

Make an Opening: Words That Breathe

Parashat Noach / Genesis 6:16

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Sometimes the flood doesn't come all at once. It comes as a slow rising—the waters of change, of loss, of exhaustion and uncertainty—until one day we realize we're already ankle-deep.

Parashat Noach begins there, at the moment when rising waters meet a human heart. Each of us, in some way, knows what it is to live through rising waters—when the familiar dissolves and we're not sure what will hold. The story of Noah is not only about surviving the storm, but about learning how to make an opening inside it.

Before the first drop fell, Noah must have sensed what was coming—the slow unmaking of the world he knew. How would he stay connected to life as everything around him was preparing to dissolve? Into that vast uncertainty, God offered a single instruction that feels, even now, both mysterious and tender: **צַהֵר תַּעֲשֶׂה לַתִּיבָה — “Make a tzohar in the ark.”**

Our commentators have long puzzled over this verse. What was this *tzohar* Noah was commanded to make? Rashi offers two possibilities: that it was a window letting in light, or a precious stone that glowed from within—two ways of surviving the flood: opening outward to what is beyond you, or kindling something inward to sustain you. Bartenura links *tzohar* to *tzohorayim*—“midday,” the hour of sharp light and full exposure. Ramban, by contrast, reminds us that *tzohar* shares roots with both *zohar* (radiance) and *sohar* (prison). The ark, he suggests, holds both illumination and limitation. Taken together, these voices sketch the paradox of refuge—the tension between protection and confinement, safety and stagnation. The very structure that protects us can also become what traps us. Every vessel—everything we rely on to carry us from here to there—must find a way to breathe.

We might think this story is ancient, but the question it raises is urgent: **How do we stay open—to one another, to complexity, to life itself—when the world around us is closing in?** We live in a time when our social fabric, like Noah's world, feels waterlogged—heavy with outrage, rigid with certainty. Public discourse has become a series of sealed boxes. Our words, designed to connect us, so often become weapons or walls.

The Hebrew word *teva* offers a way in. In Torah it names the ark itself, but in later Hebrew it also means “word.” *Tevat Noach*—Noah's ark—can also be heard as *Noah's word*. The verse, then, isn't only about survival; it's about speech. It invites us to consider what kind of words we build—and whether they have room for breath, for uncertainty, for life to move through. It's an invitation to make our words more like arks—strong enough to hold what matters, yet open enough to breathe. Words that leave space for uncertainty and curiosity stay connected to the living world, open to what lies beyond our own knowing.

Openings like these take many forms: a question that leans forward instead of closing in; a pause that lets breath return to the conversation; a story that doesn't resolve, trusting meaning to keep unfolding; or metaphor—speech that circles truth instead of striking it head-on, knowing that what is most real can only be approached obliquely. Such openings invite participation. They create space for another voice—for imagination, disagreement, or wonder. They remind us that understanding grows in the fertile gap between what is said and what is still waiting to be spoken.

Of course, the *teva* was not all openings. It had to be watertight enough to stay afloat and spacious enough to hold the beating hearts inside. Our words, too, must be strong enough to bear the weight of what matters most—our commitments and values, our longings, our truth, our pain. Strong words aren't made of hardness, but of integrity, humility, and authenticity—words steady enough to weather the storm yet open enough for the wind to move through. When strength and space come together, language becomes like the ark itself—seaworthy and alive, able to carry life through the waters while still letting the world in.

The Torah's metaphor takes this even further. After commanding Noah to make an opening, God adds a striking detail: the entrance should be placed on the side of the ark—*el tzidah*. It's as if to say: openings rarely appear in the center of things; they come from the edges—where inside meets outside, where perspective shifts. The openings that bring life into our words often come from the side—from indirection, image, and nuance. The poet Emily Dickinson said it this way: “**Tell all the truth but tell it slant— / Success in Circuit lies.**” In a culture that prizes straight lines and decisive answers, Torah reminds us that truth is rarely direct. It moves sideways, listens at the edges, and reveals itself through relationship.

The mystics taught that once spoken, God's voice reverberates into multiplicity—*achat dibrah Elohim, shtayim zu shamati*—“God spoke one thing, yet I heard two.” Creation depends on this reverberation, this willingness for meaning to split and refract. When we make an opening in our words, we allow for that reverberation. Rather than an echo chamber, our language becomes an ecosystem—exchanging, absorbing, releasing, transforming through interaction: a festival of call-and-response, always evolving, rebalancing, resisting the “last word.” Ramban's observation—that *tzohar* can also mean *sohar*, prison—now feels prophetic. Our words can widen the space between us, or unintentionally close it. Spiritual life—and ecological life—asks us to keep those walls living, breathing, porous.

We live in our own age of flood: rising seas, rising temperatures, rising fear. Like Noah, we are building vessels—communities, movements, words, practices, stories, prayers—to carry life through the storm. But *tzohar ta'aseh la-teva* still calls to us: **Make openings**. Openings for conversation. For complexity. For nuance. For contradiction where both things are true. Openings for other voices—human and more-than-human—to add their wisdom. Openings in ourselves, our hearts, for what we do not yet understand, for the reverberations that come when we truly listen. Openings that let both the floodwaters and the sunlight speak.

When the rains finally stop, Noah opens the *teva* once more—this time through a *chalon*, a window. Many commentators understand this to be the same *tzohar* he was commanded to

make at the beginning: the opening that once let the world in now becomes the way life moves out. Through that opening he sends the raven, then the dove—testing the conditions, searching for signs of renewal. What was a passage for survival becomes a passage for relationship, a way of listening for the world's response.

May we, too, learn to make such openings—in our words, our hearts, our prayers. May we speak gently enough for breath to pass through, steadfast enough to weather the storm of our day, and honestly enough for connection to take root. And may our words move sideways toward truth, letting light and shadow share the same sky.