DAYENU
A Jewish Call to Climate Action

CHALLENGING DESTRUCTION: MOVING FROM NOAH TO ABRAHAM

When it comes to climate change, many of us spend years unable to act because we do not know what to do, or do not believe we can make a difference. Thankfully, we are not the first generation to face a threat of destruction. We can turn to our ancestors and the wisdom of Torah to help us move forward.

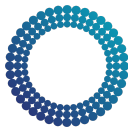**READ THE FOLLOWING TEXTS ABOUT NOAH AND ABRAHAM WITH A STUDY PARTNER OR YOUR DAYENU CIRCLE.**

Be sure to leave enough time for the open-ended discussion questions at the end.

Genesis 6:5-9

(5) The LORD saw how great was humanity's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by their mind was nothing but evil all the time. (6) And the LORD regretted making humans on earth, and God's heart was saddened. (7) The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans whom I created—humans together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them." (8) But Noah found favor with the LORD. (9) This is the line of Noah.—**Noah was a righteous man (a *tzaddik*)**; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.—

ה) וַיַּרְא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וְכָל־יֵצֶר מַחְשְׁבֹת לִבּוֹ רַק רַע כָּל־הַיּוֹם: (ו) וַיִּנָּחֶם ה' כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לִבּוֹ: (ז) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶמְחֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמָיִם כִּי נִחַמְתִּי כִּי עֲשִׂיתִם: (ח) וְנֹחַ מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי ה': (ט) אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹקִים הִתְהַלֶּךְ־נֹחַ: {פ}

How does Noah's Flood compare to climate change? How does it differ?

After God confides in Noah that God is bringing a Flood, God gives Noah instructions on how to build the ark, and Noah follows the instructions without a word of response back to God. The ancient rabbis posed a question: How can we call Noah a righteous person (a *tzaddik*) when he did nothing to try and prevent the Flood? Rabbi Levi Yitchak of Berditchev, an an 18th century Hasidic Master, offers this explanation:

The Kedushat Levi on Genesis 6:9

There is a kind of tzaddik who serves God, but is so lowly in their own eyes that they think to themselves, "Who am I to pray for God to reverse the bad decree?" and therefore they don't pray. Now even though Noah was a great and blameless tzaddik, he was very small in his own eyes and did not have faith that he was a powerful tzaddik with the ability to annul the decree of the flood.

ויש צדיק אחד שעובד הבורא ברוך הוא, והוא שפל בעיני עצמו מאוד מאוד, וחושב בלבו "מי אני שאתפלל לבטל הגזירה?" לכן אינו מתפלל לבטל. ונח, הגם שהיה צדיק גדול ותמים, היה קטן בעיניו מאוד, ולא היתה לא אמונה בעצמו שהוא צדיק מושל ויכול לבטל הגזירה.

> According to this excerpt from the Kedushat Levi, what is Noah's predicament?

Later in Genesis, God confides in Abraham that God plans to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham says:

Genesis 18:23-26

(23) Abraham came forward [to God] and said...(25) Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (26) And the LORD answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמַר...

חָלִלָה לְּךָ מֵעֲשֹׂת ׀ כַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית צַדִּיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כַצַּדִּיק כָּרָשָׁע חָלִלָה לָּךְ הֲשֹׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִם־אֶמְצָא בִסְדֹם חֲמִשִּׁים צַדִּיקִם בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנָשָׂאתִי לְכָל־הַמָּקוֹם בַּעֲבוּרָם:

The Zohar Chadash (a mystical manuscript published in the 16th century) gives us this story. The English here is a mix between translation and summary of the Aramaic and Hebrew.
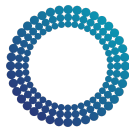
Zohar Chadash, Noach: 109-115:

What did the Holy One say to Noah, when he came out of the ark and saw the world completely destroyed? Noah began crying and said, "God, you are called Compassionate! You were supposed to have compassion on your creatures!" God replied, "Stupid shepherd! Now you ask me? Why did you not speak up when I told you gently what I was going to do? I spent so much time with you, and spoke with you, so you would request mercy for the world… But once you heard that you would be saved in the ark, the evil that would befall the world didn't impact your heart…:"

Rabbi Yochanan said, "See the difference between the different righteous ones. Noah did not pray for his generation like Abraham did. But when God told Abraham that God would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham stood before God and tried to save the wicked people of the city.

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן, מָה הֵשִׁיב הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְנֹחַ כְּשֶׁיָּצָא מִן הַתֵּיבָה וְרָאָה כָּל הָעוֹלָם חָרֵב, וְהִתְחִיל לִבְכּוֹת עָלָיו, וְאָמַר, רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, נִקְרֵאתָ רַחוּם, הָיָה לְךָ לְרַחֵם עַל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ. הֵשִׁיבוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא,רַעְיָא שַׁטְיָא, כְּעָן אֲמַרְתְּ דָּא, וְלָא בְּזִמְנָא דַּאֲמָרִית לָךְ בְּלִישָׁנָא רְכִיכָא, דִּכְתִיב (שם ו) עֲשֵׂה לְךָ תֵּבַת עֲצֵי גֹפֶר כו', וַאֲנִי הִנְנִי מֵבִיא אֶת הַמַּבּוּל כו', לְשַׁחֵת כָּל בָּשָׂר כו', וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לְנֹחַ כו', כִּי אֹתְךָ רָאִיתִי צַדִּיק לְפָנַי בַּדּוֹר הַזֶּה, כּוּלֵּי הַאי אִתְעַכְּבִית עִמָּךְ, וַאֲמָרִית לָךְ, בְּדִיל דְּתִבְעֵי רַחֲמִין עַל עָלְמָא. וּמִכְּדֵין דְּשָׁמַעְתְּ דְּתִשְׁתֵּיזִיב אַתְּ בְּתֵיבוּתָא, לָא עָאל בְּלִבָּךְ בִּישׁוּתָא דְּעָלְמָא, וַעֲבַדְתְּ תֵּיבוּתָא וְאִשְׁתְּזֵבְתָּא. וּכְעָן דְּאִתְאֲבֵיד עָלְמָא, פָּתְחֵית פּוּמָּךְ לְמַלָּלָא קֳדָמַי בַּעְיָין וְתַחֲנוּנִין

אָמַר רְבִּי יוֹחָנָן, בֹּא וּרְאֵה מַה בֵּין הַצַּדִּיקִים שֶׁהָיוּ…. נֹחַ לֹא הֵגִין עַל דּוֹרוֹ, וְלֹא הִתְפַּלֵּל עָלָיו כְּאַבְרָהָם. דְּכֵיוָן דְּאָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְאַבְרָהָם, זַעֲקַת סְדוֹם וַעֲמוֹרָה כִּי רָבָּה, מִיָּד וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמַר

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss with a study partner or Dayenu Circle

1. In what ways do you feel "lowly in your own eyes" like Noah, when confronted with the climate crisis?

2. Do you identify with Noah in any other ways?

3. In what ways have you spoken up, like Abraham? What motivates you?

4. In Genesis, God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah despite Abraham's bargaining. Yet the ancient rabbis still say Abraham is the greater tzaddik, in large part because he challenges God to save the cities. What do you make of that? What might we learn here about challenging a "decree of destruction," even when we are not assured success?

5. What support could help you move from emulating Noah to emulating Abraham?

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Text study by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman, Dayenu's Rabbinic Ambassador, in Partnership with Hebrew College

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