

No·ah 5772

Genesis 6:9–11:32

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A Sabbath Song for Parashat No·ah

It is a lovely Jewish practice to sing songs at the Shabbat table. The little booklets that contain grace also provide the words of many *zemirot*, Sabbath songs. If we look at two of the more popular ones, *Yah Ribbon* and *Mah Yedidot Menuhatekh*, we find that their common theme is a plea to observe the Sabbath in the present, and a hope for a future in which God redeems the People Israel. But there is one song that differs from all the rest. It makes reference to this week's Parashat No·ah. The name of the song is "The Dove Found a Place to Rest on the Sabbath (*Yonah Maz'ah Bo Manoah*)."

Before reading it closely, we need to be conversant with several details of Parashat No·ah (Gen. 6:9–11). When the flood waters recede and Noah's ark comes to rest at Ararat, he sends out a dove to find dry land. It returns to him because it did not find a place to rest its foot, *v'lo maz'ah hayonah manoah lekha raglah* (Gen. 8:9). When Noah sends the dove out a second time, it comes back with an olive branch in its mouth. The third time it does not return at all, presumably because it found a place to rest. Noah and his family then leave the ark. Noah thanks God with animal offerings. God makes a covenant with Noah—if he, Noah, will not shed blood, then God will not shed blood, i.e., God will never again bring a flood to destroy humanity (Gen. 9:1–17).

We can now turn to the Sabbath song, "The Dove Found a Place to Rest on the Sabbath," written by Yehudah Halevi, the great Spanish poet of the 12th century. It has five stanzas. The first stresses, as do most Shabbat *zemirot*, meticulous observance of the Sabbath. The stanza also makes an explicit reference to the Noah story by saying that the dove *did* find a resting place and that it happened on the Sabbath. The author is thus "improving" on the Bible. This Sabbath event is an instance of poetic license, because neither the Torah nor the rabbinic midrashim make such a claim. Since the song is in praise of the Sabbath, the innovative point of the dove's Sabbath rest makes good sense. It is also true that in medieval Jewish poetry, the dove often symbolizes the Jewish people, who are enjoined to rest on the Sabbath.

The second stanza mentions the Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments, given by God, the All-Powerful One, *amitz ko'ah* (which rhymes with Noah). The third stanza, the middle one of the five, talks about *brit*, the covenant at Sinai between God and the Jewish people. The Torah relates that, even before hearing the terms of the covenant, the people said they will obey them. The concept of *brit* is central to Judaism. If we love God and keep God's mitzvot, then God will bring rain, we will eat and be satisfied, and we will remain on the good land to which God has brought us. If we do not keep the mitzvot, we will suffer. The fourth

stanza repeats the themes of the second one, that God spoke to the people at Mount Moriah and told them to keep the Sabbath. We thus see that the covenant of the third stanza is flanked before and after by stanzas that speak of the Sabbath.

The last stanza says that the Jewish people will remind God of another covenant that He made with all people on the face of the earth. It is not the one at Sinai, but the one with Noah, already mentioned in the first stanza. In this first covenant, God promised never to flood the earth again. Note that this early covenant has nothing to do with the Sabbath and is not limited to the Jewish people. To make his lofty point, the poet incorporates language from Isaiah 54:9—*kee mei Noah zot li asher nishba'ti mei'avor mei Noah od al ha'aretz*—which means that God promised never to bring the waters of Noah again to cover the world. No other Sabbath song ends on this high note.

So this song is distinctive: it begins with a reference to Noah, which no other song does, moves on to talk about Jews, the Sabbath, and the covenant at Sinai, which most other songs do mention, but then ends where it began, with a reference to the very first covenant: in exchange for an end to bloodshed, God will not destroy the world again. This is a grand message to communicate on this Sabbath or at any other time. Did Yehudah Halevi write this song to be sung on the Sabbath of Parashat No-ah? It is possible. But we do not know the poet's intent. What we do know is that we sing this song today to many different melodies; that we rarely pay attention to what the words mean; but that, if we did, we would see that this song soars over all the others in that it speaks of a bright future for all of humanity.

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