

Noakh

By Mike Cockrill

October 21, 2017

Silence that traps you in the prison of self is a floodwater that rises up from below your feet and devours your world.

In God time Project Adam was in its infancy – just ten generations of humans, as quick as the ring of a bell – but it was not going well. Noah's father Lamech had figured out how to forge metal implements. He boasted that he killed for mere bruises and slights and no one was more powerful than he. By the generation of Noah people had become weaponized with swords. Further, the divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and began to take them as they pleased. In Noah, God sees the world has become violent and evil, and He regrets ever making man.

Rashi says the evil that had taken hold in the world was sexual evil and the violence was robbery.

What is this sexual evil? This is not a puritanical rejection of healthy sexuality. Rather, the evil Rashi is talking about is the evil of narcissistic, rapacious sexuality. A sexuality that is the opposite of love. Love communicates. Love forges a bond between two people. In love, Avivah Zornberg tells us, the one cares about the world constructed by the other. In the rapacious sexuality of self-centered greed, the other has no voice. The other is invaded with no regard for her own identity. The "divine beings" who take as they please can easily be seen for what they are: Men in power - The kings on earth who graze as they like in their fiefdoms, their congressional seat, their TV studio, their multi-national real estate conglomerate, their Hollywood production company.... Treating people like finger food brought to them on platters. As they casually graze your voice is taken away. The strings of power that yank and tug from the levers above, bind and silence you.

This week in the New York Times, Quentin Tarantino said, "I knew." It made me think about the two words that women have been flooding social media with, "Me Too." Suddenly an experience too long accommodated and shrouded in silence, exploded into plain sight and became exposed as common. All too common. He knew. We knew, Me too. In a flood like this, everyone is swallowed by the raging waters.

Noah is a perfect storm of silence leading to destruction. I see at least three silences at play. One: The silence of voices that no longer reach up to God. The loss of the vertical / spiritual connection. Two: The silence of many voices in conflict along the horizontal plane of human conquest and subjugation – a sound and fury, as Shakespeare would say, signifying nothing. Three: The silence of those who are

suppressed, whose very identity has been eradicated and, remembering Rashi, “robbed” of who they are.

Such is the silence of the floodwaters that destroy a world. Water has no language. No consciousness. But Adam and Eve - humanity that is - can speak. We look out on our world and give things names. And, we have a vertical relationship that connects us spiritually to a Creator - with words. Or, that was the original idea. God spoke to Adam and Eve, as well as Cain. They talked. (What happens when we are separated from our ability to speak? When we are wounded, assaulted, used, yet feel to be disempowered to name names? Or when we name names, it is disregarded.)

In startling irony, God gives the job of salvaging a select remnant of life on earth to a silent man. When God asks Noah to build the ark, Noah does so. When the Divine Creator reveals his plan to destroy all the inhabitants of the earth, save Noah's family and the animals he takes along on the ark, Noah offers no defense or advocacy of his fellow human beings. Nor does he offer any warning that we hear of - only the building of an ark, per God's instructions - without complaint or hesitation.

Noah we are told is a righteous man. Righteous however, in his generation. Which taken as a whole is a low bar to pass. Noah's generation, after all, was not worth saving. The ancient Rabbis were of two minds about Noah and one view held, if Noah was living in the generation of Abraham, Noah would be worthless. Abraham, spoke to God. Abraham attempted to save Sodom and pleaded with God that perhaps there might be 50, 20 even 10 good people there. Would the Eternal want future generations to think the Divine would kill the innocent? Abraham was willing to challenge God with this question. But not so Noah.

Sealed into his ark by God, Noah with his family and the mating pairs of animals, ride out the waters that give up no secrets and wash away all. In eradicating what He has brought in the being, is God also complicit in silence? Or is that the prelude of a creator: To make and destroy? I began to wonder: Is Noah the perfect co-conspirator in a mass extinction, because Noah's lips were sealed so to speak?

After the flood, with his vineyard planted and producing grapes for wine, Noah wakes from a drunken stupor and finally speaks. In a reverse blessing he curses Canaan, Ham's progeny. Why? Ham saw the drunken Noah's nakedness and ran to tell his brothers Shem and Japheth, who approach their father with averted eyes and cover him.

At last there is a truth being spoken. Finally Ham is telling others what he has seen. He is naming names. Yet, the strings of power curse him. Ham's son Canaan will be the slave of his brothers, decrees an outraged Noah.

All in, the rabbis envision various sordid scenarios for what Ham may have done to his father in his tent. Perhaps Ham castrated his father – or even committed an act of sodomy, they claim. But why would a guilty son readily admit such things? What if this is a slander against Ham? What if the nakedness Ham saw in his father was the truth of who his father really was? A man who silently rode in a protected cocoon, above the waves while everything and everyone they knew was washed away. Noah receives an olive branch and rainbow while the world dies. Was God not indeed using Noah as an agent in the silencing of the world that God regretted ever making? Is the olive branch a thank you wrapped in a rainbow? Miamonides does not agree, but Rashi makes a startling claim. "God is just an individual." That should give you pause. Since Adam was created in God's image, reasons Rashi, then God has hands. Do these hands not *also* hold the strings of power. Of course they do.

Did an outraged Ham rip away the curtains and blankets that the drunken Noah encased himself in to block out the harsh light of reality? Maybe Ham did fall upon his father violently and with his own sense of justice.

But in the end, the world is flooded and we still end up with Babel.

A few nights ago I dreamt I was a raven restlessly flying to and fro over a churning sea. In my dream I arrived at a rock that jutted up black and glistening from the water that rushed over it in the swelling surf. I hovered only for a frantic moment and flew off. It seemed as though this would be a search that would continue for my whole existence.

I had never dreamt of a raven before. I had not even thought at all about the raven as I wrote my drash on Noach. The Dove? Returning with its olive branch in its beak, looking like a hallmark greeting card declaring Peace? Yes. I had thought about that, and I didn't particularly like the dove. But the Raven who flew out to search here and there never to return? No. I had not acknowledged that dark searcher.

So in a dream, here was the raven. And the raven was me. Swiftly flying in a vast emptiness. Searching for something. What? I felt it was searching for expression. It was searching for the right form. The right words.

Words build worlds where before there is only the chaos of waters; Waters not divided, sea from land. In this strange and unsettling dream, there was only water and silence – and a raven flying to and fro with no place to rest.

Words build worlds. "Me Too." emerges out of silence. "I knew" emerges from the darkness of complicity. Put together they begin to form something: A place to stand and begin.

God created the world with words and gave those words to us. Do we build a world or destroy a world? We are becoming all too familiar with, fake news, internet troll... words used to create babble - which is a form of silence created out of meaningless noise.

I find empowerment and a sense of obligation in my Jewish practice. Words mean something. Words can reach vertically to a spiritual place - a place beyond self-centered ego. And words can reach out horizontally to our material world, giving names and identity to things. We must find connections here on this horizontal plane we share as humans. The connections Aviva Zornberg talks about when she describes love as caring about the world constructed by another.

How many chances do we get? When God placed the rainbow in the sky it was not in fact a thank you bow for Noah. It was a note to self, a post-it in the sky to remind God to never again bring the waters to destroy all life on earth. This was a promise God made. At that moment, God asked nothing in return. However, I also don't think God is going to be sending a rescue ark either. This is our world, to repair or to destroy. I hope we keep searching. I hope we find the right words and not silence.