Finding Something New

Parashat Noach

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How does one find something new to say about one of the most-discussed and most-analyzed episodes in the Torah—really, in the whole of human literature? And not just new, but interesting? As Kohelet famously says, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). But are we really asking the wrong question? Why does everything have to be "new"? What difference does it make if something is new or not? Or are we simply addicted to novelty?

These questions, surprisingly, have implications for the story of Noach and the Deluge itself. The Flood is God's opportunity to wipe out the world and start over from scratch—to delete and replace. What does God do? God wipes out all humanity, except Noach and his family, and all animals, except the ones in the ark. (And except for fish, which seem to survive the erasing and repopulation of life on earth; see b. *Zevachim* 113b.) So there are a lot of "excepts" qualifying "God destroyed everything and started over".

But God doesn't really start the world over again from scratch. The animals after the Flood are the same animals, descendants of those brought onto the ark, and not newly created ones. Neither does God recreate humanity: the humans who repopulate the earth are likewise descendants of the original humans, and not newly created ones. And strikingly, God's own view of humanity before and after the Flood appears unchanged also. Before the Flood, God sees "how every inclination of the human heart is solely wicked, all day long" (Gen. 6:5), and after the Flood, God's divine diagnosis of humanity doesn't change: "for the inclination of the human heart is wicked from its youth" (Gen. 8:21). In many ways, the post-Deluge world is exactly the same as the pre-Deluge one.

And yet, the post-Flood world is not exactly unchanged, either: what's different about it isn't the presence of evil or wickedness in the world, but God's response to it. God sees the same human heart both before and after the Flood, with the difference that after the Flood, God decides not to destroy, and cites the very same diagnosis as the reason. What follows is the covenant with Noach and the establishment of the rainbow as its symbol. God chooses *relationship*, expressed through covenant, as the vehicle for this change.

The text does gesture toward re-creation: the waters recede, dry land appears, and God repeats the blessing of Genesis 1 to Noach—"be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1)—almost as if Noach were a new Adam. But what's restored is the setting, not the

cast. God doesn't re-create the world: God renews it, and renewal doesn't necessarily mean material changes, but attitudinal ones. The Torah's literary irony is that when God initially resolves to destroy humanity, God grieves *el libo*, "to His heart" (Gen. 6:6), and then after the Flood, when God reflects on how humanity's heart is unchanged, God is again speaking *el libo*, "to His heart" (Gen. 8:21). What changed wasn't humanity's heart—it was God's.

The temptation to delete and replace is one that we recognize all too well. Planned obsolescence, "new and improved", and our endless algorithmic feeds all run on the same logic: discard, replace, repeat. "Fast fashion" and electronics built to break in two years are the business model of a society that prizes the fresh over the durable, where new things of limited lifespans are easier to procure than less flashy things that are more permanent. Kohelet understood the root of it long ago: "The eye is never satisfied with seeing," he says (Eccl. 1:8). Newness is the package in which the market wraps up trash and sells it back to us.

Kohelet is right to say that "there is nothing new under the sun". But it's the same sun that rises every morning, despite apparently disappearing and reappearing every day. Instead of calling that repetition, our liturgy calls it renewal. The first *beracha* recited before the daily *Sh'ma* as part of the morning service thanks God for the perpetual cycle of day and night, and describes God as continually renewing creation:

> הַמֵּאִיר לָאָרֶץ וְלַדָּרִים עָלֶיהָ בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְטוּבוֹ מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל־יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית:
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> God illumines the land and the inhabitants thereon in mercy, and through God's goodness continually renews, each day, the work of creation. (my translation)

Our *parasha* expresses God's change of heart in the language of the cycles of nature. Having pledged never again to doom the earth, God promises:

> עֹד כָּל־יְמֵי הָאָרֶץ זֶרַע וְקָצִיר וְקֹר וָחֹם וְקַיִץ וָחֹרֶף וְיוֹם וָלָיְלָה לֹא יִשְׁבֹּתוּ:
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> So long as the earth endures, Seedtime and harvest, Cold and heat, Summer and winter, Day and night Shall not cease. (Gen. 8:22, NJPS translation)

Last week I discussed how the text of Genesis 1 encourages us to become partners with God in creation. Parashat Noach continues the partnership: if God renews creation every day, our part as humans is to renew our relationship with creation, and for us Jews, with the Torah itself. The midrash picks up on the verse in the *Ve-ahav'ta*, "let these words which I command you this day be upon your heart" (Deut. 6:6), that the words "this day" seem strange: after all, the Torah wasn't revealed over one day. It says:

> אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם – שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיוּ בְעֵינֶיךָ כְּדִיּוֹטַגְמָא יְשָׁנָה, שֶׁאֵין אָדָם סוֹפְנָהּ, אֶלָּא כְּדִיּוֹטַגְמָא חֲדָשָׁה שֶׁהַכֹּל רָצִים לִקְרוֹתָהּ.
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> "Which I command you this day" — that they not become like an antiquated imperial decree, which nobody takes seriously, but rather like a new decree, which everyone rushes to read. (*Sifrei Devarim* 33, my translation)

The midrash is saying that the words should *feel* like a new decree, not that they *are* a new decree. Unlike with fast fashion or cheap electronics, in which newness is about ease, disposability, and alienation, here, newness is about how we receive the Torah. The market

sells you newness and makes you want to replace; the Torah challenges us to renew ourselves within it.

God faces the same world, the same human race, after the Deluge, and answers the moment with a new commitment. We face the same choice: to discard and replace, or to meet the moment with renewed attention. Novelty cannot substitute for relationship. And as for finding something new in Parashat Noach itself—just as the world is the same after the Flood, but God's attitude is different, so too is the text the same every time we come to it. What can be new is how we arrive.