

Parshat Noach: On Finding Illumination

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From where do we draw our inner strength? How do we navigate a world in which we are constantly bombarded by overwhelming information? Noah's world was literally going to be destroyed and he had to find a way to put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward. He had to muster great strength to build the ark and save his family in the face of societal annihilation.

How did he do this?

Toward the end of the architectural instructions God tells Noah, צהר תעשה לתיבה – *Make a tzohar for the ark* (Genesis 6:16). The word צהר (*tzohar*) is a hapax legomenon - it appears once, and only once, in the Bible. (Interestingly, the phrase עצי-גופר, usually translated simply as *gopher-wood*, which appears two sentences earlier is also a hapax.)

When a word is only found once in a literary work it is very difficult to decipher its exact meaning. Rashi on the verse quotes the following Midrash, suggesting the *tzohar* might refer to a unique architectural instruction:

Bereishit Rabba (T-A)

Parshat Noach 31:16

Make a tzohar for the ark:

R' Aba bar Kahana said, "[*Tzohar* means] window."

R' Levi said. "[*Tzohar* means] precious gem."

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק)

פרשת נח פרשה לא:טז

"צהר תעשה לתיבה"

ר' אבא בר כהנא אמר חלון

ר' לוי אמר מרגלית

These two rabbis offer two very different explanations of this word. What is this mysterious *Tzohar* and how might this debate guide us through these days of turbulence?

It appears that Noah had a practical problem the *tzohar* was meant to address - where was he to get light? One option was to make a window, as R' Aba bar Kahana offers. Ancient windows were simply wholes with planks that could be removed. When the plank was removed, the window was "opened" and light could enter the ark from the outside. This poses a challenge, as he had to ensure the rain would not come in the opening.

The alternative was to place a precious metal in a wall of the ark that could disperse the limited light from within the ark in different directions and locations, almost like a small chandelier. R' Levi offered that the *tzohar* was just this kind of precious gem that could sparkle inside the ark. I believe that this debate, though practical on its face, reflects a deep struggle at the heart of Modern and Open Orthodoxy.

The *Ba'al Shem Tov* in his עמוד התפילה (Pillar of Prayer, available in English by Menachem Kallus) builds

a spiritual system on the technical details of the ark. He starts by pointing out the the word תיבה, usually translated as “ark” can also mean “word.” When we are told to make a *tzohar* for the ark, we are really being reminded of the importance of illuminating the words of prayer.

The *Ba'al Shem* is inviting us to see more in these verses than appears at first reading. Perhaps the debate about where the light must come from is referring to something bigger. Are we meant to draw light from the outside or the inside? The *tzohar* is standing at the border line between inside and out - it is a place of liminal holiness. Do we draw our inspiration from the world outside the ark or do we enlighten ourselves from within? How can we calibrate the *tzohar* so the balance between the inner and outer light is at equilibrium?

In some streams of Jewish Life the answer to this question is very simple. Perhaps, the light comes only from with the community of Jews who are just like us. Alternatively, the light comes almost exclusively from the uplifting values of modernity. We live in community that seeks to bask in the inner light of Torah, while at the same time bring in the healthy aspects of modernity that shed an inspired light.

Noah had to figure out the right balance of inner and outer light, as do each of us. I hope and pray that we are able to bring in the right amount of light from the world around us so that we may understand more deeply what it is that God wants from us. I bless us all to be inspired by Noah to keep putting one foot in front of the other even in the face of deeply flawed rabbinic leadership and not give up on the inner light and beauty of our Torah.



Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, was the first graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Upon graduation he served as the Rabbi of Kehilat Keshet: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood for seven years. In Rabbi Fox's tenure at Keshet, the community grew three-fold from thirty families to nearly one hundred. During that time Rabbi Fox also taught at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as well as the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Bergen County. He also served on the board of the Synagogue Leadership Initiative of the UJA of NNJ. Rabbi Fox is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and has also been a member of the faculty of the Drisha Institute, the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Westchester County, and Hadar.