

Building an Ark in the Midst of a Flood: Mindfulness Practices for Staying Afloat James Jacobson-Maisels

We are living in an overwhelming time brought on by both a plague and a host of social and political upheavals which have disrupted our daily lives, upended our institutions, crashed our economies, and caused devastating losses of lives. In the face of these unfolding crises, many of us feel overwhelmed, like it's all just too much. Too much uncertainty, too much to handle, too many demands, too many emotions, too much pressure, too many thoughts, too many decisions, too many people in one small house, too much isolation, and too much fear.

This “too much” feeling is familiar to many of us. Yet at a moment when this feeling is so intense, how do we stay clear and connected to ourselves, one another, and the divine? How do we not give in to fear? How do we act responsibly to protect ourselves and others and bring transformation and change without getting lost in despair or desperation or falling into complacency?

While the Covid-19 pandemic may feel unprecedented to us, this degree of uncertainty and vulnerability, the sense of overwhelm, was not foreign to our ancestors. Indeed, it was once an assumed part of human life. Our ancestors faced plagues, expulsions, wars, and upheavals, and used the wisdom of their Judaism to meet these daunting challenges. In that tradition, I want to present here some of the ways the Jewish tradition has given us to cope with the overwhelm that we can feel in such moments.

***Mayim Rabim*—The Flood**

One of the most powerful images of overwhelm in our texts can be found in Psalm 32: “Therefore let every pious one pray to You, when he is found, that the rushing mighty waters (*mayim rabim*) not overtake him” (Ps. 32:6). This image of rushing mighty waters, *mayim rabim*, is later taken up in the Hasidic tradition as a way to describe that moment when unwanted and unhelpful thoughts, emotions, and sensations threaten to swamp us, an experience the Hasidic tradition calls *makhshavot zarot* (alien states of consciousness). This image of flooding conveys our internal sense of being lost in a wave of thought or emotion. It recalls that primal biblical image of the flood which threatens “to destroy all flesh which has the breath of life within it” (Gen. 6:17). Indeed, it can feel like “the wellsprings of the vast deep have broken forth and the floodgates of the sky have broken open” (Gen. 2:11). We can be engulfed by a range of emotions (anger, desire, confusion, hurt, anxiety), by the recognition of the basic and profound uncertainty and instability of our world, or by excessive and obsessive thought (rehearsing, fantasy, planning, worrying, fixing). Someone says something that feels hurtful, critical, or threatening, and we are filled with anger, self-blame, or shame. Your boss mentions that the company is in trouble, for example, and the mind starts spinning out of control wondering if you are going to be laid off, what you will do, how you and your family will cope; the chest tightens, the heart speeds up, and there is a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach.

R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe (1889-1943), provides us with three metaphors to describe how we might experience this flood of thought and emotion. Sometimes,

he tells us, we feel as if we are caught in a slingshot, flung in all directions, unable to orient ourselves. At other times, we might feel like we're drowning, sinking to the bottom of a swamp. Or we may simply feel so overwhelmed that we shut down. It is as if, he says, piles of garbage have been dumped on top of our soul and heart, smothering our emotions—both joyful feelings and painful ones—or blanketing us in a dulling anxiety (*Hakhsharat HaAvrekhim*, §1, pp. 4-5). These are all versions of the *mayim rabim*, the great waters, that threaten to overwhelm us, leaving us feeling lost and destabilized.

When we are caught in one of these states, we often have one of three responses: Lashing, Thrashing, or Shutting Down.

When we lash out, we yell, criticize, and blame (ourselves or others), become defensive or spiteful. Our body may become tight, our muscles tense. Our reserves of patience are low. So when our partner does that thing we find annoying, or our child refuses to listen, or our colleague drops the ball on the project due tomorrow, we react, lashing out at them, or fuming and ruminating internally.

