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INTRODUCTION

News flash: the most important thing about becoming bar or bat mitzvah isn't the party. Nor is it the presents. Nor even being able to celebrate with your family and friends—as wonderful as those things are. Nor is it even standing before the congregation and reading the prayers of the liturgy—as important as that is.

No, the most important thing about becoming bar or bat mitzvah is sharing Torah with the congregation. And why is that? Because of all Jewish skills, that is the most important one.

Here is what is true about rites of passage: you can tell what a culture values by the tasks it asks its young people to perform on their way to maturity. In American culture, you become responsible for driving, responsible for voting, and yes, responsible for drinking responsibly.

In some cultures, the rite of passage toward maturity includes some kind of trial, or a test of strength. Sometimes, it is a kind of “outward bound” camping adventure. Among the Maasai tribe in Africa, it is traditional for a young person to hunt and kill a lion. In some Hispanic cultures, fifteen year-old girls celebrate the *quinceañera*, which marks their entrance into maturity.

What is Judaism's way of marking maturity? It combines both of these rites of passage: *responsibility* and *test*. You show that you are on your way to becoming a *responsible* Jewish adult through a public *test* of strength and knowledge—reading or chanting Torah, and then teaching it to the congregation.

This is the most important Jewish ritual mitzvah (commandment), and that is how you demonstrate that you are, truly, bar or bat mitzvah—old enough to be responsible for the mitzvot.

What Is Torah?

So, what exactly is the Torah? You probably know this already, but let's review.

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The Torah (teaching) consists of “the five books of Moses,” sometimes also called the *chumash* (from the Hebrew word *chameish*, which means “five”), or, sometimes, the Greek word Pentateuch (which means “the five teachings”).

Here are the five books of the Torah, with their common names and their Hebrew names.

- ▶ **Genesis (The beginning), which in Hebrew is Bere’shit (from the first words—“When God began to create”).** Bere’shit spans the years from Creation to Joseph’s death in Egypt. Many of the Bible’s best stories are in Genesis: the creation story itself; Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; Cain and Abel; Noah and the Flood; and the tales of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. It also includes one of the greatest pieces of world literature, the story of Joseph, which is actually the oldest complete novel in history, comprising more than one-quarter of all Genesis.
- ▶ **Exodus (Getting out), which in Hebrew is Shemot (These are the names).** Exodus begins with the story of the Israelite slavery in Egypt. It then moves to the rise of Moses as a leader, and the Israelites’ liberation from slavery. After the Israelites leave Egypt, they experience the miracle of the parting of the Sea of Reeds (or “Red Sea”); the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai; the idolatry of the Golden Calf; and the design and construction of the Tabernacle and of the ark for the original tablets of the law, which our ancestors carried with them in the desert. Exodus also includes various ethical and civil laws, such as “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (22:20).
- ▶ **Leviticus (about the Levites), or, in Hebrew, Va-yikra’ (And God called).** It goes into great detail about the kinds of sacrifices that the ancient Israelites brought as offerings; the laws of ritual purity; the animals that were permitted and forbidden for eating (the beginnings of the tradition of kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws); the diagnosis of various skin diseases; the ethical laws of holiness; the ritual calendar of the Jewish year; and various agricultural laws concerning the treatment of the Land of Israel. Leviticus is basically the manual of ancient Judaism.

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- ▶ **Numbers (because the book begins with the census of the Israelites), or, in Hebrew, Be-midbar (In the wilderness).** The book describes the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and the various rebellions against Moses. The constant theme: “Egypt wasn’t so bad. Maybe we should go back.” The greatest rebellion against Moses was the negative reports of the spies about the Land of Israel, which discouraged the Israelites from wanting to move forward into the land. For that reason, the “wilderness generation” must die off before a new generation can come into maturity and finish the journey.
 - ▶ **Deuteronomy (The repetition of the laws of the Torah), or, in Hebrew, Devarim (The words).** The final book of the Torah is, essentially, Moses’s farewell address to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Land of Israel. Here we find various laws that had been previously taught, though sometimes with different wording. Much of Deuteronomy contains laws that will be important to the Israelites as they enter the Land of Israel—laws concerning the establishment of a monarchy and the ethics of warfare. Perhaps the most famous passage from Deuteronomy contains the *Shema*, the declaration of God’s unity and uniqueness, and the *Ve-ahavta*, which follows it. Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses on Mount Nebo as he looks across the Jordan Valley into the land that he will not enter.

