Cocooning: Thoughts on Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

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Forecasters and marketers have come up with a word to describe a current trend: cocooning. This term refers to a growing phenomenon in which people increasingly strive for a sense of personal space by cutting themselves off from the "outside world." They avoid social interactions by enclosing themselves in their own private world to the extent possible.

Examples of cocooning: interacting socially only with people of the same socio-economic status; children playing computer games rather than playing with friends in the neighborhood; communicating largely by cell phones or emails or texting, rather than in face to face conversations; plugging into i-pods or other devices and be oblivious of the people around you.

Cocooning is a way of enclosing ourselves in a home environment where we don't have to interact as much with outside society. We can safely wrap ourselves in our own world, without having to deal with those whom we can keep comfortably away from us.

Cocooning is an appealing concept, in that it reflects the need to stay in control of our lives in a protected environment. We live in a noisy world, with many challenges and struggles, competition, ugliness, rudeness, exploitation. It's so nice to shut all those things out and build our own private ark of peace and quiet.

Yet, those who have studied the phenomenon of cocooning have also pointed out its negative features. People become more self-centered, more egotistic, more concerned with their own private comforts and pleasures. Their sense of responsibility for society diminishes. Their tolerance for others' opinions and viewpoints declines. People cocoon so that they don't have to worry about the needs or feelings of others. Only their comfort and safety matter, nothing else. Let others make their own cocoons. Let others worry about themselves.

While forecasters and marketers describe cocooning as a relatively new trend, the Torah gives a prime example of this phenomenon going back thousands of years. The ultimate “cocooner” was Noah. When God informed Noah that He was going to bring a flood to destroy the world, Noah did not raise his voice in protest. Rather, he went to work building an ark to save himself and his family. He would safely ride out the storm in his “cocoon.”

A Midrash imagines a conversation between Noah and God after the flood had wiped out the population. When leaving the ark, Noah was stunned by the devastation and the immense loss of life. He called out to God: “Lord, why did You do this? Why didn’t you spare the people this calamity?” God replied: “Noah, why didn’t you pray for the people when I first informed you of their impending destruction? If you would have spoken up then, I would not have brought the flood. You offered no protest or prayer: you only went off to build your ark.”

Noah was a “cocooner.” He surely had a right and responsibility to look out for himself and for his family. Yet, by being a “cocooner” he lost his sense of connection with society; he did not internalize a personal responsibility for others. Let others take care of themselves, it’s their problem not mine.

The Midrash points out that Noah’s cocooning ultimately played a role in the destruction of society. If he had been more involved with others, if he had taken their welfare seriously, he could have prayed to God to avert the flood—and God would have listened!

The Noah story goes on to tell that Noah became drunk after the flood. This may be understood to mean that Noah was overwhelmed by his situation. He wanted to escape his past and his future by becoming intoxicated. Cocooning had been a grievous error. It had given him and his family a short-lived feeling of safety and security; yet, it contributed to the destruction of society.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to create safe space for oneself and one’s family. There is nothing wrong with trying to shut out the unpleasant features of the “outside world.” Yet, if we make cocoons that dull our sense of connection with others and that mar our commitment to society as a whole—then we fall into the pattern of Noah.

We all have a right to private space. But we all have a responsibility to the public at large. We need to be sure that we maintain a proper balance. We can begin by recognizing our own “cocooning” tendencies, and making sure that we don’t let these tendencies close us off from the pulse of life outside of ourselves.

Angel for Shabbat