At other times we start to thrash, desperately trying to regain control and balance. The Baal Shem Tov (known as the Besht, 1700-1760, the founder of Hasidism) describes an image of a person lost in *makhshavot zarot* (foreign mind states) as one drowning in a river, flailing and thrashing their arms to keep from sinking (Keter Shem Tov, §215, p. 122-3). We anxiously scroll through news updates on our phones, as if that will somehow make us feel safer and more empowered. Or we become increasingly controlling—with ourselves and everyone around us—desperately trying to make sure everything is taken care of, everything is in order, and everything will be all right. Of course that thrashing, as with the drowning person, is not an effective means of keeping us afloat. But at the moment we don't know what else to do.

Or we shut down. It's all just too much, too overwhelming, so we just stop feeling anything at all. We burrow into that pile of garbage the Piaseczner described. We may feel numb, anxious, depressed, or like we're in a fog or a daze.

So what do we do when we are flooded? The Torah already tells us: We build an ark. We create something that can keep us afloat so we can ride out the waves of the flood. The word for ark in Hebrew, *teivah*, can also mean "word," and the Hasidic masters understood the words of our prayers as the ark which allows us to stay afloat in the midst of the flood (Ephraim of Sudylkow, *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim*, Noah, d.h. U-Petah).

What spiritual tools and practices might serve as our ark in these challenging times? When we can't find shelter from the storm, how might we attain buoyancy and clarity that allow us to ride out the flood without getting swamped? In the following, I want to introduce four concrete practices from the Jewish tradition and contemporary meditative traditions that can help us build an ark in times of challenge.

Awareness

The first practice is simply that of awareness. The Piaseczner Rebbe teaches that when we bring a powerful embodied awareness to our experience, what he calls *mahshava hazaka*, then we are able to be present, open, and loving with our emotions without getting overwhelmed by them or shutting down (Hakhaharat HaAvreikhim, pp. 30-31). For instance, we have an important project due tomorrow that we don't feel we've done well enough. Anxiety starts to arise in us and feels like it might soon get out of control. One hand moves toward chocolate and the other reaches to turn on some show or see what someone has posted to dull and distract us from this unpleasant emotion. Yet instead of drowning in the anxiety, we can bring a grounded awareness to the anxiety itself—noticing the racing thoughts, the fluttering in the tummy, the tightness of the chest—and compassionately holding all of that experience in a loving presence as if it were a crying child. Rather than undoing you, this mode of relating stirs compassion and care and grounds you in your own strength and clarity, your ability to be with whatever arises. Rather than turning toward some unhelpful habit to avoid the emotions, you can make clear, non-panicked choices about what, if anything, you should be doing now to make the project better, or whether you have done enough and it is time to let it go until tomorrow.

Standing outside of our experience, we can extend a stick to the part of ourselves that is drowning in the swamp, still the frenetic motion of the slingshot, or gently clear away the garbage pile to allow the tender voice of the soul to come forth. Rather than letting our rising emotions spiral out of control, we can intervene before they overwhelm us—not to shut the emotions down, but rather to open to them with some buoyancy and clarity. This way, what might have become a flood of incapacitating emotions instead becomes a cleansing river, as the Piaseczner describes it (R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Bnei Machshava Tovah*, p. 27), that allows our feelings to simply move through us in a way that is enlivening and liberating.

It is in this sense that the Torah tells us that the ark must have an “opening for the light” (Gen. 6:16). This is precisely what mindfulness does. It lets in some light and air so we can choose other ways of reacting and see something bigger than the flood—the majestic and wide open sky that lets our heart touch something more expansive. This expansiveness can be a way of connecting with the Divine. For, as the midrash teaches, “there is no empty space without the presence of the *Shekhinah* (divine presence)” (Exodus Rabba 2:5). When we are able to find our spaciousness again, to rescue ourselves from whatever narrow place is trapping us, even if only for a moment, the Divine is there.

