

## Midrash on Noah and the Preservation of Species by Rabbi David Seidenberg, [neohasid.org](http://neohasid.org), [rebduvid86@gmail.com](mailto:rebduvid86@gmail.com)

The following midrashic texts focus on specific verses of the story of Noah and the flood. Study of these texts and commentaries can begin with reading the story of Noah and the flood, *Genesis* 6:9 – 9:17. Questions and commentary on each passage can be found in the study guide which follows.

### Noah's Righteousness

A. *These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous, whole-hearted man in his generations.* (Gen. 5:9)

What made Noah unique? Why were he and his family alone saved from among all of humanity? The midrash probes this question from many angles. Each commentary below suggests an answer which may lead us to a second question: How should we emulate Noah?

1. R. Levi said: Everyone about whom it is said that "he was" saw a new world. The Rabbis said: Every man of whom it is said "he was" fed and sustained others. Noah fed and sustained [those in the ark] twelve months, as it says, "And take for you of all food that is eaten..." *Genesis Rabbah*, I, 30:8, p.236-7.
2. "He does not turn by way of the vineyards": the intention [of the generation of the flood] was not to plant vineyards [i.e. not to reproduce]. But Noah's only intention was to be fruitful and multiply in the world, hence, "These are the generations of Noah..." *Genesis Rabbah*, 30:2, p.233.
3. Wherever [the phrase] "a man" occurs it indicates a righteous man who warned [others]. For one hundred and twenty years Noah planted cedars and cut them down. On being asked, "Why are you doing this?" he replied, "The Lord of the Universe has informed me that He will bring a Flood in the world." *Genesis Rabbah*, 30:7, p.235.
4. Why is Noah called "righteous"? Because he fed the creatures of the Holy One, and became like his Creator. Thus it says, "For the Lord is righteous, loving righteous deeds." *Tanchuma*, Noah 4, p.35.

### God's Compassion

B. *And Elohim remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the animals which were with him in the ark...* (Gen. 8:1)

In the story of the flood, humans and animals appear to be treated with equal concern by God. The midrash elaborates on this theme frequently. Here are a few examples:

5. [God remembered because] "the Lord (*Adonai*) is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works." R. Joshua b. Levi said: The Lord is good to all [creatures], and His mercies are over all, because they are all His works. R. Joshua of Sakhnin said in R. Levi's name: The Lord is good to all, and He gives of his mercy to all creatures [so that they can be merciful to others]. *Genesis Rabbah*, 33:3, p.260.
6. It is written, "A righteous one knows the soul of his animal." (Prov. 12:10) The righteous one of the world [God] even understands the soul of his animal [i.e. the animals in the ark], even when he is angry. *Tanchuma*, Noah 10, p.39.

7. If He remembered Noah, why also the animals? May the name of the Holy One be blessed, who never deprives any creature of its reward. If even a mouse has preserved its family [i.e. species] it deserves to receive a reward. *Tanchuma*, Noah 11, p.41.

### **On Feeding the Animals**

C. *And you, take for you of all the food that is eaten, and gather it to you, it will be for you and for them for eating.* (Gen. 7:21)

What did it mean for Noah to have to gather food for all the creatures in the world? These midrashim explore both the spiritual and practical aspects of Noah's task.

8. "And Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord." (6:8) How far [did God's grace to Noah extend]? To the point that he knew which animal was to be fed in the second hour of the day and which beast was to be fed in the third hour of the night. *Genesis Rabbah*, 29:4, p.231.

9. "And take for you of all the food that is eaten." R. Abba b. Kahana said: He took pressed figs with him... He took in branches for the elephants, *chatsubah* for the deer, and *z'khukhit* for the ostriches. R. Levi said: Vine-shoots for the vine plantings, fig saplings for fig trees, and olive saplings for olive trees. *Genesis Rabbah*, 31:14, p.247.

10. According to R. Abba b. Kahana "And it will be for you and for them for eating" means something that is [equally] for you and for them. According to R. Levi, "And it will be for you and for them" means you are the principal and they are secondary, [because it says] "and gather it to you" — people do not store up anything unless they need it [for themselves]. *Genesis Rabbah*, 31:14p.247.

