

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Noach
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Noach in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3155/jewish/Noach-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The Parshah is named "Noach" (Noah) after the protagonist of its major event: The Great Flood. It is found in Genesis 6:9.

G-d instructs Noah—the only righteous man in a world consumed by violence and corruption—to build a large wooden teivah (“ark”), coated within and without with pitch. A great deluge, says G-d, will wipe out all life from the face of the earth; but the ark will float upon the water, sheltering Noah and his family, and two members (male and female) of each animal species (and 7 of the "pure" species). Rain falls for 40 days and nights, and the waters churn for 150 days more before calming and beginning to recede. The ark settles on Mount Ararat, and Noah dispatches a raven, and then a series of doves, “to see if the waters were abated from the face of the earth.” When the ground dries completely—exactly one solar year (365 days) after the onset of the Flood—G-d commands Noah to exit the teivah and repopulate the earth.

Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices to G-d. G-d swears never again to destroy all of mankind because of their deeds, and sets the rainbow as a testimony of His new covenant with man. G-d also commands Noah regarding the sacredness of life: murder is deemed a capital offense, and while man is permitted to eat the meat of animals, he is forbidden to eat flesh or blood taken from a living animal.

Noah plants a vineyard and becomes drunk on its produce. Two of Noah’s sons, Shem and Japheth, are blessed for covering up their father’s nakedness, while his third son, Ham, is punished for taking advantage of his debasement. The descendants of Noah remain a single people, with a single language and culture, for ten generations. Then they defy their Creator by building a great tower to symbolize their own invincibility; G-d confuses their language so that “one does not comprehend the tongue of the other,” causing them to abandon their project and disperse across the face of the earth, splitting into seventy nations. The Parshah of Noach concludes with a chronology of the ten generations from Noah to Abram (later Abraham), and the latter’s journey from his birthplace of Ur Casdim to Charan, on the way to the land of Canaan.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 54: 1-10

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/578168/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Forsaken Jerusalem is likened to a barren woman devoid of children. G-d enjoins her to rejoice, for the time will soon come when the Jewish nation will return and proliferate, repopulating Israel's once desolate cities. The prophet assures the Jewish people that G-d has not forsaken them. Although He has momentarily hid His countenance from them, He will gather them from their exiles with great mercy. The *haftorah* compares the final Redemption to the pact G-d made with Noah in this week's Torah reading. Just as G-d promised to never bring a flood over the entire earth, so too He will never again be angry at the Jewish people.

"For the mountains may move and the hills might collapse, but My kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of My peace collapse."

A Tale of Four Cities by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/noach/a-tale-of-four-cities/>

Between the Flood and the call to Abraham, between the universal covenant with Noah and the particular covenant with one people, comes the strange, suggestive story of Babel:

The whole world spoke the same language, the same words. And as the people migrated from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let us make bricks, let us bake them thoroughly." They used bricks for stone and tar for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches the heavens, and make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered across the face of the earth." Gen. 11:1-4

What I want to explore here is not simply the story of Babel considered in itself, but the larger theme. For what we have here is the second act in a four act drama that is unmistakably one of the connecting threads of Bereishit, the Book of Beginnings. It is a sustained polemic against the city and all that went with it in the ancient world. The city – it seems to say – is not where we find God.

The first act begins with the first two human children. Cain and Abel both bring offerings to God. God accepts Abel's, not Cain's. Cain in anger murders Abel. God confronts him with his guilt: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." Cain's punishment was to be a "restless wanderer on the earth." Cain then "went out from the Lord's Presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden." We then read:

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Enoch. He [Cain] built a city, naming it Enoch after his son. Gen. 4:17

The first city was founded by the first murderer, the first fratricide. The city was born in blood.

There is an obvious parallel in the story of the founding of Rome by Romulus who killed his brother Remus, but there the parallel ends. The Rome story – of children

fathered by one of the gods, left to die by their uncle, and brought up by wolves – is a typical founding myth, a legend told to explain the origins of a particular city, usually involving a hero, bloodshed, and the overturning of an established order. The story of Cain is not as founding myth because the Bible is not interested in Cain's city, nor does it valorise acts of violence. It is the opposite of a founding myth. It is a critique of cities as such. The most important fact about the first city, according to the Bible, is that it was built in defiance of God's will. Cain was sentenced to a life of wandering, but instead he built a town.

