitions of) blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, theft, and eating the blood of a living animal.

¹² Improving ourselves: The Jewish practice of *Mussar* offers great wisdom in developing our character traits.