Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Noach

What's Olive Got to Do with It?

One of the most enduring symbols to emerge from this week's portion, Noach, is the olive branch. After forty days of rain and an even longer wait for the waters to recede, Noach decides that it is time to determine whether the earth is habitable once again:

בראשית ח:ו-יב	**Genesis 8:6-12**
6. וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וַיִּפְתַּח נֹחַ אֶת־חַלּוֹן הַתֵּבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: 7. וַיְשַׁלַּח אֶת־הָעֹרֵב וַיֵּצֵא יָצוֹא וָשׁוֹב עַד־יְבֹשֶׁת הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ: 8. וַיְשַׁלַּח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה מֵאִתּוֹ לִרְאוֹת הֲקַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: 9. וְלֹא־מָצְאָה הַיּוֹנָה מָנוֹחַ לְכַף־רַגְלָהּ וַתָּשָׁב אֵלָיו אֶל־הַתֵּבָה כִּי־מַיִם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיִּקָּחֶהָ וַיָּבֵא אֹתָהּ אֵלָיו אֶל־הַתֵּבָה: 10. וַיָּחֶל עוֹד שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אֲחֵרִים וַיֹּסֶף שַׁלַּח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה מִן־הַתֵּבָה: 11. וַתָּבֹא אֵלָיו הַיּוֹנָה לְעֵת עֶרֶב וְהִנֵּה עֲלֵה־זַיִת טָרָף בְּפִיהָ וַיֵּדַע נֹחַ כִּי־קַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ: 12. וַיִּיָּחֶל עוֹד שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אֲחֵרִים וַיְשַׁלַּח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה וְלֹא־יָסְפָה שׁוּב־אֵלָיו עוֹד: 12 וַיִּיָּחֶל עוֹד שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אֲחֵרִים וַיְשַׁלַּח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה וְלֹא־יָסְפָה שׁוּב־אֵלָיו עוֹד:	At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove to see whether the waters had decreased from the surface of the ground. But the dove could not find a resting place for its foot, and returned to him to the ark, for there was water over all the earth. So putting out his hand, he took it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth. He waited yet another seven days and sent out the dove; it did not return to him again.

- **After the dove returned with an olive leaf, Noah already had evidence that the waters had receded. Why do you think he waited another seven days before sending it out again?**
- **Based on these verses, what do you think the olive branch symbolizes?**

In the modern imagination, the olive branch (along with the dove which carries it) is seen as a symbol of peace. However, traditional Jewish sources tend to use the olive branch to teach different messages. One example of this can be found in the Talmud:

סנהדרין קח:	**Sanhedrin 108b**
"וְהִנֵּה עֲלֵה זַיִת טָרָף בְּפִיהָ". אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: אָמְרָה יוֹנָה לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, יְהִי	With regard to the verse: "And in her mouth was an olive branch plucked off

מְזוֹנוֹתַי מְרוֹרִים כְּזַיִת וּמְסוּרִים בְּיָדְךָ, וְאַל יִהְיוּ מְתוּקִים כִּדְבַשׁ וּמְסוּרִים בְּיַד בָּשָׂר וָדָם	[*taraf*]" (Genesis 8:11), Rabbi Elazar says: The dove said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, may my sustenance be bitter as the olive and dependent on Your hands, and not sweet as honey and dependent on the hands of flesh and blood.

- **How does Rabbi Elazar's decision to personify the dove deepen your understanding of the story?**
- **Do you relate to the dove's preference to depend on God rather than on other people, even at a cost? Can you think of an experience that has shaped your perspective on this question?**

Yet another interpretation of the olive branch can be found in the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent nineteenth-century German rabbi, scholar, and communal leader. Originally written in German, his Torah commentary combines classical and innovative approaches, allowing him to uncover new meanings in the biblical text.

Rabbi Hirsch on Genesis 8:11

Towards evening: so it had remained outside the whole day, indicating that a considerable change had already occurred. *Taraf* is not a verb but a noun, like *teref*—food seized by oneself—and the word is chosen here with the utmost significance. What an animal in a state of freedom takes independently for food is called *teref*. Thus, *teref natan lire'av*—"He gives *teref* to those who fear Him." That which others obtain only by "snatching," the *yere'im*, those who fear God, receive from the hand of God. For a whole year, the dove had been fed but had not enjoyed *teref*—food gained independently through its own efforts. That it had remained outside the whole day was already a sign that *kalu hamayim*, the waters had receded; it had already found *mano'ach*, rest, for its foot. But hunger could still have driven it back. Then it arrived with an olive leaf in its mouth as food—something it would not ordinarily eat! Our Sages use this bitter olive leaf in the dove's mouth to teach a profound truth: bitter, unusual, normally intolerable food, eaten in freedom and independence, is sweeter than the sweetest food eaten in a state of dependence. For us, then, the olive leaf is not a symbol of peace but of the value of independence and freedom—and of contentment and moderation.

