

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

PARASHAT NOACH

**"This one shall comfort us for our work"
The Story of the Flood and the Principle of *Teshuva* (Repentance)**

By Dr. Brachi Elitzur

A major part of *Parashat Noach* is devoted to a description of the construction of the ark, its size and structure, the materials used to build it, and the animals brought inside it. The extensive detail raises two questions. First, if there is a Divine promise that there will be no repeat of the Flood, what is the point of this detailed description, as it will have no relevant application in the future? Second, it would seem that notwithstanding the tremendous efforts invested in building the ark, the salvation of Noach, his family, and the animals aboard with them could not have been possible without a Divine miracle. If a miracle was necessary in any case, then why the need for all the hard work? Would the miracle not have been even more impressive had Noach and his family remained at home and all the animals remained in their natural habitats, with the Flood simply passing over them, like the death of the firstborn later on in Egypt?

A teaching from the Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 5) addresses both questions:

R. Huna said in the name of R. Yossi: For 120 years, God waited for the generation of the flood, in case they would repent, but they did not. When God said to Noach, "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood," Noah arose and planted cedars. People would say to him, "Noach, what are these cedars for?" He said to them, "God told me that He will bring a flood upon the world, and He told me to make an ark, so that I may take refuge with my family." [But] they mocked his words. When the cedars were grown and Noach cut them down, people asked him, "Why have you cut down those cedars?," and Noah offered the same reply. He then started to build the ark, and they said to him, "What is the purpose of the Ark?," and again he would explain. What was the point of all of this? The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Perhaps they will repent; when they witness the planting of the cedars and then the building of the ark, perhaps their hearts will bend." But they did not repent; instead, they mocked him and jeered. Since they did not repent, God said to Noach, "Come with all of your household into the ark" (*Bereishit* 7:1). Following this [we read], "He destroyed every living substance..." (verse 23).

The declared aim of building the ark, according to the *midrash*, is to create a refuge from the imminent Flood, but the process of building, carried out in full public view, is meant to draw attention to this project and to arouse some fear of the impending punishment, leading to a movement of repentance.

While the opportunity for repentance extended to this violent generation is expanded upon at length in the midrashic literature,¹ on the plain level of the verses it would seem that God resolved to annihilate this generation of sinners, such that no remnant would be left:

God said. "I shall destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping creature and birds of the air, for I regret having made them." (*Bereishit* 6:7);

God said to Noah: "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them, and behold, I will destroy them with the earth." (6:13)

What, then, is the textual basis for the *midrashei Chazal*? Are they in fact inspired by textual allusions, or is it possible that in this instance, the educational and didactical aims of the creators of the *midrash*, who sought to emphasize the value of repentance, are not necessarily strongly bound up with the plain meaning of the text?

There are two characteristics of the story of the Flood that may point to the textual basis that is the source of *Chazal's* interpretation in their teachings from the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods.

The gradual subsiding of the waters of the Flood

The first characteristic is hinted at by Rashi:

"And the rain was upon the earth [forty days and forty nights]" (verse 12) – but further on (verse 17), the text reads, "And the Flood [was forty days upon the earth]." [Why the repetition? To teach us that] when God brought down the rain, He brought it down mercifully, so that if they would repent, it would be rain of blessing, but since they did not repent, it became a

¹ E.g., *Sanhedrin* 108a-b: "This teaches that the righteous Noah would rebuke them and say to them, 'Repent, for if not – the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring the Flood upon you.'" *Bereishit Rabba* 32:10 – "And it came to pass after seven days' (7:10) – this teaches that God gave them the opportunity of the seven days of mourning for the righteous Metushelach to repent, but they did not." *Mekhilta Massekhta De-Shirata*, chapter 5, 38:2: "[Your right hand, O Lord, is] glorious in power (*nedari ba-koach*)' – Your glory and tremendous power are revealed in Your having granted an extension [of time] to the generation of the Flood in order to repent, but they did not repent, as it is written, 'My spirit shall not strive on account of man' (*Bereishit* 6:3), but You did not decree their annihilation until their evil was complete before You."

