

Title: Noah and the Flood: Bereshit 6:9 - 7:24 and 9:1-7

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Description: Lesson 3 of Torah Bekiut, a course designed to give students a basic grounding in some of the key Torah texts and to engage students with vital moral, interpersonal and religious issues in order to transform Bible study into a relevant activity and the Torah itself into a source of meaning.

Introduction

The story of the Flood raises the question of an individual's responsibility for those around him or her in a time of crisis. Noah is a man who knows disaster is on the way and acts to save his family and the natural world. The Torah describes him in the opening to the story as a "righteous man, blameless in his generation". However, these words have been the subject of controversy among Torah commentators. Do they mean that Noah was a truly righteous person, despite the fact he lived in an evil age, or is there an implication that Noah was entirely average and only appeared moral relative to the bad people around him? The Torah hints that the latter is the correct answer, and implicitly criticises Noah for taking no action other than following God's minimal instructions to the letter.

But can Noah really be blamed, living as he does in an age of immorality and evil? This question raises the following fundamental issue: to what extent are we morally responsible for our actions, and to what extent can environment be used to explain behaviour? When a person is caught doing something wrong, can they legitimately quote an inadequate education, mental illness, bad genes, abusive family background and so on to mitigate their responsibility for their actions? Studying the story of Noah provides an opportunity to discuss these questions.

Learning outcomes

Students will

- Discuss how far individual responsibility for others extends in a time of crisis
- Judge Noah in light of the conclusions to this discussion
- Understand the ambiguity of a biblical verse, using Rashi's commentary as a resource
- Try to resolve the ambiguity by careful reading of the wider narrative

Lesson plan

1. If you knew a disaster was coming, what would you do?

The teacher opens by asking students to imagine a large scale disaster (flood, hurricane, chemical war....) was on the way. If you found out about it and no-one else knew, what would you try to do?

- Make sure you were OK?
- Save your family?
- Try and help your friends?
- Try to warn everyone?

The teacher allows a brief discussion to develop, challenging students' opinions by focusing them on the conflicts between the various possibilities and the consequent conflicts. For example, warning everyone of the impending catastrophe would mean having less time to make preparations for your family. Or, trying to take your whole family with you might slow you up and prevent your escape - maybe it would be better to save yourself?

Next, the teacher tells the students that this week's text focuses on a character who found himself in exactly this situation.

2. Introducing Noah

The teacher asks a student to read out Bereshit chapter 6 verse 9. S/he then asks the class: How is Noah described? (Answer - as a righteous person, blameless in his age). How would you expect this kind of person to act if he knew there was a disaster coming?

3. What did Noah actually do?

having begun to discuss what a righteous person would do in Noah's situation, we will read the story from the Torah and discover what actually happened. Perhaps we should be prepared for a surprise.

The students learn chapter 6 verse 10 - the end of chapter 7 in hevruta. Following the hevruta study, the teacher helps the class sum up the narrative, focusing on Noah's actions. A discussion ensues, concentrating on the following questions:

- How do you judge Noah's behaviour?
- What would you have done in his place?
- What should he have done?

The teacher should encourage the students to consider whether Noah did the right thing by following God's orders to save his family and the animals, without making any attempt to warn other people of the imminent danger and persuade them to change their ways.

4. Why is Noah called “a righteous man ... blameless in his age?”

Having established that Noah’s actions are at the very least open to criticism, we return to the beginning of the *parsha* (6:9) and ask: why on earth is he described as “a righteous man ... blameless in his generation?” The teacher can invite students to offer interpretations of this statement in light of Noah’s behaviour.

Next, the teacher hands out Rashi’s interpretation of the verse. Rashi comments as follows:

Rashi on Bereshit 6:9:

“There are those of our scholars who interpret this verse as being in praise of Noah: had he lived in a righteous generation, how much more righteous would he have been! Others interpret this verse as condemning him: he was only righteous relative to his generation, but had he lived in the time of Abraham he would not have been considered anything special.”

Having ensured the class understands the two interpretations being offered, the teacher asks the students which interpretation they agree with and invites a few responses.

5. A textual answer to the debate?

There is some evidence as to which interpretation is correct (ie. whether Noah is especially righteous or only righteous relative to his generation) at the end of the flood story.

The teacher asks a student to read out chapter 9 verses 1-7 and asks the class what new rules are imposed on human beings in this passage. There are two answers:

- Human beings are allowed to eat meat for the first time (remember that in the creation story only plants were made available for food)
- The death penalty for murder is imposed

Does this imply that God’s expectations of human beings have gone up or down?

One understanding is that God has lowered his expectations of people. Given their moral weakness, he lowers the moral standards by allowing people to kill animals, thereby focusing their moral attention on inter-human relations. But even in this area God is now pessimistic, and feels the need to impose drastic sanctions as a deterrent.

This lowering of expectations implies a more pessimistic assessment of Noah, the person who the new human society is going to be based on. Perhaps God was disappointed by him, in that He expected him not only to do the minimum that he was instructed, but to take the initiative and try to help others too. Careful attention to the text highlights this obedient, non-proactive side of Noah’s character (See 6:22, 7:5 - Noah ONLY does exactly what God tells him!).

6. Conclusion

A discussion should be allowed to develop, focusing on Noah's character, but also encompassing the students' own lives and experiences:

- What is the effect of surroundings and peer pressure on a person's behaviour?
- Should we judge the moral behaviour of ourselves and others in absolute terms or relative to the surroundings we live in?
- For example, do criminals who come from deprived, violent backgrounds deserve more understanding?
- Should talented, good people who come from strong, supportive families receive less credit for their achievements?