1. <u>The Actual Jewish Story of Noah and The Flood</u>:

There is the Noah story that is familiar to us, and the one that is overlooked. The familiar story echoes throughout history, across cultures and religions, and is the one on which we so often focus our attention. But, there is another, more essentially Jewish story that teaches a unique message, if we just listen closely for it.

First, here is the familiar version. In *פרשת נוח*, we are introduced to Noah with the phrase,נוח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו, *Noah was a righteous man, pure, in his generation*. Noah produces progeny, a future generation. The earth filled with *חמס, "violence and wrongdoing."* God saw this and declared to Noah, this righteous and pure man of his generation that *קץ כל-בשר בא לפני כי-מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם והנני משחיתם את-הארץ: The end of all flesh comes before me, because the entire earth is full of violence and wrongdoing because of them; therefore, presently I am destroying the earth!*

Noah is ordered to construct and Ark. God prepares the flood waters for 40 days of inundation, and makes a covenant with Noah and his progeny for after that inundation. All non-human animals, clean and unclean alike, are to be conducted into the Ark. And Noah obeys in these commanded preparations. The waters come, the Ark is set sail, and the earth dies: וימח את-כל-היקום אשר על-פני האדמה מאדם עד בהמה עד-רמש ועד-עוף השמים וימחו מן-הארץ וישאר אך-נוח ואשר איתו בתבה: *And all that which existed was blotted out … but Noah alone and those who were with him in that box were left.*

And then God remembered, ויזכר. The world is created anew as the waters of destruction recede back to their springs in the earth. Just as in the first creation story, the winds sweep the waters and hold them back in their place, so too here as the waters return to their floodgates. In the Seventh month there is not just a new year as we have just celebrated, but a new world as the Ark comes to rest on Mt. Ararat. Noah remains in the Ark for 40 days. The dove is sent and does not return. Seven days pass. The raven is sent and returns, and so ends this human nightmare.

You might have been raised to think that what I have just told you was the story of Noah encapsulated in its entirety. Today, I will tell you, no, that's not the story. These events that I have just narrated for you are rather an echo of memory that most modern human cultures share, and I will say more about this important aspect in a moment: It is the memory of a great, devastating flood, of social and environmental "קץ," "end," which would be in our parlance *apocalypse*.

There is a Jewish story here that begins at the end of what I just narrated above. The Jewish story *begins* with the words צא מן-התבה אתה ואשתך ובניך ושני-בניך איתך: [*God says to Noah,] Come out of the ark--you, your wife, your two children with you.* Noah's action in response is described

as follows: וַיָּחֶל נֹחַ אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטַּע כָּרֶם: *And Noah began again--ויחל--a man of the ground, he planted a vineyard* (Gen 9:18).

It is my contention today that the *Jewish* Noah story teaches us something important: In Judaism we do not look to the apocalypse, the end of this world or that. No, we begin our work *after the end*, when we have come out of the "ark" of surviving an apocalypse. There have been so many ends -- קצים -- in Jewish history: Pharaonic Egypt, the Babylonian exile, the Roman empire, the Crusades, Nazi Europe, the Israeli War of Independence, to name a few. We begin our Jewish story whenever we come out of every instance of violence, struggling to be permitted to express our Jewish difference, and to escape the immortal social technology of anti-Semitism--and *then we start our work as Jews*. The Jewish story of starting again is not in the great glorious stories of war, the Exodus, or vast ancient Empires. Noah, his kin, and his non-human charges came out and they everyday things, like pitching tents and growing food. This Jewish story is fabricated from the everyday, small details of life, of struggling to be human.

In Noah's tale, they did things right. They sacrificed to God, as was the thing one did in those days and in that world, and God was pleased by that odor. God makes a covenant with *all humankind*. But they also got things very wrong: ויחל נוח איש האדמה ויטע כרם--*Noah, a man of the earth, set out and he planted a vineyard*. And then he got drunk, and something horrible and incestuous is hinted in his pursuant drunkenness between Noah and his own son. Some of his offspring, the biblical Canaanites, were cursed and enslaved in the narration of biblical Israel by this egregious wrong. So things went well and other things went disastrously in this very Jewish story. Our engagement and obligation as Jews is precisely in the picayune details of curses and blessings, triumphs and disasters, that occur *after* the flood story the rest of humanity remembers so well.

