



5 Ways

to survive the storm

Devastating floods are a reality for many people in the world. Floods wreak havoc, plunging communities into experiences of fear, tragedy, loss, ruin. As waters recede, as communities are rebuilt and life goes on, also apparent is the human capacity for courage, solidarity, compassion, and new ways of seeing the world. Little wonder that the biblical flood story is such a powerful image of the divine-human relationship in crisis. Drawing on the symbolism of the Great Flood in Genesis, share your thoughts on how to come through an experience of overwhelming distress. Five thoughts to start the conversation...

1. Listen. The Great Flood ensues from the pain of God who is betrayed by his own beloved creation (Gen. 6:6). What can we learn? Perhaps simply to listen! Listen to the Lord, and to those who bear the Lord's message.

2. Gather. The Ark is an image of a saved and saving community. As storm clouds gather, enter the ark. Better still, help to build it!

3. Accept. Vulnerable in a storm-tossed ark, what can one learn about humility, about acceptance of limitation, weakness?

4. Wait. In a crisis, sometimes the best thing we can do is to be patient. It won't rain forever.

5. Watch. Watch for signs of hope, healing, new life... the dove bearing an olive leaf, the rainbow's arch.

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 Light of Torah

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

This *Light of Torah* series leads Catholic parishioners through the first five books of the bible, attentive to the interpretative insights of the Jewish tradition. Traditional Jewish approaches teach us to slow down our reading and pay attention to the surprising details of the sacred text.

Take, for instance, the story of Noah's Ark, the subject of this week's Torah portion. Have you ever noticed that Gen. 7:16 seems to suggest that it was the Lord, not Noah, who shut the door of the ark behind its last passenger as the flood set in? After all that building on Noah's part, the Lord closes the door. Why is this subtle detail recorded? Does it really matter? What deeper meaning can be discerned here? By becoming attuned to the rabbinic mindset that savors the tiny details of God's Word we discover fascinating pathways of contemplation and discussion.

We will leave it to you to ponder the closing of the door of the Ark. As we proceed with this week's issue, probing the subtleties of the Great Flood, let's turn our attention to the flood waters themselves. Read on...

Issue #2
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Genesis 6:9—11:32
Noah



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 6:9–11:32

The story of Noah's Ark extends over four chapters in Genesis (6-9). There is a lot to digest.* As you read it, what particular aspect or detail of the narrative catches your attention? Here we focus on chapter 7 where, after the rains begin and 'the Deluge was forty days upon the earth' (v.17), the rise of the flood waters is described in verses 17-20.

* For other Light of Torah discussions on Noah's Ark, see the archives for 2009/10 and 2010/11 on our website: lightoftorah.net

Tasting Torah

The rise of the flood waters in Gen. 7 finds dramatic telling through the use of repetition:

The waters increased...(v.17)

The waters swelled and increased exceedingly upon the earth...(v.18)

When the waters had swelled exceedingly, yes exceedingly upon the earth...(v.19)

Fifteen cubits upward swelled the waters...(v.20)

With each rising level, something happens: the Ark is lifted (v.17), it floats (v.18), the mountains are covered (v.19) and covered in a final way (v.20). Creatively ponder these verses with your *havrutah*/discussion partner. How does God's Word speak to you through the dramatic images, repeated words, rhythmic phrasing?

Touching Torah

Contemporary Torah scholar Richard Friedman reminds us of two things that sharpen our appreciation of this scene. First, according to the ancient view of the universe, the earth existed in a kind of habitable bubble holding back waters above and below. Now the ground ruptures, the skies crack open (see 7.11), the waters break through and the very structure of the universe is compromised. This is not just rain, it is cosmic crisis! Secondly, while we usually think of the Ark as a boat, in biblical terms it is a rectangular box. It floats, but it has no rudder or sail. The fragility of Noah's Ark at the mercy of the elements is underscored.

Depthing Torah

And as if to drive home the utter helplessness of the situation, after describing the death of all living things (7:21-23) the text presents this curious phrase: 'Noah alone remained...' (7:23).

It is curious because in the next breath we read: 'and those who were with him in the Ark.' Clearly Noah is not the only living human. Why then this reference to 'only Noah'? This question fired the rabbinic discussion. How does it fire yours? Is there something particular about Noah that is being suggested here? Take a moment to discuss with your *havrutah* partner.

Rashi¹ refers to a midrashic (storytelling) tradition which, in its playful way, notes that the sound of the Hebrew word for 'only' (*akh*) is that of a person coughing or retching, thus concluding that the phrase 'only Noah' is a reference to Noah's diminished health. Why diminished? Because it takes a great deal of energy to care for an ark full of animals in the midst of cosmic catastrophe! As we smile at the midrash we should not dismiss its depths. Notice how a single word leads the rabbinic mind into a whole new area of contemplation: the arduous effort and personal wellbeing of Noah (physically, spiritually) during a great crisis.

Doing Torah

Taking up the midrash we might ask: what is my experience of enduring a great crisis? Do I identify with the 'aloneness' of Noah hinted at by Torah? Continue your sharing in *havrutah*.



Faith & Life

Have you ever been sad under raining skies? I think it is a beautifully tactile experience of prayer, to feel one's tears mingle with raindrops. It is as if creation identifies with your pain, and even the heavens weep with you... Or perhaps rows of ministering angels who cannot hold back their tears... Or perhaps the Lord himself who cries uncontrollably for and with the woundedness of this world; for as scripture says, "it grieved him to his heart" (Gen. 6:6).
Share your own midrashic reflection on a verse from today's Torah portion.

1. Rashi: 11th c. French Torah scholar. Sources: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001); Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY: Mesorah, 1995, 1999). Scripture quotations: Fox.