



# Parshat Noach: Differences Matter

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Two phenomena in this week's *parasha* reinforce scholars' contention that the Bible was an evolving, growing collection of sacred texts that clearly resonated with an ancient audience. Using traditional and modern commentaries our ancient texts speak to *us* as well.

The first issue which draws our attention is the confusion regarding the number of animals which must be brought onto the ark.

**Traditional commentaries** point out that the instruction to bring "2 of each" is to ensure the propagation of the species post-Flood while "7 of each" is to allow for future ritual sacrifices.

**A modern, literary-historical explanation** understands the "contradiction" as evidence of two versions of the same story, from different centuries. The "2 of each" reflects a version from a time when animal sacrifice was not as ritualized and regulated as it was to later become in Leviticus, while the "7 of each" version assumes the later pattern of regular animal sacrifice, hence the need for more animals.

The second issue stems from the fact that our story contains some of the same key elements found in Mesopotamian flood myths current at that time, including problematic humans, a dove, animals and an ark. Was our story based on Mesopotamian myths? Was it original?

**The Traditional approach** fiercely maintains that there are no contradictions or "problems" with our texts. After all, if the Torah is from God, how can there be mistakes?! Furthermore, they would argue, the fact that other cultures had flood stories has nothing to do with the Hebrew Bible.

**The "modern" approach** seeks to understand how and why a sacred text might contain contradictions, and how literary elements from nearby cultures could creep into a Jewish text.

Discussions concerning divine revelation, Biblical authorship and the editing and evolution of sacred texts rarely end in compromise. Instead of seeking to prove one view at the expense of the other, why not use both?

The status of animal sacrifice clearly evolved among the Jewish People from the simple, spontaneous offerings in Genesis to a complex system in Leviticus to the elaborate service in the

Temples in Jerusalem. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, Maimonides wrote that humans were theologically moving beyond sacrifice. If we look past the details in the “2 versus 7” debate we can see an important message: the world changes; so does the nature of our “ritual” relationship to God. Human civilization can grow and improve, and God even encourages that growth by giving the people a second chance to re-create human society.

In a similar vein, the debate over the “origin” of the Flood story is interesting but one should not lose sight of the main point. What’s important here aren’t the similarities between the two stories, but the *differences*. The same is true concerning parallel “creation” stories from that time. The more we can establish that ancient Israelites were aware of the ideas surrounding them, the more we can appreciate how the Torah’s version stood out for that ancient audience. Whereas Mesopotamian myths emphasized that people were a bother to capricious gods who created the world through violence, the Torah insists that humans are the crown of an orderly, peaceful creation that God called “good.” This approach preserves the integrity of the text while appreciating the cultural context in which the text is embedded.

Whether one views the Torah as one “original” document or an evolving compilation of sacred texts, the key is to understand the message: the world and our existence are both gifts from God.

#### **AS A FAMILY:**

- Begin to set aside money to be used to dedicate a part of Schechter’s new Sefer Torah.
- Discuss the following questions about the Torah. (Try to take both the traditional approach and the modern approach.)
  1. Why do we love the Torah?
  2. Why do we study the Torah?
  3. If you could add something to the Torah what would it be?
  4. What’s the best story in the Torah?

#### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION ABOUT THIS WEEK’S PARSHA, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why was God angry with the people?
2. Why a flood? Why not some other punishment?
3. Why did God save Noah? Why not someone else?
4. What makes someone a Tzadik?
5. Why is the dove the symbol of peace?
6. Why did God stop the people from building the Tower of Babel?
7. What does Babel mean?