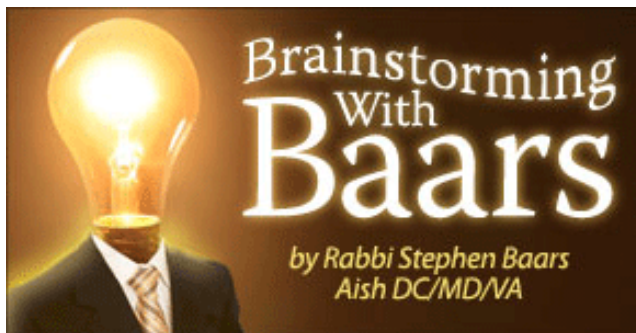


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This Is Boring!

Newly Revised

When did "boring" become cruel and unusual punishment?

On any given Sunday, at least one of my children will proclaim his despair of life with the ubiquitous: "I'm bored." I promptly give him the address of the United Nations and tell him to make a formal complaint to the Security Council.

He never does. I mean what's the point? China will veto it anyway (China vetoes anything that would make the world better).

Truth be told, I get bored too. In fact, and I hate to tell you this, everyone gets bored. Even more shocking, no one lives a life of thrills and excitement where boredom isn't a challenge. Do you think people who are living on the edge of their seats would watch the soaps or care what Tom Cruise is doing? This so-called entertainment only happens among

very bored people.

Only in Hollywood do action men look like they live a life of constant excitement. But nobody really lives that kind of life. Or, to be more accurate, even the people who jump out of planes or hunt dangerous animals for a living get bored with it. This is one of the most interesting aspects of being human.

"Man is exceedingly gifted at taking any aspect of life and turning it into a habit." (Rav Noah Weinberg)

It is equally evident that there are no aspects of meaninglessness to which human beings won't apply great thought.

Marriage, children, friends and family are engaged with numbing routine. Yet we read books, discuss ad-infinity, think and rethink our work, our exercise, our diet, our clothes and even our dishes.

Do you think these two phenomena are related?

In other words, to the degree we obsess with making the meaningless meaningful, we in turn, make the meaningful meaningless.

Take a look in the magazine rack at your local supermarket. It's filled with super-glossy periodicals on everything from golf to weight loss, from cooking to cars. But parenting, marriage, prayer and introspection aren't there. For fun, ask the store manager if they have "Enlightenment Weekly" or are they all sold out? No, you won't see Brad Pitt on the cover of that one.

Coincidence? Not likely. Don't take me wrong here, there is nothing wrong with a game of golf. But there is little right with it either.

Noah's Story

Noah's Ark was gigantic - about the size of a football field. The great flood was coming and God told Noah to build it to save himself and the future.

The project took Noah 120 years of hard work. People came from far and wide to ask Noah what it all meant. Noah told them of the coming destruction. Nobody listened and many in fact ridiculed him. Noah was subject to tremendous alienation and social pressure. The Midrash says that people even wanted to kill him for building the Ark.

However, when the waters finally came, a curious thing happened, Noah hesitated to enter the Ark. He wasn't ready to be saved through the very means he'd labored so hard to build. It was not until the waters came in great torrents that Noah finally entered the Ark. (Rashi - Genesis 7:7)

What happened?

Anything, and more importantly, everything, when done repeatedly, can become boring.

The more familiar, the less thought. At one time, driving was exciting. At one time eating was fun. There is an endless supply of examples. Look at your own life and see how many things you do that at one time you thought were thrilling. It means that the things you think would be thrilling are just as boring if done repeatedly.

"In of itself, nothing is meaningful except change, and changes are only meaningful when things stay the same."

There are two types of changes, the ones that happen on the outside. Those occur when we move, do something different, drive a new car, etc. Those kind of changes don't make any difference:

"Themorethingschangethemoretheystay the same." (Alphonse Karr)

Listen carefully to what Mr. Karr is telling us:
The more things stay the same, the more they change.

When we don't distract ourselves, then we think about what is really important. Anything meaningful needs repeating, and in the repetition, it will become more meaningful. The less we change on the outside the better we become on the inside.

Unless of course, we don't want to.

There is a simple word for when we don't want to deal with a life filled with meaningful acts: boredom.

You can be bored teaching the illiterate, feeding the poor, learning about life, even saving the world. That is, if you let it become a habit.

Habit is not limited to saving the world. Marriage can never be boring if you face the inner challenges you would rather avoid. Anything and everything can be a habit, with disastrous effects.

"Men cling to opinions to which they are accustomed from their youth. This prevents them from finding the truth, for they adhere to the opinions of habit." (Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 1:31)

Brainstorming Questions to Ponder

Question 1: Make a list of the five most meaningful things you do in your life.

Question 2: How many of them give you a

thrill?

Question 3: Go back in your mind to when you were more excited about doing any of the five and try to recreate that experience and feeling.



The Malady of Self-Deception

Yiddish humor defines "**chutzpa**" as the case of a child who murders his parents and then asks for leniency from the court because he is an orphan!

While such **exaggerated self-deception** is hard to imagine in real life, the capacity for human beings to lose touch with their actions can be truly remarkable. A true story which illustrates this took place in a suburb of Warsaw about 70 years ago:

A woman had come from out of town, bringing her family's meager savings with her, searching for profitable business transactions. As it happened, while she was staying at the local Jewish inn, thieves stole her money. When the local rabbis saw how distraught the woman was, they hit upon an unusual plan - to talk with the "leading" thieves in the area, whom these rabbis knew, and see if the money could be retrieved.

Surprised at being summoned by the rabbis, the thieves agreed to a meeting. One of the rabbis explained to them the difficult straits

the victimized woman was in, and, though he was not at all certain what their response would be, suggested that the thieves keep 30 percent of the loot and give the rest back to the poor woman. Upon hearing this, one thief fell into a rage, shouting, "**We worked hard for the money!** It belongs to us! We're not going to keep less than 60 percent!"

Self-deception plays a role in this week's Torah portion. Much of the Parsha revolves around the story of the Great Flood. As is well known, the Biblical narrative describes how mankind had become so evil that the Almighty felt no choice but to destroy the human race and start over again. Only Noah and his family were spared when God brought a flood upon the world and returned it to the **chaotic watery state** that existed at the start of the original creation.

In fact, in many ways the Bible makes clear that what is occurring is nothing less than a "**second creation.**" Aside from the reemergence of the primordial waters, and the renewed mixture of light and darkness, when Noah emerges from the ark, he receives pronouncements from the Almighty virtually identical with those given to Adam - e.g., to care for the world and to propagate it.

What is less clear, however, is **what exactly was the transgression** that "broke the camel's back" and caused the Almighty to bring a flood upon mankind. The Bible actually offers a number of possibilities. One possibility is that people of the time were guilty of sexual licentiousness of a most base type. The Midrash graphically describes the flood as being a case of measure for measure. Since an improper flow of sexuality poured forth from men everywhere, they were punished in turn with a flood of water.

Theft and violence are also described in the Bible as being rampant, and Rashi and many other commentaries see this as the ultimate cause of mankind's demise. While the Almighty

was willing to withhold punishing them for their sexual immorality (since much of that activity was done consensually), He could not tolerate the stealing and victimizing of one another.

Conflict between one's children is one of the most disheartening and aggravating experiences that parents face. In fact, in Jewish tradition, this phenomenon is described as the most upsetting thing to the "Parent of us all," the Almighty. The Midrash notes that in the time of King David, the Israelites did not meet with the same success in battle as they did under the later leadership of King Ahab. **But why should this be** - in David's era the nation worshipped God faithfully, while in Ahab's time they worshipped idols!?

The Midrash explains that during David's life there was much dissension among the people while in Ahab's time the Israelites loved one another. Though they were unfaithful to God, the Almighty still rewarded his children for **the love they showed to one another** by granting them victories on the battlefield.

Much of the book of Genesis is devoted to this **conflict between brothers**. Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, are all stories of bitter sibling rivalries. Yet all these stories **end in reconciliation**. Together, Ishmael and Isaac bury their father Abraham. Jacob and Esau become reconciled when they meet after a 22-year separation. And Joseph forgives his brothers for their allowing him to be sold into slavery.

In the era of the Flood, the Sages suggest a deeper malady associated with the rampant thievery. The Midrash reports that often many thieves would descend on their victim together, but each of them would **take only a very small quantity** of goods to insure their individual exemption from prosecution. The thieves would repeat this over and over again. The end result was that though they had

become enriched, **the thieves could rationalize** they hadn't really done anything wrong, for, after all, no court was demanding they stand trial.

With this understanding, the error of the flood generation was more than simply a case of people constantly stealing. It was a situation in which people had so lost their moral compass that they'd become embroiled in self-deception and could no longer recognize that they'd done wrong. It was because their **self-deception had become so extreme** that they were beyond repair and the Almighty had no choice but to start His creation all over again.



The Power of Unity

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place, [I think,] "What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that you should be mindful of him?" Yet You have made him but slightly less than God, and crowned him with honor and splendor. (Psalms 8:4-6)

Looking up at the cosmos, at the specks of light that seem to stretch onward forever into the millions of galaxies light-years away, we are struck with an overwhelming sense of awe. We get a taste of the Infinite power of the Creator of the universe and in contrast feel so

infinitesimally small. "What is man that You should remember him?" King David proclaims.

And then he explains, "You have made him but slightly less than God." Human beings have incredible power! We can almost match the Almighty.

What is this enormous power that makes us "but slightly less than God"? In this week's parashah the Torah reveals our secret power, a power so strong that mankind realized that it gave them the ability to wage battle against God Himself.

How can this be? Who would be crazy enough to fight with the Creator of the universe?

Sounds ludicrous, but this is exactly what the builders of the Tower of Babel did.

Fighting Against the Almighty

The whole world was united as one nation, with one language and one purpose, as the verse says, "The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose (*devarim achadim*)" (*Bereishis* 11:1). Rashi explains that the words "*devarim achadim*" mean "one plan." "Hashem has no right to take the upper regions for Himself," they reasoned. "Let us ascend to the heavens and wage war against Him."