2. Most of Humanity Remembers the Great Inundation that Destroyed both Life and Society:

The Noah story is an example common to most human cultures. It recalls the floods that destroyed the earth about 12-15 thousand years before our present time. It recalls the disasters that made us evolve into humans. We could even say that the flood that ended the ice age world begins all of the history that we can remember.

What, then, is it to be human?

Humanity is 6-8 million years old according to our best work on the paucity of remains that we have discovered from our fossil record. There were then in the world primates--animals with opposable thumbs and a spine that could tolerate quasi-upright gait. Some primates were related to modern humans, to us. These genetic ancestors we call "hominins." Hominins included our ancient ancestors that looked like us and others that were very different. In the great human family tree, as is true in the evolution of all life, there were some lines that were dead ends. Other lines produced animals similar to us, and I mean nearly 99% genetically

similar, such as chimps, bonobos, and gorillas. Our very small, fine, and chance-surviving and -enduring branch of hominins became hominids, human-like. And then they became humans--*several species with whom we co-existed for most of our 6 to 8 million years in this world*.

What made us human? We were made human by the small decisions we made, invented, and passed on in the context of and more often against the great natural forces of the world. How did we make ourselves human as we evolved through קץ after קץ of natural disasters? We discovered because we had the facility of language and we had technologies of tool-making.

Our mother land, the now-extinct forests of central and east Africa used to be wet, and then they began to dry and turn into the savannah we imagine and see today. Dryness meant scarcity of food. Those of us who by chance genetic mutation were able to tolerate both plant foods and meat foods survived to pass on these mutations. Those who could make tools could hunt and eventually harness fire. We could cook to make poisonous roots become delicious meals. We could draw ever more and every more efficient caloric energy from this world.

This hunting and cooking technology led directly both to social bonding and it also supported the growth of our complex brains. Our brains allowed us to reckon complex kinship relations. Our understanding of kinship and relatedness allowed us to work together, with non-natal kin, those with whom we did not share a crib, a mother's breast, or a sibling's embrace. It was the constant instability of the climate and the environment that propelled our species to come to dominate the earth as we now have. *We are evolved as a species to live and thrive and invent on the קץ, on the precipice of disaster*. *We do so by attending to careful and mundane things like making tools and coming up with words*.

But all this happened *also* to at least four different species of humans--*Homo sapiens*, us; *Homo neanderthalensis*, the Neanderthals; *Homo erectus*, actually a complex of species; and the recently discovered *Homo floresiensis*, a dwarf species from an island in what is now southeast Asia. There were others whose status as distinct species are more debated, too.

Why do we alone remain while our sibling human species went extinct? Recall that concept of קץ, the precipice of disaster on which we evolved. Not all hominids could ride this mighty, disastrous, tsunami back to shore. The climate was unstable, and the hot-house warm and wet world became dry, and then it became too cold. The world slept, frozen in ice covering vast fields of extinct species that lacked our tools, language, and social structure.

Fast forward to fifteen thousand years ago the earth was still very, very cold: there was the deepest and most frozen moment of the ice-age. Neanderthals were pushed too far south by the encroaching glaciers of Europe and could not subsist without herds of elk to eat. The Floresiensis dwarf-people were taken out by a volcano on their last island stronghold. It was not solely by chance that we, *Homo sapiens* survived. It was also by means of our kinship systems, our tools and technology, and our complex linguistic faculty to represent, teach, and to

remember, we alone thrived. So as humans remember this: It is not the disasters which define us as a species and as humanity. Rather, it by our working together to thrive thereafter.

3. <u>On Difference: Ancient Near Easterners</u>, <u>Christians, and Muslims Remember Something Different</u>:

Consider then the echoes of the time of tribulation, the ice age floods as the experience of all humanity. This is the story remembered throughout cultures of the world, only *after* which begins our Jewish story. Consider the closest version, from 6th century BCE Mesopotamia. This is the memory of the flood that is closest both in terms of its content and in terms of its temporal and spatial proximity to our own Torah. Hear now another echo of what it means to become humans as the glaciers melt and as torrents of waters remake the world. Listen, then, to the very different way the ancient Mesopotamians heard meaning in this becoming human at the edge of disaster.

Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic reads, and I excerpt: *Utnapishtim spoke to him, to Gilgamesh, "Let me reveal to you a closely guarded matter, Gilgamesh, and let me tell you the secret of the gods. Shuruppak is a city that you yourself know, situated on the Euphrates. That city was already old, when the gods within it decided that the great gods should make a flood… Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubara-Tutu, dismantle your house, build a boat. Leave possessions, search out living things. Reject cattle and save lives! Put aboard the seed of all living things, into the boat…. [When] the sun rose, the boat was complete… When the first light of dawn appeared, a black cloud came up from the base of the sky, Adad [the thundering storm god] kept rumbling inside it… For six days and seven nights the wind blew, flood and tempest overwhelmed the land… I looked to the weather; silence reigned…. I bent down, then sat. I wept. My tears ran down my cheeks… When the seventh day arrived, I put out a dove… the dove went, it came back… a swallow… a raven. The raven went and saw the waters recede… [The god] Ellil came up to the boat, he seized my hand… he touched our foreheads… stood between us, blessed us: Until now Utnapishtim was mortal, but henceforth… [he] and his woman shall be as we gods are…"* (Gilg. Tab. X:, Dalley 1989: 109-116).

This is truly a story of the end of the world. Indeed, in contrast to our story of Noah in Genesis, it is a story about the end itself--both the end of life and the end of being human. The reward for bearing witness to the death of the world is to kneel at the high god's feet and to become less like humans and more like gods. But in our Torah, we become more human--not good, not bad, and ever-evolving. In the Torah as we inherit it today, we have retold this ancient memory of the catastrophic floods that followed the end of the last ice age. As we learn from the study of human evolution, so too do we learn from this week's פרשה: Disasters lead us deeper into our own humanity--our being human begins at disaster.

Our daughter religions, Christianity and Islam, have heard the tale of Noah differently. We attend today to our *difference. This difference is our people's soul for which we have fought, died, escaped, and rebuilt, end after end.* On this uniquely Jewish ritual observance of Shabbat,

we reflect on what makes us different and unique, and how this difference that we alone possess in our particular version of the Noah story might lend something important to this messy, broken world in which we exist intertwined with the fabric of other religious and cultural systems.

In the examples that follow, I will attend not to our daughter religions' theologies and many cultural forms, but to their sacred texts as a way to highlight their different stories. In Christianity's New Testament, the message of Noah is quite a bit different. The Gospel of Luke uses the technique of genealogy to situate Jesus' father, Joseph, as the direct descendent of Noah. There is something of purity and special election in the genealogy; Noah survived so the Christian savior of humankind could eventually be born. By contrast, in Judaism, Noah is the ancestor of all of post-diluvian humanity, he is the source of a universal covenant between the Eternal and all humans.

In the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews, the writer mentions Noah: " By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith" (NIV). Again, Noah is special and apart from the general crowd of humanity as a member of the line of actors in a salvation history that traces the faithfulness of many biblical figures from Cain and Able onward. The letter to the Hebrews continues regarding figures like and including Noah: "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

In fact, the theme of a universal covenant with God disappears from other NT writers' retellings of the Noah story; it becomes one of special election. We read in the NT's I Peter: " … God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also— not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand…" (I Peter 3: 19-22). Christianity, strictly textually speaking and in a historical context, hears in Noah's story salvation in the world to come, but our world is lost to sin and brokenness, and this is *not* our Jewish message. We dive into the mess of the mud and muck that remains *after* things end.

Islam, too hears sin, repentance, and forgiveness in its echoes of Noah's tale and the memory of the post-ice age floods that once ravaged this world. In the Qur'an, which for faithful Muslims was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in late Antique Arabia, in the cradle of mostly Christian but also Jewish kingdoms and stories. We now read the following about yet another perspective on the Noah story: He is a prefiguration of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, a prophetic herald of the God of the Jews and the Christians, who offers the straight path to God and to salvations after the end of the world on the day of reckoning. There is preparation to

enter a new world, but it is one that humans do not build, it is a heavenly world and not the one we know, and it only comes after death.

In this literary context of the Qur'an, Noah becomes another prophet who comes before and is not heard by the people to whom he comes to prophesy, so the flood comes and ends the world. Modern Qur'an commentator, Prof. Nasr, summarizes Surah 71, *Nuh*, or "Noah" theologically as follows: "Although the biblical account provides details about the construction the ark (Gen 6:12-16) and of Noah's life after the flood (Gen 9), the Qur'an focuses almost entirely on Noah's function as a *warner* who called his people to guidance and their subsequent rejection of him... The Flood... receives no more than a line... This indicates God's punishment is not the focus of the Qur'an account. Instead, like other prophets, such as Abraham and Jesus, the Qur'anic account of Noah emphasizes God's mercy and guidance" (Nasr 1421).

