

Parashat Noach
October 16, 2015

I took a mini-vacation this week. I didn't go anywhere, but I took a few days off from my regular life, mostly to catch up from the month of Tishrei. I didn't do anything particularly exciting - unless you count putting away the Sukkah, going to the dentist, and cleaning out my closet as "exciting". I didn't realize this until recently, but just as I ignored my email for most of the week, it turns out I ignored my feelings for most of the week too.

If I'm being honest, I probably started ignoring those emotions about 2 weeks ago, when Eitam and Naama Henkin were murdered in front of their children, while driving home from a Sukkot celebration. The papers reported that Naama died instantly in the passenger seat, but Eitam was able to get out of the car, open the back door, get his kids out of the backseat and tell them to run, before collapsing in the street where he was shot again and ultimately died.

Imagining that scene, and the unimaginable loss that their families now face, almost did me in.

Between then and now, there have been countless terror attacks in Israel. So many so that when I check Facebook or the newspaper, it's often hard to tell if I'm seeing a new story or if it's the same report I read an hour ago.

So on my mini-vacation from regular life, I inadvertently took a vacation from being the empathetic, emotional human-being that I strive to be. I protected myself from the pain and outrage. I put up a wall and tried not to imagine what it would feel like to be in Israel right now. To be a parent in Israel right now. I shut down and mostly stayed quiet.

There are many reasons why that was the wrong move - least of which is that ignoring problems, it turns out, doesn't make them go away.

But the real reason it was the wrong move is that people need us to speak up. It took a few days, but I finally began to get the message from my Israeli friends that I had been too quiet. They were feeling the deafening silence of my (of our collective) lack of words this week.

Usually, when we talk about speaking up about Israel, we're talking about calling out the media, ensuring that Israel's story is told, and protecting Israel's image. This week, our Israeli friends just needed our empathy. They needed to hear that we're hurting and scared too; that we understand, at some level, what they're going through; and that we care about them.

Tradition tells us that Noah spent 120 years building his ark. 120 years is an entire lifetime of years. Why so long? God gave him 120 years to build the ark, in the hope that he might notice the world around him and work to fix it.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe said that Noah was given his name, which means "rest" or "comfort", in part because of his tremendous mediocrity. Noah would not go beyond his comfort zone, extend himself to the people around him, or grow from the challenges God placed in his path. Unlike Abraham, who fiercely argued with God to spare humanity, Noah complacently, dutifully, built his ark, one nail and one piece of wood at a time.

We have no tales of Noah's attempt to help his neighbors emerge from their wickedness and repent. We have no insight into what he imagined would happen to his community, once the ark was finished and the flood waters came. And we

have no sense of his internal struggle (or lack there of) about the immorality that surrounded him.

But after this week's violence, I can understand if his desire was to shut down and look inward. The world is a big scary place, and this week it felt like I was powerless to make any impact. So I made a mistake and stopped trying, stopped feeling, and wished I could stop caring.

I wonder when Noah stopped feeling.

Tradition gives Noah a hard time for his behavior because he wasn't the empathetic, emotional person he should have been - and he was given plenty of opportunities to do so.

Let's not be Noah. Let's continue to dream about a world where our friends don't eye strangers with suspicions, cross the street when they hear Arabic spoken, and wonder whether or not it's safe to bring their kids to day care. Let's continue to feel, to hurt, and to cry - together. And let's make sure that we're reassuring our Israeli cousins that we're here for them.

Wishing us all a Shabbat of peace. Shabbat Shalom.