

Parshat Noach

Emerging from the Ark

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Take a moment and think of one word that describes Noach. Noach is a complicated figure - a man of faith, a leader, a builder, a family man, timid, quiet, a survivor.

Scholars throughout our tradition have struggled to figure out Noach. Although the Torah tells us Noach is an *איש צדיק* - a righteous person, many see the following word “בדורותיו” – in his generation as a qualifier. Noach wouldn’t have been righteous in another generation, compared to Avraham, for example. Rashi explains Noah walked with God - *אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים - הִתְהַלֵּךְ־בְּנֹחַ*. But Avraham, he walked **before** God. Noach needed help, but Avraham drew strength from within. And this is seen as a bad thing. But, I wonder - is it so bad? What does it mean to walk in front of God instead of with God?

There is a midrash in the Midrash Tanchuma - thought to be one of the oldest collections of midrashim that we have. The midrash asks why the Torah tells us that God told Noach it was time to leave the Teivah. The midrash imagines that Noach is sitting in the ark thinking, “God told me when to go into the Ark, so I should probably wait for permission to leave as well”. Rabbi Yehudah Bar Ilai says: If I had been there, I would have smashed down the doors of the ark and taken myself out.

Wow. That is so powerful. I can imagine Rabbi Yehudah Bar Ilai’s frustration. Picture him shaking Noach and saying - “get out there, man!” In fact Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says - “when it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission. God gives us permission. He expects us to go on ahead.” Avraham walked in front of God, Noach walked with God. Noach needed help. Now I have certainly been thought of as a door smasher from time to time. And I don’t have to imagine the feelings of impatience. I often feel them. And yet, the past eighteen months have given me perspective. About what it means to survive a scary, world wide pandemic, about what it means to feel stuck in the ark. And I have begun to feel that Noach is getting the short end of the stick.

The Shenei Luchot HaBerit written by Rabbi Isaiah HaLevi Horovitz in the 16th century in Israel writes that Noach personifies the personality of a *Shoneh*, one who changes - He witnessed a world which functioned; he then witnessed a world that was destroyed; finally he witnessed a world rebuilt. He lived in a time of cataclysmic change. This is no small thing. At a time where things are constantly changing and unknown perhaps Noach’s strongest quality is the faith that he clung to. Of course Noach needed God to walk alongside him - the grounds were constantly shifting underneath his feet.

Although Noach saw the waters recede and he conducted his tests of science, sending out the birds to explore, it seems he needed to continue to put his faith directly in God and wait for God’s explicit direction. Perhaps instead of seeing this as timidity, we should see it as an act of patience and great faith. When it is time to open our metaphoric ark doors - will we bang them down, charging ahead to rebuild a shattered world? Or will we want to wait, to have patience, to listen to God’s counsel?

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There are lots of ways to survive a trauma and I certainly don't mean to say one is better than another. But, I want to encourage us to see Noach's character and give ourselves some of the credit I am arguing he deserves. Living through trauma may make us slower to react, more hesitant, more reliant on our faith than science. And that is OK. We can learn from Noach to remain deeply rooted in faith through disaster. We can rebuild our shattered world only once we have rebuilt ourselves.

Noach leaves the ark a changed man. We all will. And those traumas do not recede as quickly as the floods do. I could imagine another version to the end of the midrash. Perhaps Rabbi Yehudah Bar Ilai would have said "If I had been there, I would have channeled my faith and my patience. If I had been there, I would have walked out of the ark, with God by my side, not behind me."

I want to leave you with a poem written by an Israeli poet, Rivka Miriam:

Noah installed wheels on his ark
dragging it after him
in case the flood suddenly returned.
Grapevines, noticing fins on his temples
and shiny scales at the opening of his shirt,
turned into raisins, dried out their juices
to ease his fear of their drowning wetness.
Noah installed wheels on his ark
and when the children hung from its side-poles for a ride
Noah lovingly offered them brittle clods of Ararat.



Yael Keller is the former Director of Operations at Maharat. She earned a Masters in Public Policy from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management and a Masters in Jewish Professional Leadership at the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University. Upon graduation, she was the Director of Programming at Uri L'Tzedek, the Orthodox Social Justice movement. In graduate school she was an intern at the Joint Distribution Committee in Israel, where she worked on the grant writing team, advocating for Jews at risk throughout the world and a site educator at Impact Boston, where she facilitated a teen experience focused on social action, community service and advocacy. Before graduate school, Yael spent three years in Washington, DC, working at the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington and Hillel's Schusterman International Center. She also spent a semester in Israel studying at the Pardes Institute of Judaic Studies before attending the Hornstein Program. Yael earned her B.A. in Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. She was active in her campus Hillel, serving as a student leader and board member.