We thus hear the theme recited in the Qur'an: "Truly We sent Noah to his people, "Warn your people before a painful punishment comes upon them." He said, "O my people, I am a clear warner unto you, that you may worship God, reverence him, and obey me, that he may forgive you some of your sins and grant you reprieve until a term appointed" (Surah 71, Ayat 1-4a, trans. Nasr).

Today, let the words of the Noah story, which we now know begins as disaster comes and eventually abates be heard carefully by us, and let them inspire us, not to the heights of the sublime and the eternal, but to the beauty and despair intertwined in the daily acts of human life. As Jews living in a pluralistic world, one that demands some degree of assimilation, we need not to forget what makes us different and unique, and what novel and important echoes we hear in our story of Noah, inherited from the ancient Near East and passed to the great world religions of the West, Christianity and Islam.

But *we Jews are not a world religion*; we are *small*, and we have to make sure our lessons can be heard. We Jews offer humanity a different lesson than Christianity or Islam, not one of a salvation history of sin and forgiveness, but one of work and the sanctification of the mundane details of human success and failure that allow us as a species to survive and to endure.

4. <u>This is Our קץ, Our מבול, and Our 350 years</u>:

In our language, Hebrew, Noah's name is based on the semantic root נ-ו-ח. We see this root commonly enough in biblical Hebrew, we hear it in Modern Hebrew, and we see it appear in Hebrew's sister languages across time. *HALOT* (678-679) observes that in the *qal* the range of meanings is as follows: to settle down, to rest, to repose, or to await. We tend as English-natives, I think, to have this range of meanings come to mind when we think about Noah's name--he brings the Ark safely to dry land, he rests while the earth floods, he awaits the will of the creator deity in the biblical tale. But as we learn today, the Noah story actually starts for Jews *after* the settling down, *after the קץ*.

The meaning of the Torah itself evolves, even as our holy language of Hebrew evolves. By the time when we come to Modern Hebrew, new meanings emerge. My sermon advisor, R. Dr. Rechnitzer, who is himself a Hebrew native, pointed out to me the following observation: In modern Hebrew, the adjective נוח is "comfortable." It does not mean great, it does not mean less than good, it just means "alright," "okay." Indeed, Klein observes the following etymology of the modern Hebrew word, נוח: easy, kind, benign, pleasing. But note carefully that none of these says "wonderful, great, or good."

This, then is the actual Jewish story, our own importantly different cultural twist that we carry with us in the world as our own sign for all generations: *Noah, a man of the earth, set out. He planted a vineyard. He drank from the wine. He became drunk. And he stripped down in his tent. Ham, ancestor of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness. He told his two brothers about this outside. And so Shem and Yaphet took a garment, and they put it on their backs. They went backwards. The covered their father's nakedness... Then Noah ceased from his wine. He learned what his littlest son had done to him. He declared: "Canaan is cursed. A slave even among slaves shall be his brothers. But he also said: "Blessed is the God of Shem, let Canaan be a slave to him...* [He blesses Yaphet, too...] And the story concludes: *Noah lived after the flood for 350 years. All of Noah's days amounted to 950 years. And he then died.*

This, our Jewish flood story, is a mess. Good intentions of restoring a settled, agricultural existence to the post-apocalyptic world lead to a vineyard. Wine is good in Judaism, if not among the best of things. In Judaism, in the blessings over pleasures, this blessing over the fruit of the vine takes precedence over all other blessings and comes first in so many of our rituals. But the fruit of Noah's good intentions lead to drunkenness, some uncomfortable, and euphemistically indescribable sexual content occurs with the youngest son. Out of the blessing of fruit and agriculture comes the curse of Canaan. Out of this curse emerges the blessing of Shem and Yaphet. And here we are, again, in a world made complicated.

These complications are worth reflecting on because they do not merely affect the actors who bring about curse or blessing, but rather *for generations of ancestors to come*. History, their future, is chaotic again. But this messy new world is the תיקון of the text: Good and bad are inflexible polarities. The middle is where we best live, and in which we live most fully human. Living with both polarities allows us to endure and grow past every קץ.

