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Carrying Our Grief Together

The rains began softly at first. No one seemed to notice. But as it persisted, something felt different. The rain grew heavier and louder. Bolts of lightning pierced the thick, dark sky as thunder rumbled in the distance.

The water collected in the low-lying areas, rising ominously. It had nowhere to go. Soon it was waist-high, then chest-high. The roads flooded and became impassable. The people scrambled to move to higher ground, though many were swept up in the rolling tide of debris-filled water. They began to panic.

The water was moving too fast, drowning crops and animals. Soon there was no food. Illness spread.

In the distance, they could make out the massive ark that Noah had been building. How they wanted to climb aboard. But it was too far away, and impenetrable, sealed up to protect those inside.

The storm, and the flooding, was relentless. The world became watery chaos. No one survived except for Noah and his family and the animals inside the ark.

After 40 days the rain stopped. It took much longer for the waters to subside. Eventually Noah stepped out of the ark to a world transformed, barren except for bloated bodies, both human and animal. Thick, rancid mud covered the ground. The stench was unbearable.

Noah sacrificed some animals on an altar to God, and God promised never again to destroy the world. Noah then planted a vineyard, made wine, and drank until he became so intoxicated that he fell into a stupor.

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Popular imagination has transformed the story of Noah into a children's tale. Noah is a faithful man who follows God's commands. Smiling animals march two-by-two into a cozy ark. It rains, a flood wipes out all the wicked people, and the story ends with a shiny rainbow.

Jewish tradition, however, understands the story a bit differently.

The Torah describes Noah as an *ish tzadik tamim haya b'dorotav*, a righteous man who was blameless in his generation. Commentators disagree, though, about how righteous he actually was. Rabbi Yochanan argues that Noah may have been righteous in *his* generation, but had he lived in a less corrupt generation, he would not have been considered righteous at all.

The Hassidim accuse Noah of being a *tzadik im pelz* – a righteous man in a fur coat. While he could have warmed everyone around him by lighting a fire, he chose to wear a coat, warm only himself, and ignore those who were freezing.

A midrash, a rabbinic story, teaches that it took Noah 120 years to build the ark, in the hopes that the people, who were guilty of terrible injustices, would notice and atone for their misdeeds. Commentators again disagree as to whether Noah actually tried to convince the people to change their ways or remained silent.

The Zohar, a text from the Jewish mystical tradition, does not think well of Noah:

[When Noah came out of the ark]
he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed
He began crying for the world and said
"Master of the world!
If you destroyed Your world because of human sin or human fools,
then why did You create them?
One or the other You should do:
either do not create the human being
or do not destroy the world!"

How did the Blessed Holy One respond? "Foolish shepherd!"…
[Before the flood] I lingered with you and spoke to you at length
so that you would ask for mercy for the world!
But as soon as you heard that you would be safe in the ark,
the evil of the world did not touch your heart.
You built the ark and saved yourself.
Now that the world has been destroyed
you open your mouth to utter questions and pleas?
(Translation by Daniel Matt)

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Most of us do not dread a God who will create another flood, but we have our own anxieties and fears. We live with the threat of contemporary flooding, hurricanes, scorching heat, drought, tornadoes, and wildfires. We feel demoralized when we read of the mass extinction of species, climate refugees, and collapsing glaciers. We feel betrayed by our elected leaders. We

are outraged by unbridled corporate power, furious by the injustice of the world's wealthiest nations wrecking the most destruction, while the global poor are forced to suffer.

We wonder, where will the next natural disaster hit, and will it affect us?

Or put differently, in the words of the prayer, the Unetaneh Tokef, which we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

"On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,…
Who shall perish by water and who by fire."

We need not spend months crowded into an ark to feel the precariousness of our world, to fear for the future of humanity. We are fragile and vulnerable. We cannot predict what kind of world our children or grandchildren will inhabit, and it is difficult not to imagine an apocalyptic one.

Like Noah, some of us get drunk when we cannot cope with the world, or when our sorrow becomes too heavy. Others of us deny there is a problem, maintain unfounded optimism, and cut ourselves off from feeling any real emotion.

And it's not just the destruction of our planet. We fear the crumbling of democracy, political polarization, widening of economic disparity, ongoing war, and persistence of racial inequity.

In addition to these issues, we also carry with us personal loss: the end of a job, the dissolution of a relationship, illness, or the death of a loved one. We regret the decisions we made and the paths we never pursued. We are disappointed in ourselves, for our failures, and for the harm we have caused others. We are hurt by those who have betrayed our trust.

Grief—whether it is communal or individual, political or personal in nature—can be raw and heavy. When we turn away, we do not allow ourselves to process grief. Too often we shut down—to the world around us, and to individuals in our lives. We feel guilty or angry, or we regret our actions, and instead of grieving, feeling our way through, and trying to make amends if possible, we seek to avoid the pain.

How do we keep our hearts open and refuse to give in to despair?

I do not know exactly, but it seems that we must allow ourselves to grieve our broken world just like we would grieve a broken relationship. We think we cannot handle it. But we are capable of holding much more grief than we think. We are more resilient than we assume.

Grief needs to be expressed and shared. Grief is too complicated to work through on our own. Certainly, solitude has its place. But we must grieve together, and create community together. We need other people to talk us through it, to sit with us in our sadness, to witness the loss, to even challenge us at times. This is how we build trust and find our strength to keep on going.

This is how we ward off cynicism and reject the idea that we cannot change, that the world around us cannot change.

Some people use daily practices to help them cope with their grief. Meditation and prayer help us open our hearts and face the feelings as they arise. We cannot think our way through difficult emotions. These practices help us to embrace our vulnerability and tolerate uncertainty.

We also have mourning rituals. After a death, mourning is public. We gather together with loved ones, and community, to remember, to share stories, to express grief. We mark the loss with a funeral, when we sit shiva, and when we say Kaddish for a loved one. These rituals provide space for the grief.

We need more public mourning practices to mark communal losses. The queer community in the 1980s and 90s made mourning public. They created an enormous AIDS quilt to remember every person who died from the epidemic. At a time when gay men were shunned, AIDS activists and family members expressed their grief and mourned together. They brought awareness to the loss. And alongside that mourning they forced our public leaders into changing policies and funding AIDS drugs.

Over a million Americans have died from the COVID pandemic. In addition to human life, we lost our sense of safety, trust in our elected officials, social connections, financial security, and so much more. While we are eager to move on, and make these years a distant memory, we have not communally voiced our grief or marked these losses.

Perhaps we can create Jewish rituals based on the observance of Tisha B'Av, a day when we communally remember the destruction of the First and Second Temples. This day falls in July or August when the weather is hot. It's a fast day. Jews gather in synagogue, turn off the lights, sit on the floor with candles or flashlights, and hauntingly chant from the Book of Lamentations. We mourn exile and oppression.

Why not use similar rituals to mourn the destruction of our planet? Communal mourning can be a bridge from grief to action. Like the AIDS quilt, it can be transformative.

Noah must have felt unimaginable guilt when he stepped off the ark. He builds an altar to offer a sacrifice to God, but it is unclear why he is doing it. He might have been expressing his gratitude that he and his family survived; atoning on behalf of the people for the sins they committed before they perished in the flood; or atoning for his sin of silence, for refusing to challenge God or challenge the people.

When confronted with injustice, Jewish tradition is clear: we have a responsibility to protest and to dissent. To be silent is to be complicit. What if instead, Noah, like Abraham, argued with God? Or pleaded with the people to change. Maybe no one would have listened. But a few people might have. And they might have amplified Noah's one small voice and engaged others. There were possibilities, even if Noah could not articulate or even imagine them.

There are always possibilities. We simply do not know what will come next, what conversation could heal a damaged relationship, what political action could save a neighborhood.

The Unetaneh Tokef prayer that we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur reminds us that we are vulnerable. But the end teaches us that we must take responsibility for ourselves, our communities, and our world. We have to engage in teshuvah and come to terms with who we are; turn towards tefillah and open our hearts in gratitude; and give tzedakah, give generously and work towards justice. This is how we will create change.

On this Yom Kippur, let us carry our grief together, being present to it and sharing it with others.

Let us build real community and foster deep connections.

Let us find ways to mourn, privately and publicly, as individuals and as a community.

Our words matter. Our actions matter. Our world matters.

Gmar chatimah tovah.