

PARASHAT NOACH

Genesis 6:9–11:32

Parashat Noach tells the story of God's decision to destroy the earth with a flood because of the corruption and wickedness found in the world. Only a righteous man by the name of Noah, his family, and pairs of every kind of creature were to survive. Noah was told to build a large boat, an ark, and to make a place on it for every creature he was to save. After the Flood, those aboard the ark started life on earth all over again, and God promised never to send another flood. Later, human beings decided to build a city and a huge tower that would reach from earth to heaven. Seeing what they were doing, God scattered them all over the earth and gave them different languages to speak.

OUR TARGUM

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God looked upon the earth and saw that it was a place of evildoing. Human beings were corrupt. They made laws and then refused to obey them. People were concerned only with their own personal gain. Selfishness, cruelty, and dishonesty prevailed.

So God decided to destroy all life on earth with a flood. Noah, who was considered a "righteous" person, was ordered to build a boat, or ark, which would hold his family and a male and female of

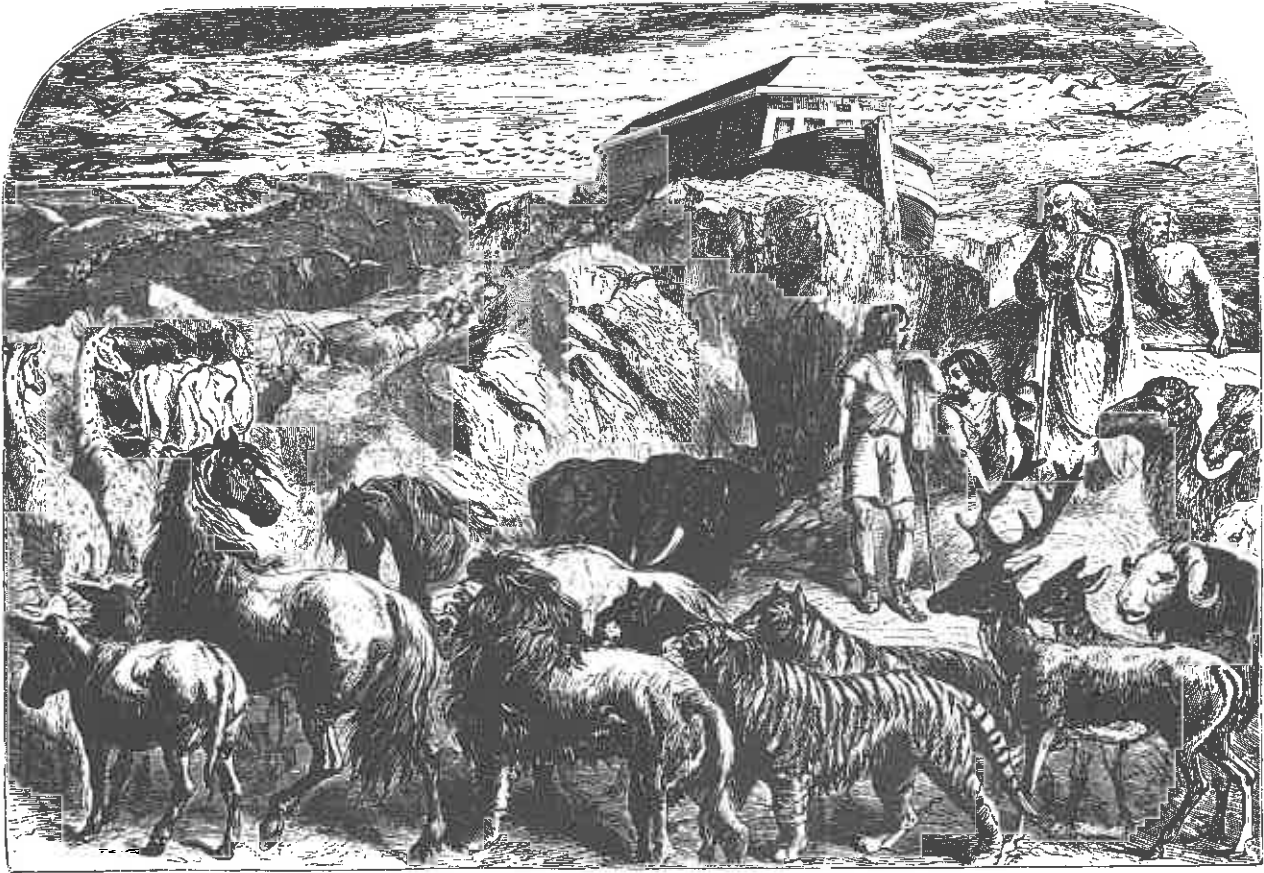
every living thing upon the earth. Noah built the ark, and, when the Flood came, everything in the ark survived.