Jews read the Torah in sequence—starting with Bere’shit right after Simchat Torah in the autumn, and then finishing Devarim on the following Simchat Torah. Each Torah portion is called a parashah (division; sometimes called a *sidrah*, a place in the order of the Torah reading). The stories go around in a full circle, reminding us that we can always gain more insights and more wisdom from the Torah. This means that if you don’t “get” the meaning this year, don’t worry—it will come around again.

And What Else? The Haftarah

We read or chant the Torah from the Torah scroll—the most sacred thing that a Jewish community has in its possession. The Torah is

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written without vowels, and the ability to read it and chant it is part of the challenge and the test.

But there is more to the synagogue reading. Every Torah reading has an accompanying haftarah reading. Haftarah means “conclusion,” because there was once a time when the service actually ended with that reading. Some scholars believe that the reading of the haftarah originated at a time when non-Jewish authorities outlawed the reading of the Torah, and the Jews read the haftarah sections instead. In fact, in some synagogues, young people who become bar or bat mitzvah read very little Torah and instead read the entire haftarah portion.

The haftarah portion comes from the *Nevi'im*, the prophetic books, which are the second part of the Jewish Bible. It is either read or chanted from a Hebrew Bible, or maybe from a booklet or a photocopy.

The ancient sages chose the haftarah passages because their themes reminded them of the words or stories in the Torah text. Sometimes, they chose *haftarot* with special themes in honor of a festival or an upcoming festival.

Not all books in the prophetic section of the Hebrew Bible consist of prophecy. Several are historical. For example:

The book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest and settlement of Israel.

The book of Judges speaks of the period of early tribal rulers who would rise to power, usually for the purpose of uniting the tribes in war against their enemies. Some of these leaders are famous: Deborah, the great prophetess and military leader, and Samson, the biblical strong man.

The books of Samuel start with Samuel, the last judge, and then move to the creation of the Israelite monarchy under Saul and David (approximately 1000 BCE).

The books of Kings tell of the death of King David, the rise of King Solomon, and how the Israelite kingdom split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (approximately 900 BCE).

And then there are the books of the prophets, those spokesmen for God whose words fired the Jewish conscience. Their names are immortal: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, among others.

Someone once said: “There is no evidence of a biblical prophet ever being invited back a second time for dinner.” Why? Because the prophets were tough. They had no patience for injustice, apathy, or hypocrisy. No one escaped their criticisms. Here’s what they taught:

- ▶ God commands the Jews to behave decently toward one another. In fact, God cares more about basic ethics and decency than about ritual behavior.
- ▶ God chose the Jews *not* for special privileges, but for special duties to humanity.
- ▶ As bad as the Jews sometimes were, there was always the possibility that they would improve their behavior.
- ▶ As bad as things might be now, it will not always be that way. Someday, there will be universal justice and peace. Human history is moving forward toward an ultimate conclusion that some call the Messianic Age: a time of universal peace and prosperity for the Jewish people and for all the people of the world.

Your Mission—To Teach Torah to the Congregation

On the day when you become bar or bat mitzvah, you will be reading, or chanting, Torah—in Hebrew. You will be reading, or chanting, the haftarah—in Hebrew. That is the major skill that publicly marks the becoming of bar or bat mitzvah. But, perhaps even more important than that, you need to be able to teach something about the Torah portion, and perhaps the haftarah as well.

And that is where this book comes in. It will be a very valuable resource for you, and your family, in the b’nai mitzvah process.

