

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Noach
October 24, 2020 * Cheshvan 6, 5781**

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Noah in A Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3155/jewish/Noach-in-a-Nutshell.htm

G-d instructs Noah—the only righteous man in a world consumed by violence and corruption—to build a large wooden teivah (“ark”), coated within and without with pitch. A great deluge, says G-d, will wipe out all life from the face of the earth; but the ark will float upon the water, sheltering Noah and his family, and two members (male and female) of each animal species.

Rain falls for 40 days and nights, and the waters churn for 150 days more before calming and beginning to recede. The ark settles on Mount Ararat, and from its window Noah dispatches a raven, and then a series of doves, “to see if the waters were abated from the face of the earth.” When the ground dries completely—exactly one solar year (365 days) after the onset of the Flood—G-d commands Noah to exit the teivah and repopulate the earth.

Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices to G-d. G-d swears never again to destroy all of mankind because of their deeds, and sets the rainbow as a testimony of His new covenant with man. G-d also commands Noah regarding the sacredness of life: murder is deemed a capital offense, and while man is permitted to eat the meat of animals, he is forbidden to eat flesh or blood taken from a living animal.

Noah plants a vineyard and becomes drunk on its produce. Two of Noah’s sons, Shem and Japheth, are blessed for covering up their father’s nakedness, while his third son, Ham, is punished for taking advantage of his debasement.

The descendants of Noah remain a single people, with a single language and culture, for ten generations. Then they defy their Creator by building a great tower to symbolize their own invincibility; G-d confuses their language so that “one does not comprehend the tongue of the other,” causing them to abandon their project and disperse across the face of the earth, splitting into seventy nations.

The Parshah of Noach concludes with a chronology of the ten generations from Noah to Abram (later Abraham), and the latter’s journey from his birthplace of Ur Casdim to Charan, on the way to the land of Canaan.

Noach in a Haftarah

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/578168/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Forsaken Jerusalem is likened to a barren woman devoid of children. G-d enjoins her to

rejoice, for the time will soon come when the Jewish nation will return and proliferate, repopulating Israel's once desolate cities. The prophet assures the Jewish people that G-d has not forsaken them. Although He has momentarily hid His countenance from them, He will gather them from their exiles with great mercy. The haftorah compares the final Redemption to the pact G-d made with Noah in this week's Torah reading. Just as G-d promised to never bring a flood over the entire earth, so too He will never again be angry at the Jewish people.

"For the mountains may move and the hills might collapse, but My kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of My peace collapse."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Righteousness is not Leadership (Noach 5781)

<https://rabbisacks.org/noach-5781/>

The praise accorded to Noah is unparalleled in Tanach. He was, says the Torah, "a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God." No such praise is given to Abraham or Moses or any of the Prophets. The only person in the Bible who comes close is Job, described as "blameless and upright (tam ve-yashar); he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). Noah is in fact the only individual that the Tanach describes as righteous (tzaddik).

Yet the Noah we see at the end of his life is not the person we saw at the beginning.

After the Flood:

Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked. (Gen. 9:20-23)

The man of God has become a man of the soil. The upright man has become a drunkard. The man clothed in virtue now lies naked. The man who saved his family from the Flood is now so undignified that two of his sons are ashamed to look at him. This is a tale of decline. Why?

Noah is the classic case of someone who is righteous, but who is not a leader. In a disastrous age, when all has been corrupted, when the world is filled with violence, when even God Himself – in the most poignant line in the whole Torah – "regretted that He had made man on earth, and was pained to His very core," Noah alone justifies God's faith in humanity, the faith that led Him to create humankind in the first place. That is an immense achievement, and nothing should detract from it. Noah is, after all, the man through whom God makes a covenant with all humanity. Noah is to humanity what Abraham is to the Jewish people.

