

Midrashim about Noah for Shabbat Noah

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Noah’s Righteousness

These are the generations of Noah: Noah was (bayah) 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 comment below 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” (*bayah*) saw a new world. The Rabbis said: Everyone 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* 30:8

2. 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

3. 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

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

4. “And Elohim remembered.” [As it says,] “*Hashem* is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.” R. Levi said: The Lord is good to all [creatures], and His mercies are over all, because they are 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 each other]. *Genesis Rabbah* 33:3

5. 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

On Feeding the Animals

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 had to gather food for all the creatures in the world. These *midrashim* explore both the spiritual and practical aspects of Noah’s task.

6. “And Noah found grace in the eyes of *Hashem*.” (Gen 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

7. “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, *chatsubab* for the deer, *z’khubhit* 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

8. 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* 31:14

9. 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. Yochanan said: One time, when Noah was late in feeding the lion, the lion bit him, and he went away limping. *Tanchuma* Noah 14

10. 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

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.

11. “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

Insights and Ideas for *Midrashim* on Noah for Shabbat Noah

The *midrashim* above give us an opportunity to look at how the rabbis thought about human responsibility for other creatures. 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 another question: How should we care for others?

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 three explanations for Noah's righteousness given here; Noah had not fulfilled any of them 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. We might recognize aspects of ourselves in this description.

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 midrash, 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 feeding the other creatures give Noah a chance to renew creation?

2. Noah drew out the building of the ark so that others would have a chance to understand and repent. How he chose to build the ark includes another lesson: 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 in a sustainable way.

3. 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 us like God. Rather, it is our ability to feed other creatures and care for them, to see them as God might see them, that makes us like our Creator. 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?

B. *And God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the animals which were with him in the ark...* God has compassion for every creature and every species, even to the point of making a covenant with all of them.

4. *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. 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?

5. 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 took tremendous skill and knowledge. According to one midrash, Noah's knowledge was a result of his close relationship to God. According to another, it was because he could care for other creatures in this way that he merited having a relationship with God.

6. Human knowledge about the needs of other creatures is seen in this passage as evidence of God's grace. 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 our own survival?

7. 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). Both are necessary from an ecological standpoint. According to a modern midrash, Noah's wife Naamah, played an essential role in this task, gathering seeds from all the plants. (See the children's books about Naamah by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso.)

8. 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.

More Midrash on Feeding the Animals

9. 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, with the risk of injury. In our own experience, sometimes protecting other species can hurt people economically or require them to make other sacrifices.

10. 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.

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)

11. 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 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.

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 that we must now steward.