

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

· 1 ·

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

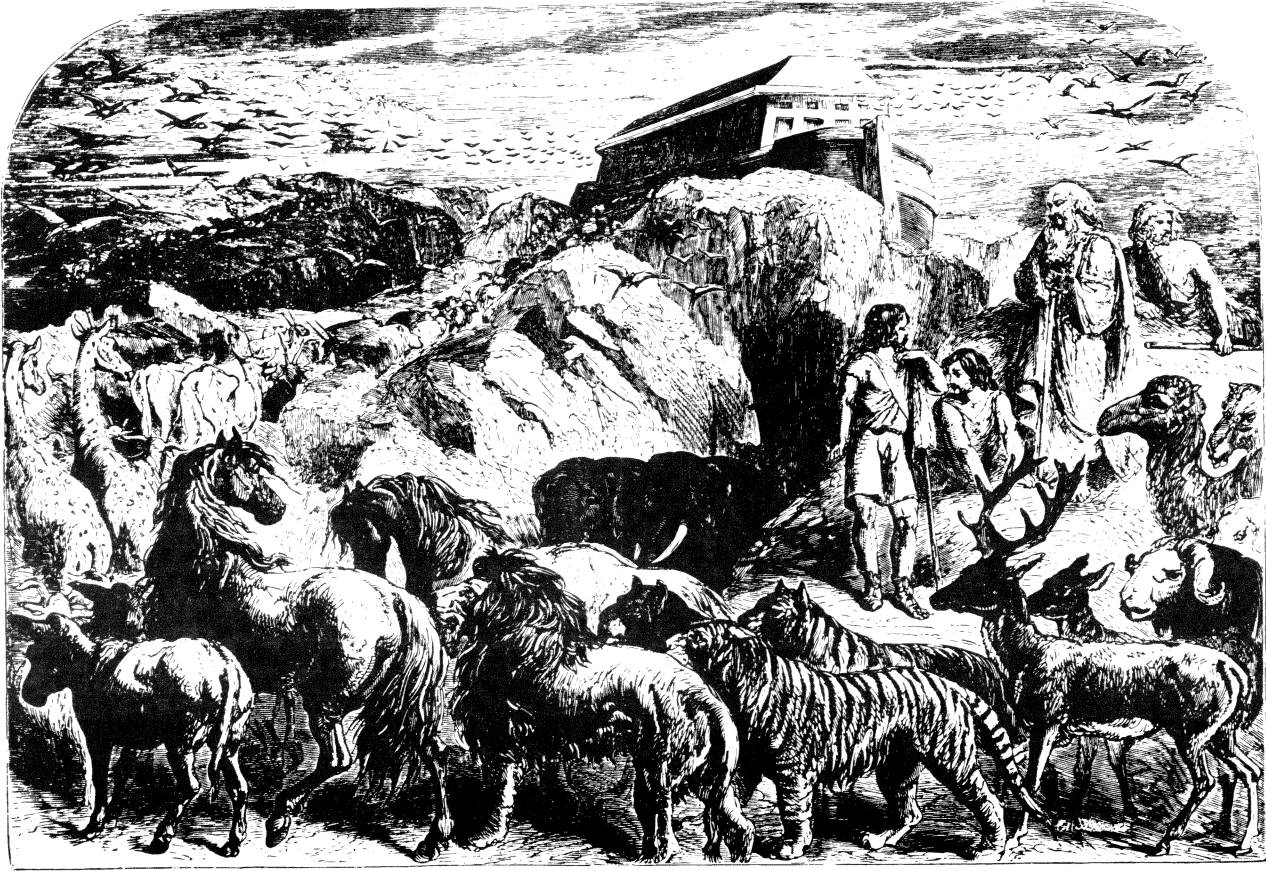
every living thing upon the earth. Noah built the ark, and, when the Flood came, everything in the ark survived.

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.”



· 2 ·

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-

· 3 ·

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 Noah 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)