

Parashat Noach נח

Torah: Genesis 6:9–11:32

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1–55:5

God's Covenant With Mankind

Based on the connection between the Hebrew for "Noah" as the same root for "comfort", the midrash comments: "Surely Scripture should have been written, "These are the offspring of Noah." It teaches, however, that he was a comfort to himself and a comfort to the world, a comfort to his fathers and a comfort to his children, a comfort to celestial beings and to mortals; (a comfort] in this world and in the world to come. (Beseshit Rabbah 30:5.)

General Overview

Parashat Noach bridges the gap between pre-historical times and the beginning of recorded human history. It is impossible to determine exactly how many years are in this time period. Some biblical scholars assert that Adam was created somewhere around the year 4,000 BCE, while others suggest around the year 10,000. Still others argue that the earth was created millions of years before we have any human records of history.

Exposition

Our commentary will not focus on the time estimate. We will save those comments when we discuss the use of genealogies in the Bible. Instead, assuming that all of the events recorded in Genesis are actual historical events, we will focus on mankind's second beginning — the flood and its results. To help us think through this parasha, we will utilize the following outline in our study:

- I. The Downfall of Mankind
- II. The Destruction of Mankind
- III. The Declaration of a Covenant with Mankind
- IV. The Divisions of Mankind

In this excerpt from Parashat Noach, we will focus on section III, The Declaration of a Covenant with Mankind.

III. The Declaration of a Covenant with Mankind

A. *The Birds*

The rains abated. After 150 days, the floodwater started to recede (7:24). Noticing that the rains were over, 8:6–12 tells us that Noah sent out some birds to investigate if there was any dry land. The raven was sent first. Ravens were birds of prey. "The raven would sustain itself by feeding on carrion which would abound if the earth were dry."¹ Finding nothing, the raven returned. The dove was sent next. Again, this bird also returned only to be sent out again after seven more days. The second time he was sent out, however, he returned with an olive branch. Since olive trees do not grow very tall, Noah knew that the

water was very close to the ground. Therefore, after waiting seven more days, he sent the dove out again. This time he did not return. This was the sign for which Noah was waiting. The flood was now finished. It was now time to leave the boat. God gave Noah the go ahead to leave the ark.

The olive branch that the dove brought back to the ark has become a famous symbol throughout history. However, many have missed its true significance. Many have assumed that the picture of the dove with the olive branch in its beak is a picture of peace. However, once one understands the use of the olive tree in the Middle East, especially among its natives, such as the Bedouin, one would know that the olive branch is not a symbol of peace, but rather a symbol that one generation is providing for the next generation; that life will go on to the next generation. When one plants an olive tree, he does not plant it for himself. He usually plants it for his descendants.²

B. *Gilgamesh*

One reason why we mention the bird story in the biblical flood account is that we find a fascinating parallel to this story in another ancient flood account. Most are undoubtedly aware that several flood stories have existed from very ancient times. Perhaps one of the most well known accounts is called the *Gilgamesh Epic*. This was the ancient Babylonian flood account. The oldest copies we have are inscribed in cuneiform³ on clay tablets dating from approximately 750 BCE, but the story itself is much older.

There are many interesting parallels between the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the Genesis story. However, one of the closest is the account of the birds. Utnapishtim records in the eleventh tablet of the *Gilgamesh Epic* that after his boat landed on Mount Nisir,

I sent forth and set free a dove. The dove went forth but came back; since no resting place for it was visible, she turned round. Then I sent forth and set free a swallow. . . then I sent forth and set free a raven. The raven went forth and, seeing that the waters had diminished, he eats, circles, and turns not round.⁴

Although there are great similarities between the two accounts, there are also some major differences. One such difference is a reversal in the order in which the birds were sent. Dr. Hamilton points out that the biblical account has the ring of truth about it as opposed to the *Gilgamesh Epic* because

the dove is a valley bird and it was released in order to determine whether the lower-lying areas were inhabitable. The progression from raven to dove makes more sense than that of dove to raven.⁵

The fact that there is such a similar flood story as *Gilgamesh* (and others) to the Bible shows that many nations and cultures have some kind of a folk memory of a cataclysmic event such as the Bible depicts. When each account is compared to the biblical flood story, in each point of comparison, the biblical account emerges as the one that has the ring of truth about it.

