

Some Comments on Noah
Rabbi Eliot Malomet October 29, 2022 4 Heshvan 5783

עֲשֵׂה לָךְ תֵּבַת עֲצֵי-גֹפֶר ... בְּרִי' ו' ייִד

Make yourself an ark of gopher wood... (Gen. 6:14)
The Torah often has commands worded in this way, ie. when God tells Abraham to leave Ur, He says, **לֵךְ לָךְ** - **go for yourself** (Gen. 12:1). When Rebekah tells Jacob to run away, she says, **בְּרַח לָךְ** - **escape for yourself** (Gen. 27:43). When God tells Moses to fashion the new set of tablets, He says, **פָּסַל לָךְ** - **carve for yourself** (Exod. 34:1). While this is a common figure of speech, it's hard **not** to hear something directed to the individual. The engaged reader asks: *Is he making the ark for himself only?* (Abraham: *is he leaving his birth-place only for himself?* In the case of Jacob, *is he escaping for himself or for someone else?* In the case of Moses, *is he carving the new tablets for himself or for the people?*) Here Noah is indeed building the ark for himself. But he is also building it for his family. And for all the animals. Sparked by this ambiguity, the rabbis create a beautiful midrash, which Rashi reformulates:

הַרְבֵּה רָחַק וְהִצְלָה לְפָנָיו, וְלָמָּה הִטְרִיחוּ בְּבִנּוֹן זֶה? כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּרְאוּהוּ אֲנָשֵׁי דוֹר הַמַּבּוּל עוֹסְקִים בָּהּ ק"כ שָׁנָה, וְשׂוֹאֲלִין אוֹתוֹ מַה זֹאת לָךְ, וְהוּא אוֹמֵר לָהֶם עֲתִיד הַקָּב"ה לְהַבְרִיא מַבּוּל לְעוֹלָם, אוֹלֵי יִשׁוּבוּ :

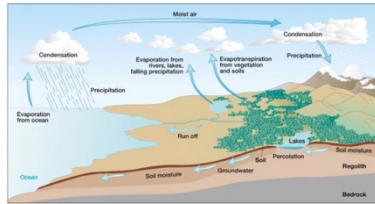
God had many ways of saving and rescuing- so why did God trouble him with this construction project? So that when the people of the generation of the Flood saw him busy with it for 120 years and would ask him, "What are you doing? he would answer them, "In the future, God will bring a flood upon the earth" - and maybe they would repent. In other words, God could have saved Noah in an abundant number of miraculous ways. So why did God command him to build *an ark for himself*? Because one would assume that the obsessive project (120 years long in the making!) would have elicited curiosity from neighbors, and when told the reason, they would have been inspired to repent. The midrash tries to solve a great moral puzzle in the story: why didn't Noah say anything or do anything to help people in the way that Abraham, argued with God about Sodom and Gomorrah? The rabbis picture Noah as someone who would have engaged with people and move them to repent. But the Torah presents Noah as silent and compliant. He does whatever God tells him to do. And we are left with the

question: *does he do it for himself or for others?*
בְּשָׁנַת שְׁשִׁים-מָאוֹת שָׁנָה לְחֵייוֹת בְּהַדְּשׁ הַשָּׁנִי בְּשִׁבְעָה-עָשָׂר יוֹם לַהַדְּשׁ בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה נִבְקְעוּ כָּל-מַעְיֵנוֹת תְּהוֹם רָבָה וְאַרְבַּת הַשָּׁמַיִם נִפְתְּחוּ: וַיְהִי הַגֶּשֶׁם עַל-הָאָרֶץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה: בְּרִי' ז' יא-יב

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day: then burst all the well-springs of the great and the sluices of the heavens opened up. The torrent was upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. (Gen. 7:11-12)

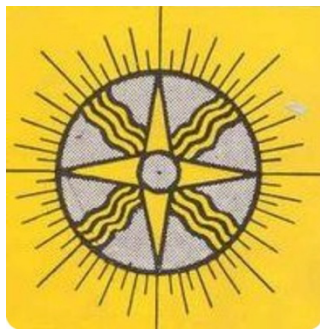
This is a description of the undoing of creation. Recall that when God creates the world, a *rakia* is placed in heaven to separate the **water that is below the rakia from the water that was above the rakia** (Gen. 1:7). Similarly, land appears only after **the waters are gathered**. In the flood, all of that is undone. The waters from above crash to the earth, and the waters from below burst up. This is one way to understand the flood. Another is what we experience from time to time in catastrophic weather events. Great torrents of rain accompanied by high winds wreak havoc on everything. In more temperate regions, flooding occurs from winter run-off. Question: Is this flood an extraordinary meteorological event or a **divine** event? It's a **divine** event but it is being told to an audience (like us) that is only familiar with the ordinary flow of seasons and (like us) occasionally exposed to severe weather events. It is not about weather. The flood story represents a disruption of the ordinary seasonal experience. The implicit message is that God who created nature is above nature and controls nature. In pagan ideologies the various forces of nature are manifestations of the various gods. In the Bible, all of nature, (and weather, ie. sunshine, rain and wind) is subservient to God. The elements do God's bidding and the orderly transition from season to season (which is God's promise at the end of the story, in verse 8:22 [*never*] again, *all the days of the earth, shall sowing and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night ever cease!*) is a re-assertion of God's order over nature. By the end of the story, **the waters were fully dried up upon the earth.** (8:13). But how did that happen? As we know, after flooding, water will

always seek its own level. It will drain into streams and rivers and finally, as Ecclesiastes says, *כָּל־הַנְּחָלִים הַלְכִים אֶל־הַיָּם וְהַיָּם אֵינָנו מָלֵא - all rivers run to the sea, but the sea is never full.* (Eccl. 1:7). But the other main thing that happens



is that, like the *Eensy Weensy Spider* nursery rhyme says: *out came the sun and dried up all the rain.**

Question: can you find mention of the sun in the entire story of the flood? Any mention? Answer: No. Why not? Answer: Good question. The reason why the sun is not mentioned in the flood story is probably the same reason it is not mentioned in the creation story. Note that what we call the *sun* is called *the great light* in the creation story. And why is that? Because *shemesh* is also the name of a great pagan god. And since the Bible is, among everything else, a radical revolution against paganism, you won't find even a hint of paganism in these foundational stories. God creates the universe and all of its



elements, and God ordains all events in nature and in history. The transition of water through its various states, solid, liquid and gas, like everything else in nature, happens only

as a result of the divine will.

**וַיִּסַּר נֹחַ אֶת־מִכְסֵה הַתְּבֵּה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה חָרְבוּ פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה:
Noah removed the covering of the ark and saw: here, the face of the ground had dried up.**

When Noah entered the ark God placed the cover on it, **וַיִּסְגֹּר ה' בַּעֲדָיו - God closed him in on his behalf.** (7:16) and here, (on the 1st day of 1st month in the 601st year of Noah's life), Noah removes the cover. The end of the flood and the drying of the water, and now the removal of the

lid, signals a transition from divine activity to human activity. God may have closed him in the ark from the outside, but Noah has to unseal the ark from the inside. You would think that, in taking off the lid, and seeing the dry land, and seeing everything going back to normal, Noah would have taken the initiative to disembark the ark. But that's not the case. Noah stays parked in the ark. It's not until the 27th day of the 2nd month (57 days later**) that God has to tell him to *get out of the ark.* **צֵא מִן־הַתְּבֵּה** (8:16). Is this Noah's timidity or his obedience? Has he been so shattered by the flood experience that he is paralyzed with fear, or is he that obedient to God that he will stay parked in the ark without a remark and not disembark until God says so? And what do we think God wants here? Human obedience or human initiative? You decide.

Why is there so much focus on dates and times in the story? We all experience time differently in intense circumstances. During a shiva, for example, mourners sometimes lose track of what day it is. Hence the need for some kind of time-structuring ritual, (shiva) to help the mourner re-orient him/herself to time. During catastrophic weather events we also lose track of time. Time *stands still* when we are deeply engaged in a task (experiencing *flow*, or a sense of timelessness). When people go on a vigorous tour, *they can't believe that it's only been a couple of days!* because they have seen so much and it feels like they have spent more time away. Similarly, the need to track time is instinctive. *What day is it today?* is a question that we ask when we want to locate ourselves in time. There is a growing literature of the perception of time during the Holocaust. The Torah is focused on time in this story because, at its core, this is a story about order and chaos. Order reverts to chaos and God re-imposes order on chaos. The flood is not a random chaotic event. It all proceeds according to a divine plan. The calendaring of all the main events during the flood signals divine order that transcends all the chaos. Take note of time. It is God's way of showing that God is in charge. **Shabbat Shalom! שבת שלום!**

* There are many songs in every culture about the emotional effects of the sun coming out after a rain. Take, *I Can See Clearly Now* by Jimmy Cliff, or *Here*

Comes the Sun by George Harrison. Supertramp, *It's Raining Again...* we could go on....

** Depending on how many days you count in a month.