Cultivating Love

A second way to build the ark we need to cope with a flood of overwhelm is to cultivate love. As the Song of Songs teaches us, “Vast floods (*mayim rabim*) cannot quench love, nor rivers drown it” (8:7). The idea of using love to anchor ourselves in times of crisis may sound Pollyanna-ish. But think back to a moment when you felt deep love for another person, or felt deeply loved by someone. In that moment, chances are that you felt less overwhelmed by whatever challenges you were facing. Perhaps this is because when we are in touch with love, we feel less isolated and more supported. Or perhaps it is because love is fundamentally grounding, for as the Zohar teaches, “the whole world exists because of love... and all exists through love” (III:267b). When we open to love we are opening to the very nature of reality, the life-force and sap of the

universe. Love is the fiber from which the fabric of creation is woven. Held in it we are at home: clear, stable, open, and safe.

We can employ a number of practices to cultivate feelings of love and belovedness. We can repeat certain phrases as part of a meditation such as “may I know that I am loved,” or “may you be held in love,” as the Piaseczner Rebbe teaches (*Derekh HaMelekh, Inyan HaShkeitah*, pp. 450-451). We can also set aside some time to call to mind each person in our life who has ever shown us love, from the time we were born to the present moment. And not just our closest friends and family members, but our teachers, coaches, neighbors, school bus drivers, colleagues, parents of childhood friends, a random clerk who smiled at us one day, and any others who have shown us care and concern. We can go year by year through our lives, picturing each of these people and remembering how they made us feel, recognizing that we could not have survived our childhood without the care of others. Touching our belovedness not only frees us from the narrow mind and heart but enables us to emerge as our best selves (*Derekh Ha-Melekh, Rosh HaShanah 2nd Night 5691*, pp. 227-231)). Or we can, as the blessing before the Shema remind us, remember that we are held in the “great” and “eternal” Divine love.

The Beauty of the Flood

A third approach to coping with the flood of overwhelm is to recognize the beauty and power of the flood itself, discovering within the waters a precious resource. Indeed, in other places in the Bible the term *mayim rabim* conveys life, power, and beauty, such as when it describes the life-giving water Moses brings forth from the rock (Num. 20:11), or depicts God’s voice and angels’ wings as sounding like “mighty waters” (Ez. 1:24). Moreover, one of the classic rabbinic images for Torah is water. So while water can take the form of a flood, it can also be the spring, well, or fountain that sustains life itself. The difference is in how we relate to it.

The Piaseczner Rebbe, for instance, explains that our feeling of being overwhelmed often results from how we react to an external circumstance. Instead of viewing whatever is stirring us as a resource, we view it as a threat and immediately resist it:

Know dear one it is not that we err but rather that the people of the world err in thinking that this world which God created is a kind of storehouse of evil desires, thoughts and inclinations, and that one who wants to serve God must leave and distance himself from the world entirely. Due to this they spend all their days far from spiritual practice and holiness and sunk in the foolishness of the world. They are like one who sees someone drowning himself in a river and declares that water is an evil thing in the world which was created only to kill. How foolish this person is! Can one live without water? Just because this mentally disturbed person did not utilize water properly and instead of using it to give life to vegetation, animals and people killed himself with it, is it evil?! (*Hovat HaTalmidim*, p. 136.)

As R. Shapira notes, while the river is a danger to one who cannot swim, water is also necessary for that person’s survival, so rejecting water entirely is not a wise response. But many of us do some version of this in our own lives. For instance, hurt by a relationship, we may pull away from intimacy and trust altogether, robbing ourselves of core human contact, support, and interaction crucial to our flourishing. Instead, we can see the beauty and power of intimacy and

our deep yearning for connection, while lovingly embracing the loss and sadness that such connection can bring, and use that to open, heal, and reconnect the heart.