Flood. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 7:12)

Rashi is commenting on the seeming repetition in the text and on the different terms used (rain vs. Flood). In fact, the phenomenon of repetition in the description of rain falling is broader in scope, and the gradual intensification is clearly felt:

- a. 6:17 – "Behold, I will bring a Flood of water upon the earth..."
- b. 7:4 – "For in another seven days, I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights..."
- c. 7:6 – "... when the Flood of water was upon the earth"
- d. 7:10 – "And it came to pass after seven days that the waters of the Flood were upon the earth"
- e. 7:11-12 – "...All the fountains of the great deep were broken open, and the windows of heaven were opened, and there was rain upon the earth for forty days..."
- f. 7:17 – "... And the waters increased and they lifted the ark..."
- g. 7:18 – "And the waters prevailed and were increased greatly upon the earth"
- h. 7:24 – "And the waters prevailed upon the earth for a hundred and fifty days"

The ark is lifted off the ground only long after the first drops start falling (stage f), and its final sealing up is mentioned only after "the fountains of the great deep were broken open," a moment before it is lifted by the water (between stages f and g):

7:16 – "And those that went in, went in male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him, **and the Lord shut him in.**"

The window and door of the ark, which allow those housed inside it to look outward and observe the destruction of the world, also allow those on the outside to observe its durability in the face of the Flood. It seems that entering the ark and joining its inhabitants was possible throughout the early stages of gentle rainfall – which, according to Rashi's explanation, was supposed to convince people of the real possibility of an imminent Flood of unprecedented scope and destruction. The rain was supposed to prompt their natural survival instinct into guiding them to a process of repentance that would allow them to take refuge in the ark. Once it was apparent that the highly unusual breaking open of the great depths and the deluge from the windows of heaven were bringing about no change of heart among the sinners, the Flood became a fact, and the ark with its paltry human population (along with representatives of all species of animals) became the sole refined core of a new world.

The twice and thrice repeated descriptions of the Flood

The second notable characteristic of the description of the Flood is the doubled and even tripled description of the preparations prior to its arrival, of its

duration, and of its results:

	A	B
Description of sin	6:5-7	6:11-13
Description of Noach	6:8	6:9
Description of the salvation	7:1-5	6:14-22
Entry into the Ark	7:10-15	7:6-9
Results of the Flood	7:23	7:21-22
Renewed covenant	8:20-22	9:12-17

The phenomenon of repetition in biblical narratives led to the development of a critical school that cast doubt on the unity of the Torah text and raised different theories as to its origins. The story of the Flood, with its many repetitions, provided ample material for this type of analysis. Religious belief in the unity of the Torah and its Divine origin demands a satisfying exegetical explanation for all the repetition in this story.

R. Mordekhai Breuer laid the foundations for a refutation of the "documentary hypothesis" postulated by Bible critics in the form of his "perspectives approach." This exegetical approach instructs the scholar to take note of the similarities between repetitive or repeated units, but to focus specifically on the fine differences between them, using these to discern the different aims behind each iteration. To this view, repetition is a technique that is meant to broaden the range of messages arising from the unit and to orient it towards different target populations, different outlooks, or different historical periods.²

Let us follow Breuer's approach and try to clarify the messages arising from the repetition of the details of the story of the Flood.³ If we compare the verses comprising the two parallel columns as set forth above, we find that the systematic difference between them concerns the Name of God. Column A brings together the details of the story that are conveyed with the use of the Name *Y-H-V-H*, while column B brings together the details that appear in connection with the Name *Elo-him*. Cassuto offers the following explanation of the significance behind the use of these different Names:

- a. The Name *Y-H-V-H* is used to express the Divinity that is unique to *Am Yisrael*, especially in its moral aspect, while the Name *Elo-him* is used to express the abstract idea of Divinity that is prevalent among academic scholars worldwide – the concept of God as experienced generally as

² For more on this approach, see M. Breuer, *Pirkei Mo'adot* (Jerusalem, 5753); *Pirkei Bereishit* (Alon Shevut, 5759). Y. Ofer (ed.), "'Shitat Ha-Bechinot' shel ha-Rav Mordekhai Breuer (Kovetz Ma'amarim U-Teguvot, Alon Shevut, 5765).

³ Breuer engaged in analysis of this biblical narrative, as well. We propose a slightly different exegetical approach from the one he set forth, but we will apply the principle that he developed as a tool to explain the significance of repetitious textual material.

Creator of the material world, as the Active Force behind nature, and as the source of life.

