



Around the Shabbat Table

**Noah 5765
October 2004**

This week's writer: Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan

Director, BJE Nassau / Queens Services, Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York

Shalom!

Introduction

This week's *parasha*, Noah, includes a story that is familiar to most: the flood that destroyed most life in the world. According to the Torah, the world was so full of violence and lawlessness, that God decided to send a flood that would kill most of humanity, leaving only Noah and his family alive. In addition, only a small number of animals (7 of "kosher" animals, and 2 of all other animals) would be saved. In order to be rescued, these people and animals would sail on a large ship (ark), surviving the storm and the flood that followed.

At the conclusion of the flood, Noah and his entourage emerged from the Ark. At that time, God showed Noah a rainbow, establishing it as a sign that He would never again send a flood to destroy all living things.

Rabbinic literature suggests that a number of decrees were given at that time: First, the Noah story contains the first biblical text that allows man to eat the meat of animals ("every creature shall be yours to eat" -- Genesis 9:3). Secondly, according to rabbinic interpretation, seven *mitzvot* are given to all peoples (known as the Noachide laws, or, in Hebrew, *sheva mitzvot b'nei Noach*). While the Jewish people will, in the future, receive the Torah with its 613 *mitzvot*, these seven Noachide laws are meant to be the foundation of *all* society, and are incumbent upon all nations.

Following the story of Noah, we are told of the "Tower of Babel." According to the Torah, prior to this story, all peoples spoke one language. As humanity settled down, many people joined together in building a high tower, which they intended to serve as a permanent architectural accomplishment ("let us build a city and a tower, with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves"). There is some disagreement among Biblical

commentators of exactly what their sin was, however, the text implies that the people intended to reach God, and possibly to challenge His authority.

At the conclusion of the story, the tower is destroyed, and the Torah gives us a list of nations, who (along with their own languages) were then scattered throughout the Near East.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. The tradition suggests that Adam and Eve, and their descendants, were not permitted to eat meat. Only after humanity's violence, and God's decision to destroy it, are people permitted to eat meat. Why do you think permission was given at this time? Is there a connection between the "violence" of people before the flood and the permission to kill animals for food following the flood?
2. The seven Noachide laws (prohibiting murder, stealing, worshiping idols, sexual immorality, eating flesh from an animal that is still alive, and cursing God; and a positive command to create a legal system) are intended to govern all societies. What is our responsibility, as Jews, to the rest of the world? Are there ways in which we can actively play a role in making the world a more moral place?

A Text to Wrestle With

In a work called the Talmud, which was edited in the fifth century, we are told that all descendants of Noah were to be bound by seven laws:

1. Do not murder.

2. Do not steal.
3. Do not worship false gods.
4. Do not be sexually immoral.
5. Do not eat the limb of an animal before it is killed.
6. Do not curse God.
7. Set up courts and bring offenders to justice.

- ☆ Why is each law considered so basic that all humanity is bound by them? Are there other laws that you think should be agreed upon by all humanity?
- ☆ If we, as Americans, are committed to "separation of church and state," what role should our belief in a divine moral code (such as these seven commandments) play in our political beliefs?

Towards an Action Agenda

The idea that, at the creation, humanity was not permitted to kill animals for food, has always been of interest to those studying the Torah. As a matter of fact, Jewish vegetarianism is alive and well. Below are links to two prominent Jewish vegetarian organizations. You can learn more about Jewish vegetarianism at:

- ☆ <http://www.jewishveg.com/index.html>
- and
- ☆ <http://www.ivu.org/jvs/>

The rainbow continues to be seen as a sign of the covenant between God and all humanity. For that reason, there is a blessing that is recited every time a rainbow is seen:

- ☆ ***Baruch atah adonai elohenu melech ha-olom, zocher habrit v'n-eeman b'vrito, v'kayam b'ma-amaro. Blessed are you, God, Ruler of the universe, who remembers the covenant, is trustworthy in the covenant and fulfills God's word.*** You can print this up to use next time there's a rainbow in your neighborhood, or the prayer is found in most prayer books.



Jewish musician Debbie Friedman has written and performed a song about the blessing to be said when seeing a rainbow. You can listen to an excerpt of her "Rainbow Song" at

☆ http://www.soundswrite.com/audio/friedman_liveatdel/RainbowB.ram

Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

This project is supported through the generosity of Joyce & Fred Claar.

BJE is an agency of UJA-Federation of New York