

PARASHAT NOACH · GENESIS 6:9–11:32

After the flood, a spectrum.

A queer Jewish study of survival, covenant, domination, difference—and what it takes to build a world where many kinds of life can flourish.

נח · Noach · rest

ON THIS PAGE

The story

The rainbow

Inside the tent

What corrupted?

Righteousness

Babel

Questions

Sources

Noach begins with a world “filled with violence” and ends with a world forced into difference. Between them: a floating refuge, a disarmed bow, a survivor’s body, and a tower built against scattering.

Care note: This guide discusses sexual violence, trauma, homophobic interpretation, and the racialized misuse of the “curse of Ham.” The difficult material is

named directly rather
than softened.

01 · THE NARRATIVE MAP

From collapse to
covenant

Genesis 6:9–11:32
moves through five
distinct scenes. Noah,
called righteous and
blameless “in his
generations,” receives
instructions for a
teivah, an ark. The
waters rise; the ark
rests; a dove returns
with an olive leaf. God
then makes an
everlasting covenant
with Noah, his
descendants, and
every living creature.
The text turns
abruptly to Noah’s
drunkenness and
nakedness, then
outward again to
nations, language,
and Babel.



Corruption	Ark	Covenant	Tent	Babel
6:9–12 · violence fills the earth	6:13–8:19 · refuge through catastrophe	9:8–17 · the bow in the clouds	9:18– 27 · seeing, doing, cursing	11:1–9 · one language scattered

The parashah does not offer a clean redemption arc. It asks what survival preserves, what violence returns, and whether a new world can make room for genuine difference.

02 · BRIT HA-KESHET

The weapon becomes a promise

“When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant.”

GENESIS 9:16



Keshet means rainbow
—and ordinarily, a
war bow. Ramban
reads it as a bow
without its string,
pointed away from
the earth: a weapon
rendered harmless.
The covenant is
strikingly broad. It is
made not only with
one family or nation,
but with “every living
creature.”

A modern queer
midrash

The rainbow’s LGBTQ
meaning begins in
1978, not in Genesis.
Its Jewish queer
reclamation is
therefore a modern
interpretive act:
covenant joined to
Pride, divine restraint
joined to resistance, a
single light refracted
into many colors.

**CLASSICAL
FRAME**

**MODERN
RECLAMATION**

Covenant
and
restraint

The
traditional
blessing
over a
rainbow
praises the
One “who
remembers
the
covenant,
is faithful
to the
covenant,
and fulfills
the word.”
It does not
mention
color at all;
covenant is
the subject.

Multiplicity
held
together

Rav Aharon
Soloveitchik’s
image of one
light
becoming a
spectrum
offers “unity
with
diversity,”
not
uniformity.
Keshet, the
LGBTQ
Jewish
organization,
carries that
image in its
name.

“The full
spectrum of
emotions
and

characteristics...
Anger and
peace,
destruction
and
reconciliation.”

RABBI LESLIE
GORDON, “RAINBOW,”
2023

At Congregation Beit
Simchat Torah, New
York’s LGBTQ
synagogue, Pride
Shabbat has used
Noah’s rainbow
covenant as the
concluding Torah
reading, paired with
the David-and-
Jonathan haftarah.
The reclamation is not
only visual; it is
liturgical.

03 • GENESIS 9:18–27

What happened inside
the tent?

The Torah says Ham
“saw” Noah’s
nakedness, yet Noah

wakes and knows
what his younger son
had “done to him.”
That gap—seeing
versus doing—drives
centuries of
interpretation. The
text’s punishment is
also displaced: Noah
curses Ham’s son
Canaan, not Ham.

**Classical sources
are explicit.**

In Sanhedrin 70a, Rav and Shmuel disagree: one says Ham castrated Noah; the other says he sexually assaulted him. Rashi preserves both opinions. Ramban instead centers Ham’s pleasure in his father’s degradation and his decision to broadcast it.

Greenberg: sex as
domination

Rabbi Steven
Greenberg reads the
rabbinic traditions
through power.
Castration strips
Noah of reproductive
and male privilege;
sexual assault
becomes a
conquering act. On
this reading, Ham's
action is not desire
but possession—the
use of sex to erase
another person's
agency.

