



No'ach

Survivors of Trauma

There are many words in the English language that originally had great power but have become watered down over the years to the point of meaninglessness. One such word is "survivor". Another is "trauma".

When I think back to my early adult life I remember the word "survivor" being reserved for those who endured a severe crisis but, either because of their exceptional skills or good fortune, emerged from it with minimal physical harm. They resumed relatively normal lives but had to cope with a variety of practical and emotional challenges.

Nowadays, the word "survivor" is applied freely even to those who have experienced the normal and expected daily difficulties which all human beings face and who have simply gone on living. "Survivor" has thus become a term that easily fits all of us.

A similar observation could be made about the word "trauma". It was

originally used to describe catastrophic conditions of great suffering, such as war, life-threatening illness, and natural disasters. Nowadays, the term is used freely to describe far lesser events. So much so that I recently overheard an ardent sports fans refer to her favorite team's loss of several consecutive ball games as a "recurring trauma".

Just last week, we began to reread the Torah. This week, we read the second of a year-long series of weekly Torah portions, No'ach (B'reishit 6:9-11:32). Throughout the coming year, we will search for the common themes of all of these readings.

There is one theme which, I suggest, pervades not only the Chumash, but the entire Jewish Bible. Indeed, it pervades all of Jewish history, down to this very day.

This theme is the story of the "survivor"; the person who lives through trauma and who copes, one way or another, with life as a survivor, with life after trauma.

One such person is the hero of this week's Torah portion, No'ach. No'ach survived the destruction of all of civilization. In the words of our Sages, he lived to see "a built-up world, a destroyed world, and a rebuilt world". No'ach was a "survivor of trauma" - no doubt about it.

There are many other candidates in the Bible who merit the term "survivor of trauma", Adam and Chava suffered trauma. They lived in paradise. But they lost it. That's trauma. They survived and went on to make lives for themselves. That's survival.

King David suffered trauma and was a survivor. So was Iyov, and so was Yirmiyahu. In a sense, so was Yona.

Names of survivors in the long history of our people come readily to mind and include rabbinic sages such as Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Rambam suffered trauma and survived mightily, as did Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel, who writes at length about the several traumas that he lived through and survived.

Finally, the horrific Holocaust, the ultimate trauma, left numerous survivors, some of whose memoirs are world famous, such as Victor Frankel, Primo Levy, and Eli Wiesel. I, for one, and many of the readers of this column, have known quite a few survivors.

In a sense, we are all survivors. Who can teach us the skills of survival?

Let us conceive of No'ach as the archetypal survivor. What can we learn from this week's Torah reading about the way he coped with the challenges of survival in the wake of

the world's nearly total destruction?

You know the story. No'ach and the members of his immediate family find refuge in the Ark from the Great Flood. The flood ends, the waters recede, and finally the Almighty speaks to No'ach and says, "Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives." They exit the ark. They survive the trauma.

But then, what does No'ach do? What are his first actions as a survivor? He starts off on the proverbial right foot. "No'ach built an altar to the Lord... He offered burnt offerings on the altar." No'ach expresses his gratitude to the Almighty.

The Almighty responds in kind. He says, "Never again will I doom the earth because of man... Nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done."

The Almighty does not stop there. He goes on to bless No'ach and his sons and He establishes an everlasting covenant with them.

So far, so good. But we abruptly learn of No'ach's weakness. We read: "No'ach, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk and he uncovered himself within his tent (9:20-21)".

No'ach resorts to drink to deal with

the challenges that face every subsequent survivor of trauma. He was the first survivor to resort to intoxicating substances to cope with the aftereffects of trauma, but he most certainly was not the last.

Is intoxication the only coping method available to survivors? It is here that I'd like to bring an insight of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch into play.

He notes that the Hebrew word in our verse for "became drunk" is VAYISHKAR. The root letters of this word are SHIN-KAF-REISH. Rav Hirsch notes that there are several other words in Hebrew with similar root letters. Two of them are SHIR, song or poem, and SHEKER, falsehood. He proceeds to explain that these three terms represent three different modes of relationship between truth and reality.

For Rav Hirsch, truth is not synonymous with reality. Reality is what is, whereas truth is what can be. The person who uses SHIR, the poetic imagination, knows that he can transform the truth which often lies hidden in the present into a new future reality. He need not live forever in a condition of post-traumatic stress. He can use the truth of his poetic imagination, of his hopes and dreams, to construct a new and better reality. This is the preferred mode for the survivor of trauma.

No'ach, however, chose a different mode entirely. He chose SHIKOR, drink. Faced with a traumatic reality, he creates for himself a fantasy reality, stimulated by intoxicating substances. He opts for a reality distorted by drink, an artificial reality, an illusion which fades rapidly with time. This is not a solution to the problem of post-traumatic survival.

Then there is a third mode, the mode of SHEKER, of falsehood. This mode comes in many varieties. We now have a vocabulary for those varieties: denial, false ideologies, alternate facts, fictitious memories. These mechanisms will not dissipate the pernicious effects of traumatic experiences.

Clearly, Rav Hirsch recommends the method of SHIR, the cultivation of the positive processes which we all possess, but of which we are seldom aware: Creative imagination, enlisting the cooperation of others, courage, and above all hope.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is wont to explain, "Hope is not optimism and optimism is not hope. Optimism is the conviction that things will be better. Hope is the conviction that we can make things better."

The survivor who effectively deals with the traumas of his or her past strives to make things better, and in the process not only survives but thrives, transcends the painful

memories of the past, and painstakingly constructs a better future.

No'ach failed as a survivor. Perhaps that is the essential distinction between him and the hero of next week's Torah portion, Avraham. He too survived traumas, ten trials by the count of our rabbis, but he was able to employ the mode of SHIR, not SHIKOR and not SHEKER.

He utilized truth to create a new reality, the reality of monotheism and, eventually, the reality of the Jewish people. 📌