



## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Noah

October 24, 2020, 6 Heshvan Tishrei 5781

**Torah:** Genesis 6:9-11:32 **Haftarah:** Isaiah 54:1-55:5

#### **Seizing the Rains**

**Ilana Kurshan**

What was the sin of those who built the city and tower of Babel? According to one Talmudic opinion (Sanhedrin 109a), the builders wished to reach the heavens and strike the sky with pickaxes so as to make the rain flow. The Babel builders, traumatized by the flood stories their grandparents told them, wanted to prevent any unexpected meteorological disasters. They wished to place the rain on an automated timer that only they could control. But the One Who causes the winds to blow and the rains to fall destroyed their giant sprinkler system and scattered them to the four winds, seizing back the rains.

It is difficult for us, who live in a world of Siri and satellites and self-cleaning ovens, to accept that our lives are not entirely in our control. We think that our technological prowess has rendered God obsolete. Not so, Parshat Noah reminds us, with its forty days and forty nights of uninterrupted flooding. Rain is emblematic of the part of our lives that is in God's hands. As such, it is a central locus of prayer. According to the Talmud (Yoma 52b), the only prayer recited by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur—a prayer that had to be recited quickly, so as not to frighten the people waiting anxiously outside—was about rain. In the holiest place at the holiest time, the emissary of the people to the Holy One devoted his few precious seconds of prayer to the matter of precipitation.

We pray for rain because we cannot control it – we accept that it is out of our hands. The Talmud (Taanit 2a) teaches that there are three keys that God does not entrust to any messenger – one of them is the key to rainfall, which nurtures the seeds we plant beneath the soil. (The others are conception, in which God nurtures the seed of

new life, and the revival of the dead, which restores the life buried beneath the soil.) God does not entrust the key to rainfall to anyone, an indication of the significance of rain in biblical theology.

Throughout the Torah, the relationship between God and humanity—and the relationship between God and Israel in particular—is mediated through rain. In the book of Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites that if they obey God's commandments, then God will grant rain in its time; but if they serve other gods, "the Lord's anger will flare up against you and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain" (11:12). This verse is part of the second paragraph of the Shema, recited twice daily as an affirmation of our faith in God. Similarly, in the long list of blessings and curses at the end of Leviticus and repeated again in Deuteronomy, God begins by promising that if the Israelites follow the commandments, then God will open the storehouses of the heavens to bring rain; and if not, God will "make your skies like iron" (Leviticus 26:19), incapable of precipitation. The Torah contrasts the land of Israel with Egypt – unlike Egypt, which is watered by the Nile, the land of Israel "soaks up its water from the rain of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after" (Deuteronomy 11:11-12). The people of Israel and the land of Israel need rain in order to survive, and it is God who unlocks the floodgates.

The Talmud teaches that "a day of rain is as great as the creation of the world" (Taanit 7b), perhaps because the world's creation can be sustained or undone by means of rain. Rain allows life to happen. The modern Hebrew word used for "to actualize" or "to make real" is *l'hagshim*, which comes from the same root as *geshem*, rain. The Babel builders wanted to actualize the rain by coming within striking distance of heaven. But the Shema and indeed the entire Siddur teach us otherwise: If we wish to bestir the heavens, we must do so with words rather than weapons, and with prayers rather than pickaxes. If, as we read in Deuteronomy (32:2), God's teachings fall down like the rain, then our prayers rise up to heaven like evaporating mist, completing a theological water cycle. It is not we but our prayers that have the power to pierce the heavens, opening the divine storehouses and showering the earth in blessing.

## **What's Wrong with Being Fair?**

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**

### **Text: Bereshit 6:9,13-22**

*(9)These are the beggetings/lineage of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.*

*(13)And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with evil-doing because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth. (14)Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood;...(15)This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits... (17)As for me, I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish. (18)...and you shall enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you... (22)Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did.*

- Noah seems to be instructed to create an ark – a rectangular structure. What limits does that create and why do you think that he is not told to build a ship?
- Why doesn't God save Noah in a simpler manner (at least for Noah)?
- Noah was saved because he was a righteous person, the rest were not. Some might call it fair. But perhaps this is not a zero-sum game? What might you have expected of Noah based on the description in v.9?

### **Commentary: Rashi Bereshit 6:14**

***Make for yourself an ark*** – *There are numerous ways by which God could have saved Noah; why, then, did he burden him with this construction of the Ark? So that the [people of] the generation of the Flood might see him employed on it for 120 years and might ask him, "What do you need this for"? and so that he might answer them, "The Holy One, blessed be He, is about to bring a flood upon the world" — perhaps they might repent.*

- According to Rashi (who brings a midrash), why did God save Noah in a such a laborious and noticeable manner?
- The long and difficult process of building an ark could have had and affect also on Noah and his family. What might they have understood about what was about to come? What might God have wanted them to do? What do you think that they could have done? Why do you think that they did not get more involved?

## **Moments of Hope**

### **Bex Rosenblatt**

This week's haftarah, Isaiah 54:1-55:5, should sound familiar. We've read it recently, split into two sections, as two of the seven haftarot of consolation read between Tisha B'Av and Rosh HaShana. These haftarot serve to comfort and console us, rebuilding us after the commemoration of loss on Tisha B'Av, so that we are ready for the renewal of the new year on Rosh HaShana.

And for a brief and glorious moment, we savour that renewal. We begin the Torah cycle anew, we read of creation and hope and possibility. Human is created in God's image, a co-partner in the creation of the named world.

But that moment is all too brief. Almost immediately, we read of the expulsion from Eden, the killing of Cain, and the boasting of Lamech. By this week's parsha, God regrets that God ever created humans on the face of the earth and sends a flood to destroy creation.

Isaiah 54 picks up on that ever-imminent threat of total destruction, on humankind's sense that our existence is precarious and sometimes things are going so badly that it seems as if God would prefer that the flood had wiped us all out after all. And yet Isaiah 54 tells us to rejoice. We are to sing out, to enlarge our tents, for we are re-entering our relationship with God.

How can we possibly deal with this tumult? How can we reread these words of comfort only weeks after having to comfort ourselves after the last tragedy in our calendar? How can these words still have meaning, and God still be good?

Our haftarah passage offers a reframing. Yes, we are still suffering. We are still "abandoned," "fearful" and "in distress." But we do not have to see this as normal. In Isaiah 54:12 we are told, "For a brief moment, I abandoned you. But with great mercy, I will gather you." Rather than viewing our lowest points as constitutive of our lives, we are urged to view those points as temporary and passing. It is our relationship with the Eternal that is eternal and worth dwelling on.

Isaiah 54:9 connects us directly back to the story of the flood: "For this is to me like the waters of Noah, which I swore would never again pour over the earth. So too I swear not to overflow my anger against you and not to rebuke you." We reread these words of comfort because the world is a tumultuous place. And yet we can choose the story we tell. This week's haftarah gives us permission to tell a story of hope and of creation, even when we are sitting in moments of despair.