

## Noach: Escape from Dystopia

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Humanity is constantly searching for a better tomorrow. Dissatisfied with our current reality, we endlessly dream of a better world without hardship and sadness. Hope for a better place upholds our belief in human potential and in the possibility of change.

As Jews, we don't just believe in the possibility of better tomorrow- we actively yearn and pray for it. As advanced as our world sometimes feels, ultimately, our world is a fallen shell of the more perfect world which we were banished from. Through original sin, Man was expelled from that world and through repeated national betrayals Jews fell into dark exile. We constantly yearn for national restoration, religious renewal and a return to Gan Eden. Though Man's can improve his condition and advance that future, only Hashem can provide comprehensive redemption of history. While humanity, in general, dreams of a better world, Jews assert that restoration is the inevitable terminus of history. The pasuk "chadesh yameinu c'kedem" (restore us as in days of yore) is both prayer and prediction. Humanity in general, and Jews in particular, all gaze across the horizon for a better tomorrow. Utopia beckons us all.

In 1516 Thomas More, a Renaissance humanist, authored a book named "Utopia" and this word - adapted from Greek- has encapsulated humanity's hopes and dreams for that better place. Ironically, a culture of "dystopianism" has recently become popular. As opposed to a utopian dream of a more advanced world, dystopianism describes a world of disorder and dysfunction. Typically, in these storylines, an apocalyptic event such as war, contagion, or natural disaster reshuffles the world order, replacing it with a condition of suffering and injustice generally characterized by oppressive governmental control, rampant medical challenges, severe shortages of food, loss of liberty and environmental calamity. Perhaps the most well-known examples from the past century are the books of George Orwell (1984, Animal Farm). In fact, the term "Orwellian" is often employed to characterize a dystopian state of affairs. In the 2010's numerous books, movies and TV programs have been cast against dystopian backgrounds.

Dystopian narratives offer a glimpse of the fragility of human society and the dangers of irresponsible political, social or environmental policies. Dystopian storylines also invite artificial escape from the challenges of our reality. As we face the adversities of life, our triumphs empower us just as our failures and struggles dispirit us. For those trapped in a Kafkaesque nightmare, Orwellian or dystopian prophecies offer an imaginative escape: the current world as we know it - complete with our struggles and frustrations- may be ending and may be replaced by a harsher world. The current world is erased and we can start fresh!!

Additionally, dystopian prophecies can lower the bar of personal achievement. A dystopian world is so harsh that mere survival is heroic and success can be attained through merely "keeping afloat" even without advancing toward personal goals. Dystopia allows us to ignore failures in our current world by anticipating a different world with more minimalist expectations. By introducing a harsher reality and a global reboot, dystopia acquits us from our current failures and frustrations.

Jewish thought flatly rejects the notion of dystopia. Four thousand years ago the world descended into dysfunction, forcing Hashem to restart His world. Inviting Noach into His refreshed planet, Hashem promised that the world would never again be destroyed. This new biosphere would be stable and its natural routine would remain indestructible. Humanity would sometimes fail and sometimes succeed, but the planet and the natural order would each be indissoluble. Doomsday prophecies about impending global apocalypses or meteor collisions are false. There may be apocalyptic events on the road to Messianic utopia, but an enduring condition of sustained dystopia will not replace reality. Ultimately, though, the world as we know it, will endure, and whatever challenges we currently face are ours to deal with; our troubles won't be deleted through a global reboot or by the introduction of a minimalist or survivalist world.

This message of parshat Noach frames about a sustainable world, also frames Judaism's view of the future. The gemara in Eiruvin comments "hayom la'asotam u'l'machar l'kabel secharam' (today is for performance while tomorrow is for reward), discouraging us from fleeing into a future world of reward as an escape from the immense challenges and opportunities of this world. Religion is meant to ground

us in the "present" even as we are aware of a dazzling future which awaits us. Residing in the potential of the "present" we don't not elope to Utopia just as we do not abscond to the fiction of dystopia. We aren't hypnotized by the future of Utopia just as we aren't seduced by the illusion of Dystopia. Today.

Life under the influence of Covid-19 can sometimes feel dystopian. The sudden collapse of our world order invites notions that world will soon degenerate into an unrecognizable state. Parshat Noach reminds us all that the world isn't ending and, at some point, Hashem will help us solve this pandemic. Surviving both the medical dangers and personal pressures of Covid-19 each demand great courage and significant emotional resources. However, this dystopian-like challenge mustn't lower the bar of our moral and religious journey. Whatever dreams we possessed before 2019 must continue to drive our future. Whatever challenges we faced beforehand, remain an essential part of our personal and religious identity. Surviving cannot be enough – especially for Jews who live with a higher purpose.

Finally, while living through a dystopian-like event we can't forget how close we are to Utopia. Last century we defeated Nazi genocide as well as Communist attempts to eradicate religion. While these storms were raging, we tirelessly rebuilt our national fiber and, of course, resettled our ancient homeland. Much of the world was opposed and even overtly hostile to our historical project of return. Yet, we have inched closer to the fulfillment of the great prophecies of our Book. Dark clouds have now descended upon our world, as humanity suffers through this pandemic. We may feel like residents of Dystopia but we are in fact authors of Utopia. One day the clouds will lift and we will see the shining towers of Utopia which continue to summon history forward.