- b. The Name *Y-H-V-H* is used to express Divinity in its "personal" sense, and in direct relationship to people or to nature; the Name *Elo-him* is used when the text alludes to Divinity as a transcendental entity, existing absolutely beyond and above material nature.⁴

Cassuto draws a distinction between the Name *Elo-him*, expressing God's control over nature and His guiding of the world in accordance with universal laws, and the Name *Y-H-V-H*, which denotes God's closeness to man and His intervention in nature in accordance with the needs of those who are close to Him.

If we combine Breuer's "perspectives approach" and Cassuto's commentary on *Shemot* 5, we might propose an answer to the question that we posed at the outset. The issue of repentance, developed at such length in the *midrashei Chazal*, is hinted at in the two-fold repetition of different parts of the story. One account, narrated with the Name *Elo-him*, describes the annihilation of the world in accordance with the laws of morality and nature, with no favoritism shown to anyone. The corruption of Creation that is brought about by man's perversions of morality demands a total destruction that leaves only the most minimal natural foundations for the continuity of man and beast in a new world. The story narrated with the Name *Y-H-V-H*, on the other hand, describes a process in which there is an attempt to put off the destruction, to enlarge the circle of those who will be delivered from it, and to set down moral laws leading to a renewed closeness between man and his Creator. The doubled storyline highlights the privilege of repentance, which allows for a deviation from the attribute of justice associated with *Elo-him*, "taking advantage", as it were, of God's desire for people to draw close to Him and His transformation of their dire verdict into compassion as a result of their return to Him.

Let us examine the differences between the interwoven accounts and see how the two different modes of Divine interaction with the world are expressed:

Description of the sin	
6(5) And Y-H-V-H saw that man's wickedness upon earth was great, and how all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil, continuously.	6(11) The earth was corrupt before Elo-him , and the earth was filled with violence.
(6) And Y-H-V-H repented that he had made man in the world, and it grieved Him to His heart.	(12) And Elo-him saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its path upon the earth.
(7) And Y-H-V-H said, "I shall wipe out man that I have created from upon the face of the earth, both man and beast, and	(13) And Elo-him said to Noah: "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with

⁴ M.D. Cassuto, *Me-Adam ad Noach*, pp. 55-56.

creeping creatures and birds of the air, for I repent that I have made them."	violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth."
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The difference in the Names of God and the additional description of God's "feelings" clearly distinguish one account from the other. The description using the Name Y-H-V-H depicts a profound connection between man and God. The idea of eradicating man arises from God's disappointment at man's widespread violation of morality, and it is presented as an option, not a given fact or decree. The version that uses the Name *Elo-him* reveals alienation between God and His creation. The "flesh" mentioned here enjoys no special preference over any other creation, and the destruction of all flesh is presented as the ultimate solution.

Description of Noach	
6(8) But Noach found favor in the eyes of Y-H-V-H .	6(9) Noach was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generations; Noach walked with Elo-him .

Noach, the first righteous man, who finds favor in God's eyes, is regarded with some ambivalence in the *midrashim*.⁵ It would seem that the basis for these teachings is, once again, the duplication in the description of his status. The double description of the relations between God and Noach is highly reminiscent of the difference between Yitzchak's love for Esav, "for he relished his venison", and Rivka's love for Yaakov, which requires no explanation and is not dependent on anything. The verse with the Name *Y-H-V-H* describes a closeness between Noach and God, with Noach providing some measure of consolation to God, as it were, for having created man. The verse that uses the Name *Elo-him* draws a distinction between Noach and his sons, on the one hand, and the other "flesh," on the other, as the justification for saving him from the decree of "Behold I shall destroy them."

Description of the Salvation	
	6(13) Elo-him said to Noach... (14) "Make for yourself an Ark of gopher wood; rooms shall you make in the Ark, and you shall cover it inside and out with pitch. (15) And this is how you shall fashion it: three hundred cubits shall be the length of the Ark; fifty cubits its breadth; and thirty cubits its height. (16) A window shall you make for the Ark, and to a cubit shall you finish it above,

⁵ See *Sanhedrin* 108a; *Bereishit Rabba* 32, p. 293; *Tanchuma, Lekh Lekha* 26. It is interesting that in all three teachings, it is R. Yochanan who is the main speaker against Noach. R. Yochanan is known as a great defender of the sinners of the *Tanakh*, even those characters widely regarded as wicked, such as Achav and Omri. This imbues his reservations with regard to Noach with special significance.

