

Parshat Noach
Talia Joffe's Bat Mitzvah Dvar
Oct. 9 2021

Shabbat Shalom! This week's Torah portion is the story of Noah. Within this story is the famous tale of Noah's Ark, that most of us probably know, but just in case you need a recap, this is a quick summary. In this story, God tells Noah to build an ark, filled with pairs of male and females from every species on earth, along with his whole family. God then tells them to live in it for almost a year, while God floods the earth to wipe out the bad people. After being on the ark for a very long time, Noah decided that he would send out a sequence of birds to determine if it was safe for them to leave the ark. After they are off the ark, God regrets having destroyed so many creatures and makes a covenant with Noah to always come up with better ways to deal with disobedient humans. So, whenever people saw a rainbow in the sky, it was God saying God remembered their promise.

All of this is cool, but when studying my parsha, I decided to take a closer look at one aspect of the Noah's Ark story, the role of the raven versus the dove. We always remember that the dove brought back the olive branch, but in fact Noah sent out a raven first before it.

The Parsha says that after 10 and a half months, Noah first sends out a raven to see if there was still water left on the earth. The story never really clarifies if the raven ever came back or if it found anything.

After the raven failed, the parsha then says that seven days later, Noah sends out a dove hoping it would find some sign of dry land. The dove ends up coming right back to the ark, not having found a place to rest. Another week later, Noah sends out the same dove, who then comes back with an olive branch in its mouth. Noah thinks this must be progress, a sign that the trees are growing again. He might have also known that olive trees are not very tall, so if the branch was plucked from one, the water level must be low. Still being cautious, he decides to wait another seven days. A week later, he sends out the same dove a third time. It does not return, so Noah thinks that it must have found some place to nest, meaning the water had dried up enough to allow him and his family to set foot on land. He then exits the ark, with all of his sons and their unnamed wives.

So why did Noah need both the raven and the dove? Maybe they had different jobs? The ancient writer Philo of Alexandria suggested that the raven was a symbol of sin, so it was just sent away to purify the ark and was not really expected to find anything.

The medieval rabbi, Rabbi David Kimhi, who was known as the Radak, thought the raven was sent to find land like the dove. When it was chosen, Noah was imagining that the world after the flood would be filled with the remains of all the people and animals that had drowned during the flood. He chose the raven because it is a

carnivore, so it would bring back and eat the flesh pieces.

Miriam Gedwiser, a contemporary talmud teacher, notes that Noah wasn't being very optimistic when it came to how the world would look after the flood. Noah sent out the raven thinking it would bring back some dead flesh, but it didn't find anything because a rotten gross world wasn't what God had planned for the world to look like after the flood. The raven comes back with nothing because the world is not the negative place Noah had first imagined. Instead, it is the dove that is successful, bringing back a fresh green branch from an olive tree that is part of the fresh new world G-d has prepared for Noah and the others on the ark.

So maybe Noah and the people on the ark had to make a real effort to be optimistic. I also wonder how they felt about getting off the ark and rebuilding their lives? It must have been really scary to suddenly have to start your life all over again after having just been stuck in a big smelly boat for many months. I wonder if they had enough food left over from the ark to eat for a few weeks while they grew and made new resources.

Shortly after they had set foot on dry land, God created the rainbow covenant with them, telling Noah and his family that they shouldn't live in fear, because God realized that what God did wasn't right. It must have been very reassuring to know that another giant flood wasn't going to force them into an ark again.

We are now living in a time quite similar to when they were leaving the ark, except we are just trying to leave a giant worldwide pandemic that has been taking over the world for almost two years. I imagine that it felt very scary for Noah and his family to finally go back to normal, but how does it feel for us? How do we feel about getting back to normal life? I started preparing for this day a little over two years ago when we had no idea COVID even existed. We were planning to have this big event, where our family and friends would come from all over the world to celebrate with me. A few months later, we realized we were gonna have to rethink that plan. I found it very stressful to be constantly wondering what new things we were thinking of changing every day. I had to learn to accept that we are living in a crazy time and that it would all work out in the end. And well, here we are, so it looks like past me was right.

Last March, I went back to school in person after having been online for almost a year. My school ended up handling the pandemic very well, but hearing about other schools having to shut down again because of a bunch of cases always scared me a bit. It took me a while to get back into the rhythm of school, and even now, it is still quite different.

Having to adapt to Zoom was another struggle of the past two years. When Covid first came along, I had no idea what in the world "Zoom" was, but quickly after being locked away, I started hearing about it all over the place, and using it for school only a week or so later.

I also had to transition to doing Bat Mitzvah studying and practicing online, while also attending Zoom services which were very different from in person ones.

But, like Noah, being optimistic has helped me to deal with all sorts of challenges, as well as dealing with whatever comes next.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me prepare for today; Sigalit Davis for teaching me Hebrew, helping me really understand my parsha, and for helping me prepare for this big day, even though we had to switch to online during the process. I would also like to thank Missie Polasky for teaching me all my aliyot and my haftarah and for really helping me make all of this happen, even though I only met her in person for the first time a few weeks ago. I would especially like to thank my parents, for giving me life, and for raising me all this time. Thank you mom, for devoting almost all your time to planning out this day and for helping me emotionally when I was stressed about everything. Thank you dad, for practicing my reading with me on all the days that I didn't have tutoring, and for taking me to Michaels every few days to get more craft supplies to make that lovely picture board outside this tent. Thank you to my siblings, Sarah and Jacob, for explaining to me what they did to prepare for their bar and bat mitzvahs and for being overall great older siblings. Thank you to my friends for always being super funny and kind, and for letting me tell you about all the things I still had to get done for this day, even though you didn't really pay attention. And finally, thank you to my wonderful cat, Chickpea, for being the best cat in the world.

Thank you all for coming, whether you are here in person or watching online. And a special hello! to my Nana and family watching around the world. Shabbat shalom!