Here is what you will find in it:

- ▶ A brief **summary** of every Torah portion. This is a basic overview of the portion; and, while it might not refer to everything in the Torah portion, it will explain its most important aspects.
- ▶ A list of the **major ideas** in the Torah portion. The purpose: to make the Torah portion real, in ways that we can relate to. Every Torah portion contains unique ideas, and when you put all

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of those ideas together, you actually come up with a list of Judaism's most important ideas.

- ▶ Two *divrei Torah* (“words of Torah,” or “sermonettes”) for each portion. These *divrei Torah* explain significant aspects of the Torah portion in accessible, reader-friendly language. Each *devar Torah* contains references to **traditional** Jewish sources (those that were written before the modern era), as well as **modern** sources and quotes. We have searched, far and wide, to find sources that are unusual, interesting, and not just the “same old stuff” that many people already know about the Torah portion. Why did we include these minisermos in the volume? Not because we want you to simply copy those sermons and pass them off as your own (that would be cheating), though you are free to quote from them. We included them so that you can see what is possible—how you can try to make meaning for yourself out of the words of Torah.
- ▶ **Connections:** This is perhaps the most valuable part. It's a list of questions that you can ask yourself, or that others might help you think about—any of which can lead to the creation of your *devar Torah*.

Note: you don't have to like everything that's in a particular Torah portion. Some aren't that loveable. Some are hard to understand; some are about religious practices that people today might find confusing, and even offensive; some contain ideas that we might find totally outmoded.

But this doesn't have to get in the way. After all, most kids spend a lot of time thinking about stories that contain ideas that modern people would find totally bizarre. Any good medieval fantasy story falls into that category.

And we also believe that, if you spend just a little bit of time with those texts, you can begin to understand what the author was trying to say.

This volume goes one step further. Sometimes, the haftarah comes off as a second thought, and no one really thinks about it. We have tried to solve that problem by including a **summary** of each haftarah,

and then a mini-sermon on the haftarah. This will help you learn how these sacred words are relevant to today's world, and even to your own life.

All Bible quotations come from the NJPS translation, which is found in the many different editions of the JPS TANAKH; in the Conservative movement's *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*; in the Reform movement's *Torah: A Modern Commentary*; and in other Bible commentaries and study guides.

How Do I Write a *Devar Torah*?

It really is easier than it looks.

There are many ways of thinking about the *devar Torah*. It is, of course, a short sermon on the meaning of the Torah (and, perhaps, the haftarah) portion. It might even be helpful to think of the *devar Torah* as a “book report” on the portion itself.

The most important thing you can know about this sacred task is: *Learn* the words. *Love* the words. Teach people what it could mean to *live* the words.

Here's a basic outline for a *devar Torah*:

“My Torah portion is (name of portion) _____,
from the book of _____, chapter
_____.

“In my Torah portion, we learn that _____
(Summary of portion)

“For me, the most important lesson of this Torah portion is (what is the best thing in the portion? Take the portion as a whole; your *devar Torah* does not have to be only, or specifically, on the verses that you are reading).

“As I learned my Torah portion, I found myself wondering:

- ▶ *Raise a question that the Torah portion itself raises.*
- ▶ “*Pick a fight*” with the portion. Argue with it.
- ▶ *Answer a question* that is listed in the “Connections” section of each Torah portion.
- ▶ *Suggest a question to your rabbi* that you would want the rabbi to answer in his or her own *devar Torah* or sermon.

“I have lived the values of the Torah by _____ (here, you can talk about how the Torah portion relates to your own life. If you have done a mitzvah project, you can talk about that here).

How To Keep It from Being Boring (and You from Being Bored)

Some people just don't like giving traditional speeches. From our perspective, that's really okay. Perhaps you can teach Torah in a different way—one that makes sense to you.

