

Parshat Noach  
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I see Parshat Noach as a subject in which my professional interests and my spiritual and intellectual interests intersect because it is my contention that Noach was the world's first transportation planner. And like me, Noach worked on emergency evacuation plans. I am not sure what type of storm is described in Bereshit 6 and 7, but I can tell you that I have been planning for coastal storms and hurricanes in New York City since the mid-1990s.

After all the theoretical planning, Superstorm Sandy hit New York City on October 29, 2012, with the preparations beginning just after we read Parshat Noach. I only realized after the storm that Noach provides a good lesson in emergency planning.

All planners require good information to do their work properly and Noach was particularly lucky in this regard. While most of the information I use comes from the US Army Corps of Engineers, Noach had inside knowledge from an extremely reliable source, who one could argue also happened to be the cause of the impending disaster. But God provided Noach this information in way that is not typical of transportation planning.

After a discussion of how evil most humans had become in the beginning of Chapter 6, God warns Noach and gives him detailed instructions how to build the Tevah, or ark, including the dimensions.

God told Noah to make “the length of the ark three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits.”

Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that God practically gave Noah a blue print for the ark:

*R. Johanan said that God instructed Noah to ‘set in precious stones and jewels, so that they may give thee light, bright as the noon.’ ...The ark had three stories. A Tanna taught: The bottom story was for the dung; the middle for the animals; and the top for man.*

As a transportation planner, I find the specifics of God’s instructions to Noah particularly interesting. Normally, we want to know more about how many people are being evacuated, vehicle capacity, mode share and the length of the trip before determining vehicle requirements. But I guess when God is your information source, planning methods are changed.

Interestingly, there is a tradition that Noah received at least some information long before the flood:

*For one hundred and twenty years Noah planted Cedar trees and cut them down. On being asked “Why are you doing this?” he replied, “The God of the Universe has informed me that God will bring a Flood into the world.”*

There is nothing like advanced planning. However, sources disagree on how long it took to build the ark. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer says that

construction lasted 52 years while Sefer HaYashar notes it only took 5 years.

One of the first things that every transportation planner needs to know is the number of bodies that will be transported. Luckily in verse 2 of the Chapter 7, God tells Noach to expect seven pairs of every clean animal and two pairs of every unclean animal. Genesis Rabbah tells us that humans and animals were separated by gender from the time they entered the ark.

I must admit I have little experience in transporting animals. But with humans, I know how much space to allow for each person to comfortably travel on bus or subway train. Not only does the size of the animals vary, but given their different personalities and needs, I would not know how to develop what in the business we call loading guidelines for this situation. However, as I mentioned earlier, since Noach was told how big to build the ark, he did not need to worry about capacity calculations.

Noach also had other planning issues that I do not normally focus on: provisions, specifically food for the animals. There are several wonderful midrashim about the animals.

It is said that during the 12 months that Noach was in the ark neither he nor his family tasted sleep because they were responsible for feeding the animals.

R. Yochanan said that once when Noach was late in feeding the lion, the lion bit him, causing him to limp.

R. Chana ben Bizna described Noach's son Shem recalling a conversation between Noach and the phoenix on how Noach was so busy feeding the other animals and noticed the phoenix lying on the hold of the ark. Noach asked "Do you not require food?" The phoenix responded, "I saw that you were busy, so I will not trouble you. May it be God's will that you should never perish."

Speaking of Noach's family, this brings me to another important point: To develop and implement any emergency plan, you need support. Noach had his three sons, Shem, Ham and Yaphet as well as his wife who all helped with feeding the animals. But it is interesting that his wife, Na'amah is never mentioned by name in this parasha. The only time her name is mentioned in the Torah, in Genesis 4:22 where it is noted that she was a descendant of Cain.

Sources disagree about Na'amah: Nachmanides said that her anonymity may be attributable to her lack of individual merit. Midrash HaGadol said that Na'amah was the most beautiful woman in the world, so much so that she caused the ministering angels to fall prey to her loveliness for they thought she was one of them. Other midrashim claim she worshipped idols, she beat on a drum and drew people to engage in idolatry, or that she may have even been a seducer of men and demons. I find all this curious, but I will not

speculate about the motives of the men who developed these traditions.

I prefer a modern midrash in the lovely children's book *Naamah, Noah's Wife* by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso which describes how while Noach was making sure that every species was represented on the ark, Na'amah was collecting samples of every seed and bulb to ensure continuity of the flora after the flood. (I should point out that this book was first brought to my attention by one of the nuns at Providence House where I volunteered with the children for over seven years.)

One of the things I love about Rabbi Sasso's midrash is how well it ties into some of the other interpretations of Parashat Noach which focus on the theme of environmental responsibility. Noach and Na'ama took care to ensure that after the flood, the environment would be restored, working as a team that understood the connection of flora and fauna.

After Hurricane Sandy, New York City is faced with a dilemma similar to that which New Orleans faced after Hurricane Katrina: Are there some places which should not be rebuilt? I remember visiting New Orleans not that long after Katrina and the locals thought that this was an inappropriate question and were offended by it. As is often the case, our tradition provides a good insight on how to handle the situation.

In the Mishnah Baba Batra, we are provided with some specifics on how to place improvements on our property so there will be no damage to the neighbor's property. This concept can be easily extended to the environment in general.

We now know that building too close to the water reduces nature's ability to respond to flooding. Thus, some waterfront dream homes could be endangering larger parts of the community.

There have been some efforts to buy out homeowners who lived in extremely vulnerable locations, but it is basically a voluntary program. I certainly sympathize with the people who have lost everything and just want to get things to return to the way it was before the storm. Yet, with climate change the vulnerability of these locations has increased and unless an entire area is left unbuilt, there is not much benefit to the environment.

I hope that our society can find a way to balance individual rights with the pressing need to protect and rebuild our environment. I pray that we can do so before it is too late.

Shabbat Shalom