

Haftarot Unrolled: Noach

Leaving the Ark

The Haftarah contains one of the more literal connections to the Parsha. When G-d assures the Jewish People that once Redemption begins, He will not let Jerusalem be destroyed again, He brings Noach as proof:

מִי נַח זֹאת לִי
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעַבְרֵי מִי נַח עוֹד עַל הָאָרֶץ
כִּן נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מִקִּצְפִי עֲלֶיךָ וּמִגֵּרָה בְּךָ:

For it is like the Waters of Noach to Me,
as I swore not to let the Waters of Noach pass over the land,
so too I have sworn not to be angry at you, nor to chastise you.

Just as G-d promised Noach not to bring another flood and kept that promise, so now He promises that Jerusalem will not make Him angry again, and He will keep this promise, too. However, G-d had made many promises, several of them about Jerusalem directly; for instance, the promise to Avraham to give the land to his descendents, and He kept those promises, too. Why does the Haftarah go all the way back to Noach? What aspect of Noach's experience is relevant to rebuilding Jerusalem?

The Midrash explains why G-d found it necessary to make this promise to Noach in the first place:

כי מי נח זאת לי אשר נשבעתי : זה שאמר הכתוב לכל זמן ועת לכל חפץ זמן היה לנו
ליכנס לתבה שנאמר בא אתה וכל ביתך אל התבה וזמן היה לו שיצא הימנה שנאמר צא מן
התבה משל לפרנס שיצא מן המקום והושיב אחר במקומו כיון שבא אמר צא ממקומך כך
נח צא מן התבה] ולא קבל לצאת אמר אצא ואהיה פרה ורבה למארה עד שנשבע לו שאינו
מביא מבול לעולם שנאמר כי מי נח זאת לי

“For it is like the Waters of Noach to Me that I swore”: as it says, “For everything there is a time..” (Kohelet 3) There was a time to go into the Ark, as it says, “Come, you and your entire family, into the Ark,” (Breishit 7:1) and there was a time to leave it, as it says, “Leave the Ark.” (Breishit 8:16)

The allegory is of an executive who took leave of his position, and appointed another in his stead. When he came back, he said, “Get out of your place”. So too, Noach did not wish to leave.

He said, “I will go out and procreate to be cursed?” Finally, G-d swore to him that He will never bring another Flood, as it says, “It is like the Waters of Noach to Me that I swore”. (Yalkut Shimoni Yeshayahu 477)

The Midrash explains why Noach had to be commanded to leave the Ark. One would think that the moment he could get out of that filthy box, he would put on his boots and run. Yet if

G-d had to command him to leave the Ark, that means that by default, he would have preferred to stay.

The Midrash offers two possible mind-sets that would cause a person to stay when it is time to go, each of which is relevant to the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the Haftarah.

The first is that of a person who is appointed to a position of responsibility that he knows is temporary. Even though he is aware that his appointment is limited, when the time comes to move on, he will not be eager to do so. Noach was responsible for the well-being of everyone in the Ark, of every being left alive in his world. It might have been a very difficult position, physically challenging and emotionally demanding, but it was also very rewarding and meaningful. Now that he has to leave - who knows what will be his role in the new world? He had grown comfortable in his position, and found reasons to stay.

The Jewish People have also grown comfortable in the Ark of their exile, no matter how tight and stifling it might be. Sometimes they even point to the rewarding and meaningful tasks that must be performed there. Even though they know that their position is temporary, and the time will come to move on, leaving is hard. They might need G-d to say, as He does in the Haftarah, "It is like the Waters of Noach to Me; I had to tell Noach that it is time to go, and now I'm telling you: it is time to go."

The second reason that Noach refused to go can be inferred from the words that the Midrash puts into his mouth: "I will go out, and I will have more children, and rebuild civilization, but what would be the point? There is no guarantee that they will do any better than their ancestors. Their world will be destroyed as well, and my efforts will be for nought!"

G-d did not dismiss these fears; instead, He addressed them directly by swearing to Noach that there will never again be a Flood of this magnitude. G-d will find other ways to handle the failure of human beings to maintain an upright and decent society, without destroying the entire world. This reassurance allows Noach to move on with rebuilding the world.

The Jewish People have seen what they had built destroyed, many, many times over the centuries. It is frightening to build again, especially on the shifting sands of the Land of Israel. Therefore, in the Haftarah of Noach, G-d says to Jerusalem:

"Do not be afraid of rebuilding for fear that it will be destroyed again. Even the generation of Noach, who were so much more evil than you ever were, were able to rebuild when made My promise to them not to destroy them again. My anger at you has been less than my anger at them, but My promise is just as lasting. I swear to you as I swore to them: this time, when you build, it will last forever.

Now come on out."

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל