

NOAH

Genesis 6:9–11:32

Summary

Noah, the only man who pleased God at the end of the previous parashah, receives God's commandment to build a large ark. God then tells Noah to gather his family and a selection of the planet's fauna to take refuge in the ship. Over the course of forty days and forty nights, a flood destroys all nonaquatic life.

When the water finally subsides, Noah, his family, and the animals exit the ark. Noah makes a sacrifice of gratitude to God, who presents him with a rainbow as a sign that the planet will never again face the threat of divine destruction.

Noah, however, quickly realizes that the deluge has not fixed humanity's morality. Awakening from a drunken stupor, he discovers that his own son has sexually molested him.

Generations later, humanity, desiring to make a name for itself, dares to build a tower to the heavens. Concerned about the people's boundless ambition, God scatters them, gives them different languages, and prevents the tower's completion.

But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives. . . . Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives. — Gen. 6:18, 8:16



Torat Yisrael: The Ark Was No Cruise Ship

When teachers relay the story of Noah and the Ark to children, they often give the tale an age-appropriate cheery patina, depicting the ark and the animals with bright, primary colors. The actual biblical text, however, is any-

thing but colorful and happy. It is a dark, dismal story, a tale of people who are left to mourn a lost and destroyed world.

The Jewish exegete Philo (20–50 CE) describes the ark as a depressing place and suggests that God said, “After so great a destruction of all those who were on earth, do not engage in luxury, for this is not fitting or lawful.”⁷ The Talmud quotes a complementary midrash (rabbinic homily) that says sexual intercourse on the ark was forbidden. As evidence, the midrash points out that in verse 6:18, the order of embarkation is Noah, his sons, Noah’s wife, and his daughters-in-law. In other words, spouses did not enter the ship together. After the flood in verse 8:16, however, the order of disembarkation is Noah, his wife, Noah’s sons, and his daughters-in-law. Based on this subtle but important difference, Rabbi Yohanan teaches that sex was forbidden on the ark, just as a mourner is forbidden to have sex during the week of shivah.⁸

One point of the story is that mourning is necessary in the aftermath of loss or tragedy. The text appears to be saying that it is neither natural nor healthful to “just move on” without experiencing grief. Instead of executing an instantaneous switch between the old and new worlds, God gives Noah and his family a transition period.

What was this transition period like? A debate between Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Abba bar Kahana (both third-century Palestinian scholars) sheds some light on the question. Rabbi Yohanan argues that when God told Noah to make a window (*tzohar*) for the ark, the Holy One advised him to install precious gems and pearls that glow and illuminate similarly to the noon day sun. In contrast, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana holds that the *tzohar* was an actual pane of glass, no different than our own windows.

What difference does it make? Rabbi Baruch Epstein, author of the *Torah Temimah*, says that the issue is transparency. Rabbi Yohanan describes an ark in which the passengers could not see those who were drowning outside, whereas Rabbi Abba Bar Kahana’s depiction would allow the passengers to see the divine punishment taking place outside the window. Rabbi Epstein says that for Rabbi Yohanan, Noah was himself a sinner in need of repentance, and thus among the people who had no right to behold God’s retributive justice with their own eyes. Conversely, he says, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana viewed Noah as a good and moral person who was both worthy of rescue and entitled to witness the death of his wayward brethren.

From the former point of view, the ark's transition period was a time for the survivors to mourn, pray, and seek forgiveness. From the latter perspective, the ark provided an opportunity for the righteous to thank God for saving their lives.

Either way, any kind of major transition is the kind of powerful, sacred time that Professor Neil Gilman calls a *liminal moment*, a moment that marks a borderline between two states of existence. For example, we may experience a liminal moment between being single and being married—when our life becomes about two people rather than one. We can also experience liminal moments when we have children or grandchildren or when we survive a serious illness or a brush with death; these kinds of events can change the nature and course of our lives. Similarly, we face liminal moments of loss with the death of someone who was an integral part of our existence. Just as we become different people by adding a person to our physical world, death changes us by taking a person away.

What liminal moments have you experienced in your life?

What do you mourn as a Jew and as a citizen of this world?

The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth. He waited still another seven days and sent the dove forth; and it did not return to him any more. — Gen. 8:11–12



Eretz Yisrael: The Olive Branch

Noah sends out a dove to find out whether or not the waters have receded from the land. When the dove returns with a plucked-off olive leaf, Noah knows not only that the waters have retreated, but that life in its bounty has returned to the Earth.

In ancient Rome, Greece, and Israel, the olive was a symbol of peace; today the olive branch is a universal representation of peace. Perhaps olives became symbolic of peace because they provided light, food, emollient for bathing,

and ointment, all of which are reminiscent of the calm and quiet characteristics of peace. Alternatively, the olive branch may have been an earlier age's symbol of surrender, akin to waving a white flag that signals an end to hostilities in our time.

