

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Charlie Schwartz

Genesis Rabbah 31:5

איזהו חמס ואיזהו גזל

אמר רבי חנינא: חמס אינו שוה פרוטה, וגזל ששוה פרוט

וכך היו אנשי המבול עושים, היה אחד מהם מוציא קופתו מליאה תורמוסים, והיה זה בא ונוטל פחות משהו פרוטה, וזה בא ונוטל פחות משהו פרוטה, עד מקום שאינו יכול להוציאו ממנו בדין

What is the difference between *gezel* and *hamas*? Rabbi Hanina says, "*Hamas* is theft of a small amount whereas *gezel* is theft of a large amount. And this is what the generation of the flood would do, when someone would come to the market with beans to sell, many people would steal an amount so small they could not be prosecuted in court."

This week's midrash has a rather shocking answer to the question of why the world deserved to be wiped out in the days of Noah. One might expect a midrash seeking to answer this question as being filled with heinous crimes: wonton murder, rampant violence, deep-seated corruption in houses of power. But instead, in the midrash, Rabbi Hanina cites a relatively small act as the reason all life on this planet was put to an end. God flooded the earth because people would steal an amount so small, it could not be prosecuted in a court of law. The world was not destroyed because of a whirlwind of violence, rather due to a still small voice of immorality, small acts of theft that fell out of the purview of any legal system.

While the action described by Rabbi Hanina was small, the cumulative effect of many small thefts resulted in a significant loss of property for the bean seller. What's more, these small thefts signify a disregard for morality and the singular concern for upholding the letter of the law as opposed to the spirit and purpose of the law. With this understanding, the lessons embedded in the midrash come into focus. Our small actions good and bad have a profound effect on the world and our society. Our concern must not be only with the minutiae of the law, religious or otherwise, but with its spirit as well. Morality and the drive to do good must permeate all that we do, whether big or small, whether at home or in the marketplace.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat No-ah
Genesis 6:9–11:32
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS.

A Sabbath Song for Parashat No-ah

It is a lovely Jewish practice to sing songs at the Shabbat table. The little booklets that contain grace also provide the words of many *zemirot*, Sabbath songs. If we look at two of the more popular ones, *Yah Ribbon* and *Mah Yedidot Menuhatekh*, we find that their common theme is a plea to observe the Sabbath in the present, and a hope for a future in which God redeems the People Israel. But there is one song that differs from all the rest. It makes reference to this week's Parashat No-ah. The name of the song is "The Dove Found a Place to Rest on the Sabbath (*Yonah Maz'ah Bo Manoah*)."

Before reading it closely, we need to be conversant with several details of Parashat No-ah (Gen. 6:9–11). When the flood waters recede and Noah's ark comes to rest at Ararat, he sends out a dove to find dry land. It returns to him because it did not find a place to rest its foot, *v'lo maz'ah hayonah manoah lekhafl raglah* (Gen. 8:9). When Noah sends the dove out a second time, it comes back with an olive branch in its mouth. The third time it does not return at all, presumably because it found a place to rest. Noah and his family then leave the ark. Noah thanks God with animal offerings. God makes a covenant with Noah—if he, Noah, will not shed blood, then God will not shed blood, i.e., God will never again bring a flood to destroy humanity (Gen. 9:1–17).

We can now turn to the Sabbath song, "The Dove Found a Place to Rest on the Sabbath," written by Yehudah Halevi, the great Spanish poet of the 12th century. It has five stanzas. The first stresses, as do most Shabbat

zemiro, meticulous observance of the Sabbath. The stanza also makes an explicit reference to the Noah story by saying that the dove *did* find a resting place and that it happened on the Sabbath. The author is thus “improving” on the Bible. This Sabbath event is an instance of poetic license, because neither the Torah nor the rabbinic midrashim make such a claim. Since the song is in praise of the Sabbath, the innovative point of the dove’s Sabbath rest makes good sense. It is also true that in medieval Jewish poetry, the dove often symbolizes the Jewish people, who are enjoined to rest on the Sabbath.