The third act, more dramatic because more detailed, is Sodom, the largest or most prominent of the cities of the plain in the Jordan valley. It is there that Lot, Abraham's nephew, makes his home. The first time we are introduced to it, in [Genesis 13](#), is when there is a quarrel between Abraham's herdsmen and those of Lot. Abraham suggests that they separate. Lot sees the affluence of the Jordan plain.

Lot raised his eyes and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan up to Tzoar was well watered. It was like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt.
[Gen. 13:10](#)

So Lot decides to settle there. Immediately we are told that the people of Sodom are "evil, great sinners against the Lord" ([Gen. 13:13](#)). Given the choice between affluence and virtue, Lot unwisely chooses affluence.

Five chapters later comes the great scene in which God announces his plan to destroy the city, and Abraham challenges him. Perhaps there are fifty innocent people there, perhaps just ten. How can God destroy the whole city?

"Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" [Gen. 18:25](#)

God then agrees that if there are ten innocent people found, He will not destroy the city. In the next chapter, we see two of the three angels that had visited Abraham, arrive at Lot's house in Sodom. Shortly thereafter, a terrible scene plays itself out:

They had not yet gone to bed when all the townsmen, the men of Sodom – young and old, all the people from every quarter – surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them." [Gen. 19:4-5](#)

It turns out that there are no innocent men. Three times – "all the townsmen," "young and old," "all the people from every quarter" – the text emphasises that without exception, every man was a would-be perpetrator of the crime.

A cumulative picture is emerging. The people of Sodom do not like strangers. They do not see them as protected by law – nor even by the conventions of hospitality. There is a clear suggestion of sexual depravity and potential violence. There is also the idea of a crowd, a mob. People in a crowd can commit crimes they would not dream of doing on their own. The sheer population density of cities is a moral hazard in and of itself. Crowds drag down more often than they lift up. Hence Abraham's decision to live apart. He wages war on behalf of Sodom ([Gen. 14](#)) and

prays for its inhabitants, but he will not live there. Not by accident were the patriarchs and matriarchs not city dwellers.

The fourth scene is, of course, Egypt, where Joseph is brought as a slave and serves in Potiphar's house. There, Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him, and failing, accuses him of a crime he did not commit, for which he is sent to prison. The descriptions of Egypt in Genesis, unlike those in Exodus, do not speak of violence but, as the Joseph story makes pointedly clear, there is sexual license and injustice.

It is in this context that we should understand the story of Babel. It is rooted in a real history, an actual time and place. Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation, was known for its city states, one of which was Ur, from which Abraham and his family came, and the greatest of which was indeed Babylon. The Torah accurately describes the technological breakthrough that allowed the cities to be built: bricks hardened by being heated in a kiln.

Likewise the idea of a tower that "reaches to heaven" describes an actual phenomenon, the ziqqurat or sacred tower that dominated the skyline of the cities of the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley. The ziqqurat was an artificial holy mountain, where the king interceded with the gods. The one at Babylon to which our story refers was one of the greatest, comprising seven stories, over three hundred feet high, and described in many non-Israelite ancient texts as "reaching" or "rivalling" the heavens.

Unlike the other three city stories, the builders of Babel commit no obvious sin. In this instance the Torah is much more subtle. Recall what the builders said:

"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches the heavens, and make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered across the face of the earth." [Gen. 11:4](#)

There are three elements here that the Torah sees as misguided. One is "that we make a name for ourselves." Names are something we are given. We do not make them for ourselves. There is a suggestion here that in the great city cultures of ancient Mesopotamia, people were actually worshipping a symbolic embodiment of themselves. Emil Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, took the same view. The function of religion, he believed, is to hold the group together, and the objects of worship are collective representations of the group. That is what the Torah sees as a form of idolatry.

