Build An Ark – 5782/2022 Yom Kippur Sermon by Rabbi Leider

I was inspired by Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels, whose profound essay, Building an Ark in the Midst of a Flood: Mindfulness Practices for Staying Afloat, from the book Torah in a Time of Plague, provided the basis for this sermon. As I felt the rising waters of Yom Kippur closing in on me, I turned to his essay. Much of this sermon are his wise words.

We live in an overwhelming time brought on by both a plague and a host of social and political upheavals which have disrupted our daily lives, upended our institutions, crashed our economies, and caused devastating losses in our lives. In the face of these unfolding crises, many of us feel overwhelmed - like it is just too much. Too much uncertainty, too much to handle, too many demands, too many emotions, too much pressure, too many thoughts, too many decisions, too many people in one small house, too much isolation, and too much fear.

This "too much" feeling is familiar to many of us and it can be intense. On this Yom Kippur, these are the questions that we must ask: How do we stay clear and connected to ourselves, one another and the Divine? How do we not give in to fear? How do we bring about transformation and change without getting lost in despair or desperation or falling into complacency?

While the COVID-19 pandemic may feel unprecedented to us, this degree of uncertainty and vulnerability, the sense of overwhelm, was not foreign to our ancestors. Indeed, it was once a part of human life. Our ancestors faced plagues,

expulsions, wars, and upheavals, and used the wisdom of Judaism to meet those daunting challenges. The Jewish tradition gives us many tools to face the overwhelm that we can feel in such moments. I learned this sage advice from a wise teacher, Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels, and I share it with you, *b'shem omro* – in his name.

One of the most powerful images of overwhelm in our texts can be found in Psalm 32: "Let everyone pray to You, that the rushing mighty waters (*mayim rabbim*) not overtake them." The image of the rushing mighty waters is something we have seen as of late, even from our dry fire-ravaged Western perch, as we see the waters of hurricanes, tropical storms and see the sense of overwhelm in communities that are experiencing them.

The Hasidic tradition takes this image and places it inside of us. It can describe that moment when unwanted and unhelpful thoughts, emotions, and sensation threaten to swamp us, when we feel lost in a wave of thought or emotion. It recalls the primal biblical image of flood which threatens "to destroy all flesh which has the breath of life within it," the book of Genesis tells us (6:17). Indeed, it can feel like "the wellspring of the vast deep has broken forth and the floodgates of the sky have broken open," as the creation story in Genesis tells us (2:11). We can be engulfed by anger, desire, confusion, hurt, anxiety – a range of emotions that reflect the basic and profound uncertainty and instability of our world. And in our minds and heart, we rehearse, fantasize, plan, worry and attempt to fix it all. Someone says something that feels

hurtful, critical, or threatening and we are filled with anger, self-blame, or shame. The chest tightens, the heart speeds up there is a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczner rebbe provides us with three metaphors to describe how we might experience this flood of thought and emotion.

1. We may feel like we are caught in a slingshot. This one we know well: Are we coming out of the pandemic? Going through another shutdown? Wearing masks? Not wearing masks. Yes, we can feel like a large boulder being loaded into King David's slingshot and flung across a field, not knowing where we will land and how we will recover.

2. The second image that the Piacezner rebbe describes is drowning: we may just feel like we are sinking to the bottom of a swamp.

3. And the third image is that we just feel so overwhelmed that we shut down. The rebbe describes this as if there were "piles of garbage dumped on top of our soul and heart, smothering our emotions, both the joyful and the painful ones, or blanketing us with a dulling anxiety. So, what do we do? We either lash, thrash, or shut down.

Lashing out – we know it well. Our body gets tight, our reserves of patience are low. Our partner does that one thing we find annoying, our kids don't listen, a work

colleague drops the ball on a big project, and we lash out by yelling, criticizing or blaming, either ourselves or others.

When we thrash, we seek to regain control. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidim says that it is as if we are drowning in a river, flailing to keep from drowning. We know this one too – when we anxiously scroll through news updates, fire reports, the AQI index on our phones, as if the information we get from this will make us feel safer and more empowered. Or we just plain get more controlling ourselves – making sure everything is taken care of, that everything will be alright. But that thrashing, just like flailing in the water, doesn't really help you to keep afloat. It is an illusion.

Oh, yes, and there is always the option to shut down. Or feel that "COVID languishing," coined by the organizational psychologist Adam Grant. It's that sense of stagnation and emptiness as you muddle through your days, like looking at your life through a foggy windshield"

So, what do we do when we are flooded? The Torah already tells us: We build an ark. We create something to keep ourselves afloat to ride out the waves of the flood. The word for ark in Hebrew is *teva* – it also means word. It could mean the words that we pray and perhaps even more importantly, the words that we say or write to each other.

What spiritual tools and practices might serve as our ark in these challenging times? When we can't find shelter from the storm, how might we attain buoyancy and clarity that allow us to ride out the flood without getting swamped?

Here are the four ways we do it:

1. **Awareness** – The Torah tells us that Noah's ark must have an opening for light (Gen. 6:16) This is precisely what we can do: let the light shine on the dark recesses of our anxiety and fear. The Piacezner rebbe calls this *mahshavah hazaka* – a powerful embodied experience in facing the flood. Say we have an important project due tomorrow, and we don't feel prepared. Anxiety starts to rise, and chocolate seems like a good response or more Netflix binging, to dull and distract us from the unpleasant emotion. But the rebbe's embodied response means going inside, asking ourselves, "Are my thoughts racing? Is my tummy fluttering? Does my chest feel constricted?" We need to see it, name it, and have compassion for ourselves, so we can make non-panicked choices. By doing this we extend a helpful branch to ourselves to keep us from drowning in the swam. And instead as the rebbe teaches us, what might have become a flood of incapacitating emotions, becomes a cleansing river, allowing our feelings to move through us.

