

Parshat Noach, Mah Nishma, Leffell School Newsletter, Fall 2020

What is the first thing each of us will do when the world opens up? What might it feel like when this particular “flood” is over?

Noah’s experience certainly resonates today. Who among us does not feel like Noah, sending out first the raven and then the dove, hoping upon hope that it is time to re-emerge from the ark. We can imagine Noah’s wish each time he sends out a bird to look for land: “maybe this time!” Maybe this is the moment of re-emergence! And yet, even the dove comes back, as it cannot find “a resting place for its foot.” Many days later, Noah finally comes out to dry land.

His first act upon re-emergence is, of all things, to plant a vineyard.

Rabbinic tradition imagines Noah planning for his vineyard even as he waited for dry land. Rashi brings a midrash reminding us that grape vines don’t grow *ex nihilo*. “When he went into the ark he had taken with him vine-branches and shoots of fig trees (Genesis Rabbah 36:3).” Even before the flood began, Noah knew he would want to plant again.

It would have been no small matter to keep the vine-branch alive in a dark, crowded ark. 13th century French commentator Chizkuni points to the amount of work it must have taken to preserve this vine-branch throughout the course of the flood. He writes, “these plants are especially sensitive to water and need protecting more than other trees. Both of these seeds need special attention in order to be planted successfully.”

In other words, preserving the vine-branch took work, protection, and cultivation. We can picture Noah, huddled over his small vine-branch, making sure it was okay, even as the waters stormed around him, even as the animals brayed, snorted and buzzed around him. It took special dedication to keep his dream of a vineyard alive.

Noah’s vineyard does not turn out to be the blessing he intended. He gets drunk and falls naked on his bed, leading to a horrible act on the part of his sons. As our tradition attests, a vineyard has the potential to bring great blessing or great suffering. Wine can be a source of great joy, a vehicle for sanctifying God’s name, or it can be a dangerous opening to vile acts. Noah’s action could have gone either way; it could have been a cause for celebrating just as much as a cause for concern.

Coming out of the ark does not always go as planned. We seek out a resting place for our feet, waiting for the land to be fully ready for us, and sometimes, we may face new challenges in the re-emergence itself. But perhaps the planning is its own act of faith. While we are inside, we can cultivate our own vine-branches, giving special attention to those things most important to us, rooting ourselves in the knowledge that the flood will end. When we come into the light again, what saplings will we have to plant?