Noah was a good man in a bad age. But his influence on the life of his contemporaries

was, apparently, non-existent. That is implicit in God's statement, "You alone have I found righteous in this whole generation" (Gen. 7:1). It is implicit also in the fact that only Noah and his family, together with the animals, were saved. It is reasonable to assume that these two facts – Noah's righteousness and his lack of influence on his contemporaries – are intimately related. Noah preserved his virtue by separating himself from his environment. That is how, in a world gone mad, he stayed sane. The famous debate among the Sages as to whether the phrase "perfect in his generations" (Gen. 6:9) is praise or criticism may well be related to this. Some said that "perfect in his generations" means that he was perfect only relative to the low standard then prevailing. Had he lived in the generation of Abraham, they said, he would have been insignificant. Others said the opposite: if in a wicked generation Noah was righteous, how much greater he would have been in a generation with role models like Abraham.

The argument, it seems to me, turns on whether Noah's isolation was part of his character, or whether it was merely the necessary tactic in that time and place. If he were naturally a loner, he would not have gained by the presence of heroes like Abraham. He would have been impervious to influence, whether for good or bad. If he was not a loner by nature but merely by circumstance, then in another age he would have sought out kindred spirits and become greater still.

Yet what exactly was Noah supposed to do? How could he have been an influence for good in a society bent on evil? Was he really meant to speak in an age when no one would listen? Sometimes people do not listen even to the voice of God Himself. We had an example of this just two chapters earlier, when God warned Cain of the danger of his violent feelings toward Abel – "Why are you so furious? Why are you depressed? ... sin is crouching at the door. It lusts after you, but you can dominate it" (Gen. 4:6-7). Yet Cain did not listen, and instead went on to murder his brother. If God speaks and people do not listen, how can we criticise Noah for not speaking when all the evidence suggests that they would not have listened to him anyway?

The Talmud raises this very question in a different context, in another lawless age: the years leading to the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of the First Temple, another lawless age:

Aha b. R. Hanina said: Never did a favourable word go forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, of which He retracted for evil, except the following, where it is written, "And the Lord said unto him: Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations that are being done in the midst thereof" (Ezek. 9:4).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Gabriel, "Go and set a mark of ink on the foreheads of the righteous, that the destroying angels may have no power over them; and a mark of blood upon the foreheads of the wicked, that the destroying angels may have power over them." Said the Attribute of Justice

before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Sovereign of the Universe! How are these different from those?"

"Those are completely righteous men, while these are completely wicked," He replied. "Sovereign of the Universe!" said Justice, "They had the power to protest but did not."

Said God, "Had they protested, they would not have heeded them."

"Sovereign of the Universe!" said Justice, "This was revealed to You, but was it revealed to them?" (Shabbat 55a)

According to this passage, even the righteous in Jerusalem were punished at the time of the destruction of the Temple because they did not protest the actions of their contemporaries. God objects to the claim of Justice: Why punish them for their failure to protest when it was clear that had they done so, no one would have listened? Justice replies: This may be clear to you or to the angels – meaning, this may be clear in hindsight – but at the time, no human could have been sure that their words would have no impact. Justice asks: How can you be sure you will fail if you never try? The Talmud notes that God reluctantly agreed with Justice. Hence the strong principle: when bad things are happening in society, when corruption, violence and injustice prevail, it is our duty to register a protest, even if it seems likely that it will have no effect. Why? Because that is what moral integrity demands. Silence may be taken as acceptance. And besides, we can never be sure that no one will listen. Morality demands that we ignore probability and focus on possibility. Perhaps someone will take notice and change their ways – and that "perhaps" is enough. This idea did not suddenly appear for the first time in the Talmud. It is stated explicitly in the book of Ezekiel. This is what God says to the Prophet:

"Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against Me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a Prophet has been among them." (Ezek. 2:3-5)

