Sequoiadendron giganteum, also known as the Giant Redwoods, are the most massive trees on Earth. In their native habitat, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, they can grow to be almost 300 feet high. That's the size of the Statue of Liberty.

Furthermore, their diameter– how wide the tree is– can grow between 19 and 25 feet, which is roughly the height of the ark behind me, including the flame on top.

That's a pretty big tree.

Interestingly, though, there is a subset of Giant Redwoods that aren't actually so Giant. These Redwoods only grow up to a height of 150 or 160 feet, meaning that they end up being only half the size of the other Redwoods.

So what could cause this disparity? Bugs? Illness?

Well, it turns out, the difference between these Redwoods and the others is that the smaller Redwoods were dug up

and transported away from the Redwood forests as saplings and were planted individually, far away from the Sequoia National Park. They were given as gifts to foreign dignitaries, or planted as living souvenirs on college campuses, far away from their siblings.

These Lone Redwoods receive adequate light, adequate water, adequate dirt– and yet, they never grow to as robust a height or width as their brethren.

Forester Peter Wohlleben, who is the author of the book The Hidden Life of Trees, explores in great detail how this phenomenon occurs. According to Wohlleben, trees are, in fact, fairly social beings. They rely on each other in countless ways, sharing roots and resources, and communicating chemically. The older trees of the same species shield the small ones and the young ones learn to regulate their growth and mineral intake from their larger neighbors.

This means that the impact of the absence of their tree “relatives”, as Wohlleben calls them, has deep consequences for the Lone Redwoods. A Lone Redwood is weaker, less robust, less strong. By contrast, a Redwood in a forest of Redwoods is strong and healthy.

Trees, it turns out, need to know that they are not alone.

And we humans, it turns out, are a lot like trees.

A defining characteristic of being human is that we, too, need to know that we are not alone. We are also social beings. And just like the Lone Redwoods, when we DO feel truly alone, especially in times of crisis, we suffer greatly, and it stunts and hurts us, too.

לֹא־טֹוב הְיֹות הָאָדָם לְבַדֹּו

– it’s not good for a person to be alone, as we read in our parasha last week. This is part of why solitary confinement is outlawed in many countries, because removing access to empathy and compassion from others is almost as devastating for a human as holding back food

and water. In order for us to flourish, and grow, and learn, we need to be grounded in the knowledge that we are connected. In order not only to survive, but to thrive, we need to know that our feelings are shared and legitimate, understood and affirmed by the community around us.

Just like Lone Redwoods, Lone Humans suffer greatly. We need empathy, we need compassion, and more than anything, we need to know that we are not alone.

This is not going to be a sermon with answers or solutions. This is not going to be a sermon of admonishments or calls to action. I don't have any of that.

I didn't become a rabbi because I believed I was always right, or thought I could solve the world's big problems, or because I didn't have doubts or crises of faith. I do.

I became a rabbi because I believe, deeply, in the importance of sacred accompaniment, in the power of

walking through life's darkest, most painful moments together.

Moments like this one.

The wound to Jews that was inflicted by the Hamas terrorist attacks two weeks ago is deep and raw and ongoing, and as a community and as individuals, we are suffering greatly. The brutality and the inhumane treatment of civilians of all ages is indefensible.

But this is also not going to be a sermon about terrorism. It's not going to be a sermon about military actions, about political negotiations, or about protests.

Instead, this is going to be a sermon rooted deeply in our central text, the Torah, and in God's actions and reactions during our *parasha*. It's also going to be about *us*, and about *our feelings* at this pivotal moment.

This is going to be a sermon about how the empathy and guidance and sacred accompaniment we all so desperately need can come not only from each other, but also from God and from our Torah and our tradition.

Now, I know it's a big ask, but I want us to try *not* to focus on our modern world, for a second.

I know it's almost impossible to turn away from everything our hearts are carrying at the moment, but I'd like us to really try and make the effort to step away from what we are seeing in the news and into the world of B'reishit, of Genesis, just for a few minutes: into the brand-new, baby world that was being created.

In fact, if I can be so audacious, if I can suggest something truly *chutzpadik*, what I'd really like is for us to imagine how *God* was feeling in our *parashiot* from the past two weeks.

As a side note, ust to reassure you, this isn't a sacrilegious exercise. In fact, imagining what God might have been thinking or feeling is a rabbinic practice dating back many centuries, reflected in commentaries and in Midrash.

For example, Rashi imagines God in the first days of Creation as being both strategic and adaptive, at times even in consultation with the angels. Bereishit Rabbah describes God as debating various orders of what to include in Creation, and considering alternatives, before proceeding as recorded in our scrolls.

