

### Dealing With the Flood of Life<sup>1</sup>

*"I'm drowning! I'm swamped with life's demands!"*

*Whether it's slaving away at our jobs, sinking into the insurmountable pile of bills, or worrying about the hundreds of big and little things that challenge us, how can we stay afloat? When life comes rushing at us—leaving us with a never-ending "To Do" list, and making us feel confused and overwhelmed—how can we cope?*

In Noah, we read about the great flood. The Hebrew word for flood, *mabul*, also means disorder and confusion. **In a world full of disorder, our priorities can become skewed and distorted.**

How did Noah handle the overwhelming floodwaters?

First, he built an ark.

The Hebrew word for ark is *tevah*, which also means "word."

When the world is churning, threatening to drown the spark of vitality within us, **we need to enter into the *tevah*—the world of words.**

Find moments of solitude, to regroup and regain your composure. Find a perspective, through studying the words of Torah and meditating on the words of prayer. Carve out a time to discover a soothing haven of wisdom against the raging floodwaters of life.

We may not be able to save the world, but we can build for ourselves an ark, a sanctum of time—protected and filled with meaning.

Noah's ark was built from gopher wood, which is soft and able to withstand the pressures of the floodwaters. A stronger but less flexible wood would have snapped. The Talmud teaches:

It is better to be as soft as a reed, than as hard as a cedar—TANIT 20b

In dealing with the pressures of a sometimes hostile world, we benefit most by having a soft, yielding nature. Look for resolution rather than confrontation.

But the gopher wood was covered with pitch. Without this waterproof covering, the floodwaters could have seeped in and destroyed the ark. As much as we need to be supple and compromising, when it comes to matters of principle, morals, or ethics, we need to be impenetrable.

And finally, to test whether the earth was dry enough to be habitable, Noah sent out a dove who returned with an olive branch in its mouth. The dove is the universal symbol of peace. **A raw olive is inedible. The olive's precious oil is produced after processing.** Only when we are at

peace with ourselves can we find and process the precious potential within our surroundings.

Noah teaches us that to find our inner peace, we need to:

- 1) **Immerse in the *tevah***, the words of spiritual wisdom and prayer;
- 2) **Become more compromising in nature like gopher wood, while remaining impenetrable in our morals like pitch;**
- 3) **See the potential around us**, even in an inedible olive.

Then the raging waters calm down, and we are able to find the beauty and blessing hidden in every person and every creation.

When Noah emerged, he beheld a new world. And we can, too.

1. *Immerse in the *tevah*, the words of spiritual wisdom and prayer.*

a. תִּבְנֶה (te-*vah*)—ark (prop. *chest, box*—the papyrus vessel in which infant Moses was laid among reeds (Exo 2:3).

- 1) A box-like craft made to float on the water but **without rudder or sail** or any other navigational aid. It does not use the services of a crew. The use of *tevah* is intended to emphasize that **the fate of the occupants** is to be **determined solely by the will of God** and not to be attributed to the skill of man (JPS).

a) The hero of the Mesopotamian legend builds a regular ship and employs boatmen to navigate it (JPS).

- 2) Noah's ark would have a displacement of about 43,000 tons. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Ut-napishtim's vessel is an exact cube of 180 feet on each side, with a tonnage three to four times that of Noah's (JPS).

a) It was approximately the same size as a large container ship.

- 3) The Rabbis say that the construction of the Ark occupied Noah for 120 years, **in order to give his contemporaries an opportunity to repent.**

a) Their curiosity would naturally be aroused by what Noah was doing—he would answer their inquiry by warning them of the judgment which God was bringing on mankind.

b) However, they scoffed at him and gave no heed to his word (Hertz).

- c) Tanhuma, <sup>2</sup>Noah, 5

"Make thee an ark of cedarwood"<sup>(1)</sup> (Gen 6:14). R. Huna said in the name of R. Yose: **For one hundred and twenty years, the Holy One kept warning the generation of the flood in the**

<sup>1</sup> Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Bereishit* (Chabad.org), pp. 15-17.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Tanhuma is the name given to three different collections of Pentateuch aggadot; two are extant, while the third is known only through citations.

**hope that they would resolve to repent.** When they did not repent, He said to Noah, "Make thee an ark of cedarwood." Noah proceeded to plant cedars. When asked, "Why these cedars?" he would reply, "**The Holy One is about to bring a flood upon the world, and He told me to make an ark, that I and my family might escape.**" **They mocked and ridiculed him. In the meantime, he watered the cedars, which kept growing.**

When asked again, "**What are you doing?**" he gave them the same reply, and the generation of the flood continued to ridicule him. Finally he cut the cedars down, and, as he sawed them into planks, he was again asked, "**What are you doing?**" He replied, "What I said I would do," even as he continued to warn the generation of the flood. **WHEN THEY DID NOT REPENT EVEN THEN, THE HOLY ONE BROUGHT THE FLOOD UPON THEM.**

At last, when they realized that they were about to perish, they tried to overturn the ark. What did the Holy One do then? He surrounded the ark with lions.

(1) So Targum Onkelos; JV: "of gopher wood."

CJB, JPS, KJV, NAS, NKJ, DSS, RSV, TNK, YLT—of *gopher*-wood ...  
LXX—of square timber ...

NIV, OKE, PJE—of cypress wood ...

NJB—of resinous wood ...

OKE, PJE—with the wood of cedar ...

b. Psalm 119

<sup>9</sup>How can a young person stay on the path of purity? **By living according to your word.**

<sup>11</sup>**I have hidden your word in my heart** that I might not sin against you.

