

## ROSH HASHANAH 2022: BUILD YOURSELF AN ARK

Rabbi Sharon Mars, Temple Israel Columbus



If a picture is worth a thousand words, this one may say it all for our generation.

**The photo on the left** was shot on May 28, 1992. Sarajevo, home to Muslims, Croats, Serbs, and even a tiny number of Jews who lived side by side in relative harmony for centuries, was under siege. Perched atop mountains which surround the famed “City of Love,” snipers took aim at starving citizens hunting for bread. The 1984 Olympic stadium had been burned, leveled, and transformed into a makeshift graveyard. Stunningly, in this war-torn moment, a lone cellist dressed in formal black coat tails sat atop the rubble of a bombed out building and sent up the melody of Albinoni’s *Adagio in G Minor* amidst crackling gunfire. Just one day before this picture was taken, Vedran Smailović witnessed the shelling of a bread line which killed 22 people. He scrambled amidst the rubble to save the wounded and returned the next day to the bloodied spot. Grief stricken but undeterred, he sat and played the plaintive tune of the *Adagio*... and would keep coming back to play the piece each day for 22 days straight in homage to each victim murdered in the siege, “even as 155-millimeter howitzer shells whistled down on the city.” As the *New York Times* reported in 1992, “Many, like Mr. Smailović, who played the cello for the Sarajevo Opera, reach for an anchor amid the chaos by doing something, however small, that carries them back to the stable, reasoned life they led before” (John F. Burns, NY Times, June 8, 1992).

**The photo on the right** is Smailović 30 years later. As you can see, some of the ruins of Sarajevo remain. They tell a story of a glorious world once whole and beautiful, brought down by the deeds of warring humans. Years may pass but this truth still holds: We are all destined to struggle with “the problem of being alive in a deeply flawed yet stubbornly beautiful world” (xxiv). Author Susan Cain asserts in her book *Bittersweet: How Longing and Sorrow Can Make Us Whole*, that, “The tragedy of life is linked inescapably with its splendor; you could tear civilization down and rebuild it from scratch,” she says, “and the same dualities would rise again.” We live in tension with light and darkness, good and evil, sacred and profane, always in competition and in seeming contradiction with one another. “*Al hadevash v'al ha'oketz, al hamar vehamatok*—as one of my favorite Israeli songs *Al Kol Eleh* intones: Life is about both “the honey and the bee sting, the bitter and the sweet.” Our lives are full of these coexisting truths. However, as Cain teaches, “[for us] to fully inhabit these dualities. . . is, paradoxically, the only way to transcend them. And transcending them is the ultimate point. The bittersweet is about the desire for communion, the wish to go home.” (xxiii)

And isn't that what we're all longing for today? To go home at last on Rosh Hashanah, to that spiritual refuge where the forces of light and dark don't clash as much as make room for each other. In our wish to go home, we know not to linger on either the honey or the bee sting too long

but accept them both as the truths they each are. To adopt this perspective can promote an attitudinal shift of mindfulness, one which psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn dubbed “full catastrophe living.” We yearn for a true home in which we learn, as Kabat-Zinn teaches, “to stop all [we’re] doing and shift over to a ‘being’ mode, learning how to make time for yourself, how to slow down and nurture calmness and self-acceptance in yourself, learning to observe what your own mind is up to from moment to moment, how to watch your thoughts and how to let go of them without getting so caught up and driven by them, how to make room for new ways of seeing old problems and for perceiving the interconnectedness of things.” Doing this, Kabat-Zinn prescribes “listening to your body; working with physical and emotional pain; dealing with fear, panic, and anxiety; and coping with time stress, sleep stress, people stress, role stress, work stress, food stress, and world stress” is the antidote. To save ourselves from the tidal waves of stress that sometimes or often deluge us, we need mindfulness to be our life boat.

My aim this Rosh Hashanah morning is to remind us all—myself included—that despite all the doom and gloom of today’s reality, all is not lost. That’s critical when we consider a smidge of what has transpired this year alone to challenge our equilibrium: We have witnessed the continuing struggle to contain the global pandemic of our lifetime, Covid; a war propagated by a Russia on Ukraine with thousands of deaths in its wake, destabilizing the world economy and further creating shortages of basic supplies; the overturning in our country of laws protecting the fundamental rights of women to have autonomy over their bodies; the systematic suppression of voting rights and criminal justice reform by state governments; the seemingly endless elections held in Israel after coalitions form and fall again and again; and the eclipsing decimation of nature’s bounty by corporate greed. Just to name a few. And that doesn’t even begin to account for the individual tolls that illness, job loss, relationship breakdowns, and other more personal disasters may have exacted on our souls and our mental health this year.

