

Shabbat Noah 5786

October 25, 2025

B'nei Mitzvah of Max and Sam Moss

Max, you want us to consider whether there was a grave injustice at the center of our parasha. How could it be right for G-d to wipe out all life on earth? Given that Noah and his family were judged innocent enough to live, wasn't there a high likelihood that some other human beings on earth also did not merit the death penalty? What if G-d was so focused on punishment that G-d swept away innocent lives along with the guilty? You suggest that the framework of restorative justice might have been more useful, with its emphasis on repairing harm. You feel that G-d – and we – should not judge an entire population by the acts of a few. We should not engage in collective punishment, but should follow the principles of Mishna Sanhedrin and value every single life with great care.

Sam, you came from almost the opposite angle, worried less that G-d was too punishing and more that G-d was being too lenient. You asked whether the covenant of the rainbow, by which G-d promised never again to destroy life on earth, gave humanity a free pass to continue to be evil and destructive. And you are particularly concerned about how we treat the earth, about our rapidly changing climate and the destruction of our ecosystem. However, by studying the commentaries with Rabbi Traylor, you learned that the rainbow was not at all a free pass. Rather, the rainbow represented a covenant that centered on human responsibility. As you put it, "The rainbow God placed in the sky was not just a sign of survival but a reminder to us to do better and make good choices."

I want to take these two ideas – that we should value every single life with care and that we should take responsibility for our choices – and look at some of the midrashim about what happened inside the ark. Between the onset of the flood that you were talking about, Max, and the rainbow that you were talking about, Sam, imagine what we would be feeling if we were Noah and his family. The whole world is being destroyed. The earth is filled with turbulent waters. And you are on a gigantic boat full of wild animals. Would you feel despair, would you be afraid? What would you do?

The Rabbis teach that despite the fearsome conditions, Noah and his family spent that year taking care of every single living thing according to its particular needs. This required paying attention to each diverse species – listening, if you will, for what each kind of animal needed to eat and when they needed to eat it. Genesis Rabba says that Noah brought different food for the elephant and for the deer and for the ostriches. Tanchuma adds that he fed each animal when it wanted to eat, at different hours throughout the night, so that he never slept. The Talmud imagines Noah's son Shem relating that he and his father were very troubled that they could not figure out what to feed the chameleon, until they observed it eating a worm, so then they went to great lengths to get worms for the chameleon. Imagine if we gave this level of attention to the diversity of species on our planet, and what that would mean for how we treat the environment. And imagine if we listened this closely to people we don't understand. As you might imagine, it wasn't easy, because some of these animals were ferocious. Midrash Tanhuma tells us that one time Noah was late feeding the lion and the lion bit him so badly that when the flood was over Noah emerged from the ark limping.

Now that we've explored what Noah and his family did, let's consider what Noah and his family did *not* do. Even though the conditions were stressful, even though they must have been afraid, they did not turn against one another, probably because it wouldn't have been safe. Even if they disagreed, even if they had different strategies or priorities or approaches, they must have known that they needed to work together, they needed all hands on deck to be safe, to stay strong, to make it together to dry land.

We are not on a boat full of wild animals, thank G-d, but we are traversing turbulent waters. President Trump just literally took a wrecking ball to the White House, an unfortunately apt metaphor for his approach to the pillars of our democracy. The Congress is shut down. Federal agents stormed lower Manhattan and arrested immigrants along with citizens this week. And many Jewish people are filled with fear about the New York City mayoral election – some have fear about antisemitism, some have fear about the weaponization of antisemitism, and some have fear about both.

The question is: what do we do? How ought we respond to these times? What would it look like to live by the teachings of Torah? And what would it look like to lead?

Here's how the Jews of Park Slope are navigating it. We know that we have a big range of perspectives about this moment. Rather than divide the community, or turn one group against another, or avoid the difficult conversation, we decided to try to listen to one another across our diversity. We have all experienced a great deal of antisemitism in the last several years, and many of us have strong feelings about that. This is a progressive Zionist congregation, and many of us have strong feelings about that. But when people here see the world differently from one another, we try to have the courage to speak to each other, we try to have the courage to listen to each other. We know that we don't have to agree to belong. We always strive to stretch our tent wide enough to include everyone.

So when, in September, we held a listening circle for our members to talk about the mayoral election, people came with strong and diverse feelings about the candidates. People spoke with intensity, and people listened. And at the end of our time, we asked what CBE could do to help. Our members said they wished they could share their deep concerns directly with the candidates and ask them questions. And amazingly it turned out that all three of the leading candidates were willing to come to CBE. Zohran Mamdani and Curtis Sliwa came in the last two weeks, and Andrew Cuomo will be here on Tuesday.

Of course, as a religious institution, we would never endorse a candidate for public office. We hope that it will one day again very clearly be against the law to do so, and in the meantime we do not believe it is our place to tell our members – or anyone else – how to vote. But we do very much believe in dialogue. And we do very much believe in coming together across our differences to learn.

These Town Halls have been phenomenal. More than 500 of our members are participating, and they have written more than one hundred questions for the candidates. These questions capture and fully communicate the hopes and fears, concerns and needs of the Jewish people. They have been difficult questions, serious questions, and questions asking for accountability. And even with all of our members' strong and diverse feelings, the Town Halls have been respectful, thoughtful, disciplined, and highly educational. Our members, across the political

spectrum, no matter what they think of the candidates, have emerged from these Town Halls beaming, immensely proud of CBE. I can't tell you how many people have expressed their soaring gratitude for and pride in our congregation.

A great deal has been said publicly about our Town Hall with Zohran Mamdani (some of it unfortunately taken out of context and misrepresented), but nothing was reported about our Town Hall with Curtis Sliwa. CBE hosted a Republican candidate for mayor and no one said a thing! If you missed it, you missed out. Curtis Sliwa said things that no one expected and surprised many people in the room. Let me be crystal clear: I am not endorsing a candidate by telling you about this meeting. I am saying that these Town Halls are allowing us to challenge our assumptions and to learn. I am saying that this moment, when our country is so divided, calls for coming together across our differences. I am saying that this moment, when so many people are shouting, calls for listening.

Just like it would have been unsafe for Noah and his family to start fighting with one another and turning against each other on that ark, it's dangerous for us too. We are a tiny population afloat on raging seas, and we need each other. Just like the residents of the ark, we are, at the end of the day, a family. We are connected by a deeper and higher love that requires us to try to understand each other with the benefit of the doubt and see each other in as clear a light as we can.

We are not on a big boat full of wild animals, but many people *are* despairing and many people *are* afraid. We know that despair and fear interfere with the human capacity for wisdom. Leadership in this moment, living by Torah in this moment, means creating the best possible conditions for wisdom. Which means not encouraging fear or despair. It means doing exactly as you urge us to do, Max and Sam. It means not judging people collectively but instead listening to everyone in their diversity. And it means taking responsibility to make good choices and always striving to do better.

Every weekday we say in the Amidah,

אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת וּמְלִמָּד לְאִנוּשׁ בִּינָה: חַנּוּן מֵאַתָּה דַּעַת בִּינָה וְהַשְׁכֵּל: בְּרוּךְ
אַתָּה יְהוָה חוֹנֵן הַדַּעַת

You graciously give human beings the capacity for wisdom and teach mortals understanding. Grant us wisdom, understanding and discernment. Blessed are You, Adonai, who graces us with wisdom.

May we be discerning. May we be understanding. May we be wise.

Shabbat Shalom.