

What Can Judaism Teach Us About Sustainability at This Crucial Moment in History?

1. Drilling a Hole on a Ship

מדרש ויקרא רבה ד:ו

תני חזקיה (ירמיה נ, יז): "שֶׁהַפְּזוּרָה יִשְׂרָאֵל", נמשלו ישראל לשֶׁה, מה שֶׁה הִזָּה לֹקָה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ אוּ בְּאֶחָד מֵאֲבָרָיו וְכָל אֲבָרָיו מְרַגְּשִׁין, כִּדְּהוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶחָד מֵהֶן חוֹטֵא וְכָלֶן מְרַגְּשִׁין (במדבר טז, כב): "הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחָטָא", תני רבי שמעון בר יוחאי: מִשָּׁל לְבָנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהָיוּ יוֹשְׁבֵין בְּסִפִּינָה, נָטַל אֶחָד מֵהֶן מִקֹּדֶם וְהִתְחִיל קוֹדֵם תַּחְתּוֹ, אָמְרוּ לוֹ חֲבֵרָיו מַה אַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹשֶׂה, אָמַר לָהֶם מַה אֶכְפֵּת לָכֶם לֹא תַחְתִּי אֲנִי קוֹדֵם? אָמְרוּ לוֹ שֶׁהֵמָּה עוֹלִין וּמַצִּיפִין עָלֵינוּ אֶת הַסִּפִּינָה. כִּדְּאָמַר אִיּוֹב (איוב יט, ד): "וְאֶף אֲמַנְם שְׁגִיתִי אֶתִּי תָלִין מְשׁוּגָתִי", אָמְרוּ לוֹ חֲבֵרָיו (איוב לד, לז): "כִּי יִסִּיף עַל חֲטָאתוֹ פֶּשַׁע בִּינֵינוּ יִשְׁפּוֹק", אַתָּה מְסַפִּיק בִּינֵינוּ אֶת עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ.

Midrash Vayikra Rabbah –4:6 Translation from *Judaic Classics Library* and Artscroll. Bolded sections are translation of the text. Non-bolded sections are editor's insertions:

...R' Shimon ben Yochai provides an analogy to people who were sitting in a boat. One of them took a borer and began boring a hole in the floor of the boat **beneath him**. His friends said to him, 'What are you sitting and doing to the boat?!' He replied to them, "What does it matter to you? Am I not boring beneath myself?!" They said to him, "Your actions are of concern to us, **because the waters are rising through that hole and flooding the entire boat!**"

The Midrash relates a passage from *Job* to this idea: **So said Job, Even if I have erred, my error lodges within me** (Job 19:4). [Job's] friends said to him in response, **For he adds rebellion to his error, among us "yispok"** (ibid. 34:37), meaning, **you are bringing punishment among us for your sins**.

Questions for consideration:

- What motivates this person to dig a hole under their seat?
- What accounts for the disregard of other people's welfare?
- What can the people on the ship do to convince this person to change his or her behavior?

דגל מחנה אפרים במדבר פרשת שלח ד"ה עוד ירמוז

עוד ירמוז דרך מוסר השכל על דרך מאמרם ז"ל (קידושין מ' א) לעולם יראה אדם עצמו כאילו כל העולם כולו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף זכות עשה עבירה אחת וכו' עיין שם, עוד ענין אחר לעורר על זה כי ידוע שכל העולם כולו בכלל, הוא אדם שלם ובפרטות יש עיני העדה ראשי העדה רגלי העדה וכן שאר בחינות ובכללם הוא פרצוף שלם ולכן כל שלימות העולם תלוי באיש אחד כשפוגם חס ושלום אזי פוגם בשלימות העולם ונתפשט הגע מחציו בכולו כדאיתא משל במדרש (ויקרא רבה ד', ו) באחד שעשה נקב בספינה ושאלו אותו למה אתה עושה זה והשיב תחתי ובמקומי אני נוקב והתחילו לצחק בו כן הוא הדבר גם כן בכללות נשמות של ישראל האחוזים בשורש אחד כל אחד לפי בחינתו וכל אחד ואחד תלוי בו שלימות העולם כולו:

Degel Machane Efraim (Parshat Shelach), translated by R' Leo Dee

The Sages taught (Kiddushin 40a) "A person should always look at the world as if it is perfectly balanced: 50% meritorious and 50% wicked. If a person does one mitzvah – great, the whole world is shifted to merit, but one sin and.... Another perspective: the world is like a whole human being – there are the eyes of society, heads of society, limbs of society and so on. Just as when one limb is afflicted, the ailment spreads across the whole body, so too when one person in the world is afflicted, the ailment spreads across the whole of society. That is the parable of the man drilling a hole in the boat – we can laugh at it, but it represents the souls of the Jewish people that sprout out of a single root, with each soul offering its unique qualities, the whole world depends on each and every soul to make it complete.

