

Try Your Best
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Temple Emunah

I don't have a lot of time to watch TV, so I try to choose the shows that I do watch carefully. At the moment,

my favorite is "The Good Place." I don't want to give too much away, but the basic premise is that the main characters are dead, and in the afterlife, there is a Good Place and a Bad Place. Every person has a point score, and every action they take during their lives has the potential to raise or lower that score. If



you do something good, you gain points. If you do something bad, you lose points. If you have a high enough score when you die, you go to the Good Place. If you don't, you go to the Bad Place. Seem simple enough.

There's an amazing scene, however, from last year's season, season 3, that turns all of this on its head. One of the characters discovers a record of every action that every person in the world ever took and the impact on their points, and makes the following realization:

"In 1534, Douglass Wynegarr of Hawkhurst, England, gave his grandmother roses for her birthday. He picked them himself, walked them over to her, she was happy, BOOM! 145 points. In **2009**, Doug Ewing of Scaggsville, Maryland, **also** gave his grandmother a dozen roses, but **he lost** four points. Why? Because he ordered roses using a cellphone that was made in a sweatshop. The flowers were grown with toxic pesticides, picked by exploited migrant workers, delivered from thousands of miles away, which created a massive carbon footprint, and his money went to a billionaire racist CEO."



Now, these words, spoken expertly by actor Ted Danson, might seem like a stereotype of concerns that people in certain social groups might worry about, but it's barely an exaggeration of reality. The show is right: our world is complicated. Actions that are completely normative, that people do all the time, have consequences that we don't even know about, and even if we do, they often seem out of our control.

We take actions all the time that hurt other people, and in order to avoid these actions, we often have to behave in ways that are inconvenient to us, seem strange to others, and cost extra money. I know someone who, after a communal meal, will collect everyone else's compost to take home with her. Many of us might say— I recycle a lot, maybe I even compost at home, it's ok to throw something away every once in a while. It's reasonable to not recycle or compost in this case. In fact, it's considered somewhat weird to carry around other people's garbage with you to take home. But who decides what is reasonable and what is weird? It may seem normal to do something, but that action may still have a negative impact on the world. In the language of "The Good Place," it might still lower my points score.

Today in the Torah, we read that Noah was איש צדיק בדורותיו, a righteous person *in his generation*. Of course, the commentators all pounce on that modifying phrase. Is it a compliment, or an insult? If Noah was a good guy only in comparison to people who were so bad that God caused the world to be destroyed because of them, then is that really saying much? The Talmudic sage Rabbi Yohanan says, no! "Relative to the other people **of his generation** he was righteous and wholehearted, **but not** relative to those **of other generations.**" The medieval commentator Rashi spells out Rabbi Yohanan's meaning. "In comparison with his own generation he was accounted righteous, but had he lived in the generation of Abraham he would have been accounted as of no importance." When Abraham was told that a city of wrongdoers would be destroyed, he argued with God to try to save the city. When Noah was told that an entire world would be destroyed, he followed orders, and built an ark to save himself without saying a word. He may have been better than those around him, but

he was still fairly self-centered. Rashi, however, disagrees with Rabbi Yohanan, preferring instead the understanding of Rabbi Yohanan's study partner, Reish Lakish. "If Noah had lived in a generation of righteous people he would have been even **more** righteous, owing to the force of good example." Maybe if he had lived in Abraham's time, Noah would have fought like Abraham to save that city! Maybe he would have fought even harder than Abraham! According to Reish Lakish, our actions must be understood, and judged, in *relation* to our context.

This is not just an exercise in parsing Biblical language. Rabbi Yohanan suggests that we are who we are, no matter what our surroundings. If we are average people, we would be the same anywhere. In some groups, we would be righteous. In some we might be considered downright evil. Our actions should be understood in light of their impact, nothing more. Reish Lakish says something different. We do make our own choices, but we make them in a context. A person of a particular disposition might always be a little more generous than those around them, for example, but that means their level of generosity might change wildly depending on the norms around them. At first glance, this second interpretation seems intuitively right to me. We know that we are influenced by the world around us. Our tastes are shaped by the world around us, our manners are shaped by the world around us, our opinions are shaped by the world around us, and yes, our behavior is shaped by the world around us. Of course we should be judged in context!

On the other hand, there are consequences to any action, no matter how normative it may be. I may decide that it is too weird for me to carry around my garbage, or other people's garbage, in public, and that it is "ok" to throw away recyclables and compostables when I am not in my own home or at *shul*. I don't think it makes me a bad person to use and throw away a recyclable water bottle every once in a long