After one hundred and fifty days of flooding, the waters subsided, and the ark came to rest in the mountains of Ararat, located in Iran. Noah sent a raven out to search for dry land. Then he sent a dove, and, when it returned with an olive branch in its beak, he knew that the floodwaters were gone.

Noah, his family, and all the living creatures left the ark, and God promised that "never again" would the world be destroyed by a flood. As a

sign of that promise, God put a rainbow in the sky.

other. The city in Shinar where all this took place was named *Babel*, which means "confusion."



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After the Flood, human life increased on the earth. People spoke one language, and they built a city and a high tower in the land of Shinar. "Let's make a name for ourselves," they said to one another. "Let's build our tower so that it reaches high into the heavens!"

God saw what they were doing and was displeased. "If as one people with one language this is how they act, then they will be able to do anything they decide." Fearing their abuse of power, God scattered the people all over the earth and confused them so that they spoke many languages and were unable to understand one an-

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Afterwards, Shem, Noah's son, had a son by the name of Arpachshad, whose son was Shelah, whose son was Eber, whose son was Peleg, whose son was Reu, whose son was Serug, whose son was Nahor, whose son was Terah. Terah had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Abram was the founder of the Jewish people, and he married Sarai. Haran was the father of Lot.

Near the end of his life, Terah took Abram, Sarai, and his grandson, Lot, and they traveled from Ur of the Chaldeans, which is located on the Euphrates River in what is today Iraq, to Haran, which is located in Syria. They settled there, and Terah died.

THEMES

Parashat Noach contains three important themes:

1. One "righteous" human being can make a difference in saving the world.
2. Corruption, dishonesty, and selfishness can destroy the world.
3. When people create or build for fame or for power over others, they bring unhappiness and confusion into the world.

PEREK ALEF: *Was Noah Really a "Righteous" Person?*

At the very beginning of this Torah portion we are told three things about Noah: he "walked with God"; he was "blameless in his generation"; and he was "a righteous man." Later we read that God said to him: "You alone have I found righteous before Me in this generation."

There are those who maintain that the Torah's description of Noah is accurate. They point out that Noah followed what God commanded him to do. When God ordered him to build the ark, he did so. When he was told to round up pairs of all living creatures and to make a place for them in the ark, he did so. He did not doubt God's commandment but faithfully carried it out. As a result, life on earth was preserved after the Flood.

Ibn Ezra



*Ramban
(Nachmanides)*



In addition, according to some commentators, Noah was a totally ethical person. Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra taught that Noah was "righteous in his deeds." Nachmanides explained that Noah was "neither a person of violence, nor a person who cheated and lied as did the guilty people of his generation . . . he did not participate in the cults of astrology, enchantment, and soothsaying, nor did he worship idols. He walked with God."

But does the fact that Noah did what God commanded him to do make him a "righteous" person? Was it enough not to engage in violence or not to become involved in the cults of his day? Are we to consider Noah a "righteous" person because he followed God's orders without asking any questions? Was it sufficient for him to save himself, his family, and pairs of all living creatures from the destructive waters of the Flood?

Some teachers of Jewish tradition have com-

pared Noah to Abraham. They point out that, when God was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued on behalf of their citizens. Even though they were corrupt, dishonest, and violent, Abraham took their side and tried to save them and their cities.

By contrast, Noah said nothing on behalf of the people of his generation. He was indifferent to the suffering they were about to experience and expressed no regret over the pain of those who would drown in the waters of the Flood. He made no effort to defend them or to intercede with God on their behalf. Noah simply followed directions and built his ark.

Righteous but . . .

The Zohar explains that Noah was out to save himself and his family. He did not intervene or speak up for the people of his generation when he was told that they would be destroyed.