- ▶ Write an “open letter” to one of the characters in your Torah portion. “Dear Abraham: I hope that your trip to Canaan was not too hard . . .” “Dear Moses: Were you afraid when you got the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai? I sure would have been . . .”
- ▶ Write a news story about what happens. Imagine yourself to be a television or news reporter. “Residents of neighboring cities were horrified yesterday as the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were burned to the ground. Some say that God was responsible . . .”
- ▶ Write an imaginary interview with a character in your Torah portion.
- ▶ Tell the story from the point of view of another character, or a minor character, in the story. For instance, tell the story of the Garden of Eden from the point of view of the serpent. Or the story of the Binding of Isaac from the point of view of the ram, which was substituted for Isaac as a sacrifice. Or perhaps the story of the sale of Joseph from the point of view of his coat, which was stripped off him and dipped in a goat's blood.
- ▶ Write a poem about your Torah portion.
- ▶ Write a song about your Torah portion.
- ▶ Write a play about your Torah portion, and have some friends act it out with you.
- ▶ Create a piece of artwork about your Torah portion.

The bottom line is: Make this a joyful experience. Yes—it could even be fun.

The Very Last Thing You Need to Know at This Point

The Torah scroll is written without vowels. Why? Don't *sofrim* (Torah scribes) know the vowels?

Of course they do.

So, why do they leave the vowels out?

One reason is that the Torah came into existence at a time when sages were still arguing about the proper vowels, and the proper pronunciation.

But here is another reason: The Torah text, as we have it today, and as it sits in the scroll, is actually *an unfinished work*. Think of it: the words are just sitting there. Because they have no vowels, it is as if they have no voice.

When we read the Torah publicly, we give voice to the ancient words. And when we find meaning in those ancient words, and we talk about those meanings, those words jump to life. They enter our lives. They make our world deeper and better.

Mazal tov to you, and your family. This is your journey toward Jewish maturity. Love it.

GENESIS

❖ Bere'shit: Genesis 1:1–6:8

This is how it all starts—with a Torah portion that poses a lot of questions. God creates the world in six days (right, but how long was a day?). God rests on the seventh day, which is how Shabbat gets started. God then creates Adam and Eve and places them in the Garden of Eden.

Things are going great until Adam and Eve disobey God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God kicks them out of the garden. Just when you think things are bad enough, Cain kills his brother, Abel. As punishment, Cain is condemned to wander the earth. And over the next several generations, humanity increasingly descends into violence.

Maybe the whole “humanity” project isn’t working out as well as God had planned. Stay tuned for God’s solution to the problem.

Summary

- ▶ God creates the universe as we know it in a series of six days. (1:1–29)
- ▶ Human beings are created in the image of God. (1:26–28)
- ▶ The seventh day of creation is a day of rest—Shabbat—and God declares it holy. (2:1–3)
- ▶ Human beings had a special role in the Garden of Eden, and God commands them not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The snake convinces Adam and Eve to disobey God’s command, with severe consequences that include expulsion from the garden. (2:4–3:24)
- ▶ Cain kills his brother, Abel, and God confronts him. From there, things go downhill fast and humanity increasingly descends into violence. (4:1–6:8)

4 *Genesis*

The Big Ideas

- ▶ **The story of creation in Genesis is a moral story, about the nature of the world and of humanity itself.** It contains ethical teachings about the pattern of creation and the meaning of the world itself.
- ▶ **God created order out of chaos.** We don't know how long a day was, but the most important thing is that there is a rhythm and pattern to creation, and that things do not simply happen in a random way.
- ▶ **Language is a tool of creation.** That is precisely how God uses language: "Let there be . . ." The words that we say have the power to create worlds, or, if we use words irresponsibly, they can destroy worlds—and people—as well.
- ▶ **Nature must be respected.** We are not free to do whatever we want to the earth, its living things, and its resources. Because the earth is God's creation, we must respect it and take care of it, which was one of God's commandments to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
- ▶ **Special times can be holy.** The first thing declared holy in the Torah is not a place nor a person, but a time. The seventh day is holy and set apart because God rested on that day. When we rest on Shabbat we too make it a holy—a special—day.
- ▶ **Human beings are responsible for one another.** The Torah tells us that humanity is made in God's image, and one way of interpreting this is that there is a piece of God within us all. In some deep way, we are all connected to each other and to God, and we should treat one other as we want to be treated, and as God would want to be treated.