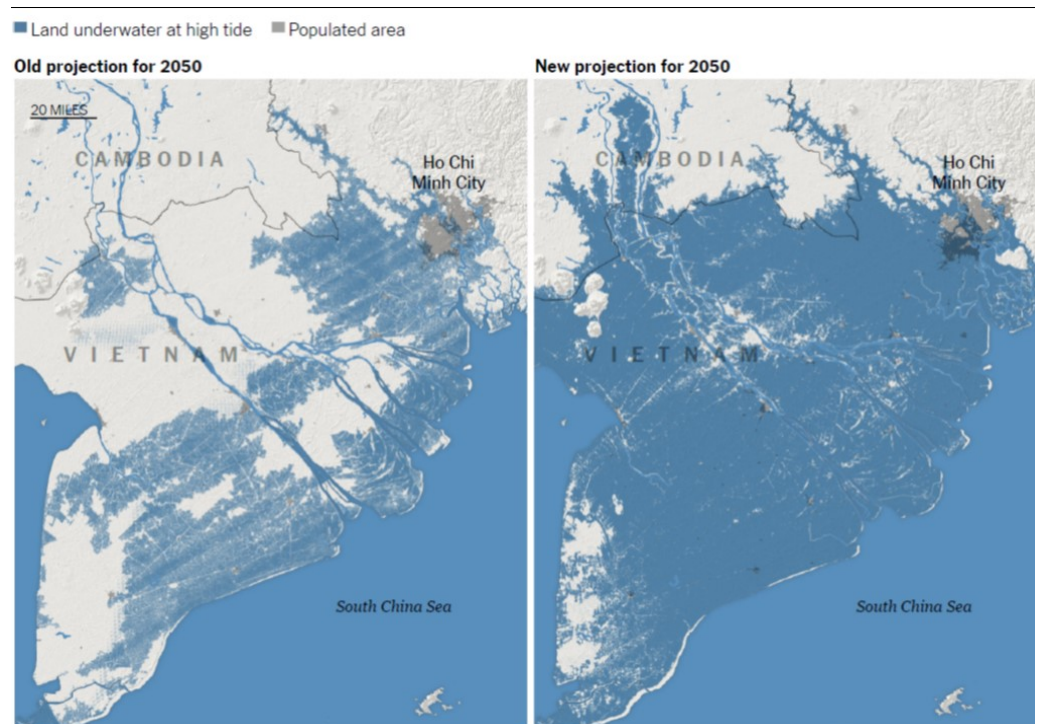
while. But that waste I am creating still adds to our overall garbage output, and that plastic may very well end up in the ocean instead of a landfill, as we have learned often happens. And I may decide that, even though air travel creates enormous carbon emissions, that I still want to travel on occasion, to see family or to go to Israel or for vacations. Can anyone imagine that flying on an airplane makes someone a bad person? And yet, that extra carbon that I have helped add to our atmosphere is still going to make the planet a little bit hotter.

A *midrash* from *B'reisheet Rabbah* imagines that Noah wasn't the only relatively righteous person in his generation— he was “good enough” to save, but he wasn't the only one. If that's the case, we can imagine how these slightly-above-average people nevertheless contributed to suffering in their world, suffering that piled up enough to warrant an enormous flood that washed them all away. Our own actions threaten to bring on our own giant flood, or more accurately, a series of them. The New York Times published an article this week about the new predictions for where the high-tide mark will be in 2050. The maps are frightening. Many cities, and large portions of many

countries, will be underwater. 150 million people live today on land that will be covered by ocean during high tide.

When our world is underwater, it doesn't much matter if we were justified in driving our cars, flying to our vacations or jobs, or using

those plastic water bottles. The consequences of our actions will have caught up to us. I might feel satisfied



with having a slightly smaller carbon footprint than my neighbor, but that won't stop our climate from changing dramatically.

So where does that leave us? First of all, the concepts of “good” and “bad” aren't always the most useful. There's no reason to beat ourselves up or consider ourselves “bad people” simply for behaving in the way that most people in our society behave, or even for behaving slightly “better”—whatever that means—than those around us. In the world of *The Good Place*, Noah's behavior might have landed him in the Bad Place, but God didn't seem to mind. To God, being relatively good was so good, that it merited saving. God could have started completely over, maybe creating a new form of being that would be better than humans, but no—God chose Noah, this guy who we might consider to be average, because the fact that he managed to be even somewhat good given who his neighbors were was IMPRESSIVE. Being a צדיק בדורותיו, a *tzaddik* relative to those around you, can be really hard, and should be applauded. We don't need to stop bringing each other flowers, even if they might not always have been grown in an ethical way. At the same time, we can't forget about the consequences of our actions. When we stay informed and aware of the problems in the world around us, we can channel that awareness into trying to do better. And there are more things we can do. Whether you want to go vegan two meals a day like Rabbi Lerner suggested to us in the name of Jonathan Safran Foer a few weeks ago, or buy carbon offsets to counterbalance your personal carbon footprint, or switch your home electricity to renewable energy, or any other action to make the world a better place, every step you take has a concrete impact, no matter how small. Or maybe you don't want the climate to be your focus. Maybe the pain and suffering you want to focus on averting is in another arena. Either way, it's the flip side to that idea from that scene in the good place. If every action we make has an impact, that counts for good impacts as well as bad ones. It means that even small positive actions make a difference.

Yes, living our everyday lives has all sorts of consequences. And yes, we should be aware of them and try to minimize them. AND the enormity of that challenge is no reason to give up, and no reason to feel bad about ourselves. Maybe we can't all be Abraham arguing with God to save a city. But maybe even Abraham wouldn't have acted the way he did in a different age. If we can each only manage to be as true to ourselves as Noah was, we may, together, just manage to avert a flood.