*"His righteousness bore the stamp of mediocrity."
(Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe, Levush ha-Ora)*

Noah remained silent because he did not believe that God would really bring the Flood to destroy all life. He lacked faith. He thought that God was just going to frighten the wicked people of his generation into changing their evil and violent behavior. So he did not speak up and tell them to save themselves. (Toledot Yitzhak)

*A great leader is not only a person of ideas, not only a person of personal integrity and devotion, but also a person of tenderness, a person of compassion. . . . If he is insensitive to the sorrows of people, all of his ideals and all of his personal qualities fail to confer greatness upon him.
(Rabbi Morris Adler, The Voice Still Speaks, Bloch, New York, 1969, p. 20)*

In the Talmud, Rabbi Berechia asks why Noah did not at least pray for his generation to repent and be saved. Apparently, Noah was a pious man who “walked with God,” but his “piety” did not extend to a concern about the welfare of others. We have no report of his going out to warn the people around him that a terrible flood was about to destroy them. Nor are we told that he pleaded with them to change their evil ways and to save themselves. Noah, it appears, was more concerned with his own safety and survival than he was with the survival of his friends and neighbors.

The eighteenth-century chasidic master Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk once observed that there are two kinds of “righteous” persons: one is genuinely “righteous”; the other dresses like a “righteous” person in a fur coat. Each of them faces a freezing winter in a different way: one will go out and collect wood for a fire; the other will wrap himself in his fur coat. The one who collects wood lights a fire and invites others to join him. He not only warms himself but others as well. The one who makes himself cozy in his own heavy coat is secure, but those around him will freeze. For Elimelech the genuinely “righteous” person was the one who shared warmth with others. In that sense, Noah was not truly “righteous.”

The author of *Toledot Yitzhak* argues that Noah doubted what God had told him about a terrible flood that was going to destroy all life on earth. Noah couldn’t believe that such a destruction would take place. Therefore, he kept the information to himself rather than sharing it with others. Instead of warning them—giving them a chance to appeal to God or to build their own arks—he said nothing.

Can we consider a person who hides such information a “righteous” person?

And what kind of leadership did Noah display? Nowhere are we told that he had any followers or any students. He built his ark all by himself. He seems to have been a loner, a “righteous” man whose influence extended only to the narrow circle of his family.

Interpreters even raise serious questions about Noah’s family. Some argue that his children were saved only because of *his* “righteousness,” not because of any good deeds of *their* own. Like their father, none of them spoke out on behalf of those about to be destroyed. Nor did they offer any

warnings or try to talk Noah into building some extra arks in which to save more people and other forms of life. Tragically, Noah failed to have a righteous influence even upon his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Who is “righteous”?

“. . . the righteous is generous and keeps giving.” (Psalms 37:21)

“The righteous must be a lover of human beings.” (Wisdom of Solomon 12:19; also Kiddushin 40a)

So there are questions to be asked about how “righteous” a person Noah really was. Was it enough for him to build an ark and save his family and all the living creatures God had commanded him to place inside? Should he have protested what God was about to do just as Abraham did when God told him that Sodom and Gomorrah were about to be destroyed? (See Genesis 18:16–33.) Can we call a person “righteous” if he does not inspire followers or if he refuses to share critical information with those whose lives may depend upon it? Was Noah really a “righteous” person?

PEREK BET: *Why Did God Send the Flood?*

When the Torah describes the creation of the world, we are told that it was “good.” Yet a few chapters later in the story of Noah we are informed that God said: “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.” (Genesis 6:13)

What had happened? How could the God who had called all that had been created “good,” and even “very good,” now plan to destroy everything?

The Torah uses two words to illustrate what was happening in Noah’s generation and to explain why God decided to send the destructive waters of the Flood. They are *shichet*, meaning “corruption,” and *chamas*, meaning “lawlessness.”

What was the nature of that “corruption” and

“lawlessness”? Was it really so serious that it justified the destruction of all life?

What was their “corruption” and “lawlessness”?

