

Noah's ark inspires a new tale of 'holy poop': Opinion

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By Gerald L. Zelizer

"Holy poop" is not a variation of a popular scatological curse. Instead, it describes a unique understanding of the biblical Noah and the Ark. It refers to a process that connects that story to actual, life-threatening conditions affecting billions of people, and the possibility of significantly lessening that threat.

Popularly, Noah and the Ark have been the subject of wall hangings in children's rooms, Discovery Channel programs showing lost remains of boats found on remote Turkish mountains, and even a film currently in production starring Russell Crowe as Noah.

In my religious tradition, the ancient rabbis, as they read the biblical Noah account, asked an odd question: How did Noah dispose of the human and animal waste in the boat?

Their theory? The Bible describes the ark as having three levels. On the top level lived humans. On the second were the animals. The lowest deck was utilized to collect and store human waste. A survival strategy not just for the deluge but for the human biological condition!

So what about survival strategies for the contemporary human condition? In our country, plumbing and sanitary conditions are generally assumed. But not elsewhere. Unsanitary conditions, usually contaminated water, contribute to diarrheal disease, which kills 1.8 million people a year, of whom 90 percent are children younger than 5.

According to a YouTube video produced by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: "There's dozens of words to describe it ... but for 2.6 billion people around the globe, no place to actually 'do it.'"

The foundation announced \$42 million in grants to "Reinvent the Toilet." The aim is "to spur innovations in the capture and storage of waste, as well as processing into human energy, fertilizer and fresh water." The foundation has already awarded grants to several universities and firms whose engineering research reimagined the toilet in brand-new ways. Which got some of us in my Metuchen synagogue to thinking. Certainly religious institutions cannot match the resources of the Gates Foundation. But could we do in microcosm what the Gates Foundation was doing in macrocosm? Could we, at least, concretely help one family to solve its potentially lethal survival challenge?

A member of my congregation, Harold Geller, connected us with U.S.-based GreenMicrofinance Global of Brattleboro, Vt. The group's core mission is to empower local nongovernmental organizations to create sustainable enterprises in land management, agriculture, energy, biogas, biofuels, clean cook stoves and water.

GMf in turn partnered with several local Ghanaian NGOs that implement these kinds of projects with local farmers. A biogas engineer from India subcontracted by GMf assisted with the overall biolatrines design. Individuals in my congregation contributed the funds, as did the women's and men's auxiliary groups.

Coordinating with GMf, we eventually linked with the family of Rose Manu in Ghana. Rose is a 50-year-old single mother who lives with her children and grandchildren outside of Kumasi. She has a small farm. Through the sale of corn, pepper and garden eggs from this farm, she provides for her family.

Our funding provides a biolatrine for the Manu family. A biolatrine recycles human waste into methane, which is then used for cooking and heating, not to mention as a highly potent organic fertilizer. Not only will the living conditions of the Manu family become more sanitary, but also human body waste, along with animal and vegetable waste, will be recycled into useful energy — a wonderful technology that gets rid of something no one wants in the first place.
empathy FOR MANKIND

Geller explained why he spearheaded this project in my congregation: "I believe that Judaism is very much about compassionate works that accompany our religious practice."

Some in the congregation asked me important questions:

- This modest effort to help the survival of one family doesn't impact the overwhelming number of people throughout the world whose health and lives are threatened by unsanitary conditions. Why undertake tokenism?
- Isn't this really social work and not religion?
- Why begin abroad when there are so many dire situations of families right within our own country?

Sure, our project is insignificant relative to the whole. But because Judaism says that "saving one life is regarded as saving the entire world," it is better to start with one rather than none. A vision that tries to save the entire world risks a frustration that eventually saves no one.

The biolatrine project does have a social work component. Call it what you will, the ancient rabbis who read the Noah story saw maximizing sanitation as a religious mission, too, and integral to sacred survival under God's plan.

Why not start in this country? Because compassion and good works should not recognize national or religious boundaries. A life is a life is a life.

Reimagining sanitation in this way is to sacralize the mundane. In other words, "Holy poop."

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