



The What and Why of the Ark • Parshat Noah

My grandchildren love to play with my collection of wooden Noah's ark figures. Some have moveable animals and a small Noah holding a staff. When I clean up after the children, I make sure to keep the animals in pairs. The children adore the Noah story. The image of the ark appears on kids' wallpaper and in their books; it's the stuff of toys.

The only problem is that the Noah story is not for children. It's an unhappy story of immorality, loss, and despair. The land takes its revenge on society and destroys all within its path. Even the closing covenant God made with Noah contained a note of the tragic: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). God's promise never to destroy the world again is predicated on a lowering of expectations. Humans will forever be flawed. I'm not going to tell my young grandchildren the whole story just yet.

Maybe the only way we can understand this story is by standing with Noah before he built the ark:

God said 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 of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and finish it within a cubit of the top.

Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks. "*For My part, I am about to bring the Flood—waters upon the earth—to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish.* (Gen. 6:13-17)

Imagine, for a moment, a Divine voice calling out to you with an important task that you, and only you, can actualize. Aside from a few family members, there will be no one to assist you. You are on your own. Your world will narrow into this one responsibility for the foreseeable future, but surprisingly, it is to create something rather prosaic. You are told to build a ship and to populate that ship with a pair of animals from every species. You try to prepare yourself mentally for the assignment, but you still cannot understand its significance. Unsure of how large this boat should be, you pay careful attention to the dimensions God commands.

You read the instructions a dozen times and make a list of what you'll need. You don't want to get it wrong. The job is too important. You create an architectural rendering of the ark. You wake up with the sun. Hammer in hand, you spend all day in the hot Near East nailing boards together. Everyone around you laughs. They jokingly look for the body of water where you are going to place your ship. They act as if you've lost your mind. But the word of God is a constant whisper in your ear that keeps you focused.

It's only when the rain first beats on the roof and you rush your family and the animals inside that

you realize you've missed something critically important. You just closed the door on all of humanity. Holed up in the ark's dark and cavernous inside, you review the directions repeatedly to see where you went wrong. Suddenly you see what you failed to see before. With your singular focus on following directions, you missed that in the opening and closing of the instructions, God presented an apocalyptic vision of the world. And now it is too late to do anything to help all those you left behind. All you can do is monitor the sea and pray.

This is the fate of Noah.

God told Noah exactly what to do. But God also told Noah why. Noah focused on the what and bypassed the why. The directions he was given form a unique and unusual passage because the *Tanakh* rarely offers concrete recommendations. Abraham was told to go to another country and start a nation with no GPS. Moses was commanded to free the Jews from slavery and take them out of Egypt with no map and no guidance other than a staff. Esther was told by Mordechai to save her people but was given no script. Ruth made a covenantal commitment to Judaism without any explicit instructions. Why is it that Noah, of all people, was given such clear guidelines?

There is a powerful framing to God's technical instructions. Every few lines, God explicitly told Noah about the moral state of the world. Noah responded by taking out his tools and concentrating on the skylights. Noah missed the larger driving factor behind the situation. Rashi notes this and cites a passage of Talmud (BT *Sanhedrin* 108b) to support his reading. There are numerous ways, Rashi notes, that God could have saved Noah. Why select an ark? "So that the men of the generation of the flood might see him constructing it for 120 years and might ask him, 'What do you need this for?' and so that he might answer them, 'The Holy One, blessed be He, is about to bring a flood upon the world' — perhaps they might repent."

According to the Talmud, the ark's significance was not in its use during the flood but its very presence long before the water hit. Noah's neighbors would be curious about this building project— how could they not be? — and badger him with questions.

Noah could use this conversational opportunity to discuss the larger forces in society that prompted this task and perhaps convince others to repent. They could have all built arks, every last one. The ancient seas could have, without much imagination, been filled with many other arks captained by all of Noah's friends and neighbors. But if any such conversations existed, they are not recorded in our sedra.

Noah was righteous, one midrash states, in *his* generation. This is both compliment and criticism. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Lessons in Leadership*, concludes that "Noah was a good man who was not a leader." Noah was, in the words of leadership experts Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, a master of technical leadership. He focused on what he had to do logistically, but it ironically blinded him from seeing what he had to do adaptively. Adaptive leaders do more than solve problems. They examine causes, assess risks, and anticipate challenges and resistance. They learn the skills that will help them manage contingencies and crises.

When Noah left the ark, he offered a sacrifice — an act of giving to repair a world once flooded with theft and lawlessness. But Noah also planted a vineyard, produced wine, and got drunk in his tent. The enormity of the trauma he experienced was overwhelming. We understand his desire to lose himself in obliviousness. Drinking might have temporarily numbed Noah to all he ignored when building the ark, but at some point, the sobering reality set in. Noah had to construct a new world immune to the moral challenges of the one he left. His technical skills would be of little use. Everything about the new world required adaptive leadership.

One day, when my grandchildren are ready, I will tell them the whole story and remind them to listen to directions and always ask why and what they can do to help. Because that's what leaders do. Simon Sinek in *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, writes that, "Regardless of WHAT we do in our lives, our WHY—our driving purpose, cause or belief—never changes." Leaders who only ask 'what' questions are liable to forget the why. But it's always the why that catalyzes true and meaningful change, one raindrop at a time.