Full catastrophe living may indeed be the recipe for conscious living. But as a Jew I find myself searching always for ways to be more mindful *as a Jew*. The cellist of Sarajevo in many ways depicts what it means to be a Jew in the world. While the world can feel like it’s crashing down on us, the Jew has proverbially sought to make music out of dissonance, to seek solid ground amidst the rubble. But it’s not just our tenacity that makes us who we are - it’s the fact that the Jewish people has always found a way to square the bitter with the sweet. We balance what historian Salo Baron dubbed the “lacrimose (tearful) history of the Jews” - filled with “longing, poignancy, and sorrow” - with what Susan Cain calls the bittersweet reality of life: “an acute awareness of passing time; and a curiously piercing joy at the beauty of the world” (xxv). Because we know too well that pain is part and parcel of life, we’ve learned as Jews through the millennia to heal, to innovate, and to turn to each other for strength. Our ability to balance the bitter and the sweet - to play music while the bombs fall - has helped the Jewish people survive.

So how can we as part of the Jewish people find an anchor in this topsy turvy world, where order reigns one moment and chaos the next? The contemporary Hasidic master, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, known to his students as the Slonimer Rebbe, was born in Belarus and died in Jerusalem in the year 2000. He’s also known as the Netivot Shalom, or Paths of Peace, the name of his commentary on the weekly Torah portion. In his gorgeous series of commentaries on Parashat Noach, he teaches that we can learn a lot in our day from *Dor Hamabul*, the generation of the flood, our ancient ancestors whose corruption was so prevalent and pervasive that God determined that the only proper response to their degradation was to destroy the earth itself as God had created it.

Much as we might associate the story of Noah’s ark with primary-colored cartoons of animals marching by “twosies twosies” on nursery bedroom walls, the Netivot Shalom warns us that the story is here to do anything but entertain. The Flood didn’t happen as a punishment by God alone, he teaches—it was a direct result of what humans allowed to happen all by themselves. Yeah we did this *to ourselves!* That generation caused the desecration not only of their own generation but of the whole of God’s original Creation. What else could you expect from a band of incestuous, murdering deprived human beings? But don’t despair—there is an antidote to this corruption and depravity: To build an ark!

The Slonimer Rebbe is suggesting that the Teva - Hebrew for "ark" - is not a literal one, as you might have guessed (Steve Carrell and Morgan Freeman already did that), but rather one which we carve out inside our lives. We need to seek shelter from the tumultuous waves which bandy us about and find a *pinah tehorah* - a pure spot, our own little corner of the world where we can be safe amidst all the destruction. There are (at least) three ways as the Slonimer sees it- or three lifeboats, to take the metaphor further - to steady and ready ourselves amidst the Mabul (the flood) of life: Shabbat, Torah, and Community. Let's quickly look at each life raft and imagine the possibility of jumping aboard any or all of them.

When the generation of the flood lost its way, it suffered from Bilbul or confusion. There's a poetic connection between the Mabul (flood) and Bilbul (confusion). Think of the last time you felt overwhelmed by stress: a job deadline, a difficult conversation, or any situation over which you felt you had little to no control. If the Mabul pummeled you with the waters of confusion, Shabbat can be your life raft. Shabbat has "the power to extricate us from all afflictive conditions" when the world seems to be falling apart all around us. If you dare listen to the news of the day during the week, you likely suffer because all that bad news injects a sense of scattered consciousness into your day. Most of the time I simply shrug it off or I occasionally have been known to scream into the void inside my car. What if instead we consciously returned to our senses through a technique called *Yishuv Hada'at*, calming and centering the mind and reminding ourselves that Shabbat is always on the horizon? Shabbat is the antidote to our Bilbul/confusion—it engenders Yishuv Hada'at, a sacred and intentional resettling, through the beautiful confluence of rest and joy that is Shabbat. "This then is the power of Shabbat, through which we can be saved from all manner of deficiency and corruption," the Slonimer Rebbe writes, "for on the Shabbat we merit Yishuv Hada'at and chaos is uprooted from our mind." When we make Shabbat happen in our chaotic lives—lighting candles, drinking the fruit of the vine, sinking our teeth into some chewy challah, and maybe even setting our phone aside for a few hours—we rebalance the scales, and we can draw ourselves back to sanity, harmony, and peace.

