

Sermon Parashat Noah 5767

“If God can remake the world,
then you can rebuild your family.”
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

Right now at the Franklyn Institute there is a wonderful exhibit on Charles Darwin. The exhibit points out that in June 1831, the H.M.S. Beagle set sail on a 4-year surveying mission from England under Commander Robert Fitz Roy. Charles Darwin was on that ship.

It was on his journey to the Galapagos Islands that Darwin developed his theory of natural selection and natural evolution from his observations of the varied species. However, the most remarkable fact of all is he kept these theories secret for 21 years. Some suggest he kept the ideas to himself because he was a deeply religious man, at one time thinking he would enter the clergy, and because his theory ran in such opposition to fundamental ideas he himself held to be sacred, he couldn't express these ideas to others.

The second theory of why he kept this information to himself was not because it would destroy his own theology and philosophy, but because he feared for his own safety and security. In a world dominated by religious belief, his seemingly heretical ideas would have put him in danger. Either way, he kept his ideas to himself. Either way he didn't advance his ideas because he was afraid – he was afraid of his own outlook on life crumbling. He was afraid the world as he grew up to understand would crumble. He was afraid all of the structures that kept all of the pieces in his life in place would fall apart. Or he feared for his life.

If he *said* what he really thought, if he *acted* on what he really believed, then he could have become the object of rage and put himself in a place of great personal danger. He kept quiet. He kept his ideas to himself and he held his belief behind the closed doors of his own home. Fear and rage enslave, they entrap and they imprison. Fear and rage born of religious conviction - paralyzes. That is why Jewish women in violent relationships tend to remain in those relationships 7 years longer than their non-Jewish equivalents. The problem of domestic violence in general terms is scary – in the Jewish community it is also embarrassing. A Jewish woman with pressures of her community and fear of being ostracized, will live in unbearable conditions far longer than others. The Jewish woman raised with the ideals of family as seen only through the eyes of the traditional structure, will be unable to disrupt it, even if her life is unbearable. The pressure to remain often outweighs the ability to move on. Fear and rage enslave, they entrap and they imprison. Fear and rage born of religious conviction, long held beliefs about self in this world - paralyzes.

If Murray Straus, Richard J. Gelles, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz are correct, in the time it takes to deliver this sermon, 72 people will be abused in some manner. That 72 will represent all ages, all races, all socioeconomic measurements. Roughly one in four people in this room are victims of domestic violence. In their book, “*Behind Closed*

Doors: Violence in the American Family, they explain what goes on in our homes and in the not so quiet families in our country. There is so much anger, so much hatred foisted on one another. Some relationships that begin with a twinkle in the eye, a kindness, a love divine turn ugly and filled with hatred.

That is the message of this week's reading. You can start over and you can begin again. If God can cause complete destruction of this world and start over again, so can you. God says there is something good in this the human project - it is Noah. The rest of the world is broken.

I am bothered by the idea that a family in which divorce takes place is called a broken home. The truth is the divorce is not the break. The break occurs much earlier and most of the time, once the separation takes place, there is healing and the break can begin to mend. A home filled with anger, hatred and tension is broken and deciding to relieve some of that negativity is an act of healing. Not every family is restructured because of violence, but when there is violence and a new structure is put in place there can be real healing.

The story of Noah and the flood offers us the best insight as to how to do this. God says, take your most precious possessions and place them in the safety of a secure environment. While the floodwaters rise hold on to them. So many times when I am speaking with people who have gotten divorced, I ask, "Do you wish you never married so and so?" If they have children then their answer is always, and without exception, the same. No, I now have the greatest gift in the world, I have my daughters, I have my son, I have my children. It was worth it. Noah tells his kids to get on board. Noah takes his prize possessions onto the ark.

This week's reading starts out innocently, remaking Noah who was a righteous man. Soon the narrative turns to a phrase so easily identified in our own lives. *Va'timaleh Ha'aretz Hamas*, the world was filled with hatred.

I can imagine the built up frustration and anxiety as the hatred grew. We are already told the story well into the narrative. By the time we are let in on the action, the world is filled with *hamas*, evil and hostility. I can't imagine that one night when everything was fine the world went to sleep, and then the next morning they woke to violence that pervaded every corner of the earth. No, that's not how it works. It starts with a gesture, an angry word, and then, when not held in check, turns from a gesture to a blow, from a sarcastic comment to a crushing emotional character assassination. That is why the Or Hahayim says, *l'hodiu she'achar she'higiu lageder zeh -od hosifu*. The evil arrived at a certain level and then it went one step further. When our homes become filled with abhorrence we must make a change. There is a point at which violence can no longer be tolerated, no longer endured. In a world filled with such hatred God says, "I can't live like this any more."

That is the story of Noah and the flood - and that is the story of some of our families. The time comes when violence can no longer be tolerated, no longer endured. That is when the victim must leave and that is when the victim must become empowered. That is when a new world must be created. The most dramatic symbol in the Bible is the rainbow - it tells us "never again." The rainbow reminds us of the holy relationship we have with God. A relationship that values us as innately sacred and therefore, we should never be abused. It's not our fault. It's not your fault. Every person is holy And THEY MUST NEVER THINK THEY BROUGHT IT ON THEMSELVES. The rainbow says, "no more."

The covenant is then made and sealed with a rainbow. You do no more violence and God will no longer wipe out the world. The rainbow is produced as the light is reflected through the tears cried for the life that is no longer. When the world is wiped clean, there is a loss. There is grief over a past now gone, no matter how bad that life was. When the sunlight appears it is refracted through that prism and we all must acknowledge the necessary loss. A new life is better. A fresh start is required but it does come at a cost and there must be room for grieving. It is not all fine and good. That is true of our homes when we must restore them. That is true of our lives when we must rebuild them.

It can all start beautifully and it can sometimes turn sour. However, there is a remedy and there are people prepared to help. All over this area agencies and shelters exist. There are people trained to help both in those locations and in ours. We are here for you. Today we have the Noahs of our generation, righteous people ready to help you build a new life on the banks of the shores of a new world. This month our congregation will engage this issue providing real and concrete solutions for victims and for those who wish to help. A single sermon will make little difference but spreading the word can and will save lives.

We know that the most dangerous time begins when a person decides to leave their abuser. Fatalities occur at alarming rates. This is not a game and victims need a plan. They need support and real help from professionals. We begin that process this coming month. The Mens Club and Sisterhood will, in association with our Program committee, provide a series of learning opportunities for adults. Our schools will, in the most age appropriate ways, begin to lay the foundation for healthy relationships. Join us over and over as we build a new world for our selves and our children.