**“The
parasha
then is not
about male-
male sex
per se.
There is no
punishment
for queer
sex here.”**

RABBI STEVEN
GREENBERG, “FROM
DELIGHT TO

Sarid: the ethics of
witnessing

Michael Sarid reads
Noah as a trauma
survivor self-
medicating with wine.
Ham's failure is to
encounter suffering
and leave it
unattended, passing
the scene onward as
spectacle. Shem and
Japheth refuse that
gaze; they enter
backward and cover
their father.

The curse and its
afterlife

The "curse of Ham"
was later racialized to
justify the
enslavement of Black
Africans, especially
during the
seventeenth through
nineteenth centuries.
The biblical curse
names Canaan and
says nothing about
skin color. The racial

reading developed later. The history is a warning about how interpreters project prejudice into a text's silences—and how a reading can become an instrument of domination.

04 • THE FLOOD GENERATION

What, exactly,
corrupted the earth?

Genesis names *vatishachet*, corruption, and *chamas*, violence or lawlessness. Rashi associates the first with sexual immorality and idolatry, and the second with robbery. Midrash intensifies the sexual charge: Genesis Rabbah describes marriage documents—or possibly wedding hymns—for unions of a man with a male or

an animal. These texts have been used against LGBTQ people and should not be disguised.

But Sanhedrin 108a draws its own hierarchy: the decree of destruction was sealed because of theft. The parashah's controlling moral category is violence—the violation of bodies, property, boundaries, and other lives—not loving relationship.

READ

HONESTLY

The tradition contains stigma

The sources bundle male-male union with bestiality, coercion, and

READ

STRUCTURALLY

Follow the axis of harm

Greenberg, drawing on Avivah Zornberg, reframes the failure as sex that dissolves the other: chaotic use

robbery.
That is not
a modern
category of
consensual
LGBTQ
relationship
or
covenantal
marriage.

and
rapacious
egotism. The
question
becomes not
“which
genders?”
but “what
does this act
do to
another
person?”

Righteous—in his
generation

The rabbis hear the
phrase two ways. To
Noah's praise: if he
remained righteous in
such a generation,
how much more so
among decent
people. To his
disgrace: he was only
righteous by
comparison, unable
to match Abraham,
who later argues with
God on behalf of a
threatened city.

Genesis Rabbah
draws the contrast
through movement.
Noah "walked with
God," like a small
child needing
support; Abraham is
told to "walk before
Me." Yet another
talmudic voice
remembers a Noah
who rebuked his
generation and urged
repentance.

A queer double
reading

Noah can signify the
lonely integrity of
being the different
one—the only out
person in a family,
workplace, or
community. *Tamim*,
blameless or
wholehearted, can
name the work of
staying whole where
one's wholeness is
denied. But survival is
not the end of the
ethical question. The
Temple Israel, Duluth
sermon "The Promise
of the Rainbow,"
preached after Tyler
Clementi's death, asks
whether Noah is the
decent bystander
while Abraham is the
upstander who
challenges power.

The ark can therefore
be both necessary
refuge and
insufficient politics: a
vessel that gets
vulnerable life
through catastrophe,

followed by the
harder obligation to
remake the world
outside it.

06 • GENESIS 11:1–9

One language is not
the same as unity

Babel's builders fear
being scattered. The
Netziv reads their
project as a regime of
enforced ideology:
because opinions
differ, the builders
create a society no
one may leave. Judy
Klitsner argues that
suppressing the
divine spark of
individuality is itself
rebellion against God.
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
calls the tower "an
artificial unity"
imposed on divinely
created diversity.

**God does not end
communication. God**

ends the monopoly of
one language.

For queer study, this
can map onto the
demand for one
permissible gender
script, one family
form, one vocabulary
of belonging. But that
mapping is a study
leader's extension,
not a published
queer-specific Babel
commentary.

"Scattering" can be
read not only as
punishment, but as
the condition for
plural cultures,
diasporic creativity,
and self-naming.

A counter-reading by
Rabbi David Reinhart
observes that the text
describes divine
anxiety more clearly
than divine anger;
perhaps scattering
limits human
potential rather than
correcting sin. The
unresolved tension

matters: diversity can
liberate, and
dispersion can
wound.

07 · FOR THE ROOM

Questions that open
the text

01 What would
it mean to
take a
symbol once
aimed at us
and hang it
up as a sign
of covenant?
What does
reclamation
cost?

