

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

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חרות ואחריות

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### NOACH AND GLOBAL WARMING

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G-d promised never to destroy the world by flood again. Does this mean that we have a Divine guarantee that our landmasses will not be submerged, no matter how much carbon dioxide we pour into the atmosphere?

I suspect that most Modern Orthodox Jews reject this idea instinctively because it feels too much like learning science from Genesis. We don't reject (and shouldn't accept) evolution or the big-bang theory on the basis of Chapter 1, and so we shouldn't reject global warming on the basis of Chapter 6.

I agree fully that we should not tie Chumash to particular claims about the physical world, whether they agree or disagree with current scientific consensus. (Nor should we tie Chumash to particular claims about the meanings of ancient Sumerian texts, which presumably admit of as many plausible interpretations as Chumash.) But the question of Noach and global warming is different, because it can be understood as a theological rather than a factual question: Are there any circumstances under which G-d would allow the human race to be destroyed?

A classic spiritual gives a spectacularly discomfiting answer: *G-d gave Noah the rainbow sign/No more floods, it's the fire next time.* This reading is well-grounded textually. The Flood occurs because the sin of the human beings is **רבה**, great. The next time things go **רבה** wrong is at Sodom, and His response is to rain fire on the city. But what then is the meaning of G-d's promise?

Rabbinic literature plays this tension out in a wonderful series of historical plays.

1. Vayikra Rabbah 96:10 presents Avraham saying the following to G-d:

בשעה שבקש רחמים על סדומיים, אמר לפניו:  
 רבש"ע, נשבעת שאי אתה מביא מבול לעולם,  
 ה"ה"ד (ישעיה נד) כי מי נח זאת לי -  
 מבול של מים אי אתה מביא, מבול של אש אתה מביא!  
 מה אתה מערים על השבועה?! א"כ לא יצאת ידי שבועה?  
 ה"ה דכתיב (בראשית יח)  
 חלילה לך מעשות כדבר הזה

*At the time that Avraham sought mercy for the people of Sodom,  
 he said before Him:*

*Master of the Universe, You swore that you would not bring a  
 flood to the world,*

*as Scripture writes (Yeshayahu 54:9): For that would be the  
 waters of Noach to me (just as I have sworn not to pass the water  
 so of Noach again on the land, so I have sworn not to lose patience  
 with you and not to act on anger against you) –*

*You won't bring a flood of water, but You will bring a flood of  
 fire?!*

*Are You evading Your oath!? If so, You have not fulfilled Your  
 oath!*

*This is what Avraham meant by saying*

*"It would be a desecration (of Your word) to do such a thing!"*

2. In Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael the conversation takes place within the Gentile world:

באותה שעה, נתכנסו כל מלכי אומות העולם אצל בלעם הרשע, ואמרו לו:  
 שמא מבול מביא לעולם?

אמר להם: כבר נשבע הקדוש ברוך הוא שאינו מביא מבול לעולם,  
 שנאמר כי מי נח זאת לי אשר נשבעתי.

אמרו לו: שמא מבול של מים אינו מביא, אבל מביא מבול של אש?  
אמר להם: לא מבול של מים ולא מבול של אש הוא מביא אלא הב"ה  
רוצה ליתן תורה לעמו . . .

*At the time (of Sinai), all the Gentile kings came to Bil'am.*

*They said to him:*

*Is He perhaps bringing a Flood to the world?*

*Bil'am said to them:*

*The Holy Blessed One has already sworn not to bring a flood to  
the world,*

*as Scripture writes (Yeshayahu 54:9): For that would be the  
waters of Noach to me etc.*

*They said to him: Perhaps he is not bringing a flood of water, but  
rather a flood of fire?*

*Bil'am said to them: he is bringing neither a flood of water nor a  
flood of fire; rather, The Holy Blessed One seeks to give the  
Torah to His nation . . .*

3. Finally, Tosefta Taanit 2:13 brings the conversation  
directly into the rabbinic era:

מעשה בחסיד אחד שאמרו לו: התפלל וירדו גשמים!  
התפלל וירדו גשמים.

אמ' לו: כשם שהתפללת וירדו, כך התפלל וילכו להם!  
אמ' להם:

צאו וראו –

אם עומד אדם בקרן אפל ומשקשק את רגלו בנחל קדרון -

אנו מתפללין שלא ירדו גשמים,

אבל בטוחין שאין המקום מביא מבול לעולם,

שנ' ולא יהיה עוד מבול וגו'

ואומ' כי מי נח זאת לי אשר נשבעתי וגו'.

ר' מאיר או':

מבול של מים אין, אבל מבול של אש ושל גפרית כדרך שהביא על

הסדומים יש,

שנ' וה' המטיר על סדום וגו'

*A story about a pious man whom they told: "Pray for rain to  
fall!"*

*He prayed, and rain fell.*

*They said to him: "Just as you prayed and they fell, pray that  
they will go away!"*

*He said to them:*

*Go and see –*

*If a person can stand on the Horn of Ofel and rinse his legs in  
Wadi Kidron,  
then we'll pray for rain not to fall,*

*but we are certain that the Omnipresent will not bring a flood to  
the world,*

*as Scripture says: "There will be no further flood",  
and it also says: For that would be the waters of Noach to me etc.*

*Rabbi Meir says:*

*Not a flood of water, but yes a flood of fire and sulfur as He  
brought upon the people of Sodom,*

*as Scripture says: "And Hashem rained on Sodom etc."*

Avraham recognizes the possibility that G-d's oath  
contained a loophole, but objects; His objection is  
overruled. Bil'am tries to assure the world that the oath  
is absolute, but his assurances are found unsatisfying.  
The anonymous pious man (possibly Choni the  
Circlemaker) seems confident that G-d will not destroy  
the world, but Rabbi Meir points out the loophole, and  
seems to endorse it. In the end, we have only Bil'am to  
rely on, and he may have been deliberately evasive. So it  
seems that according to Jewish tradition, there is no  
promise that G-d will not destroy the world and the  
human race again.

There are certainly other possible loopholes. We might  
say, for instance, that G-d promised not to *bring*  
complete destruction, but made no commitment to  
prevent us from causing our own destruction. Or  
perhaps that G-d promised to prevent rapid but not  
gradual destruction.

What then does the promise mean?

As scary as global warming may seem, I want to put in a  
note of perspective. In the 60s, 70s and 80s, the world  
faced imminent destruction through nuclear war. That  
humanity survived that period largely unscathed gives  
some credence to the notion that the promise has some  
meaning.

But as we have not yet discovered that meaning, it's best  
to be cautious meanwhile.