God is telling the Prophet to speak, regardless of whether people will listen. So, one way of reading the story of Noah is as an example of lack of leadership. Noah was righteous but not a leader. He was a good man who had no influence on his environment. There are, to be sure, other ways of reading the story, but this seems to me the most straightforward. If so, then Noah is the third case in a series of failures of responsibility. As we saw last week, Adam and Eve failed to take personal responsibility for their actions ("It wasn't me"). Cain refused to take moral responsibility ("Am I my brother's keeper?"). Noah failed the test of collective responsibility. This way of interpreting the story, if correct, entails a strong conclusion. We know that Judaism involves collective responsibility, for it teaches Kol Yisrael arevim ze bazeh ("All Israel are responsible for one another" Shavuot 39a). But it may be that

simply being human also involves collective responsibility. Not only are Jews responsible for one another. So are we all, regardless of our faith or religious affiliations. So, at any rate, Maimonides argued, though Nahmanides disagreed.[1] The Hassidim had a simple way of making this point. They called Noah a tzaddik im peltz, “a righteous man in a fur coat.” There are essentially two ways of keeping warm on a cold night. You can wear a thick coat, or you can light a fire. Wear a coat and you warm only yourself. Light a fire and you can warm others too. We are supposed to light a fire.

Noah was a good man who was not a leader. Was he, after the Flood, haunted by guilt? Did he think of the lives he might have saved if only he had spoken out, whether to his contemporaries or to God? We cannot be sure. The text is suggestive but not conclusive.

It seems, though, that the Torah sets a high standard for the moral life. It is not enough to be righteous if that means turning our backs on a society that is guilty of wrongdoing. We must take a stand. We must protest. We must register dissent even if the probability of changing minds is small. That is because the moral life is a life we share with others. We are, in some sense, responsible for the society of which we are a part. It is not enough to be good. We must encourage others to be good. There are times when each of us must lead.

Shabbat Shalom [1] See Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 9:14. Also see Ramban, Commentary to Bereishit 34:13, s.v. Ve-rabbim.

[Looking Beyond Our Arks: Noah by Yitz Landes](http://www.jtsa.edu/looking-beyond-our-arks)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/looking-beyond-our-arks>

It has never been easier to identify with Noah.

In a normal year, we would be reading this week’s parashah in an entirely different setting: after a summer of sun, camp, and trips, and following the long holiday season, we would be entering our homes and settling into the fall, saying goodbye to the physical togetherness that defines the summer and the holiday season, just as the day gets shorter and the month of Marheshvan commences. In a normal year, the portion of Noah reminds us of this motion: when the rain starts, we go inside—and the tale of Noah and his family reminds us that there is indeed a sunny future ahead, waiting for us a few months down the line. The introspection we would have experienced in Elul and Tishrei, in our synagogues and schools, would now be replaced with an introspection in our homes, as we hunker down for the winter and try to stay warm. But this is not a normal year. We have all been cooped up now for months in our own “arks”—alone or with others—as we seek protection from contagion, and, in some parts of this country, from the sheer, life-threatening force of the elements. The advantage of our arks is apparent: quite simply, staying home is supposed to help us stay alive. Yet there are of course risks in such isolation. Loneliness intensifies. And for many, the home is tragically a place of danger, of insecurity, perhaps even of physical

violence.

Noah was certainly lucky—he was saved. His first reaction upon exiting the ark was to immediately build an altar and offer a sacrifice to God (Gen. 8:20). It is not surprising that most sources understand this as an act of giving thanks: Noah exits the ark, realizes that he was fortunate to survive (and notices that God made him take a lot of animals with him), and therefore offers God a sacrifice to convey his thankfulness. Yet, the Bible does not state this explicitly. What it does say is that God, after smelling the sacrificial fumes, tells Himself that “never again will I doom the earth because of man” (Gen. 8:21). Is this a reaction to an act of thanks, or to something else? According to the book of Jubilees, a Second Temple-era text that rewrites the book of Genesis and the first half of the book of Exodus, Noah atones “for the earth”—for the sins committed by all who had perished, that had defiled the earth (Jubilees 6:2). Zoharic texts also consider this to be an atonement sacrifice, but one that serves a different purpose. Picking up on a theme found already in some rabbinic sources, these texts blame Noah for not doing enough for those of his generation. The Midrash Hane’lam, a commentary embedded within the Zohar, retells Noah’s departure from the ark as follows:

