

The Rainbow vs. Violence: No'ach 5787

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Note: This week's Torah commentary contains references to domestic violence and other sensitive content.

Before the Flood, powerful men took whichever women they chose. (Genesis 6:2.) The ancient rabbinic collection Bereshit Rabbah 26:5 envisioned princes seizing women who had been promised to other men. The Flood was meant to destroy a world in which powerful people disposed of other people's bodies. Yet violence survived inside the ark. I read the scene of Genesis 9:19–29 as centered on a silent but violent act: Noah sexually abuses his son Ham before rendering his son's denunciation an offense.

Why must Noah curse Ham, father of Canaan in Genesis 9:25? Genesis 6:9 had called Noah “righteous within his generations” (“צַדִּיק... בְּדֶרֶתוֹ”). The French commentator Rashi (c. 1028–1105) asked: Is this praise, or was his righteousness merely relative? Bereshit Rabbah 36:3 goes further: “the righteous is now called a man of the soil” (“אִישׁ צַדִּיק... נִקְרָא אִישׁ אֲדָמָה”), for “he profaned himself and became profane” (“נִתְחַלֵּל וְנִעֲשָׂה חֵלִין”). The righteous man of the Flood is not immune from wrongdoing.

Noah was alone. He drank, became drunk, and exposed himself; as Genesis 9:21 puts it, “he uncovered himself.” Once Ham entered in the next verse, “he saw his father's nakedness.” Between these two verses lies a gap. I place in that gap the scene the text leaves undescribed. The Torah knows how to name sexual assault when it chooses to: in Genesis 34:2, Shekhem sees, takes, lies with, and violates Dinah. Here,

our Torah names nothing. Our sages did not leave this silence empty. Citing sages from the early 1st millennium C.E., the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 70a, recalls two responses to Genesis 9:22's reference to "what his smallest son had done to him:" "וְאֶחָד אָמַר סָרְסוּ וְאֶחָד אָמַר רָבְעוּ" ("One said: he castrated him; the other said: he raped him").

Genesis does not tell us what Ham saw. However, Genesis 9:22 tells us what Ham did with what he saw: after going outside, "וַיֵּגֵד" (*vayyagged*)—traditionally translated as "he told" (Genesis 9:22). Playing on this Hebrew word's three-letter root, which can also mean "to stretch," the Aramaic translation Targum Onkelos (from circa 200 C.E.) portrays Ham as spreading his father's shame in the street.

When Genesis 9:24 tells us that Noah learned "what his smallest son had done to him," Rashi labels "[Noah's] smallest son" ("בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן") as "the invalid and shameful one" ("הַפֶּסוּל וְהַבִּזְיוֹן"). The 13th century French rabbi Chizkiyahu ben Mano'ach, in his *Chizkuni* commentary, considers that "what his smallest son had done to him" was a "good deed" ("הַטּוֹבָה")—as if the act protected his father. The act attributed to the son may be his very speech, exposing the father's crime.

The language of nakedness leads directly to incest. Leviticus 18:7–8 identifies the "nakedness of the father" with that of the father's wife. In their article "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20–27)," Drs. John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn proposed that Ham engaged sexually with his own mother (Noah's wife), interpreting the son's offense as a usurpation of Noah's patriarchal authority. Whether or not Ham retaliated, pointing accusatory fingers of blame away from Noah's inciting act of abuse temporarily relieves Noah of any transgression he committed. Commentators exploring Ham's own sin do not necessarily conceal Noah's crime, but they make his crime—at least temporarily—unthinkable.

In Genesis 9:23, Shem and Yefet walk backward, their faces turned away, and cover Noah, having not seen their father's nakedness. On the surface, their humbleness seems praiseworthy; however, the cloak thrown over the father becomes the straitjacket of a family who prefers not to know—a cover-up, refusing to become witnesses and unable to produce testimony. Family honor becomes a regime of silence. We know this logic; the violence causes the silence, and perpetrators are protected by their position, while victims are accused of destroying the family or the community.

Reading Noah's curse against Canaan in Genesis 9:25, the Egyptian-Babylonian Jewish philosopher Sa'adyah Ga'on (882–942) understands that the real object of the curse is the father of Canaan, Ham. The divine blessing of Genesis 9:1 had prevented Noah from cursing Ham directly; to strike the child is to reach the father through his lineage. In this reading, the denunciation of assault is punished in the person of the grandson. Bereshit Rabbah 36:7 expresses its outrage: “Ham sinned, yet Canaan was cursed?” (“חַם חָטָא וְכַנְעָן נִתְקַלַּל”). This all contradicts the declaration of Ezekiel 18:20: “The son shall not bear the guilt of the father.”

After the flood, a rainbow testified that God limits God's own power. Noah would not do the same. He emerged from the Ark, ready to torture and to denounce his family, punishing his descendants. A covenant with all flesh, on the other hand, is proven not by the demonstration of power, but by a commitment to truth and justice.

All commentaries on the Book of Genesis in this Jewish year have been dedicated by Barbara and Art Hoffman to the memory of Carolyn J. Hoffman.