

The Waters/Days of Noah: God's Promise To Noah and Israel

Parshat Ki Tetzei

Deuteronomy 21:10 – 25:19/ Isaiah 54:1 - 10



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

The fifth Haftorah of consolation, taken from the second half of Isaiah, contains a series of promises and powerful images which present a poetic vision of redemption and renewal for the Jewish people. Though Israel has been abandoned, she will now reunited with her husband, maker. Her husband (God) can never forsake the wife of His youth. And just as God has promised Noah that He will never flood the earth again, so, too, God promises Israel that He will never become angry or rebuke her again. God's promise is more permanent than the mountains and the hills.

The metaphor of Israel a bride and wife is one that is frequently used throughout the Bible. Hosea sees his wife's infidelity as a symbol of Israel's apostasy. God threatens to divorce Israel just as the prophet threatens to divorce his wife – in the end his love for her (in both cases) is too great. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel use this image as well. And Song of Songs, which we read on during the summer months, is also interpreted by the sages as a metaphor about the love between God and Israel. The image of the Jewish people as a wife expresses both the intimacy as well as the responsibilities implied by our relationship to God.

Isaiah 54:9 -10

For this to me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth so I swore that I will never be angry with you or rebuke you. For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my loyalty shall never move from you, nor my covenant of friendship be shaken – said the Lord, who takes you back in love

There are two versions of the underlined expression above (Both expressions are spelled the same way – except the first is written as two words and the second as one.)

Like the waters of Noah – **ki may**

As the days of Noah – **kiyemay**

Radak – Rabbi David Kimchi

There is a controversy between the manuscripts about this expression. In most manuscripts it is written as two words. *Menachem* explains that this is the waters of the great flood and it refers to the fact that Noah was saved from them. In other manuscripts it is written as one word - *kiyemay* - Targum Jonathan (the Aramaic translation of the Bible) translates this "As the days of Noah." In any event, both interpretations are the same. After the great flood in the time of Noah God swore that He would never cover the earth with water again. Just as he made a promise that he would never again nullify this decree, so too God swore that He would never exile Israel again after His great anger and rebuke. The exile is like the flood. Just as there will be no flood, so there won't be another exile. God made two promises (in Genesis) to Noah: that he would 'not destroy the all flesh with the waters of a flood' and that there would 'not be a flood to destroy all flesh.' Since God made two negative decrees, this counts as a promise. Similarly here God made two statements 'I won't remove my loyalty' and 'my covenant of friendship will not be shaken.' The double statement here, as in Genesis, is a way of making a statement that this promise will be carried out. (Adapted from Radak)

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana Parshat Anochi, 3

“And who is the most merciful among the patriarchs? Rabbi Azariah said in the name of Rabbi Aha: ‘This is our father Abraham.’ You find that before the Holy One blessed be He brought the flood on the Sodomites, our father Abraham said before the Holy One Blessed be He: Master of the universe, You have sworn that You would never gain bring a flood to the world. For it says: *‘These days recall for me the days of Noah, as I swore that the waters of Noah’s flood should never again pour over the earth, so now I swear to you never again to be angry with you or reproach you.’* Assuredly, you are not going to bring a flood of water, but are you going to bring a flood of fire? Are You now going to act evasively against the intent of Your oath? (Adapted by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein)

Michael Fishbane, The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftorot

God is presented here as a faithful bridegroom who is able to overcome betrayal and anger. Two cases of divine commitment emphasize this very point. In the first instance the oath of God to Noah and his descendents provides a model of God’s everlasting stability. Never again will there be anger and destruction (Isaiah 54:9). In the second case natural imagery is used to highlight God’s future steadfastness with Israel. “For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my loyalty shall never move from you, nor my covenant of friendship be shaken.” (Verse 10)

Questions to Ponder

1. Which reading of the underlined words in the verse from Isaiah makes the most sense to you? Is there anything in the context of the verse that leads you to conclude that one interpretation is original and the other an error? What is the difference between them?
2. What is the connection between the Flood in the time of Noah and the exile of the Jewish people after the destruction of the temple?
3. What other parallels does Radak see between the story of Noah and the promise which God makes after the destruction of the Temple?
4. Notice that the passage from Pesikta d’Rav Kahana creates an anachronism – it places the verse from the book of Isaiah in the mouth of Abraham. How does Abraham use this expression? How does Abraham accuse God in his discussion over the fate of the Sodom and Gomorrah? How can we tell from the use of the verse that Abraham was not a literalist in his interpretation of divine revelation? How does Abraham understand the word ‘flood’ – what does Isaiah mean?
5. According the Michael Fishbane, Isaiah uses two images to show God’s commitment to the people of Israel and his desire not to destroy them or punish them again. What are they? How are they different from one another?
6. What does Isaiah mean when he speaks about God’s loyalty and His covenant of friendship? Is the prophet suggesting that the people are no longer accountable for their actions any more?

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