



## Where Was God? - Learning about Natural Disasters from Parashat Noah

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This program is intended for students aged 8-12.

This program should take 1-1.5 hours.

**Goals:** During disasters and their aftermaths, many people wonder about God's role in their suffering. This program seeks to explore God's role in tragedy from Jewish Reconstructionist perspectives. In the Noah story, God is described as holding many roles for the people (and animals) involved: griever, teacher, chooser, saver, punisher, destroyer among others. Students will have an opportunity to think about God in these many roles. As Reconstructionist Jews, we focus on God as present in our human responses to tragedy: feeling sorrow and reaching out to help those most affected by disasters through *tzeddakah* and *tikkun olam*. "When we can assist those in need or comfort those in pain, God is working through us. When we cannot, it may be said that we experience God's presence in our sorrow" ([Exploring Judaism](#), Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, page 30).

### Materials:

- Small plastic tubes used by florists to keep roses hydrated (the stems are set into the tubes, which are filled with water) with rubber tops removed and liquid drained, one per student
- 1/2 " copper coated clip (they are sold at Home Depot in packs of ten in the plumbing section), one per student
- very thin copper wire to decorate the mezuzahs, cut into lengths of 2-3 feet per student
- colored beads to string on the copper wire (the more variety the better), small ribbons for decorating
- printed copy of the Shemah OR small *klaff* (kosher mezuzah scroll), small enough to fit inside the plastic floral tubes when rolled up, one per student
- markers and paper for cards
- *yartzeit* candle, matches

### Part One: God's role in the Noah Story

For older students: Break them into *hevrutah* (study partners) and have them look at Genesis 6:5-9:17. Instruct them to read the text aloud together and to write down every role that God plays in the story (encourage them to be expansive – i.e. "God as boat engineer"). For example, in Genesis 6:5, God is both an "observer" and "one who regrets." When you sense that the students are finishing up, call the group back together and compare lists.

For younger students: Slowly read the below condensed story of Noah. As you read, encourage the students to interrupt you to call out each role that God plays in the story. Once a student has called out a role, he should use his body to demonstrate that role. For example, if a student notes that God is an observer, she can make her hands into binoculars and peer through them. The

student remains frozen in that role until he notes a new role in the story for God and moves his body to demonstrate that role. At the end of the story, have the students look around at the many roles God plays in the story.

(Make sure students listen or read carefully: I found, among others, God as griever, God as teacher, God as chooser, God as saver, God as punisher, God as destroyer, God as one who regrets ...)

For both younger and older students: Looking at your lists (older students) or around the room at your peers (younger students):

- Can you summarize the roles God plays in the Biblical story?
- Can God, like us, play many roles or is one role God's true role?
- Which of these roles are similar to the ways you currently think or used to think about God?
- Are there ways you think about God that are missing in the story?

### **The Condensed Story of Noah:**

God saw how wicked people were and how they were always plotting evil, and God regretted that God had made people on earth, and God's heart was saddened. God said, "I will erase from the earth the people whom I created – people together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them." But Noah found favor with God. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. When God saw how corrupt the earth was, God said to Noah, "I have decided to end animals because the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark; make it with gopher wood with compartments and cover it inside and outside with pitch (to make it waterproof). You should make it three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. I am about to bring the Flood to destroy all animals under the sky; everything on earth will die. But I will make a covenant with you, and you should go into the ark with your sons, your wife and your sons' wives. And of all the animals, you should take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you."

Noah did just as God had commanded him. Noah and his family went into the ark. All the fountains of the great deep burst apart, and the floodgates of the sky broke open. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. The water swelled, and the ark drifted on the waters, and the water covered all the highest mountains everywhere, and all the animals that lived on the earth died – people, cattle, creeping things and birds of the sky. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

God spoke to Noah, saying, "Come out of the ark, together with your family. Bring out all the animals that are with you and let them swarm the earth." So Noah came out together with his family. Then Noah built an altar to God and offered burnt offerings on the altar. God smelled the pleasing odor and said to Godself, "Never again will I doom the earth because of people, since the people's hearts are evil from their youth, and never again will I destroy every living being as I have done. For all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will not stop." Then God said to Noah, "I now establish my covenant with you and your children to come and with every living thing that is with you – birds, cattle and every wild beast as well. Never again will all animals be cut off by the waters of a flood and never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. God set a rainbow in the clouds and said, "This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you. When I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and You and every animal."