But these rabbinic writings focus more on God's theoretical *thoughts*, not how God might have been *feeling*.

Today, we are going to imagine God's arc (different kind of arc!) of possible emotion over the first two parashiot, and then, look at what this Divine emotional journey can teach us as we navigate our own human emotional journey in the coming days and weeks.

Here goes.

In our *parasha* from last week, *parashat* Bereishit, God created everything: light and darkness, earth and sea, rocks, lizards, animals, and finally humans in God's own image.

So, let's imagine how God might have felt, at the beginning of this emotional journey through Creation.

How might God have felt, looking down on this magnificent, brand-new world? Perhaps curious, perhaps hopeful? Imagine seeing the first roses unfurl their petals, the first bolt of lightning, the first baby buffalo being born, and knowing that You had created that, YOU had done that. Yeah. Maybe God felt proud. And then imagine having a conversation for the first time, ever– the very first conversation in the history of all conversations– with the first creature with free will, with Adam HaRishon.

That must have been an incredible feeling. Absolutely exhilarating. I imagine God as feeling optimistic, hopeful, and pleased.

And from our Torah, we know that God saw it all, and said, Tov. Good. In fact, God said Tov M'od; VERY good.

But imagine, right after creating a human being, finding out, very quickly, that even though you were God, and in charge of the Universe, that that human being was not going to just do what you said, the way that the light and darkness and water and plants had.

Instead, these human creatures that You had made started disobeying, lying, having their own ideas, feeling things that had never existed before– feelings that were brand-new to the universe, like defiance, rebellion, and even shame.

We can imagine how God might have been feeling about Adam and Eve as the reality of human existence began to

take shape. Perhaps God was frustrated at the first humans' lack of deference. Perhaps God was upset, or disappointed. Perhaps all of the above.

The emotional arc continues.

What we *do* know from our text is that when God saw our sins, God wasn't pleased, and the resulting consequences and curses handed out in *Parashat* Bereishit underscore that displeasure.

The thing is, through it all in *parashat* Bereishit, God stuck with us. God was upset, yes, but God kept working with us. God kept on protecting us even when we messed up. God kept on loving us, imperfect though we were, and holding us, even as we faced the fallout of our actions in Eden, even as Cain committed the first murder and went into exile. God rolled with the punches, gave directions, and kept checking in. As we humans learned to be human, God learned how to live with the good and the bad choices that we made with our gift of free will.

That is, until we came to this week's portion, *Parashat* Noach.

In *Parashat* Noach, the emotional arc of our story takes a dramatic turn.

וַיְהִי֙ כִּֽי־הֵחֵ֣ל הָאָדָ֔ם לָרֹ֖ב עַל־פְּנֵ֣י הָאֲדָמָ֑ה וּבָנ֥וֹת יֻלְּד֖וּ לָהֶֽם

And it was that humankind spread out over the face of the Earth and had offspring….

I imagine that that must have felt good to God, to see the human family growing. I imagine God's pride or satisfaction, watching our ancestors as they were fruitful and multiplied, just like the plants and animals. God had created Creation that kept on creating. I imagine a lot of heavenly kvelling.

Except that as we grew and multiplied, that meant that our mistakes and their consequences grew and multiplied, too. The ramifications were so much bigger than they had

been in Gan Eden, with just two people. They were even bigger than the single killing of Abel by Cain.

God watched our follies multiply, and then our mistakes multiply, and then our sins, and then, watched our *evil* multiply:

וַיַּ֣רְא יְהוָ֔ה כִּ֥י רַבָּ֖ה רָעַ֣ת הָאָדָ֑ם בָּאָ֗רֶץ וְכָל־יֵ֛צֶר מַחְשְׁבֹ֥ת לִבּ֖וֹ רַ֥ק רַ֛ע כָּל־הַיּ֥וֹם׃

יהוה saw how great was human wickedness on earth—how every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil.

What must it have felt like for God, for our Creator, to be deeply invested in our ancestors, and then to have to watch them make bad decision after bad decision until they ultimately became something awful, so caught up in wickedness and evil that it became an everyday occurrence, a way of life?

How must that have felt, to go from joy and pride, to frustration, to deep, deep dismay in your Creations?

The next, heartbreaking verse says:

וַיִּנָּחֶם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־
לִבּוֹ׃

And יהוה regretted having made humankind on earth, with a sorrowful heart

Here, we don't have to use our imaginations to know how God felt. The Torah itself gives the answer: God is full of sorrow and regret. God is in pain. God is suffering.

