When Societies Implode: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

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The Torah describes the destruction of humanity in the days of Noah. It wasn't due to idolatry or blasphemy but to the general breakdown in interpersonal relations. People were hedonistic and promiscuous. They robbed and cheated each other.

The basic lesson of the Noah story is that humanity is capable of bringing on its own destruction. The deepening of corruption is insidious. A midrash suggests that thievery began on a seemingly small scale. People would take "free samples" of merchandise, not bothering to pay the merchant. They did not bother to consider that if all others were doing the same thing, the merchants would go broke and would be unable to provide goods in the future. People did not realize that theft—even on a small level—contributes to the overall breakdown of a society's economic well-being.

The Torah alludes to the general breakdown in sexual morality. The strong and powerful took advantage of the weak. Women were treated as objects of gratification rather than as human beings with rights and feelings of their own.

A rabbinic teaching has it that Noah spent one hundred and twenty years building the ark. During this interval, he called upon people to repent their ways; but they ignored him or reviled him.

Societies (and empires) unravel when people lose trust in each other. This is seldom an abrupt dissolution, but—as in the times of Noah—a gradual breakdown in elementary decency. When cheating becomes rampant, when scammers fiendishly plot to rob others, when government officials and police take bribes to pervert justice—a society is in the throes of self-dissolution. Petty shop-lifting proliferates; smash and grab thieves grow ever more impudent; armed robbery and murder undermine society's feeling of wellbeing. Law enforcement weakens, the justice system declines.

Societies implode slowly, almost without noticing, when sexual license becomes “normal”, when personal gratification becomes the main bond between humans. Often, the sexual license is promoted as a sign of liberation and freedom of expression. People can and do rationalize many negative things into positive. But that doesn’t change the underlying breakdown in social interaction.

When anyone calls attention to the factors leading to the implosion of society, he or she may feel like Noah building his ark. Few pay any attention. The corruption gets deeper and deeper until it eventually reaches a point of no return. The forces for good are simply overwhelmed.

The Torah describes the destruction of humanity as God’s punishment of pervasive immorality. But the ongoing lesson is that humanity is itself capable of bringing on its own demise. The Noah story is a warning to all future generations—including our own. If basic human decency, honesty and trust are lacking, the foundations of society dissolve. When cheaters cheat and exploiters exploit, they threaten all society. When a society allows the negative forces to prevail, it sows the seeds of its own destruction.

One Noah wasn’t able to turn his generation around, just as lone voices today are not able to stop the erosive trends. But if enough Noahs will stand strong, perhaps the negative forces can be set back.