Divrei Torah

IN GOD'S IMAGE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The last thing that God creates is humanity. The Torah suggests that perhaps God saved the best for last. We are uniquely described as created in God's image: "And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God—creating them male and female" (1:27).

This is perhaps the greatest idea that Judaism ever gave to the

world—that every person has the spark of divinity within him or her. The great sage Rabbi Akiba recognized that our awareness of this spark makes us even more special: “Beloved are human beings, because they were created in the divine image. But it was through a special love that they became aware that they were created in the divine image.”

What does this really mean—“in the divine image”?

On its most basic level, it means that while we are certainly not God, in some way we resemble God. It means that we should try to imitate God. A large part of our human responsibilities flow from the various things that God does in the Torah. Our tradition teaches that as God creates, we can create. As God clothes Adam and Eve, so we can clothe the needy. As God gives life, so we strive to heal the sick.

Being made in God’s image means that we have special tasks and opportunities in the world. We have a special responsibility to care for all of God’s creation. Because God created the world and all living things within it, we must avoid destruction of the earth and its plant life (*ba'al tashhit*). Because God created *and blessed* animals (1:22), we must avoid cruelty to animals (*tza'ar ba'alei chayyim*). Because God created, blessed, *and* made human beings in the divine image, we must recognize the sacred in all human beings and cherish them. Yes, to avoid destruction, and yes, to avoid cruelty—but also to create ways of helping people through acts of kindness (*gemilut chasadim*).

Note that the Torah teaches that both man *and* woman are made in the divine image. All people are equal in dignity and deserve equal respect and opportunity. In the words of Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, in an imitation of the American Declaration of Independence, which also speaks of basic rights: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all human beings are created in the image of God, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain fundamental dignities, that among these are infinite value, equality and uniqueness. Our faith calls on all humanity to join in a covenant with God and a partnership between the generations for *tikkun olam* (the repair of the world) so that all forms of life are sustained in the fullest of dignity.”

So, that is the Jewish task: to work toward a world where everyone knows that he or she is created in the divine image. And a world where everyone else knows it as well!

6 Genesis

WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER?

In one sense, Cain was the first and worst murderer in the world. When he killed his brother, Abel, he essentially wiped out one-quarter of all humanity, because the Torah claims that at that time there were only four people in the world: Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel.

Both Cain and Abel brought offerings to God. God accepted Abel's offering of a lamb, but rejected Cain's offering of grain. Cain is very jealous, and very angry.

God warned Cain that "sin crouches at the door"—that we have to be careful of our feelings of anger and jealousy. It was too late for Cain to engage in "anger management." Cain killed Abel. God asked Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?" (4:9). To which Cain responded: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Of course, God knew where Abel was. (God is, after all, God, who knows everything.) God simply wanted Cain to own up to what he had done, and to learn the lesson of moral responsibility.

More than this: God wanted Cain to know that he had not only killed Abel. The text says that Abel's bloods (*demei*) cried out from the ground—a strange way of putting it, especially since "blood" is one of those words that has no plural form. A midrash explains it this way: "It is not written, 'Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!' but 'your brother's bloods'—not only his blood, but also the blood of his descendants."

The tragedy of it all is that Cain not only took his brother's life, but also cut off his brother's line forever, and then evaded responsibility. God spared Cain's life, however, while putting a mark on him. One wonders: Did Cain learn his lesson in any way? As Rabbi Marshall Meyer said: "True hope is born when I learn to scream NO to injustice, to bribery, to corruption; when I scream that I will be involved; when I scream that I won't stay frozen in my ways. True hope is born when I can scream with all my being: YES to honesty; YES, I am my brother's keeper!"

Connections

- ▶ In many places in the United States, people think that schools should teach the biblical version of creation, as well as the theory of evolution. How do you feel about this?