Our rabbis have taught: How did the blessed Holy One answer Noah when he came out of the ark and saw the world destroyed, whereupon he began weeping for it, saying, “Master of the World! You are called Compassionate! You should have shown compassion for Your creatures!”? (Pritzker edition translation)

Upon exiting the ark, Noah is aghast at the sight of destruction. He cannot believe that God, the Compassionate One, caused such calamities—and he tells Him so! God turns the blame around, reprimanding Noah:

The blessed Holy one replied, “Foolish shepherd! Now you say this—but not when I spoke to you tenderly I lingered with you and belabored you with all of this, so that you might seek compassion for the world. But as soon as you heard that you would be saved in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch your heart; you built the ark and saved yourself! Now that the world has been destroyed, you open your mouth—muttering questions and pleas before Me!”

Now Noah is asking God why He did all of this?! Noah, the “righteous of his generation” (Gen. 6:9), knew that this was coming! He should have prayed on his generation’s behalf and called upon them to change their ways.

God’s rebuke, though, also betrays God’s own weakness: He needed humans to help Him solve the world’s problems, particularly those that stem from humankind’s own misdeeds. But when they failed to do so, and when even the righteous of the generation did not do enough, the only path that God could take was one of utter destruction.

The retelling ends with Noah internalizing the depths of his personal failure:

As soon as Noah realized this, he presented sacrifices and offerings, as is written: Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every pure animal and of every pure bird, and offered ascent-offerings on the altar (Gen. 8:20).

Noah's sacrifice, in this reading, is not one of thanks, nor one of atonement for the sins of those dead and the defilement of the land. Noah's sacrifice serves to atone for his own sin—the sin of inaction, as he let civilization devolve until the Earth as he knew it was destroyed, content as he was with his own survival. We can imagine Noah waiting in his ark, knowing but not fully coming to terms with what was actually going on outside; only once it was too late did he realize what should have been clear to him all along. And this reading also draws the later elements of the story into sharper focus: when God states that “the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21), He is referring also to Noah's selfishness; and when Noah turns to alcohol (Gen. 9:21), it is from the recognition that he had looked out only for himself.

It is hard, in our own arks, to think beyond ourselves. To be sure, at times we must focus inward, in order to ensure our own vitality and health. But the challenges facing our generation—and those that we are poised to leave for the next generation—are simply far too great for us to ignore as we weather out the storm. The climate crisis that is impacting every aspect of our lives, even if we are not always noticing; the ills caused by systemic racism in this country; the fight for democracy and for equality—these are all challenges that we must address here and now.

Noah's experience reminds us that there will still be life when we exit the ark, but that we must constantly work to ensure that this reality is available to as many people as possible. Even as we focus on our very own survival, we must fight and pray for the survival of our entire world. (Yitz Landes is Adjunct Instructor in Ancient Judaism at JTS and PHD Candidate at Princeton University.)

The Divine is No Ordinary Parent: Lessons from One God to One People by Rabbi Michael Dolgin

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/divine-no-ordinary-parent-lessons-one-god-one-people>

No other Torah portion is as well known or fires the imagination as much as Parashat Noach – but the story includes a number of problematic elements. For instance: How could a 600-year-old man build a cruise ship in his back yard? Would the animals come two by two or 14 by 14? How could they survive in that ark? Why would God need to undo creation to respond to the failures of a generation?

The most difficult element of the story comes at the end. After Noah and his family have survived this incredible ordeal and emerge from the ark, God shows them a rainbow as a sign of the first covenant between humanity and God:

“Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being as I have done.” (Genesis 8:21)

Any parent will recognize the failings of this approach. This phrase amounts to, “My children, you have done wrong, and I am disappointed. If you ever do this again, I will not punish you next time.” If a sin is punishable on the first offense, should it not be more punishable if the misstep is repeated?

Yet, the message of Noach is as profound as it is surprising.

The Divine One is no ordinary parent. After creating the earth and all the beings within it and seeing what a mess that humans can make of it, God makes an amazing and brilliant parental statement: “I will clean up your mess only once. Creation is a miracle and a gift to you. Whether you make the best or the worst of it, the consequences and responsibility are yours.”