The people of that generation said: “For what reason do we need God? . . . We have no need of rain. We get an abundant supply of water from other sources, from all the streams and wells of the earth.” (Sanhedrin 108a)

A man would take two wives—one for child-bearing, the other for pleasure. (Midrash ha-Gadol 10:5)

They exchanged wives. (Genesis Rabbah 23:3)

When a person brought a basket full of peas to the marketplace, he would be surrounded by a group of people. Each would steal an amount worth less than a pruta (so small an amount that it was not considered a punishable offense). But soon the basket would be empty. The victim would be unable to present his case to a judge because each thief had cleverly taken less than the amount that was punishable by law. (Genesis Rabbah 31:50)

They removed the landmarks of their neighbors in order to extend their borders. If someone saw an ox or a donkey in the hands of an orphan or widow, he took it away. (Midrash Tanchuma, Noah 26)

Those questions were also asked by the rabbis many centuries ago. They reasoned that Noah’s generation had been blessed with “good times.” Harvests were plentiful. People lived hundreds of years without sickness, pain, or fear. The weather was always pleasantly mild. No one lacked for anything.

As a result, the rabbis tell us, the people of Noah’s generation began to take all the benefits of life for granted. They felt no need to give thanks to God for what they enjoyed. “Why shall we waste our time on prayers of praise to God?” they

argued. “Don’t we have everything we need? What more can God do for us?”

Many stopped worshiping God. Their self-interest led them to conclude that nothing was as important or “sacred” as taking care of themselves. The concerns of others were less important or of no importance at all. Since they no longer believed in God, they also no longer believed that each person was created in God’s image or that every human life was sacred and must be protected.

As a result they became suspicious of one another. Trust between them broke down, and violence increased. No one cared about the poor, the sick, or the homeless. People took advantage of one another. They robbed, lied, and murdered. They bribed judges and found loopholes in the law, twisting it to suit their selfish purposes. In the end, cruelty, terror, fear, and hatred ruled their civilization.

The Torah informs us that God’s decision to destroy life on earth was made because of *ra’at ha-adam*, “the evil of human beings.” The people of Noah’s generation, we are told, spent their days planning and devising “nothing but evil all the time.” (Genesis 6:5)

Yet, was there no way to save them? If God is “good” and created such a “good” world, why was there no warning to the people of Noah’s generation or any chance provided for them to change their evil ways? Perhaps they could have been rescued. Perhaps, like the people of Nineveh in Jonah’s time, they might have repented and asked God to forgive their violence and cruelty. Perhaps the terrible Flood was unnecessary.

The rabbis who composed the *Midrash Tanchuma* explained that God wanted the people of Noah’s generation to change their behavior. That is why God commanded Noah to build the ark. It was to serve as a warning to his generation. But no one paid attention. Here is how some of the rabbis described what happened:

God said: “If Noah starts to work on the ark, people will gather around him and say to him, ‘What are you making?’ He will answer, ‘I am building an ark because God is about to bring a flood on the earth.’” God hoped that the ark would serve as a warning, but the people of Noah’s generation paid no attention to what Noah was building.

In another version the rabbis tell us:

Noah planted cedars, and the people of his day asked him, "What are you planting cedars for?" He told them, "God is about to bring a flood and has commanded me to build an ark for me and my family to escape in." When they heard his explanation, they all laughed and ridiculed him. Later, when he was cutting down the cedar trees and planing the wood, they asked, "What are you doing with that cedarwood?" At that point he warned them, again, about the Flood, but they paid no attention and refused to repent.

(Midrash Tanchuma, Noach)

The rabbis make the point that God did not want to destroy all life on earth. Noah's generation was given every opportunity to prevent the Flood. But they would not change their "lawlessness" and "corrupt" ways. They continued their violence toward one another. Greed and distrust, cheating and dishonesty ruled their times.

God wanted to save them, to preserve all life, but they refused to cooperate. They could have changed the course of history, but they would not change themselves.

PEREK GIMEL: *What Went Wrong at the Tower of Babel?*

The Torah tells us that, after the Flood, people moved eastward and settled in the land of Shinar. They decided to build a city for themselves and a *migdal*, a "tower," that reached up into the heavens. "Let's make a name for ourselves," they said to one another, "or we will be scattered all over the earth."

Seeing the city and tower they were building, God decided to do what the people had feared. "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act," God reasoned, "then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach." For that reason God scattered them throughout the world and made them speak different languages.

The city where this all took place was named *Babel*, which means "confused" or "mixed up." That seems an appropriate description of the entire episode, and it raises several questions. What

was wrong with people building a *migdal*, a "tower"? Wouldn't we be better off if peoples everywhere spoke one language? Wouldn't that have improved communication and, perhaps, the chances for human cooperation and peace?"