How do we do this? By opening to our fullness. When we enter the ark, we bring everything inside. The Torah tells us that Noah is told to bring “two of every living thing” into the ark (Gen. 6:19), on which Rashi comments, “Every living thing—This means even demons.” We can welcome in the fear, anger, hurt, critique, threat, defensiveness and whatever else may be arising and have them become an opportunity for healing. The ark is not an escape from grief and pain, but rather a way to hold them in the vastness of both the ocean and the sky. We are saved from the flood, or the wild animals of our emotions, not by shutting the doors on them but by welcoming them in with love. When they are welcomed, we are transformed. The waters are no longer a flood but rather a resource, vital forces that help make up the wholeness of life.

Exploring Safety, Fear, and Support

A fourth practice for dealing with overwhelm is to explore our experience and understanding of safety so we might find support in difficult times. Safety is a fundamental human need. And we all experience being unsafe in different ways and to different extents, informed by our particular circumstances or identities.

When we or others are unsafe, we should of course do what we can—personally, communally, and politically—to make our and others’ lives as safe as possible. Yet whether external change is possible or not in any particular moment, certain forms of practice and ways of thinking that I will describe below may be able to make us feel more supported.

It is perhaps obvious why the question of safety would be especially important to explore in a time of plague and profound instability. In particular, the sense of overwhelm we have been describing often results from a feeling of being unsafe. During this challenging time, we may sit in our house uncertain whether we and our loved ones will be safe from the plague and uncertain whether we will keep our jobs and be able to support ourselves and our families. Or we may be out in the streets protesting, fearful of being met with violence and uncertain of our physical safety. Or we may be experiencing whatever our normal challenges are and the sense of instability they bring up. In addition, all of these various challenges are in dialogue with our own history, constitution, experiences, and habits of response. This means that our perception of threat or lack of safety may not be accurate, whether over- or under- estimating the danger.

Our response to this sense of threat is often to desperately try to find safety. At times, this can be the logical and reasonable thing to do, such as when we are under physical attack. At other times, this sense of desperation does not serve us and we can respond more wisely and effectively if we can create some space around the fear. Perhaps, for instance, worries about your job and financial security have arisen, surely a reasonable concern at this moment. But you may also notice that the anxiety it produces does not actually serve you in getting as clear as you can about the potential threat to your livelihood. Perhaps there are other ways of responding that could serve you better in the face of this and other challenges? All of the practices we have already

mentioned can help support us in finding some stability in the midst of such a storm, but I want to suggest some other approaches to the issues of safety in particular that can be helpful.

The first approach is to try to find whatever safety we can in this moment—to build for ourselves an ark. One way to do that is somatically or sensorially. Much of the time, most of our emotions are felt between our waist and head and are wrapped up in cycles of thought. When we are fearful or anxious, the somatic experience of that may be a tightness in the chest, a queasiness in the stomach, or a tension in the face—and it may be accompanied by racing thoughts or disturbing images. When we shift our attention from these experiences to the elbow, the inside of the knee, the feet on the floor or to our bottom on the chair—places in our body which generally feel either neutral or actually rooted and grounded and therefore more supportive—we can start to feel a sense of stability. Similarly, we might bring our attention to a pleasant or supportive sensation, whether in the body, in our external sensory experience, or in our imagination or memory. In all of these cases, focusing on these parts of our experience allows us to resist the pull of the fear vortex that may be arising elsewhere in our body and mind. It can give us some sense of relief, some separation from the fear cycle in our system, so that we might productively find our grounding.

Another way to do this is cognitively. We might ask ourselves questions like: Right now, do I have shelter? Do I have food and water? Do I have clothing? Am I physically safe right now? Asking these questions in situations where the answer is *yes*, or *yes for right now*, or *as far as I know, yes*, can help us recognize that we are safe in a basic existential sense *at this moment*, even when parts of ourselves feel unsafe and/or are unsafe. This realization can start to calm us down and help us feel less panicked and more able to respond wisely.

Doing this can help us touch a broader sense of safety or support that is not as dependent on external circumstances. This, I think, is the meaning of “Israel trusts in God who is their Help and Defender” (Ps. 115:19), or what it