

The verb “swelled” connotes here a continuing state: the power of the water upon the earth continued one hundred and fifty days, and did not decline in appreciable measure till after this period . . . So the chapter closes with an awe-inspiring picture of the mighty waters covering the entire earth. We see water everywhere, as though the world had reverted to its primeval state at the dawn of Creation, when the waters of the deep submerged everything. Nothing remained of the teeming life that had burst forth upon the earth. Only a tiny point appears on the face of the terrible waters: the ark that preserves between its planks the seeds of life for the future. But it is a mere atom and is almost lost in the endless expanse of water that was spread over the face of the whole earth. A melancholy scene that is liable to fill the reader with despair. What will happen to this atom of life? (*A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part Two*, 97)

Professor Cassuto successfully dramatizes the world in which Noah found himself. God’s severe punishment reinforces the message that the person of Noah is an island of virtue in a sea of corruption. Only he and his family (along with animals) merit being chosen as the remnant that will recreate the world entire. Prior to the flood, they were the “tiny point” of hope; and, after the flood, they literally become a “tiny point” preserving the “seeds of life” on “the face of the terrible waters.”

Every one of us has the capacity to become the “tiny point” of hope and change. Daily, we continue to face chaos and the destruction of moral and ethical lines. The challenge is to act in God’s image, while demonstrating the loving-kindness of Noah. Only then will we restore order to a world in desperate need.

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נח תש"ף



## Feeling the Flood

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As the curtains close on Parashat Bereshit, we find God steeped in sadness.

וַיִּנְחַם ה' כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל-לְבוֹ:

“And Adonai regretted that God had made humanity on earth and God’s heart was grieved.” (Gen. 6:6)

God is heartbroken. The people whom God formed with such care, the people into whom God exhaled God’s own divine spark, the people God loved—had chosen a path of corruption and crime. God sees this corruption, is filled with regret over having ever created humans in the first place, and is overcome by grief.

The idea of a grieving God is complicated. To help us better grasp God’s emotional experience, Rashi points us to an example of human grief that employs the same root word.

וַתְּהִי הַתְּשׁוּעָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְאָבֶל לְכָל-הָעָם כִּי-שָׁמַע הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְאֹמֶר נִעְצַב הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל-נֹו:

“That day was turned into mourning for all the people, because on that day the people heard that the king was *grieving* over his son.” (2 Sam. 19:3)

Rashi links God’s grief over the shameful state of the world to King David’s grief when he learns of the death of his rebellious child, Absalom, at the hands of David’s own troops. In the aftermath of their enemy’s defeat, the victory of the royal army is turned into mourning when the people hear David grieving over his fallen political rival, his slain beloved son.

As we hold up these two texts, our metaphors for God as Parent and God as King (familiar from our recent High Holiday recitations of *Avinu Malkenu*) mingle in David, a flesh-and-blood parent, a flesh-and-blood king, who cannot reconcile his duty to protect his people and his duty to protect his child. Rashi's comparison between the grief of our quintessential human king and the grief of our Divine King helps us see God as a distraught parent, longing for a relationship with God's children and fearing that too much damage has been done, too much distance has come between God and the people to ever find a way back into relationship.

This linguistic link of grief may provide greater context for God's heartbreak, but it doesn't make our story any easier. The scale of violence required to annihilate everything is unfathomable. Acknowledging that God is both Parent to all and Destroyer of all is what makes Parashat Noah so painful. This pain is hard to live with, so we try to sanitize our text. Today when we read the story of Noah, we dehumanize the other humans of Noah's generation; we blame Noah for not protesting. We morph these words into a children's story; we decorate nurseries with rainbows and animals in pairs of two. We do everything we can to avoid the horror. And yet if we can resist our urge to pretty-up a devastating narrative, we can come a little bit closer to knowing God's grief through our own heartbreak.

When the ark is built and the animals accounted for, God seals up Noah and his family. Then God recedes from the story. While the floodgates of the sky break open, while the springs of the earth burst forth, while the rains last for forty days, while the ark floats for a full year with no sign of life; God is nowhere to be found. The Torah does not explain God's absence during the year that the whole world drowned, but our text's attention to God's grief and regret offers a possible insight: God's sadness was so great that God had to step away as the earth was consumed—not by rage or Divine retribution— but by God's own intolerable grief.

This intolerable grief and Divine absence is not how our story ends. From the depths of water and the depths of despair, from the near annihilation of everything, God comes back to us. By coming back, God resolves to never end the world again, and enters into specific

covenantal relationship with human beings. (Gen. 9:9-17) By coming back, God demonstrates to us that coming back is possible.

If we are able to access God's grief through our own heartbreak, we open ourselves up to profound possibilities. When we witness God almost give up on everything, we see the power of persisting when there is no reason to hope. It is easy to permanently disengage from the horrors of the world, but our Torah urges us to resist that temptation. In Parashat Noah, God teaches us, above all, the significance of resilience through relationship. God shows us that it is possible to come back from paralyzing despair. Again and again and again.

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## A Taste of Torah



### A Tiny Point of Hope

**Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS**

Unrelenting human wickedness leads to the collapse of humanity and the world. Toward the end of last week's parashah, we read of the dissolution of boundaries; divine demarcations that brought order to a chaotic world. Torah teaches a cryptic story of "divine beings who cohabit with the daughters of man" (Gen. 6:4), illustrating one violation of the boundary between heaven and earth. And then, in the verse that follows, we are told, "The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5)—evidence of the human destruction of moral and ethical boundaries. Not surprising, God responds in kind or as the Rabbis say, *midah keneged midah* (measure for measure). God vows to "blot out" humans together with animals and begin anew. It is Creation reverting to chaos.

Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951), professor of Bible at Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1938–1951), paints a stark picture of this dramatic moment triggered by Genesis 7:24: "the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days."