The second mistake lay in wanting to make "a tower that reaches to the heavens." One of the basic themes of the creation narrative in [Bereishit 1](#) is the separation of realms. There is a sacred order. There is heaven and there is earth and the two must be kept distinct:

"The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the children of men." [Ps. 115:16](#)

The Torah gives its own etymology for the word Babel, which literally meant "the

gate of God.” The Torah relates it to the Hebrew root *b-l-l*, meaning “to confuse.” In the story, this refers to the confusion of languages that happens as a result of the hubris of the builders. But *b-l-l* also means “to mix, intermingle,” and this is what the Babylonians are deemed guilty of: mixing heaven and earth, that should always be kept separate. *B-l-l* is the opposite of *b-d-l*, the key verb of [Bereishit 1](#), meaning “to distinguish, separate, keep distinct and apart.”

The third mistake was the builders’ desire not to be “scattered over the face of the whole earth.” In this they were attempting to frustrate God’s command to Adam and later to Noah to “**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.**” ([Gen. 1:28](#); [Gen. 9:1](#)). This seems to be a generalised opposition to cities as such. There is no need, the Torah seems to be saying, for you to concentrate in urban environments. The patriarchs were shepherds. They moved from place to place. They lived in tents. They spent much of their time alone, far from the noise of the city, where they could be in communion with God.

So we have in Bereishit a tale of four cities: Enoch, Babel, Sodom, and the city of Egypt. This is not a minor theme but a major one. What the Torah is telling us, implicitly, is how and why Abrahamic monotheism was born.

Hunter/gatherer societies were relatively egalitarian. It was only with the birth of agriculture and the division of labour, of trade and trading centres and economic surplus and marked inequalities of wealth, concentrated in cities with their distinctive hierarchies of power, that a whole cluster of phenomena began to appear – not just the benefits of civilisation but the downside also.

This is how polytheism was born, as the heavenly justification of hierarchy on earth. It is how rulers came to be seen as semi-divine – another instance of *b-l-l*, the blurring of boundaries. It is where what mattered were wealth and power, where human beings were considered in the mass rather than as individuals. It is where whole groups were enslaved to build monumental architecture. Babel, in this respect, is the forerunner of the Egypt of the Pharaohs that we will encounter many chapters and centuries later.

The city is, in short, a dehumanising environment and potentially a place where people worship symbolic representations of themselves.

Tanach is not opposed to cities as such. Their anti-type is Jerusalem, home of the Divine Presence. But that, at this stage of history, lies long in the future.

Perhaps the most relevant distinction for us today is the one made by the sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies, *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). Community is marked by face-to-face relationships in which people know, and accept responsibility for, one another. Society, in Tonnies’ analysis, is an impersonal environment where people come together for individual gain, but remain essentially strangers to one another.

In a sense, the Torah project is to sustain *Gemeinschaft* – strong face-to-face communities – even within cities. For it is only when we relate to one another as

persons, as individuals bound together in shared covenant, that we avoid the sins of the city, which are today what they always were: sexual license, the worship of the false gods of wealth and power, the treatment of people as commodities, and the idea that some people are worth more than others. That is Babel, then and now, and the result is confusion and the fracturing of the human family.

[Noach: The Curse of Ham and the Misuse of Tradition by Rabbi Dr. Barat Ellman](https://truah.org/resources/barat-ellman-noach-moraltorah_2023/)
https://truah.org/resources/barat-ellman-noach-moraltorah_2023/

Editor's note: This (M)oral Torah was written before the beginning of the war in Israel and Gaza.

For the past several years, I have had the honor of serving as High Holiday Cantor at B'nai Israel, a Conservative synagogue in In Gainesville, Florida. While Gainesville — home to the University of Florida — is an island of sanity within Florida, the consequences of Florida education policy are everywhere. The Governor of Florida calls his state “where ‘woke’ goes to die.” Some university faculty who are also congregants admit they have adjusted their curricula because of the state’s rules limiting discussion of sex, gender, and family identity. And this fall, Prager “University” won a contract to provide a “supplemental curriculum” for K-12 education. It’s a series of animated videos featuring “Leo” and “Leyla,” two white kids who travel back in time to learn about history. Meeting figures like Columbus or Frederick Douglass, they learn that the conquest of the Americas was a benevolent project and that slavery was “a compromise to achieve something great.”

