

Life in a Box

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

On September 26, 1991, a crew of four men and four women entered **Biosphere II**, a hermetically sealed environment constructed by scientists as a functioning model of the biosphere (the life-sustaining envelope that surrounds the earth). Biosphere II--which has since been converted into a resort and conference center--enclosed an area of 3.15 acres and included a desert, a marsh, a savanna, a rain forest and a million-gallon ocean. It was home to more than 3,000 species, mostly plants and insects but also fish, reptiles, birds and mammals. It was sealed off from the earth by a 500-ton stainless steel liner and from the atmosphere by 6,000 glass panels. Construction costs exceeded \$150 million.

The eight "biospherians" spent two years sealed within the structure, deriving their food, water and oxygen from their enclosed eco-system. They emerged on September 26, 1993. The experiment yielded two marriages and reams of scientific data which, we presume, has aided our understanding of how our own macro-biosphere works.

Had the scientists running the project been more biblically inclined, they might have labeled their structure "Teivah II." The Teivah (Hebrew for "box") was a three-story, 125,000 sq. foot ark, built of timber and "sealed within and without with pitch," which Noah constructed by command of G-d. We don't know how much the Teivah cost to build, but our sages tell us that Noah labored 120 years on its construction. On the 17th of Cheshvan of the year 1656 from creation (2105 BCE), four men and four women (already married) entered the Teivah. They brought with them a male and female member of each species of mammal and bird, seeds and cuttings of various plant species, and a year's supply of food and feed. The purpose was not to study life on earth but to preserve it from the Flood brought on by a corrupt world.

For many months, the Teivah floated on the water that engulfed the earth; when the Flood began to subside, it came to rest on the summit of Mount Ararat. On Cheshvan 27, 1657, after 365 days within their boxed biosphere, the eight Teivians and their animal and plant companions emerged from the ark to build a new, better world upon the foundations of the old.

Noah was faced with an extreme situation--the impending destruction of all living things--and took extreme action, building a huge box that would hold and preserve samplings of the entire spectrum of life on earth. On a lesser but no less meaningful scale, we do the same every day of our lives.

We, too, are faced with "floods" that threaten to destroy all that is vital and alive in our personal universe. And we, too, respond by constructing "boxes" to hold and preserve precious specimens of our internal world.

8 October | 1 Cheshvan

Parashat Noach

Shabbat Begins: 6:08 pm

Shabbat Ends: 7:07 pm

Daily we are swamped by the cares and demands of material life. If we're not slaving at our jobs or worrying over our bills, there's always an electronic gadget to repair, the cleaning to take in or the garbage to take out. A torrent of materiality floods the life of modern man, filling our hours and minutes, consuming our talents, subverting our emotions, and all but drowning the spark of spirituality in our lives.

So we build boxes. A box of time dedicated for prayer each morning; a percentage of our earnings dedicated to charity; a modicum of energy reserved for some volunteer work in the community. We seal these boxes, jealously preserving these pinpoints of higher purpose in our lives from the floodwaters that seek to engulf them and claim them for themselves.

At times, the effort seems almost futile. Of a mind consumed by one's business, only a small amount of brain power is diverted by a few daily minutes of Torah. Of a heart agitated by financial worries, only a small corner is reserved for pure feelings towards a loved one. And how much remains for charity after the bills are paid? At best, only miniscule "samplings" of our resources are dedicated to a higher purpose.

Therein lies the eternal lesson of Noah's ark. Noah couldn't save the whole world--he had neither the capacity nor the mandate to build a haven of such proportions. So he constructed a sanctum for a sampling of the various life forms in Creation. These, however, were more than token representations: for twelve months, all of humanity was concentrated within the eight human beings inside the Teivah; every species of animal and plant resided in the individual representatives brought within its walls. And when the sealed box was opened, its occupants became the seeds of a new, revitalized world.

The Divine command "Come into the ark!" was followed, twelve months later, by the Divine command, "Go out of the ark!" Such is our challenge: to nurture seeds of spirituality in the midst of a material world, and then unleash them to work their influence in every area of our lives.

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