It has taken us thousands of years to absorb this lesson. If we continue to destroy its climate and its biodiversity, God will not press a Divine reset button and start life over again. Noach was a one-time story; this world is ours to lead and honor, both in terms of nature and humanity.

The portion tells us that the earth became corrupt before God, filled with lawlessness (chamas). There are many ways to translate this key word; while some choose “violence,” I prefer the JPS translation of “lawlessness.” Human beings need laws; we need structure, order, and a justice system to have a society that is sustainable, significant, and adheres to sacred values.

However, laws and rules are not nearly enough; we must also have proper underlying attitudes.

How do we look at other human beings? A common but troubling answer is found in Genesis 10. This chapter is often ignored, as it appears as a list of the world’s 70 nations. What seems like a mundane series of names, however, is actually a worldview. The organization of these nations is based on the three children of Noah: the sons of Shem are “us,” meaning they include all who are to be part of our society; the sons of Ham are “them,” meaning they include our enemies and partners in conflict; and the sons of Japheth are everyone else, meaning they do not figure prominently in our worldview, but we know they exist.

Sadly, it seems we still often divide the human family into those who are with us and those who are against us. As a result, we forget that people we consider “them” are created in the image of God, just as “we” are.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenges us to demonstrate whether we are willing to value the lives of others through social distancing and wearing masks. The murder of George Floyd and other instances of violent racism remind us that behavior that devalues human life makes the rule of law impossible.

Since the story of Noach, we have known that the world will be lawless unless we know that we are all in one boat, residents of one garden, children of the One God. (Rabbi

Michael Dolgin has served Temple Sinai Congregation of Toronto since 1992.)

[From Erwin Mevorah:](#)

Perasha Noach - rav Fischel Schacter shilita

The rabbi began his talk this week by about a national newspaper that had a front page article speaking about the " red zone " that we are currently experiencing . There was a news article written about the current spike of the virus - a picture was taken from boro park of a man walking with his lulab . Says the rabbi - this is the power of what a Mitzva is . The whole world saw how a Jew serves Hashem .The entire picture describes the power of a Jew - it's the mitzvot he does. The rabbi had the opportunity to see rav Moshe Feinstein zsl one Succot - after rav Moshe finished his Mitzva of the lulab and etrog - he lovingly kissed each of the four species . Says the rabbi can we imagine the power of that kiss - how it protected the world . When we pray and do mitzvot says the rabbi - this is our protection .

The rabbi explains a Sefet Emet on Perasha Noach -it starts out with a question - why didn't HASHEM just begin the Torah from from the time of Noach when he came out of the ark and continue from there - answers the sefet emet - because Noach only became who he became because he was able to over the challenges that he faced - his challenges started way before the flood . We have to know says the rabbi - we are who we are today only because of our challenges . Challenges and being able to over come them - are why we were put here in this earth .

The rabbi continued and explains that when Noach left the ark - he planted a vineyard and he then brought sacrifices to HASHEM . The pasook says that HASHEM smelled the sweet smell and from then he promised not to destroy the world in this way again . What was it about the " sweet smell " that accomplished this . It was the battle that Noach had with his evil inclination - the yeser hara - how he overcame the tests that were given to him . Each time we battle our yeser hara - we give off this sweet smell as well .

Noach placed the doors to the ark on the side - from there he was able to enter inside the teba . Says the rabbi we have to look for our own ark - where we can enter into - even if the entrance is on the side - use any way you can to gain entrance to serve Hashem .

HASHEM saw the rainbow in all of the most beautiful colors - the rainbow can only come from a day where it's very cloudy and not clear . This is for us to know - we can come out with flying colors only after a period of confusion .

Says the rabbi we each have a purpose in this world and we must accomplish what HASHEM put us here for . Sometimes the road is a difficult one -when we go off course - is where HASHEM pulls us back and puts us back on track .

The Kotzker rebbe tells us that Noach and his family didn't sleep - they worked non stop . The question is why then were there beds on the teba - to show Noach and his family the power of man and to show just how respected man really is - to show them that you are here for a purpose .

