

Comments on Noah: Why Were the Animals Also Destroyed?
Rabbi Eliot Malomet October 21, 2023 6 Marcheshvan 5784

Among the perennial questions related to the story of Noah is why did God destroy the animals? It's one thing for God to destroy humanity for its corruption, but why should the animals have been held accountable? Some answers:

<p>כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על הארץ (בראשית ו:יב) א"ר יוחנן: מלמד שהרביעו בהמה על תיה ותיה על בהמה והכל על אדם ואדם על הכל. סנהדרין קח.</p>	<p><i>With regard to the verse: "For all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth" (Gen. 6:12) Rabbi Yohanan says: This teaches that the people of the generation of the flood mated male domesticated animals with female undomesticated animals, and male undomesticated animals with female domesticated animals, and all male animals with human females, and human males with all female animals. Sanhedrin 108a</i></p>
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As gross as it is, it is based on a certain logic. In the creation story, God creates animals and humans separately with two divine utterances, one for the animals, one for humans:

<p>ויאמר אלהים תוצא הארץ נפש חיה למינה בהמה ורמש ותחתו ארץ למינה ויהי כן... ויאמר אלהים נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו... בראשית א:כד-כו</p>	<p>(1) God said: Let the earth bring forth living beings after their kind, herd animals, crawling things, and the wildlife of the earth after their kind! It was so... (2) God said: Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness! (Gen. 1:24-26)</p>
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God creates human beings as distinct creatures, endowed with the dignity of the divine image. The pre-Flood humans disregard that dignity in the most elemental way possible. To R. Yohanan, in addition to the repugnance of it, the intermingling of the species is the undoing of creation. It is an affront to God and something akin to contamination. When you have a moldy loaf of bread, do you cut off the mold and save unaffected parts, or throw the whole thing out? R. Yohanan that while the humans are responsible, everything is contaminated and must be destroyed.

<p>רבי יודן ורבי פנחס. רבי יודן אמר משל למלך שמסר את בנו לפדגוג והוציאו לתרבות רעה. כעס המלך על בנו והרגו. אמר המלך: כלום הוציאו את בני לתרבות רעה אלא זה? בני אבד הוא ונה קיים? לפיכך מאדם עד בהמה עד רמש ועד עוף השמים.</p>	<p>Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Pinchas: Rabbi Yudan said: This is analogous to a king who entrusted his son to a teacher who caused him to stray onto an evil path. The king became angry at his son and killed him. The king said: Was it not this man who caused him to stray onto an evil path? My son is lost; should this man endure? That is why: "[And the Lord said, I will obliterate...] from man to animal, to crawling creatures, to bird of the heavens."</p>
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<p>רבי פינחס אמר: משל למלך שהיה משיא את בנו ועשה לו חפה. סידה וכירה וצורה. כעס המלך על בנו והרגו. מה עשה? נכנס לתוך החפה התחיל לשבר את הקנקנים מפרעו בהצאות ומקרע בכריות. אמר המלך: כלום עשיתי זו אלא בשביל בני? בני אבד וזו קימת? לפיכך מאדם ועד בהמה ועד עוף השמים (בראשית ו:ז) בראשית רבה כח:ו</p>	<p>Rabbi Pinchas said: This is analogous to a king who was marrying off his son and prepared a wedding chamber for him. He whitewashed it, painted it, and decorated it. The king grew angry at his son and killed him. What did he do? He entered the wedding chamber and began shattering the wood strips, breaking the walls, and ripping the curtains. The king said: Did I not prepare this only for my son? My son is lost; should this [structure] endure? That is why God destroyed "from man to animal...to bird of the heavens." (Gen. 6:7) Gen. Rabbah 28:6</p>
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In Rabbi Yudan's parable, the king (God) employs the teacher (the earth and all its creatures) to educate his son (humanity). As strange as this might sound, in this picture, humans were to learn from animals and model themselves on animal behaviors, and then presumably at some point, they were to distinguish themselves from animals to become human. (Sounds a little like evolution, no?) But instead of differentiating themselves from animals, human beings ended up emulating the worst in animals in wanton cruelty, predatory behavior and unbridled wildness. In other words, human beings become evil. For that reason, God destroys human beings, and in the process, destroys the animals because they modeled that behavior to them. In Rabbi Pinchas' parable, the king (God) prepares a beautiful huppah (the world) for his son (humanity). The son angers the king, presumably because of his evil, and being unable to withstand this evil, the king puts him to death. In a moment of nihilism, the king says, what's the point of all of this? And he begins to dismantle the huppah. The message: God creates the world for the purpose of human beings. When human beings become evil, this angers God to the point that God decides to annihilate them and start over. God sees no point in sustaining a world and its creatures for evil human beings and so destroys the humanity, and all of its creatures, together with the world.



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A different take, based on Yonatan Grossman, *Genesis: A Tale of Beginnings* (2017). Let's focus on one specific aspect of the world before and after the Flood. When the first human couple is created in Genesis 1, God blesses them and says:

פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשְׁהָ וּרְדוּ בְדַגַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל חַיַּת הָרֶמֶשׂת עַל הָאָרֶץ.

Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth and subdue it! Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and all living things that crawl about on the earth! (Gen. 1:28)

When God blesses Noah upon his exit from the ark, he says: פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ. וּמִוֹרָאֲכֶם וּחְתָכֶם יִהְיֶה עָלֶיךָ כָּל חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וְעַל כָּל עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּרְמַשׁ הָאָדָמָה וּבְכָל דְגַי הַיָּם בְּיַדְכֶם גִּתְנוּ. (בראשית ט:א-ב)

Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth! Fear-of-you, dread-of-you shall be upon all the wildlife of the earth and upon all the birds of the heavens, all that crawls on the ground and all the fish of the sea— into your hand they are given. (Gen. 9:1-2)

What's the difference between the two blessings? In both they are told to **Bear fruit and be many**. But what is the difference between **subduing** the earth and **having dominion** over all the living creatures, vs. having the creatures **fear** and **dread** human beings? In God's plan for the world in Genesis 1, human beings are to be sovereign over the world. That is what being **in God's image** means: just as God is sovereign over the universe, humans are to be - **in God's image** - sovereign over all living creatures. The verb **וּרְדוּ** means to **have dominion**. We see this verb in the context of rules relating to the Hebrew slave: **לֹא תִרְדֶּה בוֹ בְּפָרֶךְ** (Lev. 25:43), and in other contexts relating to dominion over others - **Solomon has dominion over the whole region west of the Euphrates** (1 Kings 5:4). Sovereignty implies a hierarchical relationship: the king rules over the subject. But it also implies dependency: the king takes care of the subject and doesn't kill him/her. In other words, sovereignty implies mutuality and symbiosis. In God's plan of creation in Genesis 1, humans have sovereignty over animals. They can employ them but they are also to take care of them, and, most importantly, they cannot kill them for food. In this idyllic pre-Flood world, animals and humans are supposed to get along symbiotically, and all the species are distinct from one another **וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת כָּל הָרֶמֶשׂת עַל הָאָרֶץ לְמִינָהּ** - **God made the wildlife of the earth after their kind, and the herd-animals after their kind, and all crawling things of the soil after their kind** (Gen. 1:25), and human beings are specifically differentiated from animals. **In that idyllic world, human beings (and animals, by the way) are supposed to be vegetarians:** **הָיָה נְתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת כָּל עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת כָּל הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ פְרִי עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לָכֶם וְהָיָה לָאֲכֹלָה**. Here, I give you all plants seeding forth seeds that are upon the face of all the earth, and all trees in which there is tree fruit seeding forth seeds; for you

shall they be, for eating, (Gen. 1:29). In other words, God envisions an equilibrium between all species, with human beings having dominion over them, that is, taking care of them while at the same time, not killing them for food or for any other purpose like ritual or sport.

The crisis that brings about the Flood is that human beings become corrupt in all conceivable ways, including those offered by the rabbis above. **But the main aspect of that corruption is the failure to manage that sovereignty over creation and thereby live up to being in the image of God.** Already as early as Cain and Abel, human beings break that symbiosis. As a shepherd, Abel not only raises sheep for wool. At some point, he discovered that eating roasted animal flesh was a highly efficient, less labor-intensive means of getting nourishment. He breaks the symbiosis. And in at least one instance, he slaughters animals for a sacrifice. In our natural horror at what happens next, we overlook the fact that when he offered his sacrifice, he is actually violating the norm that God ordained! We mis-read that story to think that God "preferred" Abel's sacrifice. But when the Torah says **וַיֵּשֶׁעַ ה' אֶל הַקָּבָל וְאֵל מִנְחָתוֹ** - **And God turned to Abel and his offering** - it means that God was **surprised and astonished at Abel's act** and **took note of Abel**, as opposed to simply **accepting** his sacrifice. In other words, Abel's sacrifice was so innovative and extraordinary as a demonstration of power, ingenuity, and creativity, that God **took note of it and (more importantly!) he took note of Abel** in a way that was obviously upsetting to Cain. With Abel violating one divine norm to gain God's attention, Cain felt challenged to violate the norm himself. Instead of just killing an animal, he kills a human being, his brother. Thus, God's plan for the world is shattered already in the first generation. The symbiosis between humans and animals, as well as between humans and other humans, is shattered. It is a wonder that God doesn't start over right then and there. But in the hope that human beings will return to the norm, God waits to see what happens for the next ten generations. Things just get worse. Before the Flood the existence of the world depended on human beings. If humans violated the norm, the existence of the entire world was at stake. When they violated it, the world was destroyed. After the Flood, when the world was reconstituted with Noah, God no longer places that tremendous degree of responsibility on human beings because he knows they can't live up to it. They are no longer sovereign over animals and live symbiotically with them. They may kill for food, but they may not consume blood. Murder of other human beings is forbidden. Why were the animals killed in the Flood? Because prior to the Flood animals were dependent on human beings. When human beings in their depravity, behaved more like animals, they violated that symbiosis. The animals perished because of human depravity. Sadly, as the Simhat Torah Massacre in Israel has tragically demonstrated to us, human depravity and evil, is still with us. In abundance.

עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי!

שִׁבְתָּ שְׁלוֹמִים.