

When Will We Be Noach?

When will it be safe to go out again? Is it time? Who decides? I have to get out my house. Or maybe, I'm pretty ok staying in house. What if I go out and it happens again?

These are the questions the Noah of our Torah portion is asking when the flood waters recede. And these are the questions we are asking, too.

For seven months, we have been on our arks, isolating ourselves, saving ourselves, and saving others with us. We are all, Noah.

And the question is, when do we come out?

Noah really wants to know. He sends out a raven, and it comes back. Then a dove, and it comes back. Then the dove again, and it returns with an olive branch in its beak. Life is returning. Then Noah sends out the dove again and it doesn't return—it's found a place to nest.

This all suggests that Noah is intensely curious as to when he'll be able to get off that ark.

Then the waters recede, Noah removes the ark's cover, and sees the dry land.

But he still doesn't come out.

It's only when God says, "Come out of the ark" (Genesis 8:16) that Noah finally leaves.

I'm also intensely interested in knowing when it's time to come out, to be around people more, to have our sanctuary even half-way full, to eat in—in!—a restaurant, to go to a movie, or a show. For my kids to have playdates, for schools to be back in person, for us to come out of our boxes, our homes, our arks, our shut-in safe places. We've been wearing our masks since Purim. When can we take them off?

I understand Noah's sending out bird after bird after bird. Don't you? Noah didn't sleep, couldn't sleep, the entire time on the ark, because he was so darn busy taking care of all those animals, worrying about them, about the world. He had no personal time, no personal space, no quiet, nothing but responsibility.

The midrash sums up this exhausting claustrophobia with the words of Psalm 142:8, הוציאה ממסגר נפשי, "Release my soul from confinement." "To be totally present to the needs of the animals—this is the very meaning of the ark experience," writes Aviva Zornberg in her psycho-midrashic reading of Genesis. She continues, "It is not simply a physical weariness that afflicts him, the unremitting rigor of a feeding schedule that never allows him a 'taste of sleep.' The smell of the animals, in the final analysis, unnerves him" (*The Beginnings of Desire*, 63).

We too are feeling cooped up, and tired of caring for the same people, and animals, endlessly.

But there are some other conflicting feelings too. I don't want to come out until I know it's safe. What if there's another wave—of Covid, of water? Noah too wonders if it will be safe—what if I go out and we all start having children and God brings another flood (Genesis Rabbah 34:6)? Noah is scared of that second wave, and staying inside is safer.

Who decides if it's safe to go out? God told Noah to go into the ark, and Noah doesn't come out, won't come out, even though the land is dry, until God tells him to come out. When the same scientists, doctors, and epidemiologists who told us to wear masks and stay home as much as possible tell us to come out and take off our masks, I'll feel a little more comfortable. Like Noah. Noah in Hebrew, Noach, after all, means comfortable. When will we be Noach?

And despite the cooped up feeling, I've discovered I really like being home. Life is simpler, fewer choices, close, familiar. I could imagine Noah realizing, after a while, that he doesn't want to leave.

The writer Ann Patchett's 2001 novel *Bel Canto* tells the story of dozens of people who are held hostage for weeks and weeks. And strangely, the hostages and their captors find that time the happiest of their entire lives because of new relationships and a return to a simpler life, when they are existing, like Noah, in a closed system.

One can't speak these days about coming out without the overlay of LGBTQ people "coming out of the closet." I'll only suggest that so many of the same dynamics, of testing, testing the waters, of needing to come out, of being afraid, of being told to stay in, of being outed, or made to come out perhaps unwillingly, are part of queer experiences too.

The world is a commentary on the Torah and the Torah is a commentary on the world.

It's comforting to me to see the same dynamics I, and we, are experiencing reflected in our traditions. What we are experiencing is not quite as unprecedented as we might think.

But I'm also nervous, because when Noah does come out, after some immediate piety, debauchery ensues. Despite good intentions, it's not clear the world is dramatically better after the flood.

What will our world look like when we emerge?

How will we respond to the new world we find?

And when, oh when, like it or not, will it be time to come out?

But when will we be comfortable again? When will we be Noach?

Shabbat shalom.