

The Myth of Grandfather's Laundromat – Parashat Noah

A number of years ago, a third-generation Chinese American named Paisley Rekdal shared a story in the *New York Times* about her immigrant grandparents who had moved to Seattle in the early 1940's – her grandma working in a sewing factory and her grandpa driving a taxi, all while trying to support four young children. Then came World War II, and with it the deportation of Japanese Americans to internment camps, and suddenly Rekdal's grandfather was presented with an extraordinary opportunity. A neighbor from down the block, someone he didn't even really know, a Mr. Yanagiwa, she thinks, or perhaps it was Mr. Yamamoto, offered to sell Rekdal's grandfather his Laundromat. The purchase price was just one dollar on condition that the business be returned upon the gentleman's eventual release; all profits earned in the meantime were her grandfather's to keep. Rekdal writes, "[This man's] trust can be based on little more than the appearance of honesty radiating from my grandfather's small, bright eyes. This fact, and the fact that my grandfather did give back the Laundromat (flourishing, and with a second laundry downtown, created from its profits) for the same price that he'd been offered it, is what makes the story one of my family's best anecdotes."¹

But it doesn't end there! Many years later after her losing her mother – the one who had passed down this piece of family lore with such love over the ages - Rekdal called her grandmother to find out the name of the Japanese neighbor. "What Japanese neighbor?" her grandmother asked. "The one who sold Grandpa the Laundromat for a dollar." Rekdal came to learn that there never was a Japanese neighbor; her grandfather, sick of driving taxis, simply bought a Laundromat one day and turned it into a thriving business. Why her mother invented such a tale no one will ever know! Still, Rekdal writes, "If I have children I will tell them my mother's story about my grandfather's Laundromat. I understand I will

¹ <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20000716mag-lives-rekdal.html>

be telling them what my mother was like, what she thought her father was like, what I am like for wanting to believe it. I will be laying out certain tropes of the Asian-American experience.”²

Rekdal says that to this day, her grandmother bristles whenever she hears the Laundromat story insisting that it just never happened; the whole thing is entirely made up. She can’t understand why her family won’t listen, why they insist on passing down a tall tale that’s based on a lie. Rekdal closes her essay with these final words: “She doesn’t understand how, in cases like this, it’s not always the truth that matters.”

“*Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim v’et haaretz* – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Last week, at long last, we began all over again - with the majestic story of the universe coming into being, the sweeping narrative of our world’s earliest humans, the grand themes of right and wrong, good and evil, free will and its consequences played out on an epic scale. This morning we turn our attention to Noah, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel as we explore human fallibility, resilience, and how the people of our planet come to be so geographically diverse and multi-lingual. These first two weeks present a dizzying explosion of human civilization, as we move from the first man and woman to entire populations with their own particular languages, tools, and culture. We see a whole world and everything in it brought to life!

Along with the incredible power and beauty of these opening *parshiot* of Tanach, however, there are so many questions. If Adam and Eve had only sons, where did the rest of their line come from? Can snakes really talk? Doesn’t 969 years (the period of longevity attributed to Noah’s grand-father, Metusaleh)

² Ibid.

seem like an awfully long time for someone to live? And speaking of Noah, how did all those animals fit onto the ark anyway? The smell alone must have been horrific!

To these relatively trivial questions, we could also heap on other more significant ones. Even if we take each of the six days of Creation not as a period of 24-hours but perhaps something more, how well does this notion of the universe's origins jive with predominant scientific theories like the Big Bang and evolution? What happened to the dinosaurs in God's recounting of our world's birth? Is there any real evidence that seemingly miraculous events like surviving a giant flood or building a tower to the heavens actually took place? How do we know that these beloved, foundational stories of ours are actually true?

The brilliant Jewish thinker and former chief rabbi of Britain, Lord Jonathan Sacks (z"l), helps frame a response to these queries when he argues that in order to understand a book, even a book such as the Torah, a person first needs to know of which genre it is a part and what kinds of questions it seeks to answer. He explains that history books, in general, answer questions of chronology – “What happened?” whereas cosmological books tend to provide scientific explanations for various phenomena – “How did it happen?” Neither of these, says Sacks, is what the Hebrew Bible is really after.

Sacks writes, “If we seek to understand the Torah, we must read it as *Torah* – as law, instruction, teaching, guidance. Torah is an answer to the question: *how shall we live*...Everything it contains – not only mitzvot [commandments] but narratives, including the narrative of creation itself – is there solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction...Torah moves from the minutest details to the most majestic visions of the universe and our place within it. But it never deviates from intense focus on the

questions: What should one do? How should one live? What kind of person should one strive to become?”³

Much like Rekdal, Sacks is arguing that it's not always the truth that matters; or perhaps, more accurately, that it's Truth with a capital T that is most essential – the commitments and values that a story conveys more than the veracity of whether it actually happened in a certain way or not. I, for one, cannot be certain that a man named Noah lived with his family and hundreds of animals on an ark, battling floodwaters until a dove's olive branch assured him that everything had once again become safe. But the idea that God should come to understand that human life is immeasurably precious, even in its imperfection, and that it should never be capriciously destroyed? Well, that is a truth that I can believe in!

When I read a passage of Torah, the questions that interest me most are not “Did this really happen?” or “How could this possibly be?” Rather, I'm curious as to why the authors of Tradition – whether we believe them to be Divine or human – thought these particular stories worthy of becoming the grand narratives of our people. Just like Rekdal sought to excavate the meaning her mother wished to impart in the myth of her grandfather's Laundromat, I am fascinated by what these stories have to teach us – about our place in the universe, how we should relate to other people, the presence of God and where it might be found, and how we should best utilize the short time we have upon this earth. In the stories of Creation I see no lack of fit with modern science for while the latter seeks to explain how the expansion of space might allow for the formation of subatomic particles, the former seeks to demonstrate how a benevolent and intentional Creator formed the universe in order that human beings might care for one another and the world around them. In the narrative of the Flood, I see no glaring

³ Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation, p. 16.

implausibility but rather a lesson about God's gradual realization that accepting human error as a necessary part of life is ultimately the only way, even as we should always try to sublimate wrong-doing and sin. And I'm not really sure with whom Cain bore his subsequent children, but I'm pretty certain that his story is there to teach us of the dangers of jealousy, competition, and sibling rivalry. Sometimes, it's just not the truth that matters.

"What should one do? How should one live? What kind of person should one strive to become?" While we will not formally enter the territory of law and commandments until well into the *Sefer Shemot* (the Book of Exodus), the incredible stories we encounter here in *Bereshit* have so much to teach us about ethical and spiritual living. By watching how Tradition conveys how the world comes into being, how the first families love and fight, make mistakes and turn towards forgiveness, by watching the relationship between the patriarchs and matriarchs and their God, the trials and blessings of their faith, we are exposed to so much wisdom. Witnessing the blunders of our forebears help us to prevent similar missteps of our own and following their example gives us models to emulate. Whether or not such people actually walked the earth, their legacy is an enduring one.

And so we begin again – rolling back the scroll to these first breathtaking *parshiot*, tradition's earliest meditation on the existential questions of life. It's not always the truth that matters. A great story can sometimes do even better.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Annie Tucker