The second stanza mentions the Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments, given by God, the All-Powerful One, *amitz ko’ah* (which rhymes with Noah). The third stanza, the middle one of the five, talks about *brit*, the covenant at Sinai between God and the Jewish people. The Torah relates that, even before hearing the terms of the covenant, the people said they will obey them. The concept of *brit* is central to Judaism. If we love God and keep God’s mitzvot, then God will bring rain, we will eat and be satisfied, and we will remain on the good land to which God has brought us. If we do not keep the mitzvot, we will suffer. The fourth stanza repeats the themes of the second one, that God spoke to the people at Mount Moriah and told them to keep the Sabbath. We thus see that the covenant of the third stanza is flanked before and after by stanzas that speak of the Sabbath.

The last stanza says that the Jewish people will remind God of another covenant that He made with all people on the face of the earth. It is not the one at Sinai, but the one with Noah, already mentioned in the first stanza. In this first covenant, God promised never to flood the earth again. Note that this early covenant has nothing to do with the Sabbath and is not limited to the Jewish people. To make his lofty point, the poet incorporates language from Isaiah 54:9—*kee mei Noah zot li asher nishba’ti mei’avor mei Noah od al ha’aretz*—which means that God promised never to bring the waters of Noah again to cover the world. No other Sabbath song ends on this high note.

So this song is distinctive: it begins with a reference to Noah, which no other song does, moves on to talk about Jews, the Sabbath, and the covenant at Sinai, which most other songs do mention, but then ends where it began, with a reference to the very first covenant: in exchange for an end to bloodshed, God will not destroy the world again. This is a grand message to communicate on this Sabbath or at any other time. Did Yehudah Halevi write this song to be sung on the Sabbath of Parashat No-ah? It is possible. But we do not know the poet’s intent. What we do know is that we sing this song today to many different melodies; that we rarely pay attention to what the words mean; but that, if we did, we would see that this song soars over all the others in that it speaks of a bright future for all of humanity.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Far too soon after the creation of the world, the divine project goes awry. Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden; Cain murders his brother Abel; and boundaries between the heavens and earth are violated as “divine beings cohabit with the daughters of men” (Gen. 6:4). By the time we come to the end of last week’s parashah, we are told emphatically that “the Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth . . . and the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth” (Gen. 6:5–6). God’s dramatic response comes with the opening of Parashat No-ah, as the Creator resolves to undo creation—reverting the world back to chaos and beginning anew with Noah and his family. Noah is commanded at the outset, “Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch” (Gen. 6:14). What is the precise meaning of the Hebrew *tevah* (ark), and where else do we find this word?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments: “*Tevah*, ark, is a receptacle that only occurs in this narrative and in that of the saving of Moses, where it also serves as a means of saving a person from water. Its derivation is obscure. In any case, its shape is that of a box and not a boat. Its shape is broad at the bottom and tapering at the top, the reverse of the shape of a boat. For it is not designed at all to cleave to the waters but to be borne by them . . . the whole structure is to be a house of salvation for living creatures” (Hirsch, *Commentary on Torah: Genesis*, 140).

Rabbi Hirsch succeeds in highlighting a number of striking aspects of the ark that Noah is commanded to build. First and foremost, note well Hirsch’s comparison to the Moses narrative. Just as the ark in the Noah story is a vehicle that carries humanity to a new reality, so too does the ark, which is employed to save Moses, carry him and the Israelite nation into a new chapter. Humanity is given a second chance; and the ark of Exodus transforms a people into a nation. Second, Hirsch underscores the uniqueness of this refuge. Rather than “cleaving to the waters,” it is “borne by them.” There is something wholly sacred and ethereal about Noah’s ark. It is not simply about a journey; it is about saving life. And truly, as our commentator points out, it is about creating a “house of salvation.” Finally, I am struck by the fact that the Hebrew word for ark, *tevah*, is also the Hebrew word for a “word.” Words for the Jewish people, in the form of Torah, are our house of life and salvation. Words of rabbis transformed Israelite religion into rabbinic Judaism. And words, like the ark, have carried us through the course of history. May we continually discover new, life-giving realities as we go through life’s sacred journey, “borne” and buoyed by words of Torah.

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