

# **TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT**

## **The Length and Limits of Divine Forgiveness**

*Parshat Noah, Genesis 6:9 – 11:32*

**Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt**

**With love to their grandchildren**

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History, as it is presented in the opening chapters of Genesis, has its own unique symmetry. The generation of Noah represents the moral and spiritual nadir between Adam and Abraham. There are ten generations leading up to the great flood and ten more generations leading to God's call to Abram to go forth "to the land which I will show you." The Bible is not a history book per se; it tells us little about these generations other than who begat whom and when people lived and died. By the time of Noah, however, the world had become "corrupt before the Lord and the earth was filled with lawlessness (*chamas*)." God's creation was a disappointment. The only way God could repair the world was by washing it away and starting over.

The authors of *Pirke Avot* find a lesson about the length and limits of divine forgiveness in this passage of generation. After ten generations, God could no longer ignore the evil that had taken hold of the earth. God gives the world ample opportunity to change its ways and to return to a more harmonious way of life. When humanity fails to do so, it faces the consequences of its actions. But punishment is not necessarily a prerequisite of God's moral calculus. In the generations leading to the birth of Abram, God chooses not to destroy the world. Instead God chooses a new disciple to follow in His path. Hope is born in the ten generations leading up to Abram.

**Pirke Avot 5:2-3** There were ten generations from Adam to Noah to make known the patience of God, seeing that all those generations continued provoking God until God brought the waters of the Flood upon them. There were ten generations from Noah to Abraham to make known the patience of God, seeing that all those generations continued provoking God until Abraham our father came and received the reward that they should have earned.

**Pirke Avot 3:12** Rabbi Chaninah Ben Dosa said: One in whom the spirit of his fellow creatures takes delight, in him the spirit of the Omnipresent takes delight; and one in whom the spirit of his fellow does not delight, in him the spirit of the Omnipresent takes no delight either.

### **Sources**

#### **Avot D'Rebbe Natan, Chapter 32**

And some say: So long as Methuselah was alive the flood did not come on the earth; and even when Methuselah died it was still withheld from them for seven days after his death, as it said, "And it came to pass, after seven days, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth." (Genesis 7:10) What purpose was served by the seven days? They were seven days of mourning for Methuselah the righteous which prevented the calamity from coming upon the world. That is why it is said: "And it came to pass after seven days...."

#### **Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108a**

Rabbi Johanan said: Come and see how great is the power of robbery, for lo, though the generation of the flood transgressed all laws, their decree of punishment was sealed only because they stretched out their hands to rob, as it is written, "For the earth is filled with violence through them, and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth." (Genesis 6:13)

### **Commentary**

Although every child knows the story of Noah's ark, this is really a troubling episode in the Bible. We confront God's impatience with human evil and the possibility that our failures can result in the destruction. This is not a pretty story! And then to make matters worse, Noah fails God as soon as he leaves the ark – he immediately plants a vineyard, makes wine and gets drunk. Noah curses one son and blesses the others, leaving a fragmented and broken world. I am surprised that children do not question the harsh and punitive God we encounter for the story of the great flood.

The rabbis add some nuance and subtly to this story by suggesting that God's punishment was neither immediate nor was it a forgone conclusion. They point out that it is only after ten generations that God chooses to punish humankind. God patiently waited and repeatedly gave human kind to change its ways. Why does God wait ten generations to destroy the earth and what was it about the generation of Noah which made it especially wicked? The sages suggest that God could accept humanity's rebellion against the divine but the divine could not accept humankind's cruelty to one another. It was human wickedness to other human beings which made Noah's generation liable for punishment. A godless world could continue to exist but a lawlessness world could not. Rabbi Chaninah Ben Dosa reminds us of this lesson. God loves those people who are beloved to their fellow. A world of robbery and violence in which human beings diminish the divine image of their neighbors no longer was the world which God set out to create.

Even then, God waited as long as he could. In *Avot D'Rebbe Natan* (a later expansion of Pirke Avot) we learn that God waited until after the death of the Methuselah and the observance of his Shiva, to flood the earth. The righteous have the power to maintain the world and avert destruction. Apparently Noah did not have the power or the purity to save his generation from destruction. While he faithfully obeys God's commandments Noah remains silent in the face of a wicked generation and never attempts to change the world. Noah sets out to save himself and his family but we are never told that he tried to help others.

In contrast to Noah we see Abraham. Ten generations of disappointment have pass once again but this time God does not destroy His creation. Instead He offers Abraham a unique opportunity to create a people of God who will follow His covenant. We are left to ponder why God took a different approach to humanity's destiny in Abraham's generation. Did God have second thoughts about his previous actions? Was there something different about Abraham that gave God new hope?

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. What were the lengths and limits of God's willingness to forgive? Why was it different in the time of Noah than it was in the generation of Abraham?
2. What are the lengths and limits of your willingness to forgive? Are actions and behaviors that you are willing to forgive and others which you would find unforgivable? Is forgiveness always the right policy?
3. The word *chamas*, lawlessness, has dark implications in our modern world. While it is tempting to make a connection, the reader should note that there is no linguistic connection between this word and the name of the terrorist organization which has inflicted such pain upon Israel. *Hamas* is an abbreviation for *Harakat al-Muqāwama al-Islāmiyya* or "Islamic Resistance Movement." Why do you think violence and lawlessness proliferated in Noah's generation? Why is there so much violence in our world today?
4. Compare the lives of Noah and Abraham. How are they similar to and different from one another? The sages debated whether Noah would have been as noteworthy if he had lived in the time of Abraham? What do you think?
5. What can we do to lessen the amount of violence and lawlessness in the world today?

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