Our parshah has something to say about the misuse of history and tradition. The second half of Genesis 9 recounts how after the flood, Noah planted a vineyard, drank wine, and fell asleep in his tent. While asleep, his middle son Ham, “the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his brothers outside.” (9:22) When Noah awoke and learned what his son had done, “he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.’” (9:25)

As a biblical scholar as well as a rabbi, I am confident that the episode provides, and was meant to provide, a prooftext for Israelite opposition to the Canaanites and Israel’s right to the land of Canaan. Multiple times in the Torah, the Canaanites are described as an abomination. They are a people that the land “vomited out”; their practices are an anathema, iconic examples of everything the Israelites must not do. (Leviticus 18:27-28) As Stephen Geller has argued, the story of Dina’s rape by Shechem is a mythic precedent for the biblical attitude toward the Canaanites as over-sexed, violent, and ungovernable. (“The Rape of Dina: Transcendence and Sexuality,” in S. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress: 1996).) The episode in our parshah can be seen as yet another

proof-text for Israelite opposition to the Canaanites. So how did Noah's curse become known as "the Curse of Ham"?

Ham, we are told in Genesis 10:6-8, is the father not only of Canaan, but of Cush, Egypt, and Put. From Cush descend Sheba, Havilah, Sabtah and Raamah, regions associated with sub-Saharan Africa, in particular Ethiopia (Cush).

Beginning in the 16th century European Christians began associating Ham with Blackness and Blackness with enslavement. In other words, a social construction of race was derived from a legend more likely meant to justify Israel's right to the land of Canaan. And not just European Christians, but as David Goldenberg demonstrates in his book, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, a "notion of black inferiority [on the part of non-black people] developed...as black people were enslaved across cultures." A racially-based interpretation of Genesis 10 supported that view.

As both heirs to and stewards of the biblical tradition, it is on us to use our tradition responsibly, and to challenge its misuse, whether that be in the service of racism and racist institutions, homophobic policies and legislation, nationalistic aspirations, or exclusive claims to land. The biblical tradition has been exploited for unjust purposes by Jews as well as Christians. Sometimes this has been on the basis of a misguided interpretation, but at other times it has involved taking literally what is a theological rendering of Israelite history. At a time when the consequences of failing to face history responsibly — to teach the past, warts and all — are so high, we must be vigilant about how we use our texts and call out their misuse wherever we find it. *(Rabbi Dr. Barat Ellman earned her Ph.D. from JTS in 2011 where she was also ordained in 2004. Today, she is an adjunct professor in the Theology Department at Fordham University. She is also a non-denominational activist rabbi whose pulpit is "in the streets," where she fights for the transformation of the criminal legal system, the rights of immigrants and refugees, and for a truly anti-racist society.)*

[Simchat Torah Pogrom and The Floodwaters of Noach by Rabbi Kenneth Brander](https://ots.org.il/simchat-torah-pogrom-and-the-floodwaters-of-noach/)

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When the floodwaters subside, Noach is alone. Just mere weeks before, human civilization was robust and populous, though it had fallen prey to greed, lust and thievery. As the world flooded with crime and injustice, Noach received the order to build an ark with room for no more than eight human passengers, and now they remained the last remnant of the humanity that was, and the forebears of the society yet to come.

Yet Noach, in his careful observance of the instruction he had received, never once considered building another cabin onboard, or handing out life jackets in the town square, and he certainly did nothing to combat the crime wave and moral turpitude that had overtaken the society in which he lived. He followed the rules, kept his head down, and waited it out.

In this week's Haftara, Yeshayahu seems to point a finger at Noach for his actions. He calls the flood *mei Noach*, the floodwaters of Noach. It is as though Noach bears a degree of responsibility for the obliteration of society, as the *tzadik biSdom*, the righteous individual in a morally bankrupt society, who maintains personal integrity but fails to have any impact on the surrounding community. What happened on Shabbat Simchat Torah was nothing less than a pogrom, the largest massacre of Jews in Israel since the Second Temple period and larger than the pogroms of Ukraine (1919) or of Kishinev (1903) – among the largest single events of massacre in all of Jewish history.