### **More Midrash about Feeding the Animals**

Once we accept the obligation to protect other species, there are many difficult tasks and choices that ensue. Noah and his family had to neglect their own needs in order to take care of all the animals on the ark. The following commentaries explore the difficulties Noah faced.

11. R. Levi said: The whole twelve months that Noah was in the ark, neither he nor his family tasted sleep because they were responsible for feeding the animals. R. Abba b. Kahana said: He brought branches for the elephants... Now some ate in the second hour of the night and some in the third hour of the day, hence you know that Noah did not taste a bit of sleep. R. Yochanan said: One time, when Noah was late in feeding the lion, the lion bit him, and he went away limping. *Tanchuma*, Noah 14,p.42.

12. R. Chana b. Bizna said: Eliezer [Abraham's servant] asked Shem [Noah's son], "What was it like for you [in the ark]?" He replied, "We had so much trouble in the ark. The animals which usually feed by day we fed by day, and those which normally feed at night we fed by night. But my father didn't know what was the food of the chameleon. One day he was sitting and cutting up a pomegranate, when a worm dropped out of it, which [the chameleon] ate. From then on he mashed up bran for him, and when it became wormy, he ate it... As for the phoenix, my father discovered it lying in the hold of the ark. "Don't you require food?" he asked. "I saw that you were busy," he replied, "so I said to myself, I won't trouble you." "May it be [God's] will that you should never perish," he exclaimed. *Talmud Sanhedrin* 108b.

## On Stewardship

D. *And again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came in at evening, and here, an olive leaf torn off in her mouth...* (Gen. 8:9)

Whenever we have to manipulate the environment to save a species, there is a cost. Usually we think of the cost to ourselves, as we noted in the previous section, but the following midrash is concerned with the cost to those creatures we help.

13. "An olive leaf torn off in her mouth.." From where did she bring it? R. Birai said: The gates of the Garden of Eden were opened for her, and from there she brought it. Said R. Abbahu: Had she brought it from the Garden of Eden, shouldn't she have brought something better, like cinnamon or balsam? But in fact she gave [Noah] a hint, saying to him: "Noah, better is bitterness from this source than sweetness from your hand." *Genesis Rabbah*, 33:6, p. 266.

## Covenant

E. *And Elohim said to Noah and to his children with him: Behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, of the birds, of the cattle, and of every wild animal of the earth with you...* (Gen. 9:8-10)

In this passage God establishes the first covenant, which is with both humanity and with the other creatures. What was the content of that covenant? In light of the human-driven extinction of so many species today, what role should we be playing in the fulfillment of this covenant?

Note: Page numbers are referenced to the following English editions: *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis, vol.1, translated by H. Freedman (London: Soncino, 1983); *Midrash Tanhuma*, translated by John T. Townsend (New York: Ktav 1989); *Tractate Sanhedrin*, Babylonian Talmud (London: Soncino, 1983). Wherever possible the version found in *Midrash Rabbah* is given, since it is the most widely accessible collection in English. The texts are arranged by section according to the verse they comment on, and specific comments and reflections for each text are included below. Some minor changes in the translations have been made to facilitate reading.

# Midrash on Noah and the Preservation of Species

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## Study Guide/Forward for Educators

This midrash compilation gives you the opportunity to look at how the rabbis thought about human responsibility for other creatures in the world. By listening in on their discussions, we may begin to hear the deeper religious meaning in our own struggle to protect other creatures from destruction. One of the primary teachings we learn from these texts is to challenge the sense of human privilege, the idea that we have the right to use up the world. The rabbis wondered as we do about what makes humanity special, why we have power and what we should do with it. Throughout these texts runs a deeper question: How do we know what to do with our power? How do we take responsibility for the tremendous consequences of our choices?

