

## How to Carry A Holy Mission (*Hint: Not Alone.*)

Parshat Noah, 5784  
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My best friend from college Taylor, a Presbyterian minister in Georgia, checked in on me again this week and my response surprised us both: “As a Jew, I don’t feel afraid for my safety, but I do feel alone, maybe more so than I ever have.”

I heard many sentiments like this from our community this week. A new member in their 20s, currently traveling abroad in Italy, wrote that “they are on high alert while traveling, and were told not to wear a kippah...among the many upsetting things to me is all the non-Jewish friends I have that haven’t reached out to me to check in and see how I’m doing. And I’m frightened to think about what they are thinking and what they might be posting on social media.”

Let me admit, gratefully, that this feeling of loneliness is not something I have regularly experienced and I consider myself a “relationship optimist”: in almost every situation, I focus on what I have in common with others. My best friend and I disagree about some of our fundamental beliefs; and yet we share so much in our approach to faith, our leadership styles and how we seek to manifest God’s presence in the world. We have brainstormed many sermons together over the years.

This week though, I felt that a chasm had opened up, a gulf between the Jewish community and the rest of the world. *Am Yisrael* has rallied together mightily, panged with grief and anxiety. The *achdut*, the solidarity has been miraculous, a deafening roar of whatsapps, calls to actions, worthy causes for donation along with stories of grief and heroism. It is not just the IDF that has mobilized; I feel that we all have, and indeed, we each have a role to play in the current crisis.

Though we have rallied together, we are also still in shock and in mourning. Many have said, and I would agree, that our entire people have been sitting shiva, or maybe we’ve now entered into Shloshim, slowly returning to our routines and workplaces, but very much not the same, and not ok.

I’ve also observed that our community’s internal noise has made the silence of others all the more stark and more painful, our feelings of loneliness more pronounced. Many people who are not part of the Jewish community - our neighbors and our co-workers don’t even know that we are in a house of mourning.

A mundane example: I got my haircut this week and after the initial pleasantries, I was burdened by a very simple choice: should I share how my and my people’s hearts have been broken or stay silent, holding my thoughts and my grief close? After some

awkward minutes of silent sitting, I finally opened up, to my barber of all people...The hug he gave me before I left was deeply healing.

The Torah offers us two models of what it means to be different and carry a holy mission forward: Noah and Avraham. Noah's narrative is tragic, his life defined by alienation. Avraham too confronts a world on fire and is the consummate iconoclast; and yet he is able to establish important connections, build bridges and bring an awareness of God into the larger world.

What can we learn from each of these biblical figures about how to carry (and not carry) a holy mission forward?

From the first familiar verse, Noah is portrayed as someone at odds with his society:

אַלֶּה תוֹלְדֵי־נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֶרֶתּוֹ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ:

*This is the line of Noah.—Noah was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generation; Noah walked with God.—*

Though Noah walked with God and was righteous, he probably had trouble making small talk or finding anyone to go have a beer with. The midrash (Breishit Rabba 30:7) paints this dissonance vividly:

אִישׁ, כָּל מְקוֹם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר אִישׁ, צַדִּיק וּמִמְחָה, שֶׁכָּל מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה הָיָה נֹחַ נוֹטֵעַ אֲרָזִים וְקוֹצֵצֵן, אָמְרוּ לוֹ לָמָּה כִּדִּין, אָמַר לָהֶן כֹּה אָמַר מֶאֱרִיָּה דְּעֵלְמָא דְּהוּא מִיָּתִי מְבוֹלָא עַל עֵלְמָא, אָמְרוּ לִיה אֵין אִיתִי מְבוֹלָא לָא אֶתִּי אֵלָא עַל בֵּיתִיה דְּהוּא גְּבָרָא,

*“[Noah was a righteous] man [ish]” – everywhere that the word ‘ish’ is stated, it is a righteous man who rebukes. As all one hundred and twenty years, Noah would plant cedars and chop them down [for timber for the ark]. They said to him: ‘Why are you doing this?’ He said to them: ‘So said the Master of the world, that He is bringing a flood upon the world.’ They said to him: ‘If He brings a flood, it will come only upon the house of that man!’*

Noah is laughed at and ridiculed by much of his life. And then, of course, he leaves the rest of humanity behind him, taking company with his family, the lions, the lambs and every other species.

Compare all this to Avraham, who is also bestowed with a spiritual mission. Yet our sages portray Avraham very differently from Noah. In Parshat Lech Lecha, Rashi comments on the phrase,

וַיֵּקַח אַבְרָם... וְאֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה בְּחָרָן..

*Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran.*

**אשר עשו בחרן.** שְׁהִכְנִיטָן תַּחַת כְּנָפֵי הַשְּׂכִינָה; אַבְרָהָם מְגִיר אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים וְשָׂרָה מְגִירַת הַנָּשִׁים

*Rashi: "Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women..."*

Avraham was an evangelist of sorts, according to this midrash. He had followers and took people with him on this journey.

Other snapshots of Avraham add to this profile as someone deeply connected with everyone around him, as we'll read in the coming weeks: Avraham rescues his nephew Lot who is held captive (Breishit 14), breaks bread with King Malkitzedek (Breishit 14), runs to greet his angelic visitors (Breishit 18:2), and eventually negotiates with a local chieftain to secure *ma'arat ha'machpelah* (Breishit 19), the ancestral burial plot for Sarah.

Avraham's mission was to forge a relationship with God and bring this awareness of God into the world around him. At every step of the way, he reached out to those around him, whether friend or foe, stranger or king.

Noach did the opposite, turning inward. After leaving the ark, the Torah describes a new covenant between God and humanity, which was to be transmitted through Noah. We can think of this code - the שבע מצוות בני נח, *the seven Noahide laws* - as a preview of the Torah, intended for the entire world (9:4-7):

The seven Noahide laws included guidelines to create a just and peaceful society, a society that had a system of courts, opposed idolatry, blasphemy, and moved away from barbaric actions of forbidden sexual relations, murder/bloodshed, theft, and consuming the limb of a living animal.

What was Noah's response to this mission? He shut down, and even worse, turned to a negative coping mechanism, getting drunk (Breishit 9:20-21):

וַיִּחַל נֹחַ אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטֶּע כֶּרֶם: וַיִּשְׁתַּי מִן־הַיֵּין וַיִּשְׁכָּר וַיִּתְּגַל בְּתוֹךְ אֹהֶלָה:

*Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent.*

Avraham breaks bread with others; Noah drinks alone. It is quite a contrast indeed.

Let's be generous to Noah for a moment, as we think about our own world, which feels like it has been destroyed and very much needs rebuilding.

Noah was probably traumatized. He witnessed breathtaking destruction and must have felt alone and angry, and I want to validate that for Noah and for us as well:

We can and perhaps should feel angry, furious about what has happened in Israel - that somehow in 2023 we have turned back the clock to other parts of Jewish history and witnessed a murderous pogrom, in Israel.

We are right to be angry by the responses from innumerable public institutions that cannot deign to use the words "Hamas" or terrorist or murder in a public statement, and we can be angry about the lack of response as well, the deafening silence that many of us hear.

Anger and loneliness are two of the hallmarks of mourning, and it is because of these feelings that Jewish tradition insists that the broader community comes to visit a Shiva house.

We may feel angry, but I believe we are not alone. We are in mourning, and just as in a house of mourning, many of our neighbors and coworkers don't know what to say. Unfair as it is, there are times when we have to open ourselves up for the support we need, even when we're most vulnerable.

During my haircut, I slowly shared that I was devastated about the attack on October 7th; that I know someone who is a hostage; that my community is in mourning and racked with anxiety about the months ahead.

I also shared that I was and am grief stricken over the murder of Wadea Al-Fayoume, the 6 year old Palestinian-American not much older than Yara, just as I am grief stricken over the loss of life of Palestinians in Gaza who are used as human shields by Hamas.

This is a lot of grief to hold, and we can't hold it alone. We need people to make a shiva call to our community, which has become a house of mourning.

And so, I want to conclude with a challenge and an invitation. Next week we will begin the story of Avraham with Parshat Lech Lecha. It is the beginning of the story of the Jewish people's relationship with God, but Avraham teaches us that this relationship is meant to impact others beyond the Jewish community as well.

With this frame in mind, let us reach out to other people we know - especially our non-Jewish friends, neighbors and colleagues and invite them into this spiritual home

next Shabbat. Invite them to join us next Shabbat morning and be with us, sing with us, and stand with us.

Of course, it can't be every co-worker or neighbor, but please, if you feel comfortable, pick one. I would also add that it probably shouldn't be someone you feel angry toward, but rather, someone who might be able to lend support if they only knew what to do or so.

I received a call this week from Carol Ann Edwards Nasser - a long time friend of the shul, the Newberger family and so many others. She called to offer support and asked what she could do. I thanked her for the call and told her to call other people as well, and to tell her non-Jewish friends to do the same.

We are the descendants of *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our forefather. Carrying this holy mission is hard work, and this may be the hardest moment our community has faced in a generation or more. Avraham didn't do it alone and neither should we.

I invite you to participate in "bring a friend shul day" next Shabbat, Parshat Lech Lecha.

May we be supported by our friends in the coming days; may our community and Israel be strengthened, and may our world become the abode of righteousness and holiness that God intended, so long ago.