- ▶ Why is Shabbat important to the Jewish people? Is it important to you and your family? How do you make it so? What do you think an ideal Shabbat would be like?
- ▶ What does being created in the divine image mean to you? What are some examples of ways that we can show that people are made in the divine image?
- ▶ What are some of the implications of the way that we are supposed to care for the earth? For animals? Is it a violation of *tza'ar ba'alei chayyim* (avoid cruelty to animals) to experiment on animals for medical research? What about for cosmetic research?
- ▶ We might think of the entire Torah as the answer to God's question to Cain: "Where is Abel your brother?" What are some ways this is so?

❖ Noah: Genesis 6:9–11:32

There is an old comedy bit that includes these famous words: "Hey, Noah—how long can you tread water?" That's a good question for this Torah portion, because it contains the story of Noah and the Flood.

Noah is a good man, living in a terrible time. Everyone's doing corrupt things, except for him. God tells Noah that a great flood is coming that will destroy the world, and Noah should build an ark and take two of every animal, and his own family, into the ark. It rains—for forty days.

After the Flood subsides, Noah and his wife, his sons, and their wives emerge from the ark. Noah's sons become the ancestors of the nations of the ancient world. But things don't get better. People become arrogant, and they build the Tower of Babel, trying in vain to reach the heavens and become famous. God is just about ready to give up on the whole humanity thing.

Summary

- ▶ Because the earth has become corrupt and lawless, God decrees that there will be a flood, and commands Noah to build an ark, and to take his family and animals into it. (6:9–7:5)
- ▶ God unleashes the Flood, which lasts for forty days. When a dove

8 *Genesis*

returns to the ark with an olive leaf, Noah knows that the Flood has subsided. God promises never again to destroy the earth.

(7:10–8:22)

- ▶ Noah's sons and daughters-in-law have many children and become the ancestors of the nations of the ancient world. (10:1–32)
- ▶ The people of the world, unified by a single language, build the Tower of Babel. (11:1–9)

The Big Ideas

- ▶ **The Bible portrays God as having “human” feelings—disappointment, anger, etc.** God is not detached from creation and from human beings; to the contrary, in this Torah portion and elsewhere in the Bible, God is very much affected by what people do—especially by evil.
- ▶ **God is also “human” because God “changes” and “grows.”** God grows from the experience of the Flood and makes a covenant with Noah, in which God promises to never again destroy the earth. The rainbow is the sign of that covenant.
- ▶ **Civilization needs basic ethical laws.** The ancient sages suggest that as a result of the Flood, God demanded that humanity follow certain basic laws: to abstain from blasphemy (misusing God's name), idolatry (worshiping false gods), incest, murder, robbery, and mistreating animals; and to establish courts of law to make sure that these laws are observed. This code of laws is called the Noahide Laws.
- ▶ **All human beings are part of the same “extended family.”** Genesis 9 contains the famous “table of nations,” which imagines that all the nations of the ancient world are descended from Noah's three sons. While this chapter's geographic understanding of the world is very limited (it doesn't mention the peoples of North America, eastern Asia, or Australia, for example), it demonstrates that all human beings are connected and part of the same huge family.
- ▶ **Multiculturalism is good.** All the nations have their own territories, languages, and cultures. Human diversity is part of God's plan. Then, when the nations gather together, united by one common language, to build the Tower of Babel, it is not only an act of

massive chutzpah (building a tower to go into the heavens!); it is also contrary to God's wishes for different languages, and therefore, different and diverse peoples.

Divrei Torah

HOW GOOD WAS NOAH—REALLY?

No doubt about it—Noah was a good person. In fact, the Torah tells us that he was the most righteous person in his generation. But, perhaps that's like praising someone for being the best player on a losing team!

Let's look more closely at Noah.

Noah saved his family and the animals. This is all good. But something is missing. Nowhere do we read that Noah tried to persuade his friends, neighbors, and anyone who would listen to repent and change their ways. He didn't utter a word of concern for all the people who were about to drown in the waters of the Flood. While it's true that God commanded Noah to bring just his family and the animals aboard, you would think he would have argued with God about the death sentence for humanity.

The Hasidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, once referred to a certain rabbi (in Yiddish) as a *tzadik in peltz*—"a righteous person in a fur coat." Here is what he meant: "When it is freezing cold outside, you can build a fire, or you can wrap yourself in a fur coat. If you wear a fur coat, you're the only one who gets warm. But, if you build a fire, everyone else can get warm, as well."

While Noah didn't wear a fur coat during the Flood, he certainly remained content with saving just his family. This is precisely why, in the opinion of many of the sages, even though Noah was a good person, he was not great. When the decree of the Flood came, Noah did as he was told, but didn't intercede on behalf of all those who would lose their lives. As the Torah says simply, "Noah did so; just as God commanded him, so he did" (6:22).

Unlike Noah, Abraham, ten generations later, stands up to God. As soon as God tells Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah are to be destroyed, Abraham approaches God and famously says: "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?" (18:23). In a huge debate, Abraham asks God how many innocent people it would take to spare

the city. It's all there in 18:16–33. For many sages, God chooses to make Abraham the first Jew precisely because of his concern for others.

Righteous people cannot merely care about themselves and their families; they have to care about others as well. This is why, for example, we honor the righteous gentiles who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust, often at the risk of their own lives. The greatest heroes in history have been those who have gone beyond their own needs and their own safety to save others.

GOD CARES ABOUT MORE THAN BIG BUILDINGS

Was the Tower of Babel “real?” Maybe, maybe not; but the story has something to teach us. The tower may well have been modeled on the ziggurat, the sacred tower located in Ur, in what is now southwestern Iraq, which according to the Bible was Abraham’s birthplace. Some early sages thought that Abraham might actually have seen the ziggurat when he was growing up.

As towers go, it was relatively short—only three stories high. It had monumental staircases, however—reminding us of the *sulam*, the “staircase” (or, as it is usually translated, “ladder”) that figured prominently in Jacob’s famous dream (Genesis 28). It was constructed from raw bricks surrounded by baked bricks.

It sounds like a great building. What could possibly have been wrong with it?

First, there is something troubling about the project itself. In Genesis 10, the chapter before the building of the Tower of Babel, we read that every nation has its own location—and, presumably, its own language. God wanted every national group to have its own place, its own culture, and its own language. God never needed diversity training; God *invented* diversity!

But instead, what happened with the building of the Tower of Babel? According to the sages, the people ignored their own languages and local cultures. The builders united under one language, but that unity came at a price. As Rabbi Daniel Gordis suggests: “Dispersion is part of the divine plan. It is only thus that human beings may fully realize their own unique potential. The tower builders of Babel sought to sustain uniformity. That is why they had to be stopped.”

Second, the building of the Tower of Babel was basically an ego trip on the part of the builders. The Bible makes it very clear that the people wanted to make a “name for themselves” (11:4). They wanted bragging rights for having the biggest, tallest building in the world. They believed that this would make them famous. They may have even thought that it would bring them closer to God. Yet, apparently the builders did not consult God!

But the worst part, according to a midrash, is that the builders became so absorbed in their project that they forgot the rules of a decent society. They neglected their basic responsibilities to other people, and in the process, they lost their humanity: “If a man fell off the tower, they paid no attention to him, but if a brick fell they sat down and wept, and said: “Woe is us! When will another brick come and replace it?”

With people like this, it is no surprise that God decides that in the very place where the tower was built—ancient Ur—a man would be born who would teach the world a new way. That man will be Abraham.

Connections

- ▶ Some people read the story of Noah, the Flood, and the ark and they see a connection between that story and contemporary environmental concerns. What connections can you make between the story and our concern for the environment, such as climate change?
- ▶ A midrash says that the major sin of the generation of the Flood was that people cheated each other for such small amounts of money that the courts could not prosecute them. Why is this a sin?
- ▶ How does the story of the Flood portray God? How can God be disappointed with the world that God created? Why couldn't God have created a perfect world in the first place?
- ▶ How good a man was Noah? Was he “good enough?” Should he have warned people about the Flood? Why or why not?
- ▶ If Noah was so special, why wasn't he the first Jew?
- ▶ What was the sin of the builders of the Tower of Babel? What are some examples of this sin today?