Abravanel

Abravanel, a counselor to the kings and queens in Spain and Portugal, explained that, before they began building the tower, people had lived at peace with one another. They shared everything equally and generously. But, as soon as they began building, they started to argue bitterly with one another. They disagreed over who would bake the bricks, who would carry them, and who would place them on the tower. Each one wanted the credit for laying the first brick on a new level, for the design, for choosing the color, or for organizing the work. The project of building the tower made people jealous of one another. It caused them to hate one another. They became more interested in competing for fame than cooperating for the good of the whole human community. As a result, God destroyed the tower and scattered them throughout the world.



Benno Jacob

Rabbi Benno Jacob (1862–1945), a modern biblical scholar, suggests that those who built the tower failed because their goals were wrong. They had mastered the art of brick making, of molding and heating the clay. But, instead of using their new technology to improve living conditions in their city, to create housing for the poor, sick, and aging, they decided to use all their resources and efforts to build the highest tower in the world.

They reasoned that their high tower would bring them fame and glory. They wanted others to say, "Look what they have done!" Their terrible mistake was to use their technology for pride and vanity instead of using it to improve the quality of life in their society.

No regard for a human life

The tower was built with seven steps on the east side and seven steps on the west side, and it was seven miles high. (Some versions of the story say that it was twenty-seven miles high!) It took a person one year to climb from the bottom to the top. The bricks were carried up from one side, and the line of workers went down on the other side. If a worker fell down and died, they paid no attention to him. But, if a brick fell, they would all sit and weep. "What a loss," they would say. "Look how long it will take until we can bring another brick to take its place." (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 24)

According to the ancient rabbis, the creation of the tower was a huge project. They report that, because there were no natural stones with which to construct the tower in the plain of Shinar, it was necessary to invent a special process of baking the bricks. Hundreds of people were required to run the furnaces where they were baked; hundreds of others were needed to prepare the material. Thousands were used to carry them from the location of the baking-furnaces to the base of the tower; thousands more were employed to carry them up the steep steps that reached high into the sky.

It did not take long before the "project" became more important than the health or safety of those who were involved in it. People were enslaved as laborers. Individual rights and liberties were taken away. The building of the tower and the achievement of fame for the community became justification for brutality and the end of individual freedom. Bricks became more important than individual liberties or lives.



The Italian Torah commentator, scientist, and philosopher Obadiah Sforno (1475–1550), who lived through the bitter times of the Inquisition when Jews suffered and were often put to death for their differing religious views, criticized the

generation of tower builders for another reason. Their real crime, Sforno argued, was not simply the way in which they built the tower, but it was also in what they sought to accomplish by its creation. Their goal, Sforno explained, was *one* religion for everyone, *one* point of view on the world, *one* accepted political way of doing things.

The tower builders believed that differences of opinion, controversy, and diversity of belief were dangerous and unacceptable. They opposed freedom of thought or discussion. Those who questioned their views or authority were to be crushed. According to Sforno, when God saw that the tower builders were crushing freedom of thought and discussion, it became necessary to intervene and to scatter human beings throughout the world.

As we can see, the commentators found many important explanations for God's destruction of the Tower of Babel. The project produced jealousy and mean competition, a misuse of technology, and a cruel disregard for the worth of each individual life. It fostered a false patriotism and, ultimately, threatened the loss of freedom.

Could it be that God actually saved humanity from catastrophe by destroying the tower and dispersing us, with different languages and traditions, to all corners of the earth? Perhaps the real message of the Torah's story about the building of the Tower of Babel has to do with helping us understand that our differences in language, culture, and traditions all represent significant strengths and blessings for humanity.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. One might defend or criticize Noah by claiming that he was "just following orders." Soldiers and bureaucrats have often used this excuse to justify their action or inaction. Is this a legitimate defense in Noah's case?
2. Would you have believed Noah if he had told you that God was about to destroy the whole world? Some scientists today are warning that we are in danger of "destroying our world." Why do people refuse to listen to the "bad-

news” predictions? Why do we disbelieve our experts?

3. What is so wrong with the tower builders’ plan of *one* religion, *one* accepted political point of view, *one* point of view on the world?
4. In addition to buildings, what do human beings often value more than they should? Is there a difference between living as if you are “created in the image of God” or living as if you are a god?