

PARASHAT NOAH

Oct. 15, 1999

You can learn a lot from the New York Times crossword puzzles. Names for wading birds are a favorite. World War II battle sites that are spelled with only four letters are a favorite. Towns like Orono and Ocala make regular appearances. Occasionally a Hebrew letter or book of the Bible will make its way into those empty squares. This week on Wednesday, for instance, the clue to #15 across was Biblical skipper. The answer had 4 letters and had to be, conveniently for us Jews this week, none other than Noah. Crossword puzzles are known for their economy of language, not their profundity, of course, and so I can't object to their calling Noah a biblical skipper. Noah is often pictured bearded, wearing a long nondescript brown robe, holding a staff with which to herd those cute paired animals onto the ark. There are rainbows in the background and doves in the air. Sometimes we even see Mrs. Noah standing at his side. The text didn't see fit to name her independently so for us she is ever Eshet Noah. But if that's all there were to the story of Noah, being a biblical skipper and all, herding animals two by two, the story wouldn't resonate with us. It's because we see ourselves in Noah and Noah in ourselves that the story has endured. The best bible stories, the ones we remember, are the ones that speak to us on multiple levels about who we are.

Who was Noah? We are told he was an eesh tzadik, a righteous person, tamim haya b'dorotav, who was blameless in his age. Commentators have puzzled over that phrase "in his age." Why didn't the text just say that Noah was a righteous and blameless person? Like the New York Times crossword, the Torah believes in the economy of language, not because you have to fit the word into little squares but because God did not speak redundantly. So we believe that there was some meaning, some intention, behind the phrase "in his age." The usual commentator who is quoted is Rabbi Yochanan who said: "Noah was blameless only in *his* age, but in other ages he would not have been considered righteous." Rabbi Yochanan's idea was that Noah was surrounded by such an evil generation that he looked good by comparison; but had he lived in a different time where the people had been less wicked, Noah himself might have been quite ordinary. What's the justification for that position? When told that God planned to destroy the earth with a flood, Noah never once pleaded with God to save the world; he just saved himself, his family and the animals. Abraham, on the other hand, when told that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah unless 50 righteous people could be found, pleaded the cause of his fellow human beings. The tradition goes even further and says that that's why Abraham was chosen as the first Jew and Noah was not. Noah responded with selfishness; he wanted to remove his family from the evil and violence of his time and left others to fend for themselves.

What would we have done were we in his shoes? If we would have done the same thing, does that make us selfish and unworthy? Does that make him a bad person?

But Rabbi Yochanan's opinion did not go unchallenged. In this famous conversation in the Talmud, Resh Lakish offered a different reading of the text: "Noah was righteous *even* in his age; how much more so would he have been righteous in other ages." When you live in a time of violence, it is even harder to be good and generous because all around you are tempting you to join them. Noah deserves additional accolades because he transcended the temptation that was all around him. He was honest, peaceful and loving in an age when violence and deceit were the themes of his society.

We might leave it at that, a difference of opinion never to be resolved, had the Torah not told us a bit more about the Noah who got off the ark after 40 days and 40 nights. This is the part of the story we all conveniently forget. Yes, there is a rainbow, yes there is a covenant; but that's not the end of the story. For Noah, the skipper, now becomes a tiller of the earth, the first to plant a vineyard. "He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent." We don't know exactly what that euphemism means except that it usually refers to some kind of sexual perversion. When Ham discovers his father naked, he tells his brothers who come in and modestly cover their father, never looking at his nakedness. When Noah woke up, he cursed Ham's son Canaan and destined him to be a slave, and blessed his sons Ham and Yaphet.

Depending on your inclination, you could argue that Noah had just been reacting to the pressures of 40 days and nights on the ark, feeding and tending and caring and worrying. The lapse was understandable. Or you could say that Noah's drunkenness was proof that he had been a cad to begin with and only now was showing his true colors. But I think there is another way of looking at Noah. Of all the things Noah did on the ark, he never rested. He just kept on going. The task at hand took over his life. He spent so much time attending to everyone else that, when it was all over, I don't think he knew anymore who *he* was - if he had ever known. And he drowned his confusion in drink. The question wasn't whether Noah was a saint or a sinner; it was who was Noah.

There is a story about an old interview conducted with Hugh O'Brien, the actor who played Wyatt Earp. Remember Wyatt Earp? Wyatt Earp, Wyatt Earp, brave courageous and bold. Long live his fame and long live his glory and lone may his story be told. Hugh O'Brien said:

I found out early that no matter who you are and no matter what business you're in, all of us go through five stages of life.

The first stage is: "Who is Hugh O'Brien?" This is where you begin your journey - when you sow the seeds for success.

The second stage is: "Get me Hugh O'Brien." That's when you have your first taste of success.

The third stage is: "Get me a Hugh O'Brien type." That's when you're successful - when you're at the top of the ladder, when they can't afford you, but they want somebody like you.

The fourth stage is: "Get me a young Hugh O'Brien." We all grow old through the fourth stage.

The fifth stage brings us back to the first: "Who is Hugh O'Brien?"

The question we asked at the beginning is the same as the one we ask at the end. We began by asking, "Who is Noah?" and we end with the same question. So go our lives. We begin by asking who we are and get so busy being successful that we forget the question - until inevitably it finds us again. Remember the story of Rabbi Zusya who cried on his deathbed: "In the world to come, they will not ask me 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?' What will I answer?"