

Building Our Inner Ark To Navigate Life's Turbulent Waters

In March of 2021, when our twins' b'nei mitzvah rolled around, we spent a good deal of time looking through the thousands of digital pictures and videos we have taken since they were born for the ever-important b'nei mitzvah montage. As I looked through these pictures of our (of course) adorable children, I found myself surprised at just how much I could not recall from those very early years. The truth is, while having three children within two years was an incredible blessing, it was also, in a word- chaotic. Feeding, bathing, sleep schedules, traveling, balancing work and home obligations, and ensuring that our new family was healthy, safe, and cared for was not an easy task. The thing that got us through (in addition to our partnership, and the love and support of family and friends) was our ability to act deliberately, with intention, day in and day out- as we tried to create some sort of order out of the craziness that was our lives. As best we could we focused on organizing feeding schedules, naps, bathtime and everything in between. This *intentional structure* helped guide us through the incredible blessing of being new parents to three small children, even if and when things didn't go exactly as planned.

The birth or arrival of something new – be it a child, a new relationship, a new job, a new school, or a move – is often accompanied by feelings of unsettledness. In these transitional moments it is not unusual for our emotions to be on overload, to struggle

with anxiety, uncertainty, and trepidation as we enter into the unknown. There is a Hasidic term for this type of feeling, *pezirat ha-nefesh*, literally, a scattering of the soul.

It is very easy for our souls to feel all over the place when something new comes into being. Some of us may even be feeling this today, as we prepare to leave one year, and enter into a New Year, as we anticipate so much that is unknown. What new things will we encounter and experience in the year ahead? In our own lives, in our country, and in our world? This question, especially coming after the recent years of upheaval caused by the pandemic, likely fills many of us with this sense of unsettledness, of *pezirat ha'nefesh*, of our souls feeling scattered.

It is appropriate that Rosh Hashanah is connected to our sacred shared narrative of the creation – specifically creation of the universe, and more generally the creation of humanity.¹ Both of these moments of creation were accompanied by chaos. Just listen to the very first verse of the whole Torah:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם

When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being *tohu va'vohu*, unformed and void (chaotic) with darkness over the surface of the deep... (Genesis 1:1-2).

¹ RH10b, Vayikra Rabbah 29:1

What does God do with this *tohu va'vohu*, with this unformed darkness that is infinite and all encompassing? God puts the chaos in “order,” imposing a structure in the hopes that creation will survive. This version of the creation story is not about creating something from nothing (*ex-nihilo*), *this version* is about organizing and ordering primordial chaos. This is no easy task, even for God.

The creation of the first human beings also came full of complications and challenges. According to one midrash, it is just hours after being created that Adam and Eve eat from the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Although they are ultimately forgiven, as we, their descendants, hope to be at this time of year, God’s initial attempt at creating humanity does not seem to go very smoothly. It only takes a few chapters into our story for Adam and Eve to lie to God and for Cain to kill Abel. By the time we get to Noah and his family, we read that God, “regretted making humankind on earth” (Genesis 6:6).

We know what happens next. Chaos, flooding, destruction. It is worth noting here that the disorder of that moment is, once again, countered with an effort to create order. As God is preparing to bring the floods, God gives Noah a way to make it through, with specific instructions on how to build the ark. So Noah and his family start building a

tevah, an ark, something meant to offer protection against the storm that will soon be raging all around.

We can all imagine what Noah and his family must have been feeling, as most of us are familiar with that sense of worry and unsettledness that comes along with an approaching storm. Many of us have actually lived through this multiple times in our lives, including when we experienced the landfall of Superstorm Sandy ten years ago.

But beyond the arrival of potentially deadly weather episodes, many other moments of newness and uncertainty can feel like impending storms and can understandably cause us a sense of worry and unsettledness:

- New parents coming home with a newborn entering into a world that is entirely different than it was just days before.
- Newly married couples, entering into a life filled with hope, but also with uncertainty.
- People who are grieving, entering into an entirely new and strange world without the physical presence of a loved one.
- People who are going through a divorce, entering into an entirely new phase of their life.

- People who are making a career transition, struggling to acclimate to a new job and a new work environment.

Any one of these experiences can bring feelings of joy, feelings of sorrow, or a mixture of the two. But they reliably bring feelings of unsettledness as we anticipate what could lie ahead.

As we gather today to mark the day of the world's creation, as we begin a New Year with so much unknown, I know many of us find ourselves in a moment of unsettledness and uncertainty. Between a global pandemic, a country that many of us don't recognize, societal assumptions and norms that seem to be changing all around us, religious assumptions and norms that continue to change all around us, not to mention our own personal moments of change and transition, it may seem to many of us like we are actively moving through a storm, and we are not quite sure when the waters will settle. Not quite sure what, if anything, we can do ourselves to feel more "settled."

