

## Parashat Noach- D'var Torah 5784

As many of you know, rabbis tend to spend a lot of time preparing their High Holy Day sermons. Typically, we focus a lot of energy and effort into crafting a hopefully brilliant and poignant message, something that teaches the congregation an important point, something that sticks with everyone who heard it for years to come. After days and weeks and occasionally months of toiling, we deliver these remarks, hoping and praying that someone, anyone will like them, will appreciate them, will learn something from them. For me, it's rare that I give my High Holy Day sermons a second thought almost as soon as they're finished. But for the last few days, I've actually thought back quite a bit to both my Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur sermon from this year.

For those of you who don't remember, or never heard them to begin with, I'll summarize the main points. On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the importance of rest, of really celebrating Shabbat and making holy space in your week for prayer, community, and rejuvenation. For Yom Kippur, I spoke about the challenge of making the right decision, or choosing to step up and help others, even when it feels impossible, when the world feels like it's a burning ball of insanity. Now that I've managed to truncate weeks of work into a few brief sentences, do you see why I've been thinking about those messages so much recently?

The last two weeks in the Jewish community have felt exhausting, painful, overwhelming, awful. But I think many people felt those same or similar feelings even before the events of October 7. The world is filled with chaos and strife, anger and violence, a need for power and destruction. For most

of us, we sit here in our protective bubble, watching it on screens that show something very far from here, something intangible, something unbelievable.

It is very real for the people who are in the midst of a war zone, those experiencing the utter devastation caused by those who seek to gain more. We read about it, we see videos, we hear first person stories and collect their tears with our own. We know our world is broken and we are so far from healing. We are exhausted and finding it impossible to lift up a finger to help, to provide an open heart, to shoulder the burden of the world.

And yet, we keep coming together, looking for the light in the dark. We are looking for community, for peoplehood, for companionship, for love. We are looking for safety and peace, not just for us, but for the world as a whole. This week, we feel a little bit like Noah, the very parasha we read from this Shabbat.

Noah, a righteous person in his generation. What does that mean? I always ask our B'nai Mitzvah students to tell me what it means to be righteous, and then more, what does it mean to be righteous IN HIS GENERATION? Does it mean he was truly good and fair and generous? Or, was he just less terrible than the other corrupt people during his time? Did Noah care about the wellbeing of others? Or, did he care enough to look good in God's eyes? I ask our students to consider these questions. Most of the time, they come up with their own answers, the unjaded and seemingly innocent answers of youth.

Today, I think about what it means to be righteous when the world is on fire. What does it mean to speak up for others, to give voice to the voiceless, to give of yourself for others, to show strength when weakness would be so

much simpler, so much easier? I think about my Yom Kippur sermon and how to keep choosing goodness and peace, when it feels futile and vain. How did Noah choose righteousness, justice, and fairness in the face of such violence and oppression?

Perhaps he didn't. Perhaps Noah was just living his every day life, nothing good or bad. Perhaps Noah didn't choose righteousness, God chose it for him. Perhaps Noah accepted this choice. So perhaps we shall accept that choice as well.

Noah diligently built that ark, he packed every animal within, he saved his family and the best of the world. He created a space for the future of humanity, with only one small window to light the way. Within his great ark, he watched the destruction of the world, felt hopeless to the cries of those outside, carried that inability to provide for others on the waves, all while feeling vulnerable and afraid of the storm raging around him. For days and weeks and months, he toiled with his family, hoping and praying for a peaceful end.

We sit in our ark, our protective bubble. We endure heartaches here in Austin. We watch with terror when horrific legislation passes our state government. We grieve the moments of hatred that mar our community and frighten us to the core. But we do not exist within a physical war zone. We do not live in fear of rockets raining down on us. We do not worry that our power will be cut off because of shrapnel from a nearby battle. We are in an ark, a space that allows us to view the storm around us while keeping us safe within.

So how do we take that next step, to make the difficult choice, to find strength when it feels impossible? I turn to the words of my friend and colleague, Rabbi Jen Gubitz, who wrote this extraordinary poem for this Shabbat:

I'm sitting on Noah's ark.

He let me board early.

After the animals come on safely,

I bring my loved ones

into the rooms of my heart

as the sky pours out her tears.

Evan is sitting shiva.

Rachael tells me her body is in Kishinev.

Daniel is feeling alone in this storm.

Jodie is searching for words, she finds songs to briefly calm her soul.

Abbey's great aunt, her cousins are held hostage.

We ordered our sackcloth on Amazon,

But they've run out.

From the River to the Sea, a cousin posts on Instagram.

A middle school friend

who once brought me to Easter services  
with liturgy blaming Jews for Jesus' death  
messages me about collective punishment.

Neil from high school emails me after 20 years to tell me he is thinking of  
me.

Joe from our childhood West Sherwood Terrace texts me about his grief.

My beloved, born of the land,  
first needs quiet, to process, to worry.

His cousins are called up.

They are my cousins, too, now.

We love you, I message them repeatedly,  
as we cancel our El Al flights for November.

What about the kids in war, my nieces ask?

They hide, the eldest says.

They hide behind their mommies, the youngest agrees.

I call my dad crying.

I cry dancing the horah at Sasha's wedding.

I cry for Abbey's Carmela and Noya.

I cry because I do not understand war

and I do not understand hurting children.

I cannot sleep on this ark.

I should not sleep on this ark.

As if the last night of summer camp,

I am sitting shmira.

The WiFi is too strong and I am up late each night.

Refresh, refresh, refresh.

I am keeping watch to make sure everyone is safe.

I am sitting shmira -

Guarding the memories of the dead

until they are returned

to their families embrace.

You can't sit shmira for all of them alone,

my sister tells me.

You have to share the burden.

So, please come on board this ark with me,

There is only one skylight

And it feels so dark.

We have to come together, to pray, to exist, to be. We have to weather the storm as one. And in doing so, we find that beautiful rainbow, the rainbow of peace. Amen.