

Noach

Many people are familiar with the melodic tune that synagogues sing to the words of Mizmor L'David, as the Torah is returned to the Ark on Shabbos morning. What is less well known, is the explanation of these words, and how this poetic paragraph relates to Parshat Noach. By exploring the meaning of this prayer, one can gain insight into the story of Noach in a new and exciting way.

King David calls upon the “sons of the mighty,” i.e. the descendants of the patriarchs, to praise Hashem and recognize His might. He then describes how the powerful voice of G-d impacts the world in seven different ways. The final two verses are “Hashem sat (on His throne) at the flood, and He sits as King forever. Hashem will give power to His nation, and Hashem will bless His nation with peace.”

What does the flood and the story of Noach have to do with the voices of Hashem which make nature tremble? There is no reference of Hashem’s voice in Parshat Noach, despite the many details that are described in this parsha. Furthermore, what is the connection between the last verse and the rest of the paragraph?

In order to answer these questions, one must understand these last two verses in the context of the rest of the psalm. The voice of Hashem is on the waters, breaks the cedars, causes the cedars of Lebanon to dance like a calf, cleaves with flames of fire, scares the Kadesh desert, frightens the deer, and strips the forests bare. Is David simply demonstrating the omnipotence of Hashem by showing what His voice can do, or is he referring metaphorically to specific events in Jewish history?

There are different ways to interpret the details of this psalm, but both Rashi (11th Century) and Radak (12th Century) agree that David is speaking in metaphorical terms. Rashi understands the psalm as primarily referring to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The voice of Hashem “on the waters” refers to the splitting of the sea, a miraculous event heard around the world. The voice of Hashem “in power” refers to the voice of Hashem which amplified Moshe’s words when he repeated the Ten Commandments to the masses. The voice of Hashem “breaks the cedars and makes the cedars of Lebanon dance like a calf” refers to the nations of the world, who came to hear the voice of G-d giving Torah to the Jewish people and were terrified by it. The desert of Kadesh, a synonym for the Sinai desert, also trembled upon hearing G-d speak.

Towards the end of the psalm, Rashi states that King David stops referring to the giving of the Torah and starts talking about a vision of the future. Idol worshippers, who always stood securely like deer,

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will be frightened when G-d brings about the redemption in the end of days. The nations of the world, who always stood confidently like trees in a forest, will humble themselves before G-d and recognize His Glory. Why is the flood mentioned? Hashem sat on the throne during the flood of Noach, when He wiped out the people who worshipped other gods, stole, and lived perverted lives.

By destroying the world and its inhabitants, Hashem asserted Himself as King over the world.

David likens Hashem's sovereignty over the world in the end of days, to the universal acknowledgement of His kingdom which the flood accomplished. The final verse refers to the restoration of Jewish pride and security, when Israel will live peacefully in Messianic times.

The Talmud (Zevachim 116a), alternatively, interprets these last two verses as describing something that happened when the Torah was given. People around the world heard the noise and drama which accompanied the giving of the Ten Commandments, and they were nervous that perhaps the world was being flooded once again like in the times of Noach. They went to Balaam and asked him to explain the strange things they heard and saw. Balaam reassured them and told them not to worry because Hashem swore to Noach that He will never again bring a flood to destroy the world. Balaam explained to them that the tumult in the world was due to G-d descending and revealing Himself to the Jewish people. Accordingly, "Hashem will give might to His people" refers to the Torah He taught them at Sinai.

Radak interprets the entire chapter differently, stating that it refers to the future coming of Moshiach, as opposed to the Sinai revelation. All of the metaphors of water, trees, and animals jumping refer to idol worshippers. When Moshiach comes and all of mankind recognizes that G-d exists, all of the people who denied G-d will be taken aback and humbled by His overwhelmingly obvious presence.

Unlike Rashi, who says that the chapter starts with relating the events of the past and then shifts to talk about the future redemption, Radak sees it as one continuous description of the end of day.

According to both Rashi and Radak, the line "Hashem sat (on the throne) at the flood" is not meant to depict Hashem as an intolerant G-d who destroys the world when it disobeys His will. Rather, it describes a universal recognition of His existence, omnipotence, and sovereignty. When reading the story of Noach, one should look at it as more than a story of reward and punishment. Rather, it is an opportunity to get a glimpse of the upheaval in the world when Moshiach will come, that will ultimately bring the world to recognition of the Creator and His Oneness.

Shabbat Shalom

The JSN Team