Rosh Hashana is the ideal time to consider just what might we be able to do, not only to create ourselves anew, but also to order our lives and to settle our souls. Is there some way that we might be able to bring a sense of order to the chaos surrounding us, to our

feelings of unsettledness? How might we work to spiritually ground ourselves in a world that is filled with so many unknowns?

For this, I want to share a wonderful text that I first encountered during my recent two years of study with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. The text is from a series of books called the Netivot Shalom, written by Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky, who was also known as the Slonimer Rebbe. Rabbi Berezovsky explains the secret to surviving a world of chaos and corruption, the secret to surviving the storms of life, the secret to handling our feelings of *pezirat ha-nefesh*, of a scattered soul, lies in our ability to proactively navigate the waters that threaten to drown us. The thing that will enable us to successfully move into and through what is new and unknown is an ability to each build our own personal arks. The Slonimer Rebbe explains:

*The Torah starts out with the story of the Flood in all of its details...not because the Torah is a book of stories, telling us what happened [but as instruction]...the Flood did not come about as a form of punishment. Rather, [it was] the corruption of that generation [that] caused the ruin of all existence..."**God saw the earth, and here: it had gone to ruin**" (Gen. 6:2): the blessed Holy One saw that the whole of creation was so corrupt that it no longer had the capacity to sustain itself....*

Why does the Torah contain the story of the Flood in the first place? Not as a history lesson, but as a teaching, a warning, that sometimes a society can become so corrupt, that it no longer has the capacity to sustain itself. Sometimes, things are so corrupt and chaotic, that *because of our human choices*, destruction follows. That is frightening, but the Netivot Shalom points out that *it is also empowering* because from the beginning

we are taught that we have human agency. It was not God who caused the flood, the Slonimer Rebbe reminds his reader, it was us. And just as we as human beings have the power to destroy, so too do we have the power to build. The Netivot Shalom continues:

*...while the story of the Flood teaches us how far corruption can extend – that one can sin in their innermost chamber and nevertheless introduce vice and pollution into the whole of creation – **the Torah also instructs us how to repair even the state of the generation of the Flood: by means of Noah's ark.** Just as Noah's ark functioned with regard to the whole of the world, **so too it functions for us as individuals:** the self-control necessary to prevent the spread of such corruption. Even if one of us might sin, it will not lead to this level of corruption, because there will be one pure spot amidst all of those things that spread corruption ...*

So, just as we have the power, as individuals, to bring about corruption and chaos, we also have the power to discover a point of light, that one pure spot within ourselves that becomes our source for self-control, for repairing, and for building. Once we can learn to recognize that light, and to harness that light, we gain the capacity to build our own arks, to regain control, and to redirect ourselves in a healthy and stable direction.

How exactly does this ark-building work? Where are we to begin if we seek to move through the chaotic waters of life feeling a bit more settled, a bit less vulnerable, a bit more protected, loved, and secure, as we begin a New Year together?

We have to look deep within ourselves, to find the inner reservoir of our spirit, the inner spiritual strength, that we all have but we don't always exercise. The Netivot

Shalom explains:

*...when we fall into a state like the generation of the Flood, where the earth was corrupt before God; when it seems to us as if we have sunk to the lowest possible level and have become fully corrupted; when it seems as if our own small world were engulfed in corruption...the response to this is: **"Make yourself an ark"** (Gen. 6:14) How so? ...in each of us there is some little extra (od me'at) that is not wicked. **That is, in each of us there is a seed of vitality** (cf. Zohar I 83a), **and it is from this seed that we are able to return to rebuild our spiritual worlds.** It is an expression of God's love for us that **God planted in our very being a spark of the divine that provides us with exceptional powers, such that no matter how coarse we may become we still have it in our power to rise up again by virtue of that spark in us.***

This is our Noah's ark. This divine spark, this little extra that is not wicked, this is the ark that can save us from our generation of Flood. We can see this in the example of someone devoted to one mitzvah or spiritual practice (ḥasid ledavar eḥad) – who keeps this one mitzvah or practice, never letting go even in the worst situations. This one act is her Noah's ark that saves them from whatever negative situations they may find themselves.

*Think of it this way: it is like someone drowning in the ocean when a piece of the shipwreck floats by, and [grabbing it] is saved. **This is like when we have one practice which we keep no matter the circumstances or situation, by which we are saved from all the worst circumstances....** Contained within the capacity to make choices given us by the blessed Holy One...is that even in the worst situations – even when "the earth becomes corrupt before God" – we have the power to return to our root-source. And, this power is signified in the image of Noah's ark.*

So what are we to do? How are we to survive the chaos and confusion? **Build an inner ark** that can save us even in the worst moments.

Each one of us has a spark of goodness, an inner strength, a seed of vitality that can build spiritual worlds, that can make you stronger, that can help you navigate through uncharted waters. The Slonimer Rebbe reminds us that, if we can tap into that spark, if we can channel that inner strength to do something, just one thing, constructively and consistently, one mitzvah to better ourselves or our world- we will have built a lifeline to hold onto.