2. Noah's Ark and the Spiritual Roots of the Flood

בראשית פרק ו פסוקים יא-יד

יִא וַתִּשְׁחַת הָאָרֶץ לְפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וַתִּמָּלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס: יב וַיֵּרָא אֶל-לֵהִים אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה נִשְׁחָתָה כִּי הִשָּׁחִית כָּל בָּשָׂר אֶת דְּרָכָו עַל הָאָרֶץ: יג וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-לֵהִים לָנֹחַ קֵץ כָּל בָּשָׂר בָּא לְפָנַי כִּי מָלְאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס מִפְּנֵיהֶם וְהִנְנִי מַשְׁחִיתָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ: יד עֲשֵׂה לָךְ תֵּבַת עֲצֵי גִפְרִית...

Genesis Chapter 6, verses 11-14, Judaica Press translation

11. Now the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth became full of robbery [chamas]. **12.** And God saw the earth, and behold it had become corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth. **13.** And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth has become full of robbery because of them, and behold I am destroying them from the earth. **14.** Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood...

Rabbi Samphson Rafael Hirsch, commentary to Genesis 6:11, in The Pentateuch: vol. 1: Genesis, Rendered into English by Isaac Levy from the German, Judaica Press, Gateshead, England, 1989 p. 138-139

Chamas [wrongdoing] is a wrong that is too petty to be caught by human justice, but if committed continuously can gradually ruin your fellow man. Now here it says very significantly: The world was corrupt before God, and then the world was full of wrongdoing. First of all there was corruption of morals, sins that one imagined did not affect general civic life... But when the world is corrupt before God, all the human institutions and laws of society cannot prevent society in general from going to ruin. By *gezel*, open robbery, it will never fall, it knows how to protect itself against that by prisons and penalties. But by *chamas*, underhand dealing by cunning, astute dishonesty, craftily keeping within the letter of the law, it does go to ruin, by wrong which human justice cannot reach, but which can only be prevented by self-judging conscientiousness before God. Immorality kills this trait of the human mind, and with its loss the grave of civic well-being is also dug... It is the *chamas* on which they go to ruin, through which the whole of society becomes *chametz*, ends in fermenting foulness."

3. Jonah's Ship: The Book of Jonah, chapter 1, verses 1-6, Judaica Press Translation

- 1** And the word of God came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying: א וַיְהִי דְבַר יְיָ-הוֹהֵא אֶל יוֹנָה בֶן אֲמִתַּי לֵאמֹר:
- 2** Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim against it, for their evil has come before Me. ב קוּם לֵךְ אֶל נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקֹרֵא עָלֶיהָ כִּי עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לְפָנַי:
- 3** And Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before God, and he went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid its hire, and went down into it to come with them to Tarshish from before God. ג וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְיָ-הוֹהֵא וַיֵּרֵד יָפוֹ וַיִּמְצָא אֲנִיָּה | בָּאָה תַרְשִׁישַׁי וַיִּתֵּן שָׂכָרָהּ וַיֵּרֵד בָּהּ לְבוֹא עִמָּהֶם תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְיָ:
- 4** Now God cast a mighty wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, and the ship threatened to be broken up. ד וַי-הוֹהֵא הַטִּיל רוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה אֶל הַיָּם וַיְהִי סֹעַר גְּדוֹל בָּיָם וְהָאֲנִיָּה חֲשָׁבָה לְהִשָּׁבֵר:

4. The Titanic

From Wikipedia: "RMS Titanic was a British passenger liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in the early morning of 15 April 1912 after colliding with an iceberg during her maiden voyage from Southampton, UK, to New York City, US. The sinking resulted in the loss of more than 1,500 passengers and crew, making it one of the deadliest commercial peacetime maritime disasters in modern history. The RMS Titanic was the largest ship afloat at the time it entered service. On her maiden voyage, she carried 2,224 passengers and crew. Under the command of Edward Smith, the ship's passengers included some of the wealthiest people in the world... On 14 April 1912, four days into the crossing and about 375 miles (600 km) south of Newfoundland, she hit an iceberg at 11:40 p.m. ship's time. The collision caused the ship's hull plates to buckle inwards along her starboard side and opened five of her sixteen watertight compartments to the sea. Titanic was equipped with three main engines... The two reciprocating engines had a combined output of 30,000 hp and a further 16,000 hp was contributed by the turbine. They were powered by steam produced in 29 boilers... They were heated by burning coal, 6,611 tons of which could be carried in Titanic's bunkers with a further 1,092 tons in Hold 3. The furnaces required over 600 tons of coal a day to be shovelled into them by hand, requiring the services of 176 firemen working around the clock. 100 tons of ash a day had to be disposed of by ejecting it into the sea. Titanic's electrical plant was capable of producing more power than an average city power station of the time."