On the Arch of Titus in Rome, built to celebrate the Romans' capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Romans are depicted as wearing olive wreaths while parading the stolen treasures of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the house of holies: the Jerusalem Temple. In the past, many Jews chose not to walk under the arch as a silent act of protest. (There is now a fence around the arch and tourists are not allowed to walk under it.) Intentionally, the State of Israel's official seal, issued nearly two thousand years later, bears the very same image of a white menorah surrounded by white olive branches, now on a sky-blue background—an image derived from a vision of the prophet Zechariah.

Do you believe it is fitting that the restored Jewish state uses the same image as in the Arch of Titus, with those olive branches in its national emblem?

Does the appearance of the olive branch in the story of Noah present a liminal moment of hope?

Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it.— Gen. 9:7



Am Yisrael: Should Jews Be Fruitful and Multiply?

Today some activists advocate population controls to address what they see as an increasingly overpopulated world polluting the environment and consuming its ever-dwindling resources. Genesis, on the other hand, says that we are here to be fruitful and multiply as well as to steward and protect the Earth. Where should Jewish people stand on these important questions?

From my vantage point, the survival of the Jewish people is a greater priority than the Earth's possible overpopulation, and Jews should exempt themselves from voluntary population controls, for these reasons:

- › Some seventy years ago, the Shoah exterminated one-third of the Jewish nation. While the Jewish population has since been on the rise, we have not yet replaced our prewar numbers.⁹
- › Today's Jews have a notably low fertility rate. We are not having children in sufficient numbers even to replace those who die.
- › Looking at the broader numbers, the voluntary infertility of the world's fourteen million Jews would hardly put a dent in the Earth's estimated population of seven billion.
- › By the same token, even in the highly unlikely instance that every Jew were to have eight children, the rise in the Earth's population would still be negligible.

In today's populated world, are the biblical injunctions to be fruitful and multiply as well as to steward and protect the Earth mutually exclusive, or can they coexist? Do you agree that the Jewish people should be exempt from efforts to slow global population growth?

The waters then receded steadily from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters diminished, so that in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. — Gen. 8:3



Maḥshevet Yisrael: Did the Story of Noah's Ark Really Happen?

As with Creation itself, there are those who believe that the story of Noah and the ark is true in the factual, historical sense. Some have even gone so far as to search for the remains of the ark on Mt. Ararat, where the Torah says it came to a rest. No such expedition has ever come back with credible evidence that can be linked with the Bible's narrative. Nor does it seem possible that one family could corral the world's species onto one boat. To my mind, the story is clearly mythological.

Notably, a great many nations tell a similar story. Perhaps, then, the Near East suffered some kind of cataclysmic weather event that elicited such sto-

ries. In fact, there is convincing evidence that the Black Sea experienced cataclysmic flooding about seventy-five hundred years ago, a catastrophic event that brought both destruction and agriculture to Europe and the Near East. Some scholars theorize that an ancient cultural memory of this flood may have inspired Near Eastern flood myths like those found in the Bible and in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Paraphrasing the geologists William B. F. Ryan and Walter C. Pittman, *New York Times* science writer John Noble Wilford writes:

Could it also be . . . that the Black Sea deluge left such enduring memories that this inspired the later story of a great flood described in the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh? In the epic, the heroic warrior Gilgamesh makes a dangerous journey to meet the survivor of a great world flood and learn from him the secret of everlasting youth. . . . If a memory of the Black Sea flood indeed influenced the Gilgamesh story, then it could also be a source of the Noah story in the Book of Genesis. Scholars have long noted striking similarities between the Gilgamesh and Genesis flood accounts and suspected that the Israelites derived their version from the Gilgamesh epic or independently from a common tradition that might have stemmed from a real catastrophe long before.¹⁰

Because flood myths are found in various cultures on all six inhabited continents, there may also be a simpler explanation: human beings tell flood stories because flooding is a shared human tragedy. Ask people who have survived a severe hurricane, typhoon, or tsunami and they will confirm that there are few things more destructive than floodwater. When the sea decides to reclaim or attack the land, little can be done other than to flee to higher ground. Even forest fires and plagues can be fought, but a flood is invincible once it strikes.

If the Torah has handed us human mythology in the form of Noah's story, we might ask: What purpose does it serve?

The biblical account accentuates a theological understanding: God's promise never to destroy the Earth on account of human sin. Moreover, the narrative suggests a moral truth: there are second chances in life. Just as God gave the people of the world a second chance, we too can try to forgive others whenever possible.

Reading certain stories in the Torah as metaphors for the human condition allows many modern Jews to take the Torah seriously, without having to take it literally.

Do you believe in reading Torah passages such as the flood narrative as metaphors for the human condition?

How do you interpret this story?