Torah constitutes another amazing option to the Mabul. When our lives are flooded by life's many demands on our time and energy, Torah can be a life raft. I have studied with a fellow rabbi for the past seven years. Every time that I sit down with my havruta partner, I gain some new take on an old subject, some kernel of wisdom that I could likely never have found on my own. My friend Rabbi Michelle Pearlman puts it this way: "Torah makes me more mindful and aware to consider my actions and the actions of others in a spiritual context so that I'm more self-reflective." When we study Torah for any amount of time at any level of prior knowledge whatsoever, we work a critical muscle of awareness. Torah is the opposite of the Yetzer Hara, the evil inclination. When we come to the Torah with pure intentions - to learn and to grow—it automatically can poke a hole in the balloon of our Yetzer Hara. In fact, it necessarily nullifies it, as the Talmud teaches: "For I [the Holy One God] have created the Yetzer Hara but I have also created the Torah as its *tavlin*, as its antidote" (Kiddushin 30b). The best and most beautiful thing about Torah is that it is right here on our level - "*Lo bashamayim hi* - It's not up in the heavens beyond our reach" - but ready for us to explore and gain wisdom from. When we set out to expand our mind and consciousness, we will find ourselves cultivating self-awareness and the ability to listen. Thus, the Mabul cannot reach us with the same strength. Torah helps us shift the tides of disorder and reframe within the orderly framework of our tradition.

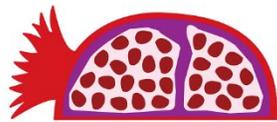
And finally, we will find dry land when we use the life raft of a sacred community. "When God-fearing people bind themselves to one another (*Yachad B'achdut*) in unity, it is a form of Noah's ark," notes the Slonimer. "When people of good character get together, this gathering produces good things, *af im lo ya'asu davar!* Even if they don't do a thing!" I first read this and said, "You're saying that to be a good Jew all I have to do is hang out with my friends? Totally awesome!!" "The simple unity of good people strengthens the forces of good." When people of similar values and shared intentions gather together for the sole purpose of gathering in community and doing good, "*Shezehu hako'ach she'makhazik ish yehudi* - This is the force that strengthens us as the Jewish people."

The opposite is also true, as we know. When people with bad intentions get together, they'll only make bad things happen - witness Dor HaMabul. On some level, Thomas Hobbes might have been right in his assessment that "[the] life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." But if the story of Noah's ark has taught us anything, the Slonimer Rebbe relates: "[While] the negative urges of our hearts [may] seek to nullify unity... the power of our salvation lies in our connection with each other." Just as when Noah, his family, and a fragment of all species were all that remained of God's creation and gathered all in one place aboard that Ark, so too when people of good character come together - then good things can happen, and peace can prosper. We just need to find that *pinah tehorah*, that little corner of the world reserved for us—Shabbat, Torah, community.

This Rosh Hashanah, we collectively acknowledge that the Mabul will always come - but that flood should not lead us to confusion; rather to utilizing the powers we have within our grasp to make those waters recede: Shabbat, Torah, and community can help us survive the full catastrophe. We can either sit in the rubble and weep or make music OR we can do both at the same time, integrating those dualities. The Mabul may not draw back on command, but together we will ride out the storm together, sitting with that which is. In this way, we may even hasten the appearance of a rainbow stretching out across the sky, the divine promise of hope cast against the heavens.

So that's what we're really doing here today on Rosh Hashanah. We're helping each other build our Arks—for ourselves and for each other—so that we can go home, so that wherever we are in this meshugenah world, we are at home. And what a beautiful home it is, this Temple Israel community. We always knew it wasn't about the place as much as the people who would call this their spiritual home. And now you're here. . .at long last! We may be sitting here with burdens on our shoulders and holes in our hearts, but together we can mitigate the pain and maximize the joy. We ride in this ark together!

That is my prayer for each of us this new year. I wish you all Shanah Tovah umetukah!



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