In the face of such evil, we will not bear the sin of Noach. We are not staying in our safe rooms, we are not running away from Israel to wait out the storm. Just the opposite – thousands have spared no expense to return home to fight! Elchanan Kalmanson z"l, an OTS alumnus, his brother and brother-in-law didn't wait for a conscription call; as soon as the news broke of the massacre on Kibbutz Beeri they ran down south, saving dozens of people.

Our students, spouses, children, and grandchildren are not Noach. We are the children of Avraham, who fought a war in order to free hostages, protect what is good in the world, and eradicate evil. This war is a continuation of the way of Avraham. We are certainly not paralyzed, but mobilized and emboldened to protect ourselves and restore the balance of justice. We are the children of Avraham! Avraham's war to rescue Lot was not a geopolitical opportunity nor was it an expression of hatred of others. Avraham, throughout his lifetime, extends his hands in peace and cooperation to those around him. He cared deeply for the people of Sodom and developed relationships and partnerships with Ephron and Elimelech. Similarly, as the students of Avraham, we wish to believe in the good of the other. But there is a time for peace, and a time for war, and we insist on ensuring our security, ridding society of a modern Amalek, and defending our people and our homeland.

At the funeral of his son, Roey – another alumnus of ours who was killed after saving many of his comrades in a battle against Hamas terrorists – Yami Weiser noted that his son did not fall in battle, but rather was elevated in battle. His heroic acts and those of all of our soldiers are expressions of valor and commitment to our highest moral ideals.

The floodwaters of Noach are upon us when we allow ourselves to be witness to evil, without doing our part to bring about a change. As Elie Wiesel once stated: "Indifference is the epitome of evil. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." It is our obligation to not build arks, but rather, in the spirit of Avraham, to fight evil and to be lighthouses that will guide our world towards a better tomorrow. *(Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone)*

The Lion and the Lamb – Parshat Noach 5784 by Rabbi Eve Posen
<https://rabbieeve.com/2023/10/18/the-lion-and-the-lamb/>

There's a well-known fable about a frog and a scorpion. The scorpion wants to cross a river but cannot swim, so it asks a frog to carry it across. The frog hesitates, afraid that the scorpion might sting it, but the scorpion promises not to, pointing out that they would both drown if it killed the frog in the middle of crossing. The frog considers this argument sensible and agrees to transport the scorpion. Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog anyway, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung, despite knowing the consequence, to which the scorpion replies, "I am sorry, but I couldn't resist the urge. It's in my nature."

This parable is meant to teach that sometimes our instinctual or habitual ways win out, even when they're not in our own best interest. The scorpion could not resist the urge to do what he always does, even if it meant that he would ultimately die along with the frog. At the same time, the frog, seemingly a natural helper, took a chance on the scorpion, knowing there was risk involved.

Whenever I hear this parable, I imagine what might have transpired on the ark that Noah built. After all, there were lambs and lions, scorpions and frogs, predators and prey, all crammed together. How could they coexist?

This week we read that very story in *Parshat Noach*. As the second section of text in the entire Torah, this portion takes us through the story of the flood, including Noah building the ark, saving his family and the animals, sending out a dove, and God's promise to never do this again. We learn of the generations of Noah and how humanity moved on to create the next piece of the narrative, the Tower of Babel. After the Tower of Babel, we see that the nations are scattered, and then the Torah quickly moves us through the 10 generations between Noah and Abraham, where the rest of our history as a people takes off.

So how did every type of animal live peacefully during their time on the ark? Our commentary suggests that these animals, unlike the society Noah was from, somehow recognized the dire situation and were able to put aside their natural enmity and cohabitate peacefully in the ark. It was only when the danger was over that they went back to their old habits. What do we make of this temporary change? Perhaps the pessimistic view focuses on the fact that the peacefulness they achieved was only temporary and that old habits and natural proclivities die hard. However, I choose the optimistic view, the one that focuses on the fact that change is possible, peace is attainable, and working together can make a difference, even if just for a short time. (*Rabbi Posen serves as Associate Rabbi at Congregation Neveh Shalom in Portland, Oregon.*)

[God's Tears by Bex Stern-Rosenblatt](https://drive.google.com/file/d/17THZoybQ-Pllm_I0zfl4yXe8RVUifLQ/view)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/17THZoybQ-Pllm_I0zfl4yXe8RVUifLQ/view

The Flood is horrible. The Flood is intended as the destruction of the world and everything in it - parents and children, dogs and cats, fruits and vegetables. The very earth itself has become corrupted. It is unthinkable that this is a story we teach our children, with toy boats and wooden animal cutouts. The Flood is God's reaction to pain. It is God deciding that it would have been better if the world had not been created. It is God trying to unmake the world, to destroy so that all destruction could stop.