02 The rainbow
covenant
includes
“every living
creature”
and requires
nothing of its
recipients.
How does

that speak to
experiences
of
conditional
welcome?

03 Do you find
Greenberg's
distinction
between
queer sex
and sex used
as
domination
persuasive?
What
changes
when harm
—not gender
—is the
moral axis?

Which
reading of
Ham moves
you more:
sexualized
domination,
or witnessing
suffering and
walking
away? What
responsibility
follows from
each?

05 How does
reading
Noah's
drinking as a
trauma
response
rather than
simple
disgrace
change the
story?

06 When has
survival itself
been
righteousness?
When did the
moment

demand more
—the move
from Noah’s
refuge to
Abraham’s
protest?

07 Where do
you
encounter
pressure
toward “one
language” in
Jewish life,
queer life, or
public life?
What might
holy
scattering
look like?

08 What do we
do with
inherited
texts whose
stigma

cannot be
wished away,
even when
their
broader
moral logic
points
toward
violence and
exploitation?

08 · KEEP STUDYING

Sources & interpretive
status

Classical debates are
marked as such
above. Greenberg,
Sarid, Gordon, and
the queer
applications are
modern readings. The
Babel-to-queer-
diversity mapping is a
facilitation extension;
no published queer-

specific Babel
commentary was
found in the research.

Primary text

[Babylonia](#)
[n Talmud,](#)
[Sanhedri](#)
[n 70a](#) ·
Ham's act
as
castration
or sexual
assault.

Queer anchor

[Steven](#)
[Greenb](#)
[erg,](#)
["From](#)
[Delight](#)
[to](#)
[Destruc](#)
[tion",](#) in
Torah
Queeries
(NYU
Press,
2009).

Trauma & witness

[Michael](#)
[Sarid,](#)
["Apres](#)
[le](#)
[Deluge:](#)
[Moi"](#)
(Keshet,
2006).

Rainbow

[Rabbi](#)
[Leslie](#)
[Gordon,](#)
["Rainbo](#)
[w"](#)
(2023) ·
divine
anger,
restraint,
and
Pride.

Diversity

["Parshat](#)
[Noach:](#)
[Unity and](#)
[Diversity"](#) ·
Rav Aharon
Soloveitchik
on rainbow
and Babel.

Righteousness

[Hadar,](#)
["In His](#)
[Generati](#)
[on"](#) ·
Noah as

rebuker
and the
demands
of public
virtue.

Names & difference

[Hadar,](#)
[“People Have](#)
[Names”](#) ·
Babel against
imposed
homogeneity.

Reform lens

[“Th](#)
[e](#)
[Ch](#)
[alle](#)
[ng](#)
[e of](#)
[Rig](#)
[hte](#)
[ous](#)
[nes](#)
[s”](#)
and
[“W](#)
[hy](#)
[a](#)
[Rai](#)
[nb](#)

[OW](#)

[?"](#).

Liturgy

["Celebrating
Fifty Years of
Jewish Pride"](#)

(2024) ·

documentation
of CBST Pride
liturgy.

Queer survival

[Nessa](#)

[Noric](#)

[h, The](#)

[Ark](#)

(CLGS,
2021).

Babel counterpoint

[Rabbi](#)
[David](#)
[A.](#)
[Reinh](#)
[art,](#)
[“Mayb](#)
[e the](#)
[Tower](#)
[of](#)
[Babel](#)
[wasn’t](#)
[so](#)
[bad”](#)
(2022).

Open questions

- No Noach-specific commentary by Dr. Jay Michaelson was found; none is attributed here.
- No published queer-specific Babel commentary was found;

the queer
mapping
above is
explicit
interpretation.

- The wording
of Genesis
Rabbah's
gemumasi'ot
dictum
varies by
manuscript:
"marriage
documents"
or "wedding
hymns."

Reusable weekly
research path

Begin with the text,
place classical and
denominational
commentary beside
queer Jewish
interpretation, and
keep facilitation
resources separate
from claims about the
text.

Sefaria

Chabad.org

Primary text and
rabbinic sources

Traditional
commentary and
parashah overview

ReformJudaism.org

Reform Torah
commentary

KeshetOnline.org

Queer Jewish
commentary and
program resources

Prepared from sources reviewed October 2026. Quoted passages are brief; follow the linked sources for full context.