- **What might Rav Hirsch be teaching us through his explicit rejection of the olive branch as a symbol of peace?**
- **Both this source and the previous one use the olive branch to explore the costs of dependence, but they approach the subject from different angles.**

What is the key difference between them, and which interpretation resonates more with you?

In addition to the differing interpretations of the olive branch's symbolism, there is also debate over where the dove found the leaf. Nachmanides, a leading medieval Torah scholar who wrote commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, offers one possible explanation:

רמב"ן, פירוש על התורה, בראשית ח:יא וְהִנֵּה עֲלֵה זַיִת טָרָף בְּפִיהָ... רַבִּי בֶּירֵיי אָמַר נִפְתְּחוּ לָהּ שַׁעֲרֵי גַּן עֵדֶן וְהֵבִיאָה אוֹתוֹ... וַאֲנִי תְּמֵהַּ עַל מַאֲמָרָם "מִגַּן עֵדֶן", אִם כֵּן לֹא יָדַע נֹחַ שֶׁקָּלוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ, כִּי שָׁם לֹא נִכְנְסוּ מֵי הַמַּבּוּל. וְאוּלַי הָיוּ שְׁעָרָיו סְגוּרִים שֶׁלֹּא יִכָּנְסוּ שָׁם הַמַּיִם, וְכַאֲשֶׁר קָלוּ הַמַּיִם נִפְתְּחוּ.	**Nachmanides on Genesis, 8:11** And lo an olive leaf… Rabbi Biryei said, "The gates of the garden of Eden were opened for the dove and from there she brought the leaf."... But I wonder about their saying that [the olive leaf was brought by the dove] from the garden of Eden. If it were so, then Noah did not know that *the waters abated from off the earth* for there [in Eden] the waters of the flood did not enter. But perhaps its gates were closed so that the waters did not enter there, but when the waters abated they were opened. [Thus the olive leaf indicated the opening of the gates which in turn indicated that the waters had abated.]

- **How does the additional detail that the olive branch came from Gan Eden deepen or change what it might symbolize?**
- **In this interpretation, Gan Eden remains untouched while the rest of the world is destroyed. What is one part of your life that you can count on to remain stable, regardless of what else you may be going through?**

Moving forward in time, we find another possible explanation for the olive branch's origin in the writings of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Rabbi Schneerson, widely known as "the Rebbe," was the last Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch and a pioneer of Jewish outreach who transformed Chabad into a major force in Jewish life worldwide.

ליקוטי שיחות חלק י, פרשת נח ג למה הביאה עלה זית דווקא ולא של אילן אחר?... בכמה מקומות בדברי חז"ל מבואר שהזית הוא אילן חזק ביותר... ולכן מקום לומר ע"ד הפשט, דאף שהיה מבול חזק וכו' מכל מקום מכל אילני זית שבעולם, נשארו עכ"פ אחדים מהם.	***Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 10, Parshat Noach 3** Why did [the dove] bring specifically an olive leaf and not a leaf from another tree?... In several places in the words of the Sages it is explained that the olive tree is an exceptionally strong tree… Therefore there is reason to say, according to the plain meaning of the text, that even

	though the flood was powerful etc., nonetheless from all the olive trees in the world, at least some of them remained.

- **Why do you think the Rebbe emphasizes that "of all the olive trees in the world, at least some of them remained"? What does this detail add to his explanation?**
- **If the olive tree survived the Flood rather than escaped it, how might that change what it symbolizes?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Why might peace have become the olive branch's most popular symbolic meaning, even though it is not mentioned in the traditional sources we have studied?
2. Of all the symbolic meanings for the olive branch proposed on this sheet, which resonates most with you, and why?
3. Verse 7 in the first source includes an often-overlooked detail: before sending out the dove, Noach sent out a raven. Based on the text, do you think the raven did something wrong, or was the earth simply not yet dry enough?
4. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Noach, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Noach page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Noach topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Olives, Doves, and the Flood.

Although this source sheet has not focused on the olive branch as a symbol of peace, traditional Jewish sources definitely see peace as an incredibly important value. You can find many of these collected on Sefaria's Peace topic page.

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