C. *The Covenantal Promises*

When Noah left the ark, following an unspecified period of time, he offered a sacrifice to the Lord from among the clean animals. The Lord showed His

acceptance of this sacrifice by responding with several profound promises to Noah.

The first promise God made is recorded in 8:21. God solemnly assured mankind that He would not curse the ground again. The word “ground” in 8:21 is *adamah* (אדמה). It might seem that this promise is reversing the curse in Genesis 3. However, the reality of the situation, i.e., a ground which is still displaying the characteristics of being cursed, would speak against that interpretation. Instead, we note that at least three times this word is used in reference to the whole inhabited earth.⁶ Hence, what is being referred to here is that God is promising not to destroy the entire earth again. The *Targum Onkelos* also understands this verse that way as well. This information might also feed into the universal flood argument!

The second promise, in 8:22, is the assurance that the cycle of the seasons will continue. There will be rains, but there will also be sunshine; there will be summer, but there will also be winter. Not only does this assure mankind that there will not be a universal flood every time it rains, but it also paves the way for the future revelation in the Torah concerning the spiritual significance of the cycle of the seasons.

After God’s promises are recounted, the text indicates that the Holy One delineates to Noah — and to the future generations that will come from him — some of their responsibilities before Him. Traditionally, the rabbis see a total of seven stipulations from these verses. They call these commandments the “Seven Commandments Given to the Descendants of Noah,” or simply the “Noahide Laws.” They constitute what we might call natural religion, as they are vital to the existence of human society.⁷ The Torah of Moshe, the rabbis assert, was given to rule Israel; but, obedience to these seven commandments alone was in ancient times required of non-Jews living among Israelites, or attaching themselves to the Jewish community.

We cite seven Noahide Laws, but in reality the total number has been a matter of debate since the times of the Mishnah. The traditional seven laws are:⁸

1. The establishment of courts of justice
2. The prohibition of blasphemy
3. The prohibition of idolatry
4. The prohibition of incest
5. The prohibition of murder
6. The prohibition of robbery
7. The eating of flesh cut from a living animal (eating of blood).

There are some Messianic thinkers who see a parallel between these seven laws and the four things that the early Messianic leaders asked the new gentile believers in Yeshua to observe as recorded in Acts 15:20. However, the text in Acts 15 does not necessarily have to be understood in that way. A good summary of some of the most common possible ways to interpret this is found in David Stern’s *Jewish New Testament Commentary*.⁹ In light of the works-righteousness implied in the traditional Jewish Noahide Laws, it does not seem

possible that the apostles would have used them or applied them to gentile believers in Yeshua.

What we have described so far concerning the events after the flood is nothing short of describing the terms of a covenant. In fact, that is what the Lord called it in 9:6. A covenant is a legally binding agreement between two or more parties. The ancient Near Eastern societies were covenant oriented. We have records from the thousands of clay tablets that have been unearthed from those civilizations, of business covenants, such as rental contracts, wedding covenants, and international covenants that we commonly call treaties.

Slaughtering an animal usually sealed a covenant, in ancient times. Sometimes the animal was served at the ceremony as the main course for a fellowship meal shared by the two agreeing parties. In addition, depending on the nature of the covenant, sometimes the pieces of the slaughtered animal were laid out on the ground in two equal parallel rows. The parties making the covenant usually walked between these rows symbolizing that they agreed that “whoever breaks this covenant, what happened to the animal, may it also happen to me.” We will discuss this more extensively when we come to Genesis 15.

In our passage, notice that Noah first sacrificed an animal. The Lord making certain promises followed this sacrifice. A covenant ceremony was taking place. All the characteristics of a typical ancient Near East covenant were present: the promises, the stipulations, the sacrifices — and...