And as the story goes on, the situation becomes far more dire, and we see where that suffering leads:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶמְחֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל
פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה

And God said, I will blot out humankind from the face of the Earth.

By the time we get to the part of Parashat Noach that we read here today, we see God becoming not only incredibly upset, and not only appalled with the state of humanity and seeing all of our evil, but we actually see God *deciding that in order to stamp out wickedness, killing us– killing ALL of us– was the only way forward.*

It takes a lot of pain to make someone, whether human or Divine, feel that kind of desire. A lot of pain. And it takes anger– justifiable, righteous anger, to reach the point where so much harm is being done that the most viable solution is the one God landed at.

We all know what happened next– forty days and forty nights of rain, flooding, Noah's family and all of the

animals in the ark. The flood filled the world for a hundred and fifty days, and God made it so that *all of humankind perished. Everyone. All adults, all elderly, all children, all youth. Everyone, gone, wiped off of the face of the Earth.*

Our Torah, commentary and Midrash don't say a lot about what God might have been feeling during the flood. There are stories of how humans must have been feeling– those on the ark, watching others die outside, and those not on the ark, desperately trying to save themselves and their families from death.

But there's not a lot about what God might have felt.

I imagine that for God, who could hear the blood of ONE person, of Abel, crying out from the Earth after being murdered by Cain, that hearing the deaths of so, so many people must have been one of the most heart-wrenching choices of Creation.

It can't have been easy, or straightforward. I imagine God as being filled with overwhelming, aching grief.

And for awhile, wickedness was destroyed, at least, mostly. But so was God's faith in humanity.

And the story could have just ended here. This could simply have been a dark chapter in our history, a painful chapter.

Except that the story doesn't end there, and for those of us here today, I'm especially glad that it didn't.

That's because right now, we, like God, have been experiencing a whole arc of emotions. Intense, painful emotions. And we need to know not only that we aren't alone in those emotions, but *that the story doesn't end here.*

Over the past two weeks, our minds and our hearts have been reeling. We, too, have been filled with pain, and with

anger, with despair, and with the need to respond with action and try to wipe out wickedness.

Now, if the story of Noah and the flood had just ended with destruction, we could still walk away from services today knowing that God understands what it means to feel anguish and to want to destroy wickedness. We could take comfort and feel affirmation in understanding that extreme anger, sorrow, and pain are not only human emotions, but also godly ones.

But the story did not stop there. And because the story did not stop there, we actually get to see something extraordinary:

Because after months and months, the water receded. The sun came out. The dry land reappeared. And God *remembered* Noah and his family. They stepped out onto the Earth, and humanity 2.0 began.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־לִבּוֹ לֹא־אֹסִף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה בַּעֲבוּר הָאָדָם

And God said: “Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done.”

Wow.

Not only do we get the reassurance from this week’s *parasha* that we are not alone as we experience pain and anger, we *also* get to see the transformation of God’s experience– from deciding to wipe out humanity, to resolving to never again do such a thing.

God went *into* the flood feeling that the only option was to kill all of us.

But God came *out* of the other side of the flood, on the other side of death and destruction in an attempt to blot

out overwhelming wickedness, *somehow* having arrived at the conclusion that never again was killing everyone going to be the answer.

What beautiful modeling it is for all of us carrying pain and anger today, and how wonderfully reassuring, to know that God, our Creator, made this emotional journey.

My dream and hope for humankind is for us to also find our way from pain to peace, just like God did. Someday.

But that day is not yet today, and our Torah doesn't give us an easy solution or map forward. Like I said, this isn't a sermon of answers.

And because we have not yet arrived at that place of peace, because there is an active flood raging in our world today, I want to focus on what the Torah *does* give us.

Our Torah gives us empathy. And compassion.

Our Torah reassures us of the most important, centering message we can hear right now: that we are *never* alone in our journey, no matter how horrific it is, because God has been there, too.

We are not alone in our anger– God has felt it, too.

We are not alone in our pain– God has felt it, too.

We are not alone in our desire to destroy wickedness– God has felt it, too.

But, we are also not alone in the knowledge that none of these feelings negates the possibility and promise of peace.

The Torah teaches us that our most painful moments are also part of a bigger journey, a bigger arc, and that even if we can't yet see the path forward, we can– and we must– believe that it can lead us to dry land and maybe even a rainbow.

We are in the thick of it now, my friends. It is raining, raining so very hard, and the floodwaters are rising.

But we are not, and we never will be, alone in this flood, or alone in our hope for peace.

God found a way through the storm, and God somehow found faith in humanity again on the other side. We can, too.

Shabbat shalom.