They plan on building a tower and invading the heavens to fight the Almighty. What are their chances? It's ridiculous.

But listen to God's response: "Behold, they are one people with one language for all, and this they begin to do! And now, it will not be withheld from them" (*Bereishis* 11:6). The Almighty Himself testifies in the Torah that as long as they are united, nothing will stop them from attaining their goal, even though their undertaking is diametrically opposed to Hashem's purpose.

In order to thwart their rebellion, Hashem sowed seeds of dissension among them. "Come, let us descend and confuse their language, so that one will not understand the language of his companion" (*Breishis*, 11:7). By changing their language, He made it difficult for them to communicate with each other, and that caused their unity to implode. Once they were at odds with each other, Hashem was able to disperse them. "And the Lord scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city" (*Breishis*, 11:7,8).

How Great is Peace

The Midrash (*Sifri*, *Naso* 42) describes the incredible power of unity: "How great is peace, for even if Israel worships idolatry, if there is peace among them, the Omnipresent, so to speak, cannot overcome them since there is peace among them."

The generation of the Tower of Babel was far worse than the generation of the flood, because they actually went to war against Hashem! Despite that, Hashem did not wipe them out, since they had one crucial redeeming quality: They were unified, with one purpose and one language, working in complete harmony to achieve their mission. Humanity came together. And as long as they were united, they were unstoppable.

Hashem said, "I cannot punish them since they are united. Of course, I cannot let them succeed with their attack, so I will undermine their unity and scatter them."

The Torah is teaching us the astonishing power of unity. When we are unified, respecting each other and genuinely listening to each other, nothing can stop us. There is an exponential power that is unleashed when we come together.

The Torah says, "Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten

thousand; and your enemies will fall by the sword before you" (*Vayikra* 26:8). But the math seems wrong. If five will chase a hundred, one hundred should chase two thousand. The Midrash says that the Torah is teaching us that "There is no comparison between a few who fulfill the Torah and a multitude who fulfill the Torah" (*Toras Kohanim* 26:10). When we are unified, our power is exponentially greater.

It is this power of unity that King David referred to when he wrote, "Yet You have made him but slightly less than God, and crowned him with honor and splendor." If you want to be in awe, Hashem says, look at mankind. When they are unified, nothing can stop them. Humanity tapped into this incredible power, but they misdirected it, using it against Hashem's plan.

Unleash the Power

The Jewish people's ultimate purpose is "to perfect the world through the Almighty's sovereignty." We are a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (*Shemos* 19:6), but do we know it? Does the entire Jewish people know it? There's no unity because we have forgotten our purpose, and as a result, we become preoccupied with our own egocentric goals, thinking only about ourselves and forgetting about the *klal*, the nation.

The Jewish people civilized humanity. Through our Torah we have taught the world the pillars of morality – monotheism, love your neighbor, justice for all, one nation will not lift their sword against another. Just imagine what we could accomplish if we would respect each other and genuinely listen to each other! We would change the world.

We are living in precarious times. With genuine unity, we can become "but slightly less than God," and then nothing can stop us. We can unleash the power that the Almighty gave us to bring Torah to His people and clarity to

mankind. The world is counting on us.



The Yes Man

No one in the entire Torah is introduced with such glowing accolades as is Noah. He is a "man," he is righteous, he is pure and he walks with God. Three separate times during the account of the Flood, the Torah tells us that Noah did "exactly as God told him to do."

And yet, who is Noah? Midway through this week's portion we are told that he lived for 350 years after the flood, and that's that. He disappears into history as quickly as he came. He is not like Abraham, the first Jew, to whom the Torah devotes four weekly portions, nor certainly the Moses who is featured in the majority of the Torah.

Where did Noah go wrong? What differentiates him from a man like Abraham?

I believe the answer lies precisely in the phrase that Noah did "exactly as God told him." God comes to Noah and says he is about to destroy all of humanity, and that Noah should build an ark to save himself. He doesn't flinch. "Yes, sir. One ark coming right up."

Notice something strange? God says He is about to destroy the world and Noah doesn't flinch. He just goes out and builds an ark.

When Abraham is told that God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he fights tooth

and nail for them. God did not tell him to do so, but God didn't need to. Abraham knew what he believed in and took initiative.

In contrast to Abraham, Noah was a "yes-man." And God does not want yes-men. If he had wanted robots, he could quite easily have created them. But he created us as humans instead - with feelings, thoughts and ideas. God created independence for us to use, not for us to suppress. Abraham stood up for what he believed was right; Noah did not have an opinion. He just followed God.

Following God is not a bad thing. But sometimes, in fact quite often, it's just not enough. God's laws are a structure on which to build, not a jail in which to live.

The word Noah in Hebrew means "rest," intransigence almost. He took the easy way of blind following, not the challenging path of leading the way forward that Abraham and Moses took. That's why the Torah forgets him so quickly. Robots are much less interesting than people.