D. The Sign

One of the most popular features of this story is the rainbow. What are we to make of it? Some say that the rainbow did not exist before the flood because there had never been rain on the earth. This is the viewpoint of Whitcomb and Morris. Basing their argument on Genesis 2:5–6, they write:

This verse is applied specifically to the initial Creation, but there is no mention made of any change in the meteorological phenomenon after the Fall, so it evidently continued until the time of the Deluge. This inference is supported also by the fact that the rainbow is mentioned as a new sign from God to man after the flood, implying strongly that rain as we know it and the subsequent rainbow were experienced for the first time then.¹⁰

Is the rainbow merely an expression of divinely instituted rules of natural physical science that when a light shines through moisture at a certain angle it creates a prism? Or, did God create it specifically to be a sign of the covenant He had just made with Noah? Or, are we to accept both ideas simultaneously? It seems that this third possibility is the most logical way to understand the rainbow. That is, its appearance is a natural outcome of the rules of natural science. As such, however, it is also an apt symbol for the covenant God newly made with Noah. The rain was a new thing, and subsequently, the rainbow was also a new entity. Accordingly, its symbolism is also new.

What, therefore, does the rainbow symbolize? How is it a symbol of the covenant made with Noah? This is not an easy question to answer. There are many opinions that try to explain the link between the rainbow and the promise to never destroy mankind by means of a worldwide deluge. One of the most common suggestions is to link the bow to the customs of ancient warriors.

According to the Rambam, it is the practice of combatants to turn their bow the other way to show that they are offering peace to their adversary. Further, the bow has no string by which to shoot the arrows.¹¹

This viewpoint also finds some biblical support from Psalm 77:18, “the clouds flooded forth waters; the sky sent out a sound, Your arrows also went abroad.” Interestingly enough, Rambam, though he suggested this interpretation, also rejected it! For him, it was enough to say

we are not to look for and ferret out its symbolism in the form of the bow, its colour or physical characteristics to determine the connection between them and what it represents for us...the bow will serve as a token or sign because the Almighty has fixed it as a token of His covenant.¹²

Aside from the explanation of any possible symbolism, it is enough to know that it was the custom in ancient Near Eastern covenants to have an outward sign as a reminder of the existence of the covenant. God chose to use the rainbow as such a sign. It is a sign not because violence and robbery had disappeared from the world and not because mankind had already been purified of sin, but on account of His mercy and patience.¹³

Before we leave the subject of the flood altogether, we desire to make one last point. The prophet Isaiah draws upon the outpouring of God’s wrath upon mankind to make a special promise to Israel. Isaiah speaks frequently about future judgments that the Lord will unleash upon Israel. However, in 54:9, Isaiah provides comforting assurances to the faithful remnant of Israel by saying,

To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.

Just as God promised not to totally destroy all of mankind again by a flood, so He also promises to the faithful remnant of Israel that He will never subject them to His wrath. Moreover, as He swore by covenant to keep His promise to Noah, so He also has sworn by covenant to be just as faithful to Israel.

¹ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 30.

² This information was gathered from Dr. Randall Smith, instructor and director of the Jerusalem Institute, during a personal conversation with him in November 1998. The Jerusalem Institute is a biblical educational institution located in Jerusalem, Israel, and dedicated to helping people to understand historical and cultural backgrounds of the Bible.

³ Cuneiform was a way of writing in the ancient Near East from approximately 3000 BCE to about the 8th or 9th BCE, when it reached its peak of usage. However, it continued to be used in some places even up to close to the first century. Basically, cuneiform was written on clay tablets with various wedge-shaped styluses. When the writer was finished, the tablets were baked so that they became hard, thus preserving the writing for a long period of time.

⁴ James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East, An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, vol. 1, 69–70.

⁵ Victor Hamilton, *Genesis*, 305.

⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (BDB), 10.

⁷ Hertz, *op. cit.*, 33.

⁸ Based on Sanhedrin 56a

⁹ Dr. Stern provides three possible interpretations of Acts 15 and the four apostolic requirements to new gentile believers. In our opinion, his possibility #3 is the most viable, i.e., that the apostles were attempting to make table fellowship possible between the Torah-observant Jewish believers in Yeshua and gentile believers who were turning to Yeshua from a strictly pagan background. It should be noted that it would not have been necessary to write these four things found in Acts 15:20ff to gentiles who were proselytes or God fearers because they were already practicing those things. See *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 277–279.

¹⁰ Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood*, 24.

¹¹ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Genesis*, 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 87.

¹³ *Ibid.*