## Noah's righteousness

A. *These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous, whole-hearted man in his generations.* (Gen. 5:9)

There are seeming contradictions in some of the midrashic explorations of Noah's righteousness. Of the four explanations for Noah's righteousness given here, Noah had only fulfilled one of them (the one of having children) at the point in the Torah where he is actually called "righteous." So Noah's chosenness was at least partly based on what he was capable of doing and not on what he had already done. Moreover, the only thing which Noah had done, procreation, hardly seems like a mark of unique righteousness. Based on these midrashim, we might wonder whether Noah really did merit God's favor at the time he was chosen.

In fact, the rabbis debated vigorously whether Noah would be counted as a righteous person in another generation, or whether he only seemed righteous in comparison with his wicked generation. According to some midrashim, Noah should have tried to save the whole world when he found out about the flood, by pleading with God for mercy (like Abraham did when he found out about Sodom). Yet we still say that Noah was righteous.

We might recognize ourselves in this debate. All of us are in some way responsible for the earth's destruction, even when we are working to lessen that destruction. It seems almost impossible to do what is necessary to stop global warming and other ecological destruction. Even if each of us strives wholeheartedly to save each species, as individuals our impact is small as long as society as a whole continues on its destructive course. As a society, even if we were ready to change everything overnight, we still might not figure out what we need to do to save other species, or it may be too late to save them. So our righteousness will always be incomplete. Can we truly act righteously even though we are not yet able to live blamelessly? Or can we only be righteous in comparison with our generation?

1. This midrash continues by giving other examples of righteous people who fed others: Joseph (who fed everyone in Egypt during the famine), Moshe (who fed Israel in the desert), and Mordechai (who fed Esther). But Noah is the only one who truly fed the whole world, with all of its creatures, and the only one, says the midrah, who saw a new world "three times: before the flood, after it was destroyed, and again when it was rebuilt." In what way was the world made new each time, i.e. how did taking responsibility for other creatures give Noah a chance to renew creation even before the flood had occurred?

2. One of the concerns we have today is the impact of an increasing human population on the world's ecosystems. However, some of the rabbis saw the generation of the flood as having the opposite problem: they tried to separate themselves from the rest of the natural world by not having children. Similarly, the generation after the flood (called the "generation of the dispersion" in midrash) built a tower so that they would not spread through the land like the other creatures. According to this passage, Noah (and, we must add to the midrash, his wife) alone embraced his status as a creature and sought to bear children.

3. In this passage, Noah's righteousness is related to the fact that he drew out the building of the ark so that others would have a chance to understand and repent. His patience is also related to how he chose to build the ark: first he planted trees and waited for them to grow, then he cut them down to build. In the shadow of the flood, Noah found the patience to only use materials as the natural order could provide them.

4. This passage proposes one interpretation for what it means for us to be created "in God's image". While it is in our nature to have the power to destroy, this power is not what makes like God. Rather, it is our ability to see other creatures as God might see them, to feed them and care for them, to protect them, that makes us like our Creator.

Both for us and for God, righteousness is related to taking care of other creatures. What responsibilities does this place on how we use our power? How does a sense of responsibility affect our place as human beings among other species?

### **God's Compassion**

B. *And God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the animals which were with him in the ark...* (Gen. 8:1)

The story of the flood seems to be about judgment and destruction, but the midrash focuses on God's compassion and mercy in saving Noah and the other creatures on the ark. God has compassion for every creature and every species, even to the point of making a covenant with all of them (see E below).

5. *Rachamim*, mercy or compassion, is frequently associated with God feeding God's creatures and providing for all their needs. In this midrash, God's compassion in remembering the animals and saving them from the flood, reflects something much deeper than simply taking care of the animals. According to Joshua b. Levi, compassion is a necessary extension and expression of God's role as creator. According to Joshua of Sakhnin, the most profound expression of God's mercy is that God gives God's creatures the capacity to show compassion to each other.

Is our humanity defined by the ways we are able to show compassion? Is it a greater mercy to be shown compassion, or to be given the capacity for compassion? What is it like to show compassion to another species?