	and the door of the Ark shall you set in its side; with lower, second and third floors shall you make it. (17) And 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 the heavens; all that is on the earth shall die.
7(1) And Y-H-V-H said to Noah: "Come – you and all of your household – into the Ark, for I have seen you righteous before Me in this generation. (2) Of every pure animal you shall take for yourself by sevens , male and female, and from the animals that are not pure – by twos, male and female. (3) Of the bird of the heavens, too, by sevens, male and female, to keep seed alive upon the face of the earth.	(18) And I shall establish My covenant with you , and you shall come into the Ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. (19) And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every kind shall you bring into the Ark, to keep them alive with you; male and female shall there be. (20) Of birds after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after its kind – two of every sort shall come to you, to keep them alive. (21) And take for yourself of all food that is eaten, and gather it to yourself, that it might be food for you, and for them."
(4) For in another seven days I shall cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights, and I shall wipe out every living substance that I have made, from upon the face of the earth."	
(5) And Noah did according to all that Y-H-V-H had commanded him.	(22) And Noah did according to all that Elo-him had commanded him ; so he did.

The differences and their significance:

- The description of the preparation of the ark is set forth in detail only in the account using the Name *Elo-him*. The ark is a natural means for man to employ in protecting himself from the Flood, and therefore the human effort and preparation is described here. The version that contains the Name *Y-H-V-H*, in contrast, relates to God's protection of His chosen ones – not necessarily through natural means. God can take care of saving Noah even without the physical process or artifact.
- The location of the description of the Flood: In the version that mentions *Y-H-V-H*, the description of the Flood appears after Noah and his family are invited to enter the ark, while in the version mentioning *Elo-him*, the Flood appears prior to the invitation. This difference in location relates to the perception of the role of the ark. In the *Y-H-V-H* version, the ark is depicted as the habitation of God's chosen ones, while in the *Elo-him*

version, the ark is perceived as a refuge for those seeking refuge from the terrible Flood.

- The reason for salvation: In the *Elo-him* version, salvation arises from an ancient covenant, of which we find no record in the text, but which appears to be connected to the relationship between God and His Creation and which obligates the survival of mankind at some minimal level. Noah and his family are chosen as the individuals through whom God will fulfill His part of the covenant. In the *Y-H-V-H* version, the emphasis is on the selection of Noah personally, owing to his unique righteousness in relation to his generation. The words, "For I have seen you righteous **before Me** in this generation" stand in contrast to "the end of all flesh has come **before Me**."
- The animals brought into the Ark: Two specimens (male and female) are the minimum necessary for the continuation of the species. In the natural description, *Elo-him* instructs that the bare minimum for the survival of Creation be brought into the Ark. In the command to bring seven (pairs of) pure animals, *Y-H-V-H* shows His concern for man's welfare, reflecting the anticipation of a renewed rapprochement in the future through the sacrifice of some of these animals.
- The command to bring food into the Ark is mentioned only in the version that uses the Name *Elo-him*, since in terms of natural laws, food is a necessary precondition for animal life. A miraculous salvation requires no such preparation.

Entering the Ark	
<p>7(10) And it came to pass after seven days that the waters of the Flood were upon the earth. (11) In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month – on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken open, and the windows of heaven were opened. (12) And there was rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. (13) On that same day, Noah, and Shem and Cham and Yefet, Noah's sons, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, came into the Ark. (14) They and every animal after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth after their kind, and all the birds after their kind – every bird of every sort. (15) And they went in to Noah into the Ark, by twos, of all flesh in which there is the breath of life.</p>	<p>7(6) And Noah was six hundred years old when the Flood of water was upon the earth.</p> <p>(7) And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him, came into the Ark because of the waters of the Flood. (8) Of the clean animals, and of the animals that are not clean, and of the birds and all that creeps upon the earth;</p> <p>(9) By twos they went in to Noah, into the Ark – male and</p>

	female, as Elo-him had commanded Noah.
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The words "because of the waters of the Flood" in the version that mentions the Name *Elo-him* contrast with the description of the ceremonial entry of God's chosen in the version that uses the Name *Y-H-V-H*. The Ark that is a refuge from the Flood in the *Elo-him* version is described in the *Y-H-V-H* version as a place that signals the start of a new world. The listing of the animals "of their kind" (*le-minah; le-minehu*) hints to the story of the Creation, which uses the same terminology, thereby serving as a sign and guarantee of new life.

Inside the Ark

7(15) And those that went in, went in male and female of all flesh, as **Elo-him** had commanded him, and **Y-H-V-H** shut him in.