But God fails. Even God could not destroy everything. Even when the ground itself has been so desecrated with blood that the only way to heal it is by totally immersing it in water, even then, the ground still emerges. Those fruits and vegetables will grow again. Even after God unleashes the primordial waters, those forces that were constrained at creation, back onto creation to destroy it, even then, the world cannot be destroyed.

We do not need another creation story after the flood. God does not need to go to battle with the primordial waters to wrestle them back into confinement. After enough time, they stop. And creation reemerges. The world is still here. We are still here. Life cannot be wiped out. Humanity cannot be wiped out. Having created, you cannot ever totally destroy your creation. There will always be a remnant, a spark, a hope. In one of the most beautiful verses of the whole Torah we read,

*“As long as all the days of the earth—
seedtime and harvest
and cold and heat
and summer and winter
and day and night
shall not cease.”*

But the symbol of this hope in the story of the Flood is also horrible. The first covenant made in the Tanakh is sealed by a bow. Traditionally, this is read as a rainbow and we all get out our watercolors to show how the world is at peace again. After all, the bow is set in the clouds. The verses themselves read:

“My bow I have set in the clouds to be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth, and so, when I send clouds over the earth, the bow will appear in the cloud. Then I will remember My covenant, between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters will no more become a Flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud and I will see it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on the earth.”

As biblical scholar Ronald Hendel has **written**, the bow can be read as a part of traditional bow and arrow too. The bow is an instrument of war. After the flood, God puts God's weapon in the clouds as a sign to himself. Perhaps God is pointing his weapon at himself. Perhaps God is going so far as to say he would rather destroy himself than attempt to destroy humanity again. Perhaps God is hanging up his bow, showing he no longer needs it. Perhaps God is aiming his bow at the clouds,

the place where the primordial waters are contained, in order to ensure that they stay contained. But most of all, God's putting his bow in the clouds reminds me of a heartbreaking line from "The Tyger" by William Blake. He writes:

When the stars threw down their spears

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

I don't want a God who creates and destroys dispassionately. I need a God who cannot smile at destruction. I need a God who waters heaven with his tears. And I need a God who knows when to hold back those tears, to restrain the waters, so that life can reemerge. (*Bex teaches Hebrew Bible and bibliodrama. She's the North American Faculty-in-Residence for The Conservative Yeshiva.*)

[What Is the Rainbow Really Teaching Us? By Tani Schwartz-Herman](https://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online/?genre=commentary)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online/?genre=commentary>

A few weeks after we got married, my husband and I traveled to Hawaii for our honeymoon, where we had the opportunity to enjoy the island's natural splendor. One thing that stood out for us was the magnificent rainbow we saw in Maui following a rainstorm. It appeared larger, more vibrant and colorful than other rainbows we had seen before. The backdrop of the mountains in Maui and the blue ocean waters made its appearance even more spectacular. My husband was the one who really called attention to it, and I remember he shared with me the inspiration he felt from witnessing this natural wonder. He is certainly not alone in feeling this way. From rainbow babies to the LGBT pride flag to the rainbows displayed in windows during Covid lockdowns, the rainbow has been adopted as a symbol for hope, possibility, and inclusion. Even—and perhaps especially—after dark times, miracles are indeed possible.

In this week's parashah we learn the origin story of the rainbow as a symbol. Following the catastrophic flood in which God destroys nearly every living thing, save for Noah and his family and the animals he brings with him onto the ark, God promises never to bring about destruction on the same scale again. God establishes the rainbow as a sign for this covenant, declaring that it will be a reminder for God always: "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures" (Gen. 9:8–17).