In saving all the animals along with Noah, God treats other creatures with the same compassion (and also with the same rigor) that God treats humanity. If we are supposed to imitate God ("to become like our Creator," in the language of the previous midrash), does this mean we should treat other creatures the same way that we treat human beings?

Perhaps this relates to why God commands Noah and his family, when they come out from the ark, to be especially careful about human blood, "for the human is made in God's image."

There are times when imitating God means treating other creatures' needs as equal to human needs, and other times when human needs must override the needs of other creatures. How do we know which imperative to follow? How can we find the best way to act according to "God's image" while still remembering to take care of ourselves?

6. We are not used to thinking about other animals as having souls. In the Torah, however, both humans and other animals are described as *nefesh chayah*, "living beings" or "living souls." The midrash is very comfortable with this concept: just as God knows our souls, God knows every creature's soul.

Have you ever felt like you knew an animal's soul? What kind of knowledge about other creatures can we really have? What kind of knowledge inspires us to act with mercy? Finally, we like to think of ourselves as the objects of God's love and compassion. Does seeing other creatures as objects of God's love make human beings less special, or does it make us more in God's image?

7. The struggle of every species to preserve itself is seen in this midrash as a form of righteousness. This echoes the comment above that Noah desired "to plant a vineyard." Every creature, no matter how small, achieves merit in God's eyes simply by fulfilling its nature and continuing its species.

### **On Feeding the Animals**

C. *And you, take for you of all the food that is eaten, and gather it to you, it will be for you and for them for eating.* (Gen. 7:21)

Noah's capacity to feed all the other creatures on the ark was one of the foundations of his being called "righteous." It took tremendous skill and knowledge about each animal for Noah to be able fulfill this task. According to one midrash here, Noah's knowledge about the needs of the other species is itself a sign of Noah's close relationship to God and a consequence of his mission. According to other midrashim, it was because of Noah's capacity to care for other creatures that he merited having a relationship with God. In either case, Noah had to understand a tremendous amount in order to undertake the task of feeding all the animals that were with him.

8. Human knowledge about the needs of other creatures is seen in this passage as evidence of God's grace. At the point in the Torah where the verse is found, Noah has not yet been given the task of building the ark. Knowing about each animal was therefore a direct expression of his connection to God, rather than a set of instructions about how to administer the ark.

Can detailed knowledge of the needs of other creatures be an experience of God's grace? Is ecological understanding worth acquiring for its own sake, or for God's sake, rather than just for the sake of figuring out what we need to do?

9. It was God who brought the animals to Noah according to the flood story (i.e., they came to the ark on their own), but only Noah could gather all the food that was necessary, both for their time in the ark (as R. Abba believes), and for the time when they would leave the ark (as R. Levi believes). From an ecological perspective, it was necessary for Noah to do both things in order for Noah to succeed in his mission.

Sometimes, it is possible to protect a species by providing what is necessary for its immediate survival. In most cases, though, ecology teaches us that we must also work to preserve ecosystems and habitats intact in order for any species to have a future. How does this change the way we think about endangered species?

10. In this continuation of the previous passage, we learn that R. Abba and R. Levi also disagreed about the nature of Noah's work. Did Noah gather food primarily for his own needs or primarily to feed the other creatures? At the heart of the debate between R. Abba and R. Levi is the recognition that sometimes human needs are primary, and sometimes they must be treated as secondary. However, even if our needs are primary, suggests R. Levi, we must fulfill them in ways that also nurture other species.

From an ecological point of view, both interpretations are true: Just like Noah, we must act both for our own sakes, and for the sake of other creatures. What are some of the ways human beings benefit from helping other species? Is protecting biodiversity something we should do primarily for ourselves, or for the benefit of other creatures?

### **More Midrash on Feeding the Animals**

According to some midrashim, taking care of all the animals on the ark was a terrible burden, requiring an extraordinary amount of labor and knowledge. In our own experience, sometimes protecting other species can hurt people economically or require them to make other sacrifices.

