

Parsha: Noach

Noah—the only righteous man in a corrupted world—is told by G-d: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence.” Therefore,

Make yourself an ark of gopher wood, and make rooms in the ark; and caulk it both inside and out with pitch.

This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth fifty cubits and the height thirty cubits. Make a window for the ark, and taper it to a cubit on top, and set the door of the ark in its side; with lower, second and third stories shall you make it.

Behold, I will bring the flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which there is the breath of life from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall die. But with you I will establish My covenant, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.

Noah is also commanded to bring into the ark two members of each animal species—a male and a female (but seven pairs of all “pure” or kosher species), as well as food for himself, his family and the animals.

The Flood

In the six-hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, on that very day all the fountains of the great deep broke open, and the windows of heaven were opened.

The rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights. . . . And the waters increased, and raised up the ark, and it was lifted up off the ground. . . . The waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth, and all the high mountains that were under the whole heaven were covered . . .

All flesh that moved upon the earth perished. . . . There remained only Noah and those who were with him in the ark.

The Flood lasted a full solar year—365 days. The 40 days of rain were followed by 150 days in which the water swelled and churned, after which “G-d remembered Noah and every living thing and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and G-d made a wind pass over the earth, and the waters were assuaged” and began to subside. Sixteen days later the ark came to rest upon the mountains of Ararat, but it took another 44 days for the mountain peaks to become visible.

Noah waited another 40 days, and then, opening the ark’s window, he sent a raven from the ark to test the conditions in the flooded world outside. The raven proved uncooperative, so a week

later Noah sent a dove. The dove returned, finding no rest for her feet, so Noah waited another seven days. This time,

The dove came in to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

When Noah dispatched the dove a third time seven days later, it did not return to the ark at all. Still, Noah remained in the ark. On “the first day of the first month”—307 days after the rains began—the water was completely drained, and Noah removed the covering of the ark, but it took another 57 days for the surface of the earth to dry completely. Finally, on the 27th day of the second month came the divine command:

G-d spoke to Noah, saying: “Go out of the ark, you, your wife, your sons, and your sons’ wives with you. Every living thing that is with you, of all flesh—of fowl, of animals, and of all the creeping things that creep on the earth—bring out with you, and they shall swarm upon the earth, and they shall be fruitful and multiply upon the earth.”

The Vow

Noah built an altar and brought offerings “of every pure beast and of every pure bird” (of which he had been commanded to bring additional members into the ark).

G-d smelled the sweet savor, and G-d said in His heart: “I will no longer curse the earth because of man, for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth, and I will no longer smite all living things as I have done.”

Never again, vowed G-d, shall the patterns of nature be so disrupted:

For as long as the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

Man and Animal

G-d then blessed Noah and his sons that they “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” and issued a number of instructions regarding the new world they are to build.

Man is given dominion over all life forms, and the fear of him is instilled in all animals. He is allowed to kill animals for food (Adam was given license to eat only plants), but is forbidden to eat meat or blood taken from an animal while it is still alive.

Human life is sacred, and murder is punishable by death—if a human court fails to punish the murderer, G-d Himself will seek redress. “From the hand of each man, his brother, I will demand the soul of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man through man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of G-d He made man.”

The Covenant

G-d spoke to Noah, and to his sons with him, saying:

“Behold, I establish My covenant with you, and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you . . . from all that came out of the ark . . . that never shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood; neither shall there ever again be a flood to destroy the earth.”

G-d said: “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you . . . I have set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of a covenant between me and the earth.

“It shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth . . . the rainbow shall be in the cloud. I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between G-d and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.”

The First Drunk

Noah began to be a man of the earth, and he planted a vineyard.

He drank of the wine, and was drunk, and was uncovered within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.

Shem and Japheth took the garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were backward, and they did not see their father's shame.

Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. He said: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” Then he said: “Blessed be the L-rd, G-d of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. G-d shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.”

Noah lived after the Flood three hundred and fifty years. All the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years, and he died.

The Dispersion

The Torah now lists the seventy nations that formed when the descendents of Shem, Ham and Japheth (Noah's three sons) dispersed across the earth. It then tells the story of how this dispersion came about.

At first the descendents of Noah formed a single community, sharing “one language and mutual words.” Migrating westward, they settled in the valley of Shin'ar (Babylon).

They said: "Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower whose top shall reach the heavens; and we shall make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

G-d came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of man had built.

G-d said: "Behold! [They are] one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they have commenced to do. Now, will there not be withheld from them all that they have planned to do? Come, let us go down and there confound their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

So G-d scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city.

Therefore He named it Babel, for there the L-rd confused (balal) the language of the entire earth, and from there the L-rd scattered them upon the face of the entire earth.

Abram's First Years

Noah's son, Shem, had a son named Arpachshad. Arpachshad fathered Shelach; Shelach's son was Eber (one of the sources of the appellation "Hebrew"); Eber fathered Peleg ("division"—it was in the year of Peleg's death that the division of humanity into nations occurred in wake of the sin of the Tower); Peleg's son was Reu; Reu's son was Serug; Serug begot Nachor; and Nachor was the father of Terach.

Terach had three sons: Haran (who died in his father's lifetime), Nachor and Abram. Haran had a son, Lot, and two daughters: Milkah, who became the wife of her uncle Nachor; and Sarai (also called Yiskah), who also wed a younger brother of her father's, Abraham. Sarai was barren, having no children.

The Parshah of Noach concludes by telling how the entire family set out from their hometown, Ur Casdim, to journey to the land of Canaan. They stopped, however, at Charan, where Terach died at the age of 205.