Just as Noach went into his teba - he had a purpose - we too must know that we each have our own arks that we must go into - and we must fulfill our purpose.

The sefer Eish kadosh tells us that each person is a captain over his ship - a captain must do everything possible to make sure his ship reaches its destination safely . When we face our challenges - and we have the attitude that I will give it my best - our ship will land safely .

Shabbat Shalom

Noach by Rabbi Enid Lader

<https://ajr.edu/teachings/divreitorah/>

Our Torah opens with an organized story of creation – a place for everything and everything in its place. Each step of the way, the natural world is tov – good. And when it is filled with living creatures and human beings, it is tov me’od – very good. As we end chapter one and begin the second chapter of Bereishit, all seems right with the world. But “very good” or even “good” does not sustain us.

We have inquiring minds, and left to our own devices, we will seek out our own answers, rather than follow specific directions. Yet, unless there is some kind of structure in place, something that helps guide us in making good (or even very good) decisions, where will our own answers lead us – and to what ends?

As our portion begins, we are introduced to Noah and find that “... The land was filled with violence...” (Gen. 6:11) The Hebrew word used for violence is hamas; this can be understood to be both a physical and an ethical violence. It has gotten so bad, that the Eternal announces to Noah that all flesh will be destroyed... “Go build an ark and start collecting two of each species... and bring your family with you...”

So where did we go wrong? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his essay “Noah: Beyond Nature,”* points to two differences between the Creation story of Genesis 1-2 and the story of Noah in Genesis 8-9. First, in Genesis 1 the word “good” is repeated seven times... and in Genesis 9 the word “covenant” is repeated seven times. And second, each account presents a different way of understanding what it means to be made betzelem Elohim – in the image of God. In Genesis 1:27 we read, “God created humankind in God’s own image; in the image of God, God created them, male and female God created them.” In Genesis 9:6 we read that “Whoever sheds the blood of a human being, by a human shall their blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made [the] human being.”

Rabbi Sacks points out that “...Genesis 1 tells me that ‘I’ am in the image of God. Genesis 9 tells me that ‘you,’ my potential victim, are made in the image of God. Genesis 1 tells us about human power. We are able, says Torah, to ‘rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air’ (Gen. 1:28). Genesis 9 tells us about the moral limits of power. We can kill, but we may not. We have the power, but not the permission.”

God had high hopes for us, but being made in the image of God, we are not a perfect copy. We make mistakes; we do have a sense of compassion and a yetzer hatov – an inclination to do good, but we also have a yetzer harah – an inclination that has the

power to send us in the wrong direction.

Noah's world had come to such an intense level of physical and ethical violence that the orderliness of Genesis 1 was upended and turned back to chaos. And that was not good.

By banning murder and instituting a system of justice, God set a sense of morality in place. Not just among the Jewish people. Noah's story precedes Abraham; Noah's story precedes standing at Sinai. This story is for all humanity. All of us are made in the image of God. All of us are worthy of life and living in peace and prosperity, not fear and poverty.

When God sets the bow – the rainbow – in the clouds, it will be a “sign of the everlasting covenant made between God and all living creatures, never again to bring waters over the earth to destroy all flesh.” (Gen. 9:15)

This is a universal covenant, made with all creatures. All creatures – the web of life that is our biosphere. Establishing a sense of what is morally and ethically right and wrong, God has given us a second chance – and helped us pivot from chaos back to an orderly world. Of course, now the responsibility is totally in our hands; not just in the hands of the few, but in the hands of all of us... and continues to this day. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Noah: Beyond Nature” in *Essays on Ethics: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (New Milford, CT and Jerusalem, Israel. Maggid Books, 2016), 11.

(Rabbi Enid C. Lader received ordination from AJR in 2010 and is the rabbi at Beth Israel – The West Temple in Cleveland, Ohio. She is the past-president of ARC (The Association of Rabbis and Cantors – the only joint rabbinical and cantorial professional organization in America), and is the treasurer of the Greater Cleveland Board of Rabbis.)