I am not surprised that the core concept of this text spoke to me quite profoundly. I am someone who likes order. I like to make the bed each day. I like my shirts hanging on the closet by color, my clothes folded neatly in the drawer, and my desk and inbox cleaned off each week before I enter into Shabbat. I chose a career, and a lifestyle, that includes a lot of rules that provide quite a bit of order in my daily life. But proactively creating an inner feeling of order is not always so easy. Sometimes, we just get too overwhelmed and we are not sure where to begin, what to hold onto, what to do to provide us the structure to move through the challenge of any given day or any given moment.

The Neitvot Shalom reminds us: think of Noah. He built an ark. *You* can also build an ark. *Just find one thing, just one mitzvah to hold onto, one thing to do consistently to get you through each day.*

As I have shared from this bima before, I did not have the easiest childhood. Navigating my parents' divorce, and then losing three grandparents and a parent all by the age of twelve, was definitely chaotic and unsettling. I don't think it is an accident that I found Judaism in general, and the practice of daily prayer in particular, early in my teenage years. I don't think it was an accident that the first religious practice I took on more intensely, even before my Shabbat observance, was daily tefilah, daily prayer.

For over thirty years, rain or shine, minyan or no minyan, at home, in synagogue, or wherever I happen to be on any given day, I make sure to wrap myself in my tallit and in my tefillin. This tradition, these mitzvot, definitely ground me each day. I have held on to this one concrete thing for decades, to keep me steady, and to bring order and structure alongside the rising of the sun each day. It is one spiritual practice that continually allows me to return to the root source of all, to God; to myself, my family, and my intention to live a life grounded in gratitude, humility, and generosity. It is one piece of my inner ark that helps keep me afloat.

How about you? What is one practice, one spiritual discipline, one Jewish tradition that you might be able to commit to doing each day in the year ahead? What is one thing that you might be able to do consistently to build and strengthen your inner ark, to keep

you afloat, to strengthen you in preparation for the hard times, the storms, that will inevitably come?

I will have much more to say about this tomorrow, but the one thing that is clear to me from this text is that if we are going to build an inner ark, if we are going to reach deep inside ourselves to find that point of strength that can help get us through the new beginnings, the unknown, the daily challenges of life – we have to be willing to work on it regularly.

We have not gathered together in this space, for one single service, since September of 2019, three years ago. That is crazy. There has been so much turbulence in the world, in America, and in our personal lives that many of us are just beginning to feel a sense of stability, a sense of “normalcy” again. But many of us are also tired, exhausted, and even afraid. When we consider our personal losses with our collective ones, it just seems like too much sometimes, and it may feel like we are constantly at risk of drowning.

Along comes this ancient wisdom reminding us of our own strength, our own capacity to stay afloat through building an inner ark. Integrating a spiritual practice, a discipline, each day can ground you and can help keep you afloat whether the waters are calm,

rough, or somewhere in between on any given day. This can and will look different for every one of us. For me it started with my daily prayer rituals. For you maybe it is adding some of our traditional prayers into your routine when you wake up in the morning, or when you go to sleep at night. Or maybe it is saying a bracha every time you sit down to a meal. It could be spending time each day writing out a list of things you are grateful for. Or perhaps it is making a daily phone call to a parent or a sibling who you now only sporadically connect with.

According to Midrash Tanhuma, it took Noah quite a bit of time and effort to build the ark. God had instructed Noah to build the ark from cedar wood, so the first thing that Noah had to do was plant some cedar trees. Passersby would mock Noah, and ridicule him for his ridiculous beliefs and this crazy plan. But Noah was not deterred. Noah knew the storm was coming, and he knew that the only way to protect against the storm was to keep building. So, he watered the cedars, day after day, until finally, they were ready to be used as wood for building the ark. When the flood came, Noah, his family, and the animals were saved-*because Noah prepared*. Noah did the hard work, patiently, tirelessly, slowly and methodically- **Noah built an ark**. And in so doing, he was able to hear the voice of God more clearly, and avoid being drowned by the raging waters that threatened all around.

We must remember that chaos can only be countered by creating spiritual order in our lives. It may seem to us that storms are raging all around, and many of us may worry that new storms, of all sorts, are lurking on the horizon. As we begin this new year together, let us each dedicate ourselves to a practice of building, a practice of preparation, a practice of spiritual discipline, to meet the challenges that have yet to unfold in our lives. If we are willing to do this work and build this structure, we will have learned more than how to simply stay afloat. We will also come to discover that each passing storm offers us an opportunity, a chance for renewal, a chance for a fresh beginning, a chance to encounter the blessings of our lives that are often hidden just beneath the surface.

So when the Yamim Noraim are over, don't just pick up a hammer to build a sukkah, consider just how you want to build your own, personal ark this year. *Shanah Tovah.*