

**Parashah:** Noah  
**Read On:** November 2, 2024 | 1 Cheshvan 5785  
**Torah:** Genesis 6:9–11:32; Numbers 28:9–15  
**Triennial:** Genesis 11:1–32; Numbers 28:9–15  
**Haftarah:** Isaiah 66:1–24

## Home Again

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

### *Dvar Parashah*

There's a tension in the Tanakh reflected in each of us - the desire to explore and the desire to settle down. We find it in the ebbs and flows of exile and kingdom. It appears also in the professions of our ancestors, the shepherds and the farmers. The tension is preserved even in the division of the Tribes of Israel - each with its own tribal allotment of land except for the wandering Levites.

It's a tension carried forward into the favorite poems of my grandparents as well. My grandfather would recite Robert Service's *The Men that Don't Fit In*, referring, in his mind, at some level to the Jews. We'd hear:

"There's a race of men that don't fit in,  
A race that can't stay still;  
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,  
And they roam the world at will."

The poem echoing from my grandmother is that of kingdom, that of being settled in a home of our own: Henry Van Dyke's *America For Me*. We hear:

"So it's home again, and home again, America for me!  
My heart is turning home again, and there I long to be,  
In the land of youth and freedom beyond the ocean bars,  
Where the air is full of sunlight and the flag is full of stars!"

The wandering and the returning, the journey and the destination. But nowhere is this tension more prevalent than in our parashah, in which first Noah and then humanity manage to wander and be home all at once. Since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden, wandering has been our lifeblood. Cain's curse was to be a restless wanderer on the earth. And for generations, that is what we did, until Noah came and lifted the curse. Noah would not be a restless wanderer on the face of the earth. The earth itself disappeared. And Noah sheltered in place, stayed at home, in the ark above the earth until the waters stopped their wandering and the earth again appeared. Noah went nowhere in his grand journey. But the world moved under him. He was exile and kingdom all at once.

A similar story is true for the builders of the Tower of Babel. We started out wandering (although who exactly we are is never named!) We know only that we were journeying from the East when we settled in a valley in Shinar. It would seem that should be the conclusion of the story. We were wanderers, then we became settled people. But the very idea of a valley contains wandering within it. A valley is a בקעה, something that has been broken, split, cleaved. It is a separation through which water can flow in a perpetual journey. The same root showed up just a few chapters earlier to describe the start of the flood, as the springs of Tehom נבקעו, starting the flood. We settle in a flood zone. It's great for agriculture, but a little dangerous as a place for building permanent monuments. And so we keep wandering. But we wander up. Settled, we reach for the sky. We break the pattern of migration to the East in order to migrate upwards. We are trying to do the same as Noah had done, to elevate ourselves from upon the earth. We are trying to wander without going anywhere. We try to see the world from the comfort of our couch.

But God won't have it. This parashah, this striving for an equilibrium in which we are released from a cycle of exile and return, ends with exile and the promise *or threat* of return. We are scattered upon the face of the earth. We are made to wander, to settle, and to wander again. We are a race of men who don't fit in, whose hearts are turning home again and there we long to be.

**The Torah's First Glimpse of the Promised Land**

Jonathan Lipnick

*Exploring the Parashah*



*\*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.*

## Procreation and Intimacy on the Ark

Rabbi Joshua Kulp

*Midrash and the Parashah*

### בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשת נח פרשה לא

וּבָאתְךָ אֶל־הַתֵּבָה אַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וְנָשֵׁי־בְנֵיךָ אִתְּךָ: (בראשית ו:יח)

ר' יהודה בר' סימון ור' חנן בשם ר' שמואל בר רב יצחק נח כיון שניכנס בתיבה נאסר לו פריה ורביה ה"ה ובאת אל התיבה אתה ובניך לעצמך ואשתך ונשי בניך לעצמן, כיון שיצא התיר לו ה"ה צא מן התיבה אתה ואשתך וגו' אמר ר' מונא כת' וליוסף יולד שני בנים (בראשית מא נ) אימתי בטרם תבוא שנת הרעב (שם שם /בראשית מ"א/).

### Genesis Rabbah 58:31

"And you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives" (Genesis 6:18).

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon and Rabbi Hanan, in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak said: When Noah entered the ark, he was forbidden from procreation. Thus, it is written, "Go into the ark, you and your sons" **by yourselves**, "and your wife and your sons' wives" **by themselves** (Genesis 6:18).. But when he left the ark, this restriction was lifted, as it is written, "Come out of the ark, **together** with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives" (Genesis 8:16)...

Rabbi Muna said: It is written, "And to Joseph were born two sons" (Genesis 41:50). When? "Before the year of famine came" (ibid.), [indicating that he fathered children only before the hardship arrived.]

As is often the case with midrash, the rabbis pick up on a genuine curiosity in the biblical text, one that a careful reader should notice, and then go on to imbue this curiosity with meaning. Small nuances in biblical texts are not just "the way people speak" but rather encode hints that a sensitive reader must pick up on.

The nuance on which the rabbis focus is that when Noah is instructed to go into the Ark, the verse seems to separate between the men and the women. Noah goes into the ark with his sons, and Noah's wives go in with her sons' wives. The hint is that during their time on the Ark, intimacy between partners and with it, procreation, must cease. However, when they emerge from the Ark, Noah and his wife are told to leave together, as are his sons and their wives. The hint is that intimacy and procreation must be restored. R. Muna reads the same message in a verse describing the birth of Joseph's sons in Egypt—they were born before the famine. During the famine, Joseph separated from his wife.

The message here is clear—during times of great destruction, of worldwide cataclysm and famine, procreation and intimacy must be suspended. I can imagine two main reasons for this, one connected to the pleasures of sexual relationships and the other to procreation. Is it appropriate for people to be engaging in such pleasurable experiences while outside the ark and all throughout Egypt people, mass numbers of people (basically everyone, in the case of the flood) are dying? The second issue is related to procreation—should we bring children into

a world of mass destruction and famine? What is the point of bringing forth children just for them to suffer and die before their time?

But I think it's also important to note the temporary nature of these suspensions: in both cases, the verse and the midrash emphasize that procreation and sexual relations were only temporarily ceased. Upon leaving the ark, Noah and his wife and his sons and their wives leave together to resume their prior relationships. Of course, had they not, we would not be here. Joseph does not have children during the famine, but he does so beforehand, even though he knows what is coming.

It's difficult these days to think about much else besides the tragedies that have met the Jewish people in Israel over the past year. 1200 people massacred on October 7, 101 hostages still in captivity, and an enormous number of soldiers killed and wounded, a number that continues to grow seemingly every day. I do not know any Israeli who has not asked themselves how they can continue to marry (or among my friends, celebrate their children's weddings), have children (or among my friends, celebrate the birth of grandchildren) and live normal lives under such circumstances. But I also don't really know anyone who has canceled a wedding (some have been postponed but as far as I know, they have all happened). Indeed, a few months ago I attended the wedding of a close friend's son the night before the funeral of another friend's son. Those were a tortuous few days.

I think the difference between us and these biblical figures is that we, unlike them, do not know what the future brings. Noah and his family knew that after the flood, renewal would come. Joseph knew that the famine would last seven years. They could temporarily put off normal life, intimacy and procreation, knowing that the destruction and famine would end. We do not live with such knowledge. A temporary suspension is not possible when one does not know when, or even if, the pain and suffering will end.

But there are no easy answers here, and we are left with the tension in its terrible fullness. How do we go home and live lives of pleasure with our loved ones when so many people, people that we know and love, are suffering and dying? How do we bring children into a world in which we fear that 18 years later they will be sent off to war? And on the other hand, how can we not?