11. This passage comes from a different midrash collection but has the same rabbis as the previous two passages. In this passage R. Levi and R. Abba extend their discussion to explore what it was like for Noah and his family in the ark. In order to do what was necessary for the sake of preserving each creature, Noah had to neglect his own needs, and according to R. Abba even risk his own life.

We also face difficult choices when there are conflicts between human needs and the actions we need to take to protect other creatures. Is it possible to satisfy all our different needs and still do the work we need to do to protect diverse species and ecosystems?

12. Only by careful observation was Noah able to fulfill his task. Here we also begin to see some resolution of the conflict between human needs and the needs of other creatures: By attending diligently to the needs of every animal, Noah was able to make new discoveries and experience new blessings.

What role does attentiveness to the natural order play in our ability to protect species? What are the blessings inherent in gaining a deeper understanding of the lives and interactions of other creatures? Sometimes it is only by seeing a deeper value in the uniqueness of each species and each creature that we can find a justification for protecting diversity. Does Noah experience such an epiphany according to this midrash?

### **On Stewardship**

*D. And again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came in at evening, and here, an olive leaf torn off in her mouth... (Gen. 8:9)*

13. Noah's role in feeding the animals on the ark brought him closer to them, but it also gave him a unique power over their lives. This is reflected in the connection made in some midrashim between Noah's feeding the animals and his being given permission to eat them when he leaves the ark. Here, the dove is seen as

raising the question of whether this hierarchy is a good thing. How can we respond to the loss of freedom, of wildness, in those creatures that we must now steward?

Though the gates of the Garden of Eden are closed to humanity, they are open to the dove. Some midrashim hold that the grapevine Noah planted after he left the ark was also descended from the one in the Garden of Eden. By planting the vine and sending out the dove, Noah maintains his connection to the Garden of Eden, even though he cannot go there. By caring for other species, we may also gain a connection to that part of ourselves which belongs "to the garden." However, this midrash suggests that by doing so we may also harm those creatures.

According to this midrash, the dove communicated with Noah by hinting through her actions. What does it mean for us to try to hear the meaning of other creatures' actions or lives? What are they telling us?

Other midrashim bring up the issue of Noah's power by criticizing Noah for sending out the male raven to find land. According to those midrashim, Noah endangered the survival of the ravens by sending out the male when there were only two of them. According to the Torah, there were seven of each kosher species, so the doves were not endangered by Noah sending out one of them.

## **Covenant**

*E. And Elohim said to Noah and to his children with him: Behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, of the birds, of the cattle, and of every wild animal of the earth with you... (Gen. 9:8-10)*

The story of the flood both affirms humanity's uniqueness as protectors of the earth's species (and as a unique threat to them: "your fear will be upon every animal" – Gen. 9:2). At the same time, it raises questions about whether we really are different from other creatures. In these verses, God makes a covenant with all creatures equally, and seems to regard humans and other creatures with the same level of respect. Three prominent examples of this are:

- 1) God tells Noah that the animals will come to him paired "a man with his woman." (7:2) This language is otherwise used only in relation to human beings.
- 2) God "remembers" the animals and Noah together and so brings the flood to an end. (8:1 – see section B)
- 3) God establishes a covenant with Noah "and with all living beings which are with you, with the bird and with the beast and with every wild animal with you." (9:9-10) This is the first covenant made in the Torah, and it is the only case in the Torah where a covenant is explicitly made with other animals.

What do these parallels teach us about the relationship between humans and other creatures?

How do we understand our relationship with the rest of God's creatures? While God's covenant is made with all the inhabitants of the ark, ultimately it is we who are the bridge between the covenant and God's creatures.

The prophet Hosea also describes a covenant with the animals. Describing redemption, he says, "On that day I will make a covenant with the wild animals of the field and the birds of the sky and what crawls upon the earth, and I will break bow and sword and war from the land, and I will make them lie down in safety." (2:20) Why is a covenant with the animals part of our redemption?

Note that the idea of a covenant with the earth itself is also found in this passage, and that motif occurs throughout Tanakh, especially in the laws of the Jubilee and Sabbatical years. (Lev. 25)