Noah Alone

I thought I knew the story of Noah's Ark, until I began reading scripture with the help of traditional Jewish insights. The rabbis have taught me to slow down my reading, to pay closer attention to the detail in the text.

Spread over a number of chapters in Genesis 6-9, there is a lot to ponder about the Great Flood. [1] Take, for instance, Genesis 7:16. Have you ever noticed that this verse suggests that it was the Lord, not Noah, who shut the door of the ark behind its last passenger as the flood set in? After all that building on Noah's part, the Lord closes the door. Why is this subtle point recorded? Does it really matter? What deeper meaning can be discerned here? Is this 'closing' a sign of divine judgment? Divine protection? Something else? By becoming attuned to the rabbinic mindset that savors the minute details of the sacred text we discover fascinating gateways to spiritual insights for contemplation, discussion and debate.

I will leave it to you to ponder the closing of the door of the ark. Let's now turn to the flood waters themselves. The rise of the waters in Genesis 7 finds dramatic telling through repetition [2]:

The waters increased... (v.17)

The waters swelled and increased exceedingly upon the earth...(v.18)

When the waters had swelled exceedingly, yes exceedingly upon the earth... (v.19)

Fifteen cubits upward swelled the waters (v.20)

With each rising level, something happens: the ark is lifted (v.17), it floats (v.18), the mountains are covered (v.19) and covered in a final way (v.20). Ponder these verses. How does G-d's word speak to you through the dramatic images, repeated words, rhythmic phrasing?

Biblical scholars remind us of two things to sharpen our appreciation of this scene.[3] First, in the ancient view of the universe, the earth existed in a kind of habitable bubble holding back waters above and below. Now the ground ruptures, the skies crack open (7:11), the waters break through, the very structure of the universe is compromised. This isn't just rain, it's cosmic crisis!

Second, while we usually think of the ark as a boat, in biblical terms it is a rectangular box. It floats, but it has no rudder or sail. The fragility of Noah's ark at the mercy of the elements is underscored.

And as if to drive home the utter helplessness of the situation, after describing the death of all living things (7:21-23) the story presents this curious phrase: Noah alone remained... (7:23). It is curious because in the next breath we read, 'and those who were with him in the Ark.' Clearly Noah is not the only living human. Why then the reference to 'only Noah'? This question fired the discussion of the rabbis. How does it fire yours? What in particular about Noah is being suggested here?

The great Torah scholar Rashi [4] refers to a Jewish storytelling tradition (midrash) which, in its 'playful' way, notes that the sound of the Hebrew word for 'only' (*akh*) is that of a person coughing or retching. In a creative leap, the midrash concludes that the phrase 'only Noah' refers to Noah's diminished health. Why diminished? Because it takes energy to care for an ark full of animals in the midst of cosmic catastrophe! (Apparently Noah was not only exhausted but bleeding from wounds inflicted by a hungry lion!) Perhaps we find ourselves smiling with this midrashic elaboration on the scripture text, but we should not dismiss its interpretive depths. Notice how a single Hebrew word leads the rabbinic mind into a whole field of lively enquiry, storytelling and reflection. At its heart is Noah—a man who stands apart—and the arduous effort he makes, as well as the toll on his wellbeing, during a grave crisis affecting the entire world.

Reflection

Taking up this midrashic lead we might well ask:

- What is my experience of enduring a crisis?
- Do I identify with the 'aloneness' of Noah hinted at by verse 7:23?
- Am I exhausted and wounded through my labour to be faithful? Floods, after all, are real, and Noah's Ark is a powerful symbol for many kinds of human crises: physical, moral, spiritual.
- Continue to reflect on the story of Noah, debating possible interpretations with a friend. •

Notes

1. English translation by Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).
2. See Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 38.
3. See Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (HarperCollins, 2001), 37-39.
4. Rashi (11th century scholar, France) discusses a midrashic text in Sanhedrin 108b, Tanchuma Yashan 14. See Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (New York: Mesorah, 1999).

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