This is truly extraordinary: it is the only time God pairs a covenant with something that is visible in nature to us all. It is not surprising, then, that there a plethora of commentaries on the rainbow, discussing whether and how we can reconcile the scientific traits of the rainbow with the verses in the Torah; remarking on both the negative and positive significance of the rainbow; and instructing us on what to do when we see a rainbow including what to say, how we should look at it, and

whether or not to call attention to it.

As I delved into commentaries about the rainbow, I discovered some fascinating ideas which gave me a newfound appreciation for why so many of us are drawn to it, and why it carries so much meaning beyond its natural beauty.

To begin, it is helpful to understand the science behind how the rainbow forms. A rainbow results when the sun's rays are refracted by drops of mist or rain into separate bands of color. When we look at regular sunlight we do not see these colors. It is only through the prism of water that we are able to see the vibrant colors inherent in sunlight.

Biblical commentators offered different ways of reconciling this natural occurrence with the notion that God created the rainbow as a covenant after the flood. Some commentators, such as the Ramban, concur with Greek scholars that the rainbow had always been in existence, but after the flood God changes the status of the rainbow by assigning it as a covenant. Ibn Ezra (9:14) offers a different take on this idea. He suggests that the rainbow was always in existence, but that we weren't able to see it before. However, "after the flood God strengthened the sun's light" to enable us to see the rainbow.

This highlights the remarkable quality of the rainbow: the colors are always present but are only revealed to us at a particular time. Specifically, we can only see the rainbow after rainfall, perhaps at a time when its message of hope is most meaningful to us. This serves as an important reminder that there is beauty everywhere; we just don't always have the ability to see it. Especially when we're going through a challenging time in our lives, it's helpful to consider the beauty that we will be able to see once the sun's rays are shining brightly down again.

It is also interesting to observe the quiet nature of the rainbow, especially as a choice for a sign from God.

The rainbow is a beautiful sight; however, it can also easily go unnoticed. There are no loud sounds calling our attention to it, such as thunder. It doesn't even appear immediately in our view—we need to look up into the sky to see it. Perhaps assigning the rainbow as a covenant is God's way of calling upon us to be an active partner; to seek out rainbows and to take time to consider their significance, thus coming closer to God.

Finally, I want to note that the rainbow did not always carry with it a positive connotation. Keshet, the word used in the biblical narrative for rainbow, is also the word used for a bow, as in bow and arrow. In the Jewish Publication Society Bible commentary, Nahum Sarna writes that our understanding of the rainbow as a symbol of the covenant is actually distinct from other ancient Near Eastern notions of the bow as a sign of war, military victory, and dominance. Through the story of Noah, Sarna says, "hostility is transformed into a token of reconciliation between God and Man."^[1] Ramban also discusses the connection between the rainbow and the bow used in battle, noting that God made the rainbow with its feet bent upward,

like an inverted bow, which is similar to what warriors do when they are calling for peace from their opponents.

The notion that the rainbow, a sign for God's covenant, has negative roots, is quite remarkable! What could have been used for war and destruction is turned around, signaling peace and hope for the future. What a powerful lesson. If the meaning of the rainbow can be changed so significantly, we are called upon to consider what else we can turn around in our personal lives or in the world.

May we all merit to have rainbows revealed to us, and to see the ones that are in front of us, throughout our lives. And may we gain strength from the rainbow and its promise of transformation, blessings, and peace. [\[i\]](#) Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia : Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 62–3. (*Tani Schwartz-Herman is Program Director at JTS*)

[Trauma of Going to War: The Wars of King David and their Lessons for Today](#) [by Rabbi Prof. David Frankel](#)

<https://schechter.edu/trauma-of-going-to-war-paradox-of-building-a-temple-despite-having-blood-on-our-hands/>

[In the Wake of the War in Gaza](#)

The citizens of Israel, and the Jewish people at large, are living through a horrific tragedy, and in a state of terrible mourning.

We are all suffering a mixture of pain, anxiety, deep sadness, anger, and frustration, in the wake of the barbaric terrorist operation carried out by religious fanatics against thousands of innocent Israeli civilians. We fear for the fate of the hostages and for the wellbeing of our soldiers who must embark on the perilous task of freeing them and destroying the enemy.

