



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Noach

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Trapped Inside A Box: Zooming In On Noah's Ark

By Rabbi Jonathan Morgenstern

What will you be remembered by? Great individuals in history are always remembered by one thing or another. There is always a unique association that is the legacy of that person. If I were to say Bill Gates, you'd probably say Microsoft. Alexander Graham Bell? The telephone. Steve Jobs? Apple. Dr. Anthony Fauci? The COVID-19 Pandemic. In our history, there's Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism. *Rashi*, his *Peirush Al Ha'Torah* commentary. *Rav Yosef Karo*, the *Shulchan Aruch*. And the list goes on.

Now, if I were to say *Noach* what would you think? Would you say Noah's ark, or maybe the flood? God had to have known these would become *Noach's* lasting legacy. Why is this so? Why will he forever be remembered as the man who made an ark and was saved from a global flood, from the *Mabul*?

Furthermore, why did *Hashem* choose to save *Noach* and his family in this way? He could have told them to climb to a mountain-top? God could have removed everyone from the earth and left only *Noach* and his family, like a Jewish rapture story. Why an ark? What is its meaning? And what is the unique message *Hashem* gave to *Noach* and through him to us that has resonated for thousands of years?

Isaiah (54:9) states: כִּי-מִי נַח, זֹאת לִי, אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעַבְר מִי נַח עוֹד, עַל-הָאָרֶץ. *These are like the waters of Noah to me, for as I have sworn, that the waters of Noah shall no longer go upon the earth.*

This verse points to the fact that *Noach* is somehow held accountable for the sin of the *Dor HaMabul*. It is literally referred to as his flood, and it seems apparent that the ark that he builds is poignantly emblematic of the sin of that generation. Think about the first directive that *Hashem* built into the world as He created humanity: פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ. *Go out, populate the earth* and fill it up with each other. Connect to people. Connect with people and become one great human race. However, what humanity did instead was live selfishly, only concerning themselves with "number one." וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס – They began stealing from each other, oppressing and afflicting each other, doing anything and everything to fulfill their selfish and narcissistic needs. And what about *Noach*? Did he engage in those behaviors? No, but he suffered from their very same affliction. During his 600 years in this wretched, morally decrepit, environment he locked himself and his family away in an ivory tower, separating himself from the influence and criminality of others. And at the same time, separating himself from the cries of others, as well. For every time a crime is committed, there is a tragic victim left in its wake, and everywhere an oppressor exists, some poor soul is being oppressed.

Why an ark? What is its meaning? And what is the unique message Hashem gave to Noah?

If you think about it, *Noach* was in a *teivah* for his entire life, cut off from the world and humanity. So when God told *Noach* to build a *teivah* and to stay in it for as long as it takes to wipe out his friends (well, he probably didn't have any friends), neighbors, and countrymen, it is no wonder that he went along with this request willingly — this was the way he lived his life. And what's particularly striking about a *teivah* is that it is not even like a boat, which is partially open to the outside

world. In contrast, a *teivah*, an ark, is enclosed, sealed off from any connection from the environment. Understood in this light, while *Noach* may have taken the commandment to build a *teivah* as a means of redemption and salvation, it was probably meant to be a subtle, if not harsh, rebuke of him and his approach to life. And perhaps embedded within this rebuke was an effort to teach *Noach* that this "*teivah* mentality" was the undoing of the world and though he and his family were saved it is important not to ignore the instruction to *צִהַר תַּעֲשֶׂה לַתִּבָּה*, to *make a light for the ark*.

It is as if *Hashem* was saying to *Noach*, while everyone around you is perishing and you're staring at those walls, trapped within the bubble of callousness and self-absorption that you've built around yourself, there's something you need to understand — you must have a *tzohar*; a window to the world. You must have an opening to see out of your bubble to be there for the people around you, to be a true citizen of the world and a sensitive, caring human being.

Fast forward about 4,000 years (or more 😊) to our day and age. We are, perhaps, more connected than ever to people all over the planet through the internet, cellphones, and social media — from blogs to Facebook to Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and more. And there is no question that this inter-connectedness should make us more aware of and sensitive to each other and certainly more cognizant of everyone around us. However, when you think about it, is this technology connecting us more, or is it isolating us more? Be honest. When you're sitting with your spouse, family, or friends, how often do you check your phone or feed? How often are you involved in another conversation via text, email, or WhatsApp while someone is talking to you? This is not to say that these technologies are bad. We have amazing tools to stay in touch with people — to be connected and stay connected — but the irony is that the tools meant to connect us to everyone around us, have become like little *teivot*. To one degree or another, they have become self-contained, enclosed arks that we are trapped in.

The tools meant to connect us to everyone around us, have become like little Teivot.

All of us learned this lesson when the once-in-a-generation pandemic locked us in. At first, technology — Zoom, WhatsApp, social media — served a redemptive purpose by keeping us connected, providing us with the feeling of being together, even while apart. But it didn't take long for Zoom to feel like what it really is, just our heads trapped in a box. Because as God ordained from the beginning of time itself, *פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ*. People need people. Just as gravity pulls us back to earth, people naturally gravitate towards each other.

May this vital lesson of the "waters of Noah" and his (in)famous ark never be forgotten by us and generations to come. And may God never again bring calamity upon the earth — through a flood, plague, or other means — as we actualize the ideals and values that *Hashem* intended for us and all of humanity.

Rabbi Jonathan Morgenstern and his *Aishet Chayil*, Jordana, moved to Scarsdale over 20 years ago. They quite simply love the Young Israel of Scarsdale community and look forward to many more years of "Living Inspired & Growing Together" with all of you.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
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