

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Noach
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פרשת נח
ד' במרחשון תשע"ט

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 6:9-11:32

In this *parasha* we hear the story of Noach and the flood; its aftermath when Noach planted a vineyard and got inebriated and his son saw “his nakedness”; and finally, the story of the Tower of Babel and the birth of Avram.

The number “40” appears no less than six times in the flood story. The rains fell for forty days and forty nights, and this fact is repeated three times. Noach also waited forty days after he saw the tops of the mountains reappear before he sent out the raven from the *teivah* (Ark). (Noach first sent out a raven, who came back with nothing; then a dove who also returned with nothing; another dove who came back with an olive branch in its beak; and a final dove who flew away and did not return.)

How can we account for the repeated appearance of the number 40? There are a number of Bible scholars who believe that 40 is used not as a precise number, but rather to indicate a great deal of time. According to them, this applies not only to the flood saga, but also to the 40 years in the desert, Moshe’s 40-day sojourns on *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai), and other episodes that include the number 40.

Precision in time measurement is a relatively modern phenomenon. Although sundials and water clocks are truly ancient, the mechanical clock was not invented until the 14th century, and until the invention of electricity, technology, and complex mechanics, humans estimated the time of day and periods of time.

In the 21st century we make statements such as, “Shabbat this week begins at 5:50pm in the Washington area,” but for most of history, Jews looked at the sky to see when sunset was near, and measured the end of Shabbat by the color and darkness of the night sky, and number of stars in it. Even Rosh Chodesh, the first day

of the Jewish month, was determined by the report of the appearance of the New Moon rather than by temporal calculations, which is how we would probably still be doing it had the *Beit Hamikdash* (Temple) not been destroyed.

Although we cannot buck the pace and mores of modern life, it is not a bad idea to step back and, at least once in a while, stop living by the clock and just experience life. Perhaps the number forty, which sounds precise but is meant to indicate some indeterminate period of time, will remind us to proverbially “stop and smell the roses” instead of consistently being held prisoner by our watches, smart phones, and other devices that track our schedules and keep us punctual.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How do you think people got up in the morning before the invention of the alarm clock?
- What do you think people did after nightfall before the invention of electricity? There were no lights, no TV, no Internet, no video games, no computers, no radio, no movies, etc.
- If you had a day in which you had no obligations, appointments, or places to be, how would you spend it? Why?