[Why Humdrum Cheshvan Is the Jewish Month We All Need Right Now by Stuart Halpern](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/humdrum-cheshvan-the-month-we-need-right-now)

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/humdrum-cheshvan-the-month-we-need-right-now>

No holidays. No special rituals. But it's the perfect chance to rediscover the divine possibility of the boring.

No one Instagrams taking down their sukkah. Polishing and prepping one's menorah seven-plus weeks before Hanukkah begins is not something even the most pious would venture to do. And so, here we are: The High Holidays are over, and the next festivity is months away. We're into Cheshvan now, the only month on the Hebrew calendar that contains absolutely no celebrations, commemorations, or special occasions. Cheshvan is ordinary, humdrum, boring. It's also precisely what we all need right now.

If you paid even marginal attention to the news cycle in 2020, you understand exactly why the Chinese consider “may you live in interesting times” to be the ultimate curse. A global plague, nationwide protests, a political process teetering on the verge of chaos, an economy in ruins—this year has already been plenty interesting, and a month with nothing additional out of the ordinary comes as a relief.

But Cheshvan isn't magical merely because it offers us a few days of blissful routine in

an otherwise hugely disruptive year. It's meaningful because it reminds us of the lesson we too often forget, namely that the path to peace, enlightenment, well-being, and all the other good things we seek requires mastering the mundane.

It's a difficult insight to digest, especially now that the memory of Tishrei's holidays is still fresh. Shouldn't religion be about that transcendent feeling we feel when it's just about sundown on Yom Kippur, and we're wearing white and affirming again and again our commitment to God? Shouldn't it be all festive and sweet, as it is when we say the blessings and bite into that honey-dipped apple on Rosh Hashanah?

The ancient rabbis who shaped so much of our tradition thought differently. Crack open the Talmud, for example, and you might think you'll be instantly blown away by sonnets of spiritual profundity and mystical paeans to the divine. Instead, there are mostly banal details. Lots of regular, unexciting, very unmagical specifics. Tractate Berachot, for instance, the Talmud's first book, begins not with an articulation of our tradition's most lyrical blessings and prayers, but with a discussion of the timing for reciting the evening Shema. Can you say it until midnight? How about until sunrise? And what exactly constitutes nightfall anyway—is it sunset or when three stars can be seen in the sky? One is more likely to come across details of where not to pray (say, a dangerous, broken-down building) than deep philosophical discussions of what the prayers actually mean.

Now, look: I'm a rabbi. I went to yeshiva. I spend large parts of my days carefully studying the Talmud. And yet, when one of my less-observant friends complains to me about the absolutely, positively, resolutely noninspiring nature of our sacred texts, I totally get it. Anyone looking for meaning in religion, especially if they're newish to the pursuit, would greatly appreciate a bit of pomp and a dab of circumstance, some indication that here be deep truths worth cherishing. Why, then, scare off seekers by making sure that your seminal text reads more like an insurance claims adjuster's manual than like a meditation on the divine?

In true Jewish fashion, let me answer this question with a story. Once upon a time, a few of our greatest rabbis were asked what, in their opinion, was the most important verse in the Bible. It's the sort of trivia stumper that our sages, obsessive compulsives as they so often were, relished, and they wasted no time diving right in. The Bible's top verse? No brainer, said Ben Zoma: It's the Shema, proclaiming the oneness of God and the Jewish people's undying fealty to Him. It's essentially the theological baseline for the entire enterprise. Rabbi Ben Nanas, on his end, nodded, and said that while the Shema was great and all, top honors must go to "Love your neighbor as yourself," that boldly benevolent mandate. Another ancient Jewish scholar, one Jesus of Nazareth, agreed with both, and, when asked the same question, ranked these very same verses as his No. 1 and No. 2 picks, respectively. But, according to the 15th-century talmudist Rav Ya'akov Ibn Chaviv in his introduction to his midrashic collection Ein Yaakov, the best answer was probably given by one Shimon ben Pazi.

