

Dear Chavraya,

We are beset by so many needs and challenges, all crying out for attention, each one seeming in one moment or the next to be the most urgent. We are called to hear in the depths of our being the cries of Mother Earth herself, within which all else unfolds. Attention vacillating between terrors, we live in a time in which to behold in one place and moment and then in another floods of water and floods of fire. If as God has promised in this week's Torah portion, *parashat No'ach*, never again to destroy the earth with floods of water, then is it the fire next time we await? But what of us, what is our promise, what of floods that come for lack of human action, God's promise notwithstanding?

The flood that is the paradigm for all environmental destruction, the flood that drowns out all life comes as response, as consequence for human violence. The Torah tells so simply of the degradation in the ways of human life, of being human in relation to one another, for which the flood is consequence: *and the earth was corrupt before the countenance of God, and so the earth was filled with violence/va'ti'maleh ha'aretz chamas* (Gen. 6:11). It is not unlike our world and our time, creation itself so threatened, so much violence blinding us to the beauty that is meant for us to behold and enjoy, generations in perpetuity. If we can't see the image of God in one another, how shall we see the hand of God in the very structure of the world in which we live, in all the details of its fragile design.

As we face the rising waters and the flames, what about everything else, how to respond to the brutality of peoples and nations, the perfidy of leaders and the numbing of our souls? It was the same question for No'ach, how to respond to the violence, to the evil that surrounded him, much more to contend with than the waters soon to rise. There was brutality of one for another, and hatred, and arrogance, the misuse of technology, as in the building of the great tower by which to storm the very heavens. In the word for flood in the Torah, *mabul*, there is held all of the layers of violence and all of our fears. The root of *mabul* is *naval*, meaning *to whither, to fade, to degenerate*; so too to be *mean, base, vile*; and so too *meanness wickedness*; and in the end a *corpse, a carcass/n'veilah*. From the same root, *nevel/harp*, a tremor of hope upon God's heartstrings and ours.

As we seek a way of response, crying out for guidance, No'ach offers one way. Soon, Avraham will offer another way, each as interpreted by the tradition, by people who themselves struggled as we do to find the way of response to all that besets us in this world of our journeys. We are given two paradigms for activism in these two figures, the No'ach way and the Avraham way. I was once very clear in the need to embrace the Avraham way, now I am not so clear, coming to feel that both ways are part of one whole in the quest for wholeness within ourselves. Taken to define the difference in their ways, a classic distinction is made. We are told of No'ach, *et ha'elokim hit'ha'lech no'ach/No'ach walked with God* (Gen. 6:9). To Avraham, God says, *hit'ha'lech l'fanai ve'h'yeh tamim/walk before me and be complete* (Gen. 17:1). Avraham is generally seen to be the greater activist, the one who goes ahead, who doesn't wait for God, but who has God's trust in determining what action is needed in navigating the ways of the world.

In the midst of all that we face in the world around us, I have come to feel touched more deeply by the comfort that comes of walking with God. Sometimes we can't wait, we can't step back and linger, needing rather to go ahead in the way of Avraham. Sometimes that is surely what God must want, as though telling us to get going and respond to the cries of God's creatures, of God's very earth. There are also times when in the midst of our running to quench the fires and stem the tides that we need just to pause and to be renewed, to find comfort and see the beauty that will yet inspire us to keep going in the struggle.

That is the No'ach way, pausing to walk with God, to be supported, to be reminded of what it means to take the hand of another, that we can't and are not meant to do it all alone, to put out all the fires and stem all the floods by ourselves. The old song reminds, "when you can't go on any longer, take the hand held by another...." In the very name of No'ach is the reminder of his way, its root meaning to rest, to repose, to settle down, to dwell. The two letters *nun* and *chet* reversed become *chen/beauty, favor, grace*, something so gentle, gracefully to go through life, even when walking before God in the midst of all. When No'ach is born, his father says of him, *only this one can give us comfort/zeh y'na'chamenu...* (Gen. 5:29).

So it is for us in facing all that besets us and our world, to bring together the two paradigmatic ways of being activists, simply of being in the world, the ways of Avraham and of No'ach. More than I have felt in the past, I need them both, at times to walk ahead of God, to see and to do. At times needing God's support more directly to help me keep going, needing to walk with God as No'ach did. Pausing now for Shabbos, may we feel held by God and by each other, walking hand in hand. So refreshed, may we step forth and do the work that is to be done, still hope for the floods to recede.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor