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world. We can do this in all of the ways that we communicate with one another. Adding light, joy, and goodness to those interactions is a way to participate, as Noah did, in bringing about a new world.

But it doesn't stop there. If the word *ha-teivah* means "the word", what happens when I read other instances of *teivah* according to this interpretation? Can we extend the metaphor into the rest of the parashah? If we do then we find two additional instances that add another turn in what it means to focus on our speech.

When Noah is instructed, "*bo el ha-teivah*" – go into the ark – following the Baal Shem Tov that would mean: "enter into the word." The Besh't continues – "When a person enters into the words of prayer or Torah study one should do so with their whole self and with total presence." This is a useful message not only in our prayer and study but in our interpersonal communications as well. When we enter into the word, we can do so with total presence and focus.

Later, the instruction is to leave the ark, "*tse min ha-teivah*" – leave the word. In other words, stop talking. In the space when we get away from our words, we leave room in the conversation to truly listen and hear what the other person is saying to us.

The *teivah* – the ark – saves the world. It enables God and humanity to have a fresh start. To be a truly effective tool to restart the universe, both the ark and our words must be composed of light to banish the darkness that caused the need to begin again in the first place. When we enter into our ark, our words, we can do so with our whole selves and with total focus enabling that light to truly shine.

But the state of being in the *teivah* is temporary. We cannot stay there with full focus and intensity for too long. We must get out of the ark in order to engage with the world around us, with the people around us, with our community, with our tefilah and with our Torah. The words that are not ours also contain light. When we can get out of our own *teivah*, we can allow the light of others to shine as well.

When we do that, we truly build a new world together. Shabbat Shalom.

*At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.*



## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Noah

November 2, 2019 | 4 Heshvan 5780

Annual | Genesis 6:9-11:32 (Etz Hayim p. 41-63; Hertz p. 26-40)

Triennial Genesis 6:9-8:14 (Etz Hayim p. 41-48; Hertz p. 26-31)

Haftarah | Isaiah 54:1-55:5 (Etz Hayim p. 64-68; Hertz p. 41-44)

### D'var Torah: The Light in our Words

**Rabbi Uri Allen**, *Conservative Yeshiva Alum & Associate Rabbi and Director of Makom at Temple Beth Shalom in Roslyn Heights, NY*

As Noah receives the instructions for building the ark in this week's parashah, God gives an unusual command: *tsohar ta'aseh la-teiva* – make a *tsohar* in the ark. Since *tsohar* is a unique word in the Torah, occurring only with reference to Noah's Ark, we have no other context from which to figure out the meaning. Turning to Rashi however, we learn that a *tsohar* is something meant to provide light, either an actual window or precious stones that enable the sun's rays to illuminate the ark.

The Baal Shem Tov – the founder of Hasidism – understands this command to Noah not in a physical way but in a spiritual way. His focus is on the ark itself. He says that *ha-teivah* (Hebrew for the ark) here carries another meaning – 'the word'. So the command shifts from "make a light source in the ark" to "make your words light." The suggestion here is that in the same way that the ark was the mechanism for saving the world, our words can have similar saving power if they are imbued with light.

How can we do this? We can do this by looking for the good in others, recognizing it and actually giving that thought voice. We can do this through our use of social media– to promote that which is good in the

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**Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism**

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

# D'var Haftarah: God's Vow of Mercy

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

The later part of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-66) is a series of prophecies meant to encourage those who returned to rebuild the nation after seventy years of exile in Babylonia. These people needed God's reassurance that disaster would not overcome them. One of the verses that stands out in this regard is the following: "For as Noah's waters is this to Me. As I vowed not to let Noah's waters go over the earth again, so have I vowed not to be furious with you or rebuke you." (54:9) In this verse, God in his mercy, affirms their security by attaching it to a vow He made to never again bring a flood like that in the generation of Noah. (See Genesis 9:11)

This verse is repurposed in the following rabbinic story and discussion from the period of the Mishnah on the limits of this promise: "A *hasid* (miracle worker) was asked to pray for rain. He prayed and it rained. They said to him: Just as you prayed for rain and it rained, so, too, pray that the rain should go away. The *hasid* said to them: Go and see if there is a man standing on the edge of the Ofel, dabbling his feet in Nahal Kidron, [and if there is] then we will pray that it should no longer rain, but be assured that God will never again bring a flood to the world, as it says: 'There will no longer be a flood.' (Genesis 9:11) And it says [as well]: "For as Noah's waters are to Me, as I vowed not to let Noah's waters go over the earth' (Isaiah 54:9) Rabbi Meir says: There will not be a flood of water, but a flood of fire and of brimstone, like that He brought on the Sodomites. Rabbi Yehudah said: There will not be a flood over all of the people, but there will be over individuals. How so? A person might fall in the sea and drown or a ship might sink in the sea and someone on it might drown. This is an example of an individual flood. Rabbi Yosa says: 'There will not be a flood of water, but there will be a flood of plague over the nations in the time of the Messiah.'" (adapted from Tosefta Taanit 2:13, Lieberman ed. p. 334-5)

This story about a rain-making miracle worker turns into a discussion of the limits of divine mercy. Whereas in the prophetic message the emphasis was on God's merciful assurance that all would be good and secure, these sages were worried that divine restraint might constrain God's ability to ensure justice in His world. And so, each of these sages tries to limit the parameters of God's promise to refrain from the most severe punishment. We are left in the end, with a conflict between mercy and justice – an elusive and important conflict not just for God but for us as well.

# Parashah Study & Discussion

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

The Earth has become hopelessly corrupt. God decides to bring a flood to wash it all away. Noah is commanded by God to build an ark and save his family and a pair (or 7) of each species. From Noah's three sons comes humanity as the Torah knows it. From the line of Shem comes Avraham, who makes his first appearance at the very end of this parashah. But let's start at the beginning....

## TEXT - Bereshit 6:9

*This is the line of Noah - Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.*

- This is Noah's resume, apparently what got him the job of being the only human saved from the flood. What do you think in this description made him suited for his position? (Remember, he does not only have to live in the ark, he has to walk out of it when it is all over.)
- What credentials would we like to put down in such an application?

## COMMENTARY - Rashi on Bereshit 6:9 part 1

*In his generations: Some of our Sages interpret it ["in his generation"] favorably: How much more so if he had lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous! Others interpret it derogatorily: In comparison with his generation he was righteous, but if he had been in Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance.*

- Should righteousness be measured against that of others'? Is it possible to assess and evaluate without comparison?
- How much influence does our environment have on us?
- Should we be - and are we – judged by the society we live in when we disagree with its values and behavior?
- To what extent can a person live in a society and not be influenced by it?
- One of the midrashic readings brought above reduces Noah from an outstanding person to someone who barely measures up when compared to another righteous person, Avraham. Is this kind of reading motivating or discouraging for Noah? For us? Why?

## COMMENTARY - Rashi on Bereshit 6:9 part 2

*Noah walked with God: But concerning Avraham, it says (Bereshit 17:1): "walk before Me"; (24:40): "[the Lord] before Whom I walked." Noah required [God's] support to uphold him [in righteousness], but Avraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness by himself.*

- What does Rashi seem to think of Noah's righteousness?