The verse that concludes the description of the entry into the ark combines the natural salvation with Divine Providence.

Results of the Flood

7(23) And He destroyed every living substance that was upon the face of the earth – both man and cattle and creeping things and the birds of the heavens; they were destroyed from the earth.
And there remained only Noah and those who were with him in the ark.

7(21) And all flesh perished that moved upon the earth, both of birds and of cattle, and of animals, and of every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth, and all of mankind; (22) All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was upon dry land – died.

The results of the Flood, in the *Elo-him* version, summarize the accomplishment of the aim, while the *Y-H-V-H* version includes mention of the dimension of God's mercy – which, despite His aim of annihilating the entire world, left a remnant of the old world through which the new world will be built.

The Covenant

8(20) "And Noah built an altar for **Y-H-V-H**, and he took of every clean animals, and of every clean bird, and offered burnt sacrifices upon the altar. (21) And **Y-H-V-H** smelled the sweet savor, and **Y-H-V-H** said to His heart, I shall not again curse the earth any more because of man, for the impulse of man's heart is evil

9(12) And **Elo-him** said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for all generations: (13) I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. (14) And it shall be that when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud, (15) and I will remember My covenant that is between Me and you and all living creatures of all flesh, so the waters will not again be a Flood to destroy all

<p>from his youth; nor will I again smite any more all living things, as I have done. (22) While the earth remains, sowing time and the harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.</p>	<p>flesh. (16) And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I will look upon it, that I might remember the eternal covenant between Elo-him and all living creatures of all flesh that is upon the earth." (17) And Elo-him said to Noah: "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established <u>between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth.</u>"</p>
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The covenant of the rainbow, in the *Elo-him* version, is forged between God and the earth, severing nature's dependence on man's actions. The promise of the eternity of Creation is facilitated through this severance. Corresponding to this covenant of the rainbow that limits man's influence on nature, there is the *Y-H-V-H* version of the covenant, which places man's unique status at the center of the reason for God's promise.

The covenant in its *Y-H-V-H* version is uttered as a contrast to the description of man's evil at the beginning of the narrative. The sense of God being "grieved to His heart" and the threat, "I will destroy man whom I have created" is transformed into a new approach – "And *Y-H-V-H* said to His heart" and the promise, "Nor will I again smite any more all living things." The sweet savor of the sacrifice, mingling with the memory of man's evil, demonstrates man's ability to prevail over the evil that is part of him since his youth. The destruction of nature removes the possibility of the transition from youthful evil to a process of drawing close to God. Therefore, God promises that in the future, the wholeness of nature and the Creation will be maintained.

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The duplicated story of Noah, the ark, and the Flood presents two contrasting pictures: a world that runs in accordance with the fixed laws of nature and moral retribution, and humanity, which is guided by a compassionate God Who seeks to intervene in the laws of nature for the benefit of anyone who is ready to "open an opening like the eye of a needle" for Him. The image of Noah, reflected in the window of the ark, proclaims to the world the idea of *tikkun* (repair) and salvation, which remain valid even as the threat, "Behold, I will destroy the earth" is already unfolding.

Noah is given his name with a specific aspiration in mind: "...and he [Lemekh] called his name Noah, saying, "This one **shall comfort us** (*yenachamenu*) for our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which God has cursed" (5:29). This is an early hint to Noah's role in the future covenant separating man's actions from the fate of the natural world.⁶ Noah's

⁶ The word "*yenachamenu*" as the explanation for Noah's name may be interpreted as having a dual meaning. It may be understood in the sense of "comfort" or "encouragement" – meaning that Noah's righteousness is a consolation for the curse of the ground with which Adam is punished for his sin. The story of Noah, according to this view, carries the message that man's actions will

sacrifice puts an end to the curse of the ground and of the earth because of man's actions, and it casts man as the responsible party for repairing failures – as reflected in the new laws of morality that God now issues: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (9:6) – "by the judges" (Radak).

Translated by Kaeren Fish

no longer affect the fate of nature as a whole. Another possible meaning of the word "*yenachamenu*" is regret or sorrow. Thus, Noach represents the idea of regretting one's actions – which is an essential stage in the process of repentance, as Yirmiyahu teaches: "For after I had turned away, I repented (*nichamti*), and after I was instructed, I smote my thigh; I was ashamed and also confounded, for I bore the reproach of my youth" (*Yirmiyahu* 31:18).