<sup>28</sup>My soul is weary with sorrow; **strengthen me according to your word.**

<sup>41</sup>May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise; <sup>42</sup>then I can answer anyone who taunts me, **for I trust in your word.**

<sup>81</sup>My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but **I have put my hope in your word.**

<sup>105</sup>**Your word is a lamp for my feet,** a light on my path.

<sup>107</sup>I have suffered much; **preserve my life, LORD, according to your word.**

<sup>114</sup>You are my refuge and my shield; **I have put my hope in your word.**

1) Psalm 32:7

**You are my hiding place;** you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

2) Psalm 23:1-6

<sup>1</sup>A psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. <sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters ...

3) Joshua 1:8

<sup>8</sup>Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; **meditate on it day and night,** so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

a) Moses Maimonides, often considered the greatest Jewish philosopher, described meditation as **settling the mind and allowing for divine providence and inspiration.** In one passage in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (3.32), Maimonides suggests that meditation is a higher form of worship than either sacrifice or prayer.

4) Colossians 3:16 (CJB)

<sup>16</sup>**let the word of the Messiah, in all its richness, live in you,** as you teach and counsel each other in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude to God in your hearts.

2. *Become more compromising in nature like gopher wood, while remaining impenetrable in our morals like pitch.*

a. Romans 12:14-18

<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another ... <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, **as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.**

1) Romans 14:19

<sup>19</sup>Let us therefore **make every effort to do what leads to peace** and to mutual edification.

2) Hebrews 12:12-14

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup>"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. <sup>14</sup>**Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.**

b. From כָּפַר (*kaphar*)—*cover over, atone for sin.*

1) The usual word for "pitch" is *chemar*—as in Exodus 2:3 (the story of the *te-vah* that Moses was placed within).

2) The original meaning of this word is *to cover* or *shelter*.

- a) The word for *village* comes from this root, as in *Capernaum*, i.e., *K'far Nahum—the village of Nahum*.
- 3) Throughout the Bible it is also translated *forgive, purge, disannul, atone*.
- a) Psalms 78:38  
But he, [being] full of compassion, **forgave** [their] iniquity, and destroyed [them] not ..."
- a) In this case the charge was done away with, not because of man's innocence, but because of God's compassion.
- b) Psalms 79:9  
"Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name: and deliver us, and **purge** away our sins, for your name's sake."
- 1] In this, as in other passages, the cleansing is not the moral change, but the removal either of guilt or of the punishment that follows from guilt.
- 2] The ground of appeal lies not in any latent goodness in the offerer, but in the nature of God Himself.
- 3] This is implied in the familiar but too little heeded phrase "for thy Name's sake," which occurs frequently in the Tenach.
- 4) The word כִּפֵּר not only sets forth God's merciful disposition to shelter the sinner, **and symbolizes the process whereby the shelter should be obtained, but also represents the act of the priest in making atonement for the sins of the people**.
- c. Matthew 11:7-15  
<sup>7</sup>As John's disciples were leaving, Yeshua began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? **A reed swayed by the wind?** <sup>8</sup>If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. <sup>9</sup>Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' <sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup>From the days of John the Baptist until now, **the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it**. <sup>13</sup>For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup>And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. <sup>15</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear.
- 1) "The Kingdom of Heaven is breaking forth" (*not* "suffering violence") and every person in it is breaking forth, "those who are breaking out break out in it, or by means of it" (*not* "the violent take it by force").

### 3. See the potential around us, even in an inedible olive.

#### a. Exodus Rabbah 36:1

"A leafy **olive** tree, fair with goodly fruit" (Jer. 11:16). Olives, while still on the tree, are marked for shriveling, after which they are knocked down and brought up to a roof, where they are left to dry; then they are placed in a grinding mill, where they are ground; their pulp is then tied up in a hempen bale, upon which heavy stones are placed. Only after all of that do olives yield their **oil**. So, too, Israel. The nations of the earth knock them down, drive them from place to place, imprison them, put chains around their necks, and post soldiers all around them. Only then do Israel resolve on repentance, and the Holy One responds to them.

#### b. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana<sup>3</sup> 21:4; Yalkut Shimoni,<sup>4</sup> Isa., #499

R. Aha said, Israel is likened to an olive tree: "A leafy olive tree fair with goodly fruit" (Jer. 11:16). And the Holy One is likened to a lamp: "The lamp of the Lord is the spirit of man" (Prov. 20:27). **What use is made of olive oil? It is put into a lamp**, and then **the two together give light as though they were one**. Hence the Holy One will say to Israel: My children, since My **light** is your **light** and your **light** is My **light**, let us go together—you and I—and give **light** to Zion: "Arise, give **light**, for thy **light** has come" (Isa. 60:1).

R. Hoshai said: **Jerusalem is destined to become a torch for the nations of the world, who will walk by its light**, as is said, "**Nations shall walk at thy light**" (Isa. 60:3).

#### c. Phillipians 4:8-9

<sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things ...

#### d. Hebrews 11:8-12

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, **even though he did not know where he was going**. <sup>9</sup>By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

<sup>10</sup>For **he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God** ...

<sup>3</sup> *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* is a collection of Aggadic midrash. It is very old, and must be classed together with *Genesis Rabbah* and *Lamentations Rabbah*, but from a higher stage of midrashic development.

<sup>4</sup> *Yalkut Shemoni*—usually referred to as "the Yalkut" of Simeon of Frankfurt—the best known and most comprehensive midrashic anthology, covering the whole Bible. Compiled in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.