

hidden away beneath the murky waters. Just the peaks of the tallest mountains are still visible. They, too, fall slowly beneath the water's surface.

When eventually the waves extend high enough to reach the grey-blue sky, it is like an eclipse. Like quiet grief.

All that remains of my Earth is inside here, in Noah's gopher-wood box-raft, this ark that cannot be steered. It hovers between the sea-waters below and the sky-waters above. Between the world that was and the world to come. We are a floating time capsule.

Yes, this flood will become famous. For millennia, it will be referenced in study halls, in newspapers, in poetry, in everyday speech.

But a true disaster—natural or not—is not an archetype. It can't be for any of us who saw our homes destroyed and who fled our land with just a box of memories to buoy us.

When our feet touch land again, it is no longer freshly baked earth watered by the grace of dew. It is broken by rivers flowing over cracks and crests like spilt blood. The ground hurts. Still God asks each of us to live on, to be fertile.

Noah 5779

נח תשע"ט



Basic Questions

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Early in my teaching career I worked with kindergarteners, incorporating drama into daily Judaics lessons. The holiday cycle offered developmentally appropriate treasure troves of life lessons: practicing ways to say “I’m sorry” to loved ones during Tishrei; exploring Esther’s mustering of courage to speak the truth; hesitations of the Israelites to part from predictable routines in the known and familiar Egypt to try something brand-new and strange. As one might imagine, the weekly parashah was a mixed bag of content. Many Genesis stories, albeit filled with violence and deceit, spoke to their understandings of sibling rivalry and competition. Other weeks were more of a stretch to bridge to their lived experiences.

We used the ark-building as a launching point to unearthing deeper understanding within the Noah narrative, starting out with imagining assembly of the structure, packing up and preparing to board. I would then ask the children what questions *they* had. Learners would immediately latch onto the well-known “two-by-two” imagery evoked as God instructed Noah, “Of all the clean animals you shall take for yourself seven pairs, and male and its mate, and of the animals that are not clean, two, a male and its mate. Also of the fowl of the heavens, seven pairs, male and female” (Gen. 7:2–3). The children’s questions would cascade: *Who would feed and tend to the animals? How would nocturnal animals such as owls share space with leopards? Where would the birds fly? What about the smell? And really? How was there room for everyone?*

Many can recall delighting in early childhood experiences of Parashat Noah—becoming favorite barnyard and wild animals, snorting, mooing, and

slithering on the floor. What if such simulations were the sparks for expanded creative thinking? As we explored the daily existence within cramped quarters of the ark, kids wanted to know how in the world Noah's family would fulfill the responsibility for the huge task of caring for the floating wildlife habitat. Even though these kids didn't spend time in safari, the ocean deep, or the rainforest, they were most certainly zoologists—for anyone who has read bedtime stories recognizes that animals are the stars of any book nook. There is the soft-spoken, poetic *Frederick* (Leo Lionni), ever-mischievous monkey *Curious George* (Margret and H.A. Rey), the bold *Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Eric Carle), *Hippos [that] Go Berserk* (Sandra Boynton), and a *Fox in Socks* (Dr. Seuss). How could all of these animals co-exist in the same boat?

If we can allow ourselves to go back to that long-passed time in our lives, chances are that we would have similar questions to these young learners. Certainly, older generations have memories of being read fairy tales and nursery rhymes depicting wily wolves, furtive spiders, gossiping geese, and gentle sheep. As it turns out, the traditional commentators did have these same wonderings about life on the ark. According to *Midrash Tanhuma*, Noah's attention to the animals reflected his righteous nature:

“Certain animals were fed the first hour of the day, others at the second, still others at the third; while some animals were fed at the third of night, others at midnight, and still others at the time of the crowing of the cock. Our sages declared that during the twelve months in the ark, Noah slept neither during the day nor at night because he was occupied constantly with feeding the creatures in his care” (*Noah 2:5*).

Explorations of Parashat Noah often focus on the narrative bookends of preparing to leave or the aftermath—the urgent immediacy of escaping destruction, the appearance of the dove and the emergence of a rainbow, the promise of “never again.” When the journey itself serves as the focal point, one is led to ponder the big lesson that Noah's family needed to learn to care for these animals. Noah and his clan had to step outside of themselves and care for other living creatures, to try to

achieve order within the chaos of extreme poles of animal personalities, instincts, sleep rhythms, and diets. In this way, they became active co-participants in the covenant to maintain equanimity and peaceful existence.

Seemingly obvious queries do not necessarily make for easily-provided answers, and questions that begin with “*How . . .*” and “*Why . . .*” are not relegated to kindergarten carpet time. The parashah reminds us that starting from a place of childlike wonder can inspire profound considerations, such as how we would rise to the occasion to meet near-impossible demands, as did Noah and his family. We should make space for these types of questions to be asked by both the kids in our lives, as well as the adults who are kids at heart.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”l).

Genesis Chapter 7 Rory Katz, JTS Rabbinical Student

929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation. 929 invites Jews everywhere to read Tanakh, one chapter a day, together with a website of pluralistic interpretations from a wide range of contributors, including a JTS rabbinical student each Monday. Here is a past contribution from this week's parashah. Visit 929.org.il to learn more.

Today is the 39th day of flooding.

I decide to take another walk to the other end of the Ark. I take deliberate steps, both to savor the opportunity to stretch but also to avoid trampling any of the creatures who have become my closest companions. At last, moving past the pigeons, I reach the far wall and the Ark's one window. I puff steamy air onto the glass, use my palm to wipe it clean-ish, and peer out.

Having lived my life amidst caked clays and grasses, I had never seen even a lake, a pond, a pool. Now the land, the one that I had known, is