The most important verse in the Bible, quoth ben Pazi, was this: "The first lamb you

shall sacrifice in the morning and the second lamb you shall sacrifice in the evening.” Really? How are we supposed to find any meaning in a verse that describes the order of sacrifice in the ancient Temple, a reality now millennia removed from our own? The answer is as simple as it is profound: Judaism, Ben Pazi realized, like all religions, has its theological innovations and its poetically packaged moral teachings. It has its moments of personal and communal elevations, its agonies and its ecstasies and all of the other real emotions you’d expect to feel when dealing with issues like good and bad and forgiveness and sin. But Judaism’s true uniqueness, the engine that has powered our people through an endless history alternately lachrymose and redemptive, is its everyday, consistent observance. After all, spiritual sublimity is an effervescent goal. You obtain it or you don’t. But Judaism is a system predicated on action and doing. It asks not for reaching transcendent mountaintops, but for repetitive, consistent mundanity. If, as G.K. Chesterton once put it, “the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate,” Judaism’s chariot is powered by dozens of daily practices.

Which brings us back to Cheshvan. If you’re feeling like things are sliding off the rails these days—and if you’re not, please call me and tell me your secret to serenity—Cheshvan offers you a crash course in Judaism’s truest wisdom. You don’t have to wear a kittel or fast for 25 hours or shake various foodstuffs in a particular order. All you have to do is pick one thing and do it, reminding yourself, as you go along, that the road to real redemption is traveled not in giant leaps that change your life overnight but in small, measured steps that remind us, again and again and again, that we have the power to impact change, but that we must also have the patience. Working out your soul isn’t so different from working out your abs or your quads or your gluts—it’s about sweating a bit each day.

And so, in its infinite wisdom, Judaism followed up the most ecstatic of all months with the most boring one, to give us the space we need to commit to our spiritual workout. What, then, can you do?

Maybe praying three times a day, or even once, is too much. Try the 15-second-long blessing every time you exit the bathroom (yes, that’s a thing, and it was once praised in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*). Maybe now’s the time to light Shabbat candles for this time, or put on tzitzit or tefillin for the first time in a while, with what used to be a morning commute to work rendered null. Maybe you summon the courage, and the sourdough starter, to bake your own challah every week. Whatever it is, make it a regular practice this Cheshvan. You’ll find your spiritual and moral muscles trained the same way you would work out your biceps and triceps. Sure, some of these rituals might strike you as the equivalent of leg day, and we all know how unexciting practice can be. But as we recover from a month of spiritual uplift and brace ourselves from a month (or more) of political and societal discontent, Cheshvan’s reminder to be regular is what we sorely need. Coming between the High Holidays’ pageantry and before Hanukkah’s, and America’s, attempt to define national ethos, it

grants us four weeks to just be joyful in the messy and mundane routine, and recognize the divine possibility of the boring.

Observing a pivotal era in our country's history, Alexis de Tocqueville observed: "In America, it is religion that leads to enlightenment; it is the observance of divine laws that guides man to freedom." This year, let us observe Cheshvan as it was always meant to be kept. No apples, ram's horns, bamboo roofing, or bumpy citrus required. All this month asks us to do is to commit to the rough, never-ending trod through the daily, non-headline-making sacrifices our faith asks us to make, granting us, as they do, glimmers of freedom.

(Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern is Senior Adviser to the Provost of Yeshiva University and Senior Program Officer of YU's Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought. He has 16 edited books including Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth and Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States. He is currently editing a volume on the reception history of the Scroll of Esther in America.)

Yahrtzeits

Mike Schatzberg remembers his father Joseph Schatzberg on Sunday October 25th (Cheshvan 7)

Blossom Primer remembers her sister Rhonda Rappaport on Tuesday October 27th (Cheshvan 9)

Linda Chandross remembers Robert's father Samuel J. Chandross on Wednesday October 28th (Cheshvan 10)

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her father Dr. Chester M. Vernon on Thursday October 29th (Cheshvan 11)

Blossom Primer remembers her father Jack Rappaport on Friday October 30th (Cheshvan 12)