As many have said, the time for recrimination and assignment of blame will come later. Now is the time for unity and resolve, for the people of Israel, and the Jewish people at large.

A war of destruction has been forced upon us, and our survival depends on our coming out of it victorious. This is not about venting our anger, though anger is palpable and fully justified. Rather, we are engaged in a carefully calculated campaign to rectify an intolerable political and military situation, and to free our loved ones at the same time.

One of the most difficult aspects of the war we have embarked upon involves the terrible devastation and suffering that many innocents in Gaza will have to endure. Of course, responsibility for the death and destruction that has and will come to the people of Gaza lies squarely on Hamas, which cares much more about waging holy war against Israel than about the welfare and prosperity of the citizens it governs. Still, not all citizens of Gaza support the reign of terror of Hamas.

How are we to deal with this issue on the psychological, moral and religious

levels?

Can we even separate our moral and religious evaluations of this matter from the psychological trauma we are presently undergoing, or from the anxiety that we are feeling for our soldiers and hostages? Are we emotionally capable of thinking sensitively about these issues without losing our mental equilibrium, even our sanity?

Despite the difficulties, we cannot avoid the responsibility of contemplating these matters, at least on the most rudimentary level. Perhaps we may find some guidance from the famous biblical story of King David and the building of the Temple.

According to the account in the book of First Chronicles (22:8), God rejected King David's request to build the Temple in Jerusalem with the words, "You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood in my sight on the earth."

In contrast with the era of David, the era of Solomon would be an era of peace. Solomon will not be a man of war and he will be spiritually fit to build the Temple.

This divine statement is rather astonishing. Nowhere does the book of Chronicles, or any other biblical book, criticize David for embarking on his wars for Israel. On the contrary, the biblical books present David's wars as vital and necessary for Israel's defense, and he is basically commended for his victories on behalf of Israel! How, then, can we understand this rejection of David?

I suggest that our tradition presents us here with a complex and paradoxical concept of great importance: there are times when it is unavoidably necessary to commit terrible sins. The fact that a terrible sin must be committed does not mitigate the fact that it is indeed sinful, and the fact that it is sinful does not mitigate the fact that it indeed must be done. This is the essence and reality of war. There is no war without the terrible suffering and death of masses of innocent human beings created in the image of God.

And yet, there are times when the alternative to waging war, that is, the pacifist decision to refrain from it in order to preserve the lives of the innocent, is even worse. To refrain from engaging in the sins of battle emboldens the perpetrators of evil and aggression to further their campaign to wreak havoc on humanity. King David fought just wars on behalf of Israel, and is commended for that. But his hands are still stained with the blood of the innocent. His role is to pave the way for Solomon. He will build the Temple that symbolizes universal, spiritual harmony.

What can we take away from this story for today?

Minimally, it means that we must reject the voices of those at the extremes. Those who say that we must flatten Gaza without any concern for innocent civilians, seek to refashion us in the image of our enemies. This would provide them with the ultimate spiritual victory and lead to our own moral decay. On the other hand, those who say that we must refrain from meaningful and effective military action

because it would inadvertently involve the loss of civilian lives would hand military victory to the enemies of humanity, and lead to our own physical demise.

Today we are living in the era of David, and, unfortunately, this means that we must sully our hands with the blood of war. But, we must never lose sight of the ultimate goal.

Let us pray that the resolve of our actions today will ultimately lead to the peaceful era of Solomon, and the spiritual building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

(David Frankel is Associate Professor of Bible at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. He has been on the faculty since 1992. He earned his PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the direction of Prof. Moshe Weinfeld. His publications include "The Murmuring Stories of the Priestly School," and "The Land of Canaan and the Destiny of Israel." From 1991 to 1996, Frankel was rabbi of Congregation Shevet Achim in Gilo, Jerusalem.)

Yahrtzeits

Mike Schatzberg remembers his father Joseph Schatzberg on Sun. Oct. 22

Blossom Primer remembers her sister Rhoda Rappaport on Tue. Oct.24 and her

father Jack Rappaport on Fri. Oct. 27

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her father Dr. Chester M.Vernon on Thur. Oct. 26