SOUL OF TORAH נשמת התורה

A Chassidic Take On The Parsha

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Did It Really Happen? What Makes Torah Torat Emet

Parshat Noach tells the story of a world destroyed by a flood and a family entrusted with preserving life. Noach builds the *teivah*, brings his family and the animals inside, and waits for the waters to recede. When they emerge, they must begin again.

Alongside the story comes a familiar question: did it really happen? For many readers, this question reaches beyond the *Mabul*. What does believing a Torah narrative require of us? Must we affirm that its events occurred exactly as described? And if we struggle to do so, what does that mean for our faith? These questions can be painful when our attachment to Torah runs deeper than our ability to resolve our doubts.

A conversation I once overheard in *shul* offered an intriguing answer. I have changed the names and reconstructed the exchange.

> "Do you think the Mabul really happened?" Eitan asked.
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> "Absolutely," Shulamit replied.
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> "Really? Where?"
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> "In the Torah."
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> "What does that mean?"
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> "It means that the story is true. It teaches us something about God and how we should live. Whether it also describes an event that happened somewhere in the world is a different question."

Eitan was unconvinced. I kept thinking about her answer.

Shulamit was distinguishing between historical truth and religious truth. Historical truth asks whether an event occurred as described. Religious truth asks what the Torah reveals through its telling. She was affirming the latter without deciding the former. "It happened in the Torah" was, for her, a substantial affirmation of faith.

That answer can be startling. We generally assume that calling a story true means affirming that its events occurred. Shulamit was locating its religious truth in the divine teaching the story carries.

My Father, z"l

This past Monday was my father's *yahrzeit*. He lived the *Chassidut* I have spent years trying to understand. Watching him drew me to its teachings, even though he himself had little interest in studying them.

My father was a deeply spiritual *Chassid*, with little interest in explaining *Chassidut* intellectually. He experienced it. God's presence was palpable to him, including in those around him. His *Chassidut* gave his affection a spiritual depth: caring for another person was part of living close to God. He adored my mother, cherished his children, and cared deeply about

others, Jews and non-Jews alike. As his child, I experienced something of his spiritual world through the tenderness with which he treated us. I miss that tenderness, and I miss him.

He never articulated this theology. But his way of being religious drew me toward Chassidic thought, where I found language for something I had first known through him.

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One strand of that thought helps me take Shulamit's answer seriously. At its heart is the desire to draw close to God. *Chassidut* asks how learning Torah, observing *mitzvot*, and going about our daily lives can deepen that closeness. God's presence fills the world; being religious means becoming attentive to that presence and letting it shape how we live.

Torah belongs at the center of this work. The Torah is not a book of history. It is *Torat Hashem*: divine teaching that guides us in living as Jews and drawing close to God. Its stories serve that purpose. Their religious truth lies in what God teaches through them; the historical questions are beside the point.

We therefore study the stories' details carefully. Through the characters' choices, struggles, and encounters with God, the Torah teaches us how to live before Him. Reading becomes a way of confronting what that teaching demands of us and what we must change in ourselves.

Consider revelation. The giving of Torah continues beyond Sinai: God continues to speak through Torah, and through learning we receive His teaching. Chazal's interpretations participate in that ongoing revelation. The central religious concern is our receiving of Torah: can we hear God addressing us through what we learn? The historical question about what happened at Sinai can remain unanswered while this encounter becomes real in our lives.

Consider Moshe. Torah and Chazal portray him as a person whose extraordinary closeness to God accompanies profound humility. Through him, we learn what spiritual greatness asks of a human being. The historical details of Moshe's life are beside the point here. What matters is what the Torah teaches us through him, and how that teaching can deepen our own service of God.

This brings us back to Noach. The *Mabul* confronts us with a world corrupted by human violence. Inside the *teivah*, preserving life requires patient, daily care. Afterward, the survivors must learn to inhabit the world again. Reading this story as Torah means recognizing that we are answerable to God for how we treat His creation, how we protect the vulnerable, and the world we help bring into being.

My father understood that responsibility through the people he cared for. Remembering him this week, I want to read Noach with something of his attentiveness to holiness, and let the Torah's truth deepen the care we bring to one another.

"The Construction of the Ark" from the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493)