Let me provide you with a very personal example relevant to this very pulpit from which I have today been given the honor and the responsibility of speaking. Noah's real, Jewish story is predicated around inappropriate sexual contact between two men, between two blood family members. From this and other biblical sources arose in our own Reform Judaism prohibitions and still-extant feelings against homosexuality. Echoes of Noah's tale once and sometimes still do lead to the dehumanization of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

I speak today in *erev rav*, God-willing, in the last stages before becoming a rabbi. But when I was a child in the opening years of the 1980s, such a thing as me being here would have been forbidden--if not directly by policy then by treatment of many of the members of this community, and the judgment of HUC. I would have been told to remain in my ark, to accept that the קץ had come and that there was nothing left. I grew up an evolved in my humanity at the edge of this disaster of homophobia sweeping the world during the 80s. People now seem only to remember this time in echoes in stories. But it was all so recent.

Reform Judaism learned in the late 21st century from this Torah tale about Noah and his littlest son and from others that homosexuality is a sin, is wrong, in the world of good and bad. But human sexuality and sexual identity is not good nor is it bad--it is messy in social, cultural, and religious terms. People whose identity lived marked by this sin still came here. People whose imagination for a better future was stronger than the forces allied against them.

These brave pioneers came here secretly at first. And then they fought and suffered politely and quietly. In the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s to be non-heterosexual in America was to suffer in shadows, despite how people's memory has shifted. Then the brave HUC pioneers stopped whispering. They screamed and suffered aloud, visible, for the recognition of their uniqueness, for their expansion of what it means to be human and Jewish. And good and bad, right and wrong became messy, especially for me watching as I grew. Judaism became flexible.

The tumultuous debate and back-and-forth tides of culture change surged like a flood within this institution over the course of my own life as a Jew as these brave folks fought. The institution began to listen, to become more flexible and less ossified, bit by bit. I watched (astounded) and grew up as HUC debated the morality and Jewish appropriateness of the very details of my particular form of humanity. From these halls was debated: *whom* I love by my biology and mind, *how* that love happens physically, *how* that placed new demands on the liberal Jewish community and forced it to evolve, *if* I could be a rabbi--a leader and a model Jew.

I stand today as a gay Jew in *erev rav* made human by that horrific קץ. My beginning journey to the rabbinate comes in the wake of the terrible flood.That flood, surging here for most of my life, was when this place thought me inhuman, or the wrong species of human. But ends, as we learn from Noah, are not apocalypses. קצים are where we come out and work and become human. We, by which I mean HUC as an institution, are not good. Nor are as HUC we bad. We are engaged in the complex mess of this post-diluvian world. But we do *still* need to become more comfortable with the fact that this mess--not the sublime realm of ideology and inhuman ideals--is where we are honestly human, and in this mixture of good and bad we become better Jews.

I am not a blessing. I am not a curse. I am chaotic, human, and Jewish, like the rest of you. I tell you this that we might learn the lesson of flexibility in our messy world, of the need to evolve

our culture, our imagination, our language and our tools in our starting out to begin again, disaster after disaster.

The natural world is one of chance survival, observed Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace when they independently theorized evolution through natural selection 140 years ago. Some creatures, in which resides the breath of all life, are through genetic mutation or sexual selection born different. The ever-changing earth favors or disfavors these changes. If they live, they are passed on. If they die these genetic changes die with them. But humans have a capacity to direct our own survival against natural disasters, like the post-ice age floods remembered in Noah.

As humanity, we became human--linguistically, imaginatively, and technologically--because of our genetic predisposition toward flexibility. We are different *because of our minds that can imagine a future, that can express complex symbolism in language across generations and across geographic space.* Humans are different because our imaginative capacity and our linguistic art together afford us the skill of technology. Technology and society coordinated by kinship networks can have two ends: We *can* become flexible. If we are flexible and evolve, we survive and hopefully thrive. But if we do not, we ossify, we fossilize, we die, and all that we are is not inherited by a future world.

As Jews, it seems like the Torah pushes us to see, if we listen carefully enough, that we do not give up on intense engagement in everyday life for the grand nor for the sublime. We engage in the details to build a world. We are neither sinners nor saved, in the Western Christian of Muslim formulations of the idea; rather, we are human--betwixt and between getting things right and wrong.

Our unique literary echo of the end of the ice age is as follows: *You will set out again and imagine, speak, invent, and survive. You will be flexible and evolve to thrive, or you won't survive long. There will be outcomes for your actions independent of your intentions. You will do, and there will arise curses and blessings. Not just against or for you. There will be curses and blessings that affect you, and your children, and your children's children's children. This is our complicated world. Its messiness matters, and it is precisely here where we seek meaning--in the everyday details of life.*