2. **Cultivating Love** – One of my favorite verses from the Song of Songs, teaches that "Vast floods (*mayim rabim*), cannot quench love, nor rivers drown it." It may be tempting to write off love as being pollyannish, especially in the face of a pandemic. But when we are in touch with love, we feel less isolated and move supported. When we open to love, we open to the life-force and sap of the universe.

So how do we do it? We practice. The Buddhists call it meta-practice. The Piacezner rebbe tells us that we need to tell ourselves over and over: "May you be held in love." In the final blessing before the *Shma*, we say: We are held in a great love – *ahavah rabbah*. Dedicating time for reflection, meditation, prayer, allows us to call to mind each person in our life who has ever shown us love, from the time we were born to the present moment. As you flip through your internal Shutterfly book of gratitude, see the faces of everyone who has been kind to you along the way, from the random clerk to the close friend, from that 2nd grade teacher, to the neighbor down the street.

3. **Recognize the beauty of the flood** – You feel the flood coming and instead of fighting it, realize that the waters are a precious resource. My dear mentor and friend, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, likes to tell me that I am powerful when I cry. I don't love it when he says it – why? Because I want to be in control. I don't always see the *mayyim rabbim*, the rushing waters as a powerful resource that I could surf instead of reject.

The Torah tells us that *mayim rabim* convey life, power, and beauty – the life-giving water that Moses brings forth from the rock (Num. 20:11). One of the classic rabbinic images for Torah is water. We can choose to relate to water as a floor or as wellspring that sustains life.

The rebbe tells us that while the water is dangerous to the one who cannot swim, it is necessary for a person's survival, so rejecting it altogether is not a wise choice. But many of us do some version of this in our lives: for instance, hurt by a relationship, we may pull away from intimacy and trust altogether, robbing us of exactly what we need: core human contact, support, interaction. But if instead, we see the beauty and the power of intimacy, while knowing the loss and sadness that such connection can bring, we can open, heal, and reconnect the heart -that is exactly what Yom Kippur is all about.

When we open to the fullness of a life experience, the good and the bad, the joyful and the painful, there is nothing that is outside the realm of the sacred. The Torah tells us that Noah brings "two of every living thing" into the ark (Gen. 6:19), on which RaSHI comments, "Every living thing – this means even the demons." So, bring it all in: the fear, anger, hurt, critique, threat, defensiveness and have them become opportunities for healing. The ark is not an escape from grief, but rather a way to hold them in the vastness of the ocean and the sky. We are saved from the flood, or the wild animals or our emotions, not by shutting the doors on them but by welcoming them in with love. We are transformed: the waters are no longer a flood, but a resource that makes up the wholeness of life.

4. **Explore Safety –** How do we understand what it means to be safe? Safety is a fundamental human need, yet we experience being unsafe in different ways.

The sense of overwhelm that we often feel comes from feeling unsafe during a plague. We sit in our house, wondering if we or our loved ones will be safe. Can we keep our jobs? Support our families? Live to enjoy our grandchildren? Will our children be safe? What types of things can we do and feel any degree of safety? All these various challenges are in dialogue with our own history constitution, experiences and habits of response. Our perception of threat or lack of safety may not be accurate; we may over or underestimate danger.

But when we feel threatened, we often desperately try to find safety. It is logical, reasonable. But at times, these sense of desperation does not serve us, and we can respond more wisely and effectively if we can create some space around the fear. Worries about our health arise, for sure. But the anxiety that the worry produces, does not serve us. But by building an ark for ourselves, in the moment we feel that anxiety, we can and should turn to our bodies to ask, "What am I feeling in my body right now? Can I find a place in my body that feels safe and grounded? Can that be my anchor when I feel the fear and lack of safety in the tightness of my back, in the pit of my stomach?"

And there are simple cognitive questions I can ask myself too: Am I physically safe right now? Do I have shelter, food, clothing, water? When the answer is yes that helps us recognize that we are safe in a basic existential way in this moment, even when parts of ourselves free unsafe or are unsafe. This can calm us and help us respond more wisely.

I am not saying that everything is ok or is always going to be. What Judaism offers is something different: my trust and my faith lies in my ability to ground myself in some sense of support even during challenges and threat. I trust myself to be present with whatever arises. I trust that I can hold this circumstance as something wider and deeper, which is both beyond me and part of me, so that I can be with what is happening this moment, even if it is not alright.

No matter how safe we try to make ourselves sand others, there is no way to achieve complete safety. No matter, what we tell ourselves, "If only X (fill in the blank) would happen, then I would be truly safe, finally all right."

When we realize that total safety is not possible, we can begin to relax a bit. There is no way to be 100% safe from Covid-19. We do not have complete control. This is the spiritual path to feeling an "all-rightness" which is less dependent on how the world reacts to me or what happens in the world, but si rather more connected to something deep and essential within my being.

Building ourselves an ark through these practices of awareness, love, seeing the beauty of the flood and re-examining what it means to be safe, not only help us escape the

flood, but perhaps even to delight in the in the vast waters which surround us – to see new possibilities and to release old ways of being.

As we experience the terror, uncertainty and suffering and loss of this plague, we can flood ourselves and get lost in the overwhelm. Or we can find presence, love and beauty; discover support in the midst of fear. This ark of wholeness can hold our joy and grief, our love and fear, our pleasure and pain. The invitation of the ark is to create buoyancy and comfort, love, and healing amidst what feels like an overwhelming flood and so transform the flood into life-giving water. Afloat on these waters we can appreciate the sacred beauty of the vast ocean and sky which surround us, even in the middle of a plague. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah*.