

# Living in Tough Times

Parasha Noach 5779

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This morning feels more serious than usual, and for obvious reason. As most everyone, if not all, people here are aware, this past Thursday night just a few blocks from here a shooting occurred on Second Street in which two men were killed. Many of us live even closer to where the shooting happened, with a number of families in the shul living just a block or two away.

As I was coming home from shul that night, driving down Second Street, I suddenly saw police cars everywhere. I knew something serious had happened and my first reaction was to call one of our families from the shul who lives right there to be sure they were ok. Thank God, they were all okay, but shook from what had happened outside their door. It's agonizing waiting for news and it takes hours for the police to release any details, even in our world of instant communication, but hours later when the details were released the police assured us that other than the two men who had been killed, everyone was safe and the situation was "contained," as the police called it.

Yesterday, the day after that, they released more information about what had happened, and it's horrifying. A man named Daniel Finkel, 29 years old, and his girlfriend lived on Second Street, next to some of our own congregants, and Finkel had been charged that day with assaulting his girlfriend. He came home to find a 38 year old man named Jeremy Cadwallader helping his girlfriend move out. From PennLive's description of what happened: "Police said Finkel had confronted the two, saying that they were all going to die. The woman ran. Finkel shot Cadwallader, who was on a porch, multiple times, then went to the sidewalk where he shot himself, police said."

There's so much tragedy in this story and the senseless loss of two lives. It's not clear to me who Cadwallader is, and he was probably a wonderful person, and his loss is a tragedy. We do know he died helping a woman try to get out of an abusive domestic situation. For an event like this to happen so much has to go wrong, so many societal safeguards have to fail. In a situation like this a violent, and likely mentally ill, person was walking around our streets and we needed a better way to help those involved. We needed institutions to help and house victims of domestic abuse and to protect them, we needed better help for mental illness, we needed better procedures to keep people safe. This story reminds us of a part of the world we often prefer not to think about but must take seriously.

But more than other stories having something like this happen in such close proximity is even more horrifying. We are used to hearing stories like this happen in "other places," "faraway." But for something like this to happen just a block or two from our homes is unusual and gives us pause. As I was walking here this morning down Second Street, and of course, I'm thinking about what happened and I see there's a vigil outside the house, a few candles were burning despite the drizzling. It's a scene you see on the news, but don't expect to see a block from your house on a block you walk down all the time.

One of the problems of our politics is the disconnectedness we feel to the issues discussed. Having something

like this close to home reminds us that so many of the issues we hear about on the news with guns and violence and killings, are real issues we have to think about as a society, not news stories to rile people up. Issues surrounding guns, which are so prominent in contemporary politics, are not just there to create drama, they are real issues and having it close to home reminds of that.

And something else we are reminded of is those who are less fortunate than us. On Thursday night in the middle of the night we heard a sound, and Yamit and I both bolted up. After casing the house, it turned out to have just been a door blown shut by the wind, but we were on edge. We are not used to these things happening and when they do they frighten us. But many people live in areas which are crime ridden and war torn, for them gunshots and violence might be daily events. Children grown up in areas where they have to always wonder when the next gun shot might come. A horrific shooting in our neighborhood gives us a small sense of what it feels like for them to live in that situation.

We are not used to these things happening in our neighborhood. I walk down that street so many times and never once think about a gun fight in the street. But how many people do have to worry about gunfights in their neighborhood. How many kids grow up with shootings seared in their memories? And the trauma of war and gang violence all around them? And so we're reminded when these things come close to us what it is like to experience this even occasionally.

Our parasha addresses this incident in two ways. One is a clear command against murder. In the wake of allowing people to eat animals, God reminds them that human life is sacrosanct:

שֶׁפָּרַח אֶת דַּם הָאָדָם מִדַּם הַבְּהֵמָה כִּי בְצִלְמֵי אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם

Whoever sheds the blood of man through man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God He made man.(9:6)

But the other time our parasha addresses this theme is its discussion of the breakdown of society, and this brings us to the fascinating figure of Noah. The first few societies in Genesis all breakdown, until a few great individuals, like Noah and Avraham, begin to turn the tide and create better societies.

Noah is an outstanding personality and unfortunately because he is primarily discussed in only one parasha we don't get enough time to speak about him. Unlike other figures in Genesis who we spend many weeks with, with Noah we don't have the same amount of time. But in our tradition he is a real paradox. He alone, in a sinful world, with no other righteous people, remains righteous. Just imagine being the only righteous person, in the face of evil, with no support system or community. And our Sages recognize what an accomplishment this was to be good in such bleak times. But surprisingly our Sages also criticize Noah and this is unexpected. They criticize him for not having been proactive in bringing the people of his generation closer to God, like Abraham. They blame him on some level for the punishment which befalls his contemporaries.

What was he supposed to do?! How can someone be expected to change people who are all degenerated? One aspect of this criticism lies in the origins of Noah's name, which is itself the source of much confusion. The Torah describes his name as such:

וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ כִּי לָאֵם לָאֵם הָיָה וַיִּנְחַם-בָּנוּ מִמְּעֹשֵׂי-יָדָיו וּמִמַּעֲבָבֵינוּ וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ מִן-הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶרְבְּרָה יְהוָה

And he named him Noah, saying, "This one will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands from the ground, which the Lord has cursed." (5:29)

Well the commentators debate what this word נִיחַם which is the root of Noah's name means. Some follow the simple meaning - he will comfort us. But Rashi questions this reading, arguing than Noah should have been named Menachem, which means comfort. Instead, Rashi translates נִיחַם as a reference to providing respite from their toil. Noah, according to Rashi, was the founder of farming. It was he who developed the idea to plow

soil using machinery, instead of people's hands, which was what they did before him. He revolutionized the field of agriculture, and thereby brought about some respite from the curse of Adam, that people would live by the "sweat of their brow." Now people could enjoy a but more peace and have their machinery do some of the work for them.

So Noach was one of the greatest entrepreneurs in history, on par with the fellow who invented sliced bread or the wheel, it was he who first saw the opportunities in farming and noticed the potential for soil. This then is the criticism of Noach: someone who could see so much potential in what lay beneath the soil, should have been able to see potential in his fellow human beings. It was wrong that Noach thought soil could be turned over and bring out the best in it, but people couldn't be. And so Noach is criticized; someone of his ability should have devoted more of his abilities to the betterment of society.

This is something for us to keep in mind. We have talents and abilities which we devote to creating projects and careers and things, but the best use is always to help people be better, to help others and ourselves, to help our communities and societies to grow. If we are using all our creativity and energy to grow things, while ignoring people, we have to reassess our priorities.