

“Escaping to the Vineyard”

Hope. Promise. Anticipation. Perhaps these are some of the emotions that relate to God’s experience in creating the world. While God doesn’t exhibit the same characteristics as humans, defining these emotions can help us relate to a Divine Presence in the world that is filled with compassion and care.

After the creation of the world, things were looking good. No longer did “tohu v’vohu” chaos occupy precious space. There was order. Day and night, sea and land. God gave 110% into making creation as good and as perfect as possible. But, then, humans and the concept of free will come into play. Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, causing them to be exiled from the Garden of Eden forever. Cain kills his brother Abel, causing Cain and his descendants to be exiled as well. After 10 generations, God can’t take anymore.

So the only viable solution is start over again. With the help of Noah, God instructs him to build an ark to rid the earth of all of the “hamas,” lawlessness and corruption. For, Torah teaches that “noach eish tzadik tamim hayah b’dorotav- Noah was a righteous man in his time.” Noah was even privileged to walk with God. With Noah’s strength and courage, God puts a plan in place.

The story is familiar to us. Noah’s family and his 3 sons enter the ark along with 2 of every type of animal. What we don’t see is any true communication from Noah. After all of the instructions are given, we read that Noah followed God’s commandments. Period.

Questioning and debating are a huge part of our tradition. Could Noah have been brave enough to ask God why the need for the flood? Was God testing Noah, hoping he would stand up for humanity? Could Noah have asked about another option to help bring about peace? And, what about the rest of the world? Did they not see the building of the ark happening around them? Wouldn’t they question who was being allowed to enter and why?

So many questions that we are unable to answer. But, we continue to study and reflect on the lessons we gain from this story. Perhaps the most difficult section of the entire flood episode is what happens once the waters have dried. After seeing the rainbow and departing from the ark, Noah seeks refuge. He doesn’t have a conversation with his wife or children. We don’t read about him releasing the animals he has saved. Rather, he rushes to escape and plants a vineyard. While Noah is aware of the skills necessary to till the soil and plant the grapes, Torah tells us that he becomes intoxicated. Why is this detail necessary?

Wine while is a symbol of joy and celebration in our tradition, in this story it appears to be a method of escape for Noah. As modern readers, we can appreciate the nuance being told by Noah’s experience. Some commentators note that this was not the first time Noah drank too much. After all, he knew how to plant a vineyard. It was the first thing he did after being in the ark for 40 days. And he didn’t drink moderately, Torah specifically tells us that he became drunk. Was Noah an alcoholic? We recognize today that alcoholism is a real and serious disease. We also know that human beings are very capable of rationalizing behavioral patterns, disguising and hiding them in creative ways.

Mental health challenges are not new. While typically our community has been very silent about the many issues that affect one's mental and spiritual health, we see that even in Torah they have been part of our story.

Noah finds an unhealthy way of coping through what must have been a deeply traumatic experience. It must have been quite difficult to do the work necessary to build the ark. Noah had to remain strong as a husband and father. He had to manage the entire operation. Noah was also witness to the death of all the rest of creation that wasn't saved in the ark. The stress and trauma must have been severe. Maybe Noah himself was predisposed to develop clinical depression or other mental illness. We cannot know exactly what caused Noah to turn to alcohol. But, today, we can understand some helpful and appropriate ways to respond.

In recent years, we have made great strides in the areas of inclusion. The larger Jewish community and Congregation Beth Israel have responded in many productive ways. Jewish Family Service has been our partner. Now, its support staff of counselors and social workers has grown. It is there, readily available with resources for individuals and families. Without shame, discomfort, or stigma, conversations on mental health are emerging within our community. Programs and workshops are being organized to assist those family members and caretakers by providing awareness to each of us. Much like Noah, who was known as a tzadik in his time, a truly righteous person, he buried his issues and could not confront them. With compassion and concern we can assist a loved one or a friend directly. Here is when we begin the path of healing and rebuilding for them and for us.

Responding in proactive ways to the needs of others is a necessity in today's world. To be an active listener is to take the first step in being present for someone who seeks help and assistance. Getting there takes training and time. Luckily, there is a program for this. Known as "Mental Health First Aid," the training is similar to CPR. It helps individuals become more aware of signs of distress, relating to mental health and substance addiction. Through the process, a trained mental health first aid responder can assist someone in distress and gain important tools for personal balance and well-being. Continuing to break down the stigma associated with mental illness starts with these important resources. In partnership with Jewish Family Service, Congregation Beth Israel will host this valuable training session beginning next Sunday, November 10. I hope that you'll plan to join me in participating as we educate ourselves and assist in the welfare of our entire community. Brochures and fliers are available at the Membership Table after the service.

Returning to the Torah reading cycle again reminds us of the hope and promise of what can be. Noah's reaction to the flood forces us to see his hardship and suffering. He turned to alcohol where he thought he could escape and find solace. Torah tells us that Noah lived for 350 years after the flood. While we don't learn any more about how Noah filled the rest of his days, we can imagine that left untreated, there were likely many more episodes when he felt low and depressed with nowhere to turn for help.

Our Bible teaches us about the importance of wine and the dangers of alcohol when we read in the Book of Psalms that "wine cheers the hearts of humans," (Ps. 104:15) and from the Book of Proverbs that wine should be avoided for those in positions of authority. (Proverbs 31:4) Confronting our problems in the most effective way is to ask for help and assistance. We must recognize our own limitations and help each person find the healing and peace they deserve.

Let this be the year when we break down the stereotypes, shame, and stigma associated with all those who are in need of healing. Let us acknowledge that suffering exists in many shapes and forms. And, let us each do our part to grant ourselves and one another the help, support, and acceptance we all need. May we learn from Noah's story as we stand strong in promoting healthy well-being for all of God's creations everywhere. Amen. Please Rise.