



Around the Shabbat Table Shabbat Noah 5764

November 2003

This week's writer: Barbara Kessel, BJE Director of Administration, author of Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots (Brandeis University Press)

Introduction

This week's Torah portion is named for its "lead character," Noah, who was born ten generations after Adam. By Noah's time, civilization had become totally corrupt, engaged in theft and violence. But Noah was different, and God approached him, saying: I am planning to bring a flood that will destroy the world because of its corruption, but you should build for yourself and your family an ark by which I swear you will be saved. Take seven pairs of all kosher animals with you on the ark and two pairs of all the non-kosher species. Noah did as he was told and the rains lasted forty days and nights, destroying anyone and anything that was not inside the ark. After one hundred fifty days, the ark came to rest on the peak of Mt. Ararat. Forty days later, Noah sent out a raven to determine whether the earth had dried but the raven only flew back and forth. He sent out a dove, which came back with an olive leaf in her mouth, signifying the presence of dry land. Noah left the ark and made burnt offerings from among the kosher animals to God. God set a rainbow in the sky representing His covenant with humanity never again to send a flood that would obliterate it entirely.

Noah and his three sons, Shem, Cham, and Yaphet, exited the ark with their families and animals. Noah proceeded to plant a vineyard, drank its wine, became intoxicated and slept naked in his tent. His youngest son, Cham, saw him in his nakedness and ran to tell his brothers, who approached their sleeping father with their faces averted and covered him up. When Noah awoke, he realized what had happened and cursed Cham's lineage.

At this point, the *sidrah* proceeds to recount the generations that succeeded Noah through his three sons. Chapter Eleven then interrupts the genealogy with the story of the Tower of Babel, known in Hebrew as the *dor ha-palagah*, the Generation of Factions. The Torah describes how the earth's population all spoke one language. They migrated eastward and settled in a valley, agreeing to build a brick city and a tower reaching up to Heaven. God saw their arrogant plan and scattered them all over the globe, changing their one language to several different ones, so that they no longer understood one another.

The portion now returns to the genealogy and traces Shem's lineage, ending its description with Terach, Abram's father. It describes his family's journey from Ur Casdim toward Canaan, stopping on the way to settle in Charan, where Terach died.



Questions for your Family's Discussion

1. God has promised never again to flood the world in one fell swoop, no matter how badly people behave. Has mankind progressed morally since the time of the Flood, when evil was universal?
2. Noah was called upon to build an ark, to save himself and his family, as well as wildlife. The *parasha* does not indicate that he tried to intervene with God to save others, or whether he tried to save humanity by influencing them to improve their ways. If you had been Noah, what would you have done? How? Why?
3. What was wrong with Cham's behavior? What could he have done instead?
4. Two situations involving punishment appear in this parasha: When theft and violence were rampant, God punished the world with total obliteration. When humanity united to storm the Heavens and attack God, He punished them with exile and a diminished ability to communicate with one another. Which of these two punishments is more severe? What does that say about the two different types of crimes? Why? How did the punishments "fit the crimes?"
5. There are a number of stories grouped together at the beginning of the book of Genesis: Creation, the Garden of Eden, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. Are there themes in all of these stories that are similar? Can you think of a reason that they may have been grouped together?

Texts to Wrestle With

1. "These are the progeny of Noah; Noah was a righteous man..."(Chapter 6: verse 9). What does righteousness have to do with the legacy a person leaves behind?
2. "Noah was a righteous man and perfect in his generation..."(Chapter 6: verse 9): The classical medieval Torah commentator, Rashi, quotes the Talmud as offering two explanations of this verse – either Noah was righteous **despite** the evil influences of the people in his generation, or he was righteous only **in comparison to** the evil people of his generation. What is the basic difference between the two explanations? Why does the verse require explanation – what is odd about the wording of the verse?
3. Which of Noah's actions when he left the ark supports the first explanation – that he was righteous despite his evil contemporaries? Which event supports the second version?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. God was deeply dismayed that His creatures were stealing from each other and attacking one another. The opposite behavior would be to give donations to the needy. Find a legitimate clothing distribution center and gather donations from your family and friends for charity.
2. Tradition says that the earth's entire ecology was upset by mankind's evil ways. To counteract that toxicity, research some ecologically responsible behavior, including different kinds of conservation, and share your findings.

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

This project is supported through the generosity of Joyce & Fred Claar.

BJE is an agency of UJA-Federation of New York