## **Part Two: God in our Suffering**

Before the flood, God told Noah, "Go into the ark with all your household." Finally, one year after the flood had begun, Noah removed the covering of the ark and saw that the earth was dry, and God told Noah, "Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons and your sons' wives." In Genesis Rabbah (*midrash* from the rabbinic period), the rabbis wondered why God had to tell Noah to come out of the ark, since he saw for himself that the land was dry.

**Bibliodramatic Exercise:** Have the students take turns being Noah, explaining why Noah doesn't come out of the ark on his own, once he sees that the ground is dry. It might be fun to have one student be God, telling Noah to come out, while Noah hides partially behind (the ark's) door and explains why he doesn't want to. Alternatively you can have Noah explain to his wife why he doesn't think they should come out yet, even though the ground appears to be dry.

(Encourage students to use the first person voice when they are playing any of the characters: "I don't want to come out because..." Students do not have to be male to play Noah or female to play to Noah's wife.)

**Discussion:** The authors of Genesis Rabbah thought that Noah was too afraid or sad to leave the ark until God promised that God would not bring another flood. (They also thought that Noah didn't want to give up his position of being in charge of all the animals in the world) (Genesis Rabbah 34:6). The students also probably will suggest that Noah was too afraid or too sad to come out of the ark during their bibliodramatic exercise. Similarly, our Torah text says that God's heart was saddened when God saw the problems on earth. In Genesis Rabbah, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi suggests that God mourned for God's earth for seven days before God destroyed the world with the Flood (Genesis Rabbah 27:4).

Give students an opportunity to share if they have ever personally experienced a natural disaster or other trauma. If students want to, allow them to talk about how hearing about Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan and other disasters made them feel.

### **Discussion Conclusion:**

- Why does Noah eventually leave the ark?
- What are some ways we can "come out of the ark" and keep living, despite our fears and our sadness? Talk about it with friends and family, draw about it, pray ...

## **Part Three: God Working Through Us**



We have an opportunity to make *mezuzah* holders to send to Jewish families affected by Katrina. A *mezuzah* helps to create a Jewish home. Many families have been moved into temporary housing or they are beginning to rebuild their houses. This is our way of helping them to feel at home again. Pass out to each child one plastic floral tube and one copper clip. Also give each student 2-3 feet of thin copper wire.

The students then anchor the wire by wrapping it very tightly around the bottom of the tube about ten times (younger students may need a little help with this). They can then use the wire to decorate the tubes by stringing beads on the wires and wrapping the wires around the tubes. They can also tie ribbons with beads onto the tubes and the copper clips.

They should anchor the wire at the top of the tube by wrapping the wire tightly again several times and then clamping on the copper clip overtop. The copper clips snap snugly onto the tops of the tubes (as long as there are no beads between the tube and the clip). They serve both to anchor the wires at the top and also to provide two holes for families to use screws to mount their *mezuzot* on their doorposts. After the *mezuzah* holder has been completed, pass out a *klaff* or a copy of the Shema text and have students roll them and insert them into the holders (make sure to check ahead of time that they are small enough to fit inside). Students can also create cards to send along with their *mezuzot*.

### **Conclusion:**

At the beginning of the program, we talked about what roles the authors of the Noah story ascribed to God. What roles do you think God plays in the tragedies in our time, like Hurricane Katrina?

Reconstructionist Jews believe that God acts through us, inspiring us to be the best people we can be. What are some examples of people acting in a holy way during or after Katrina? How can we continue to act in a holy way?

We are going to light a *yartzeit* candle, a candle Jews light to remember people who have died. We will use it to remember people who lost their lives in Katrina. We can also use the light of the candle to remind us about the spark of God inside each of us, which inspires us to continue to act in holy ways, helping each other through tragedy.

Light candle, take a few moments of silence, and sing “Col HaOlam Culo, Gesher Tzar Meod/The whole world is a very narrow bridge” or “Eli Eli” or another appropriate song that the students know.

\* Thank you to Rabbi Linda Holtzman and Rabbi Fredi Cooper for their guidance. Thank you to Nancy Wilson for inventing the *mezuzah* project idea.