

SHABBAT SERMON  
Parashat Noach  
5778

In a graduation speech, given around 2010, the writer Anna Quindlen urged the graduates to have the courage to “honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations, and, yes, your soul by listening to its clean clear voice instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world.” In the 2007 book, “Eat, Pray, Love,” Elizabeth Gilbert wrote that God manifests Himself through “my own voice from within my own self ... God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.” Even in the version of the Girl Scout manual that was published in 1980, the tone was self-celebrating: “How can you get more in touch with you? What are you feeling? ... Every option available to you through Senior Scouting can, in some way, help you to a better understanding of yourself ... Put yourself at the ‘center stage’ of your thoughts to gain perspective on your own ways of feeling, thinking and acting.”

These writers – and this seems to be the dominant tone of our world - believe that people are naturally good, and that people just have to be their natural selves, and all will be great.

The Torah feels differently. After the Flood, God says this: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth ...” In Parashat Noach, the Torah seems to be changing its mind. If the word *tov* occurs seven times in the Creation story, the word *b’rit*, ‘covenant’ occurs seven times after the Flood.

The Torah may have believed that humans were naturally good in the Creation story, but by the time of the Flood, the Torah believes that humans cannot be good on their own. They need help. They need to be in a sacred relationship with God and other people to be good.

While the loudest voices of contemporary culture still tell us how great we are, it is a different story that inspires us.

- It's the story of the addict who overcomes his or her addiction to become a youth leader helping kids from broken homes.
- It's the story of someone who suffered from homelessness who went on to graduate college.
- It's the story of the person who had a tragic accident who went on to overcome his or her new disability.

This kind of person does not come out of their struggle healed; he or she comes out different. He or she comes out with a vocation – a new-found strength to do something good for others.

The Catholic thinker, Thomas Merton, wrote, "Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers." Self-respect does not come from being naturally good at something. It comes from being better than you used to be. I think that this is what Judaism really believes about human beings – through our relationship with God and

human beings, and with a lot of hard work, we can be better today than we were yesterday. Being good takes a lot of hard work.

Next to my desk at home is a picture of me with a congregant from Austin. The man was a businessman who had come close to bankruptcy twice but never gave up. He went on to earn a lot of money and then set up a foundation so his family could give it away. I think he did that out of his deep Jewish commitment.

Judaism does not give us one answer about the nature of human beings. But the strain I like the most thinks we are always unfinished business. Through our relationship with God and with other people, we can be better today than we were yesterday. I think that's a message of hope.