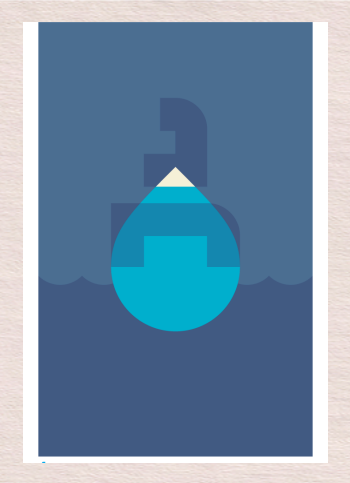
Noach: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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The world is ravaged by violence and corruption, so God tells Noah, the only righteous man around, to build a large wooden ark, collect two members of each animal species, and prepare for the deluge. After 40 days and nights of rain, and another full year of waiting for the ground to dry, Noah is finally permitted to leave his vessel and begin the task of repopulating the earth. **God sends Noah a rainbow** as a testimony of His covenant with mankind, **promising never again to wipe out all of humanity**. He also gives Noah **a series of commandments** pertaining to everything from the sanctity of human life to cruelty to animals.

But the story takes a darker turn when Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk. Two of his sons, Shem and Japheth, cover up Noah's nakedness and are blessed; the third, Ham, does not and is cursed. Still, Noah's offspring all speak the same language for ten generations, until they defy God by **building a very tall tower as a symbol of their greatness**. God confuses their language, disperses them across the world, and splits them into seventy different nations. The parsha ends with an account of Noah's ancestors, counting down ten generations all the way to Abraham.

> "Make for yourself an ark of cedar wood."

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha is *The Godfather Part II* to last week's stunning debut, a sequel that somehow manages to transcend even the great and action-packed original. And at its core is one haunting question: **What was so wrong with the world that God, having just completed His creation, felt He needed to start anew?**

Humanity's evils, the parsha tells us, come down to one bone-chilling word, a word that us contemporaries, alas, have come to know all too well: ***Hamas***.

It's not just the name of a murderous terrorist organization. It is also, the wise rabbis of the Talmud explain, **an ancient Hebrew word for all that is rotten and corrupt about humanity, from injustice to bloodshed**. To wipe the slate clean, God gives Noah the famous commandment: **"Make for yourself an ark."**

But God was not only commanding Noah, explains the 20th Century Hassidic master Rav Shalom Noach Barazovsky. He was talking to each and every single one of us: "This parsha," Barazovsky wrote, "belongs to all generations: **Even when the storm rages all around us, and everything seems grim, there's an Ark right there to save us**. When we feel down and lowly, the words of the parsha ring true—'Make for yourself an Ark.'"

That's a lovely and inspiring idea—**in every generation, it is up to us to build the vessels that save us all from doom**. Amen, Selah! And yet us brazen moderns may be forgiven for asking why an Ark was necessary. Isn't a very large boat made out of gopher wood a bit, you know, dramatic? Rashi, the ultimate commentator, explains: Noah, he writes, was commanded to build such a large vessel "in order that the people of the Generation of the Flood should see him occupying himself with it for one hundred twenty years and ask him, "For what do you need this?" And he would say to them, "The Holy One, blessed be He, is destined to bring a flood upon the world. Perhaps they would repent."

The Ark, in other words, was one-part civilizational life raft, one-part ad designed to convince all of Noah's friends and neighbors that they, too, better check themselves before they wreck themselves.

Which, no surprises there, led the medieval rabbi Moses ben Nachman, better known as Nachmanides, to ask another, rather obvious question: If the point was to convince people to repent, why did the Ark need to be so big? After all, he explained, it's obvious that no human construct could have actually been big enough to contain two of each species of animal plus food for a year; God must've intervened and performed some miracle. So why not make the Ark tiny? Wouldn't it have been cooler had God made it clear that this ship was magic, much larger on the inside than the outside suggests?

"It was made large, though by means of a divine miracle," Nachmanides explains, "because such is the way with all of the miracles in the Torah or in the books of the prophets—**man must do what he must, and the rest is up to heaven."**

In other words, a small Ark would have been a major miracle, sending the message that when disaster loomed, all we had to do was sit tight and wait for God's mercy to manifest in some otherworldly, mind-blowing way. The lesson of this week's parsha is just the opposite: **In every generation, it is up to us to save ourselves**, and only if we do our best, work hard, build the biggest and best construct we can imagine, and urge everyone else to join in on the life-saving work can we be sure that **God will join in and do the rest.**

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