



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Noah alone remained

So, you think you know the story of Noah's Ark? So did I until I began reading it with the help of traditional Jewish insights. The rabbis have taught me to slow down my reading, to pay attention to the surprising details of the text. Spread over four chapters in Genesis 6-9, there is a lot to ponder about the Great Flood.

Take, for instance, Gen. 7:16. Have you ever noticed that this verse suggests 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 point recorded? Does it really matter? What deeper spiritual meaning can be discerned here? By becoming attuned to the rabbinic mindset that savors the tiny details of God's Word we discover fascinating gateways to contemplation and discussion.

I will leave it to you to ponder the closing of the door of the ark. Let's turn our attention here to the flood waters themselves. The rise of the waters in Genesis 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)¹

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). Imaginatively ponder these verses. How does God's Word speak to you through the dramatic images, repeated words, rhythmic phrasing?

Biblical scholars remind us of two things that sharpen our appreciation of this scene. First, in 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.

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 the reference to 'only Noah'? This question fired the discussion of the rabbis. How does it fire yours? What in particular about Noah is being suggested here?

The great Torah scholar known as Rashi² refers to a Jewish storytelling tradition (midrash) which, in its playful way, notes that the sound of the Hebrew word for 'only' (*akh*) is that of a person coughing or retching. In a creative leap, the midrash concludes 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! (Apparently Noah was not only exhausted but bleeding from wounds inflicted by a hungry lion!) As we smile at the midrash we should not dismiss its depths. Notice how a single Hebrew word leads the rabbinic mind into a whole area of contemplation: the arduous effort and personal wellbeing of Noah during a great crisis.

Taking up this midrashic lead we might well ask: what is my experience of enduring a great crisis? Do I identify with the 'aloneness' of Noah hinted at by verse 7:23? Am I exhausted and wounded through my labours to be faithful? Floods, after all, are real, and Noah's Ark is a powerful symbol for many kinds of human crises: physical, moral, spiritual. •

1. English translation by E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY: Schocken Books, 1995).

2. Rashi (11th c. France) refers to a midrashic text in Sanhedrin 108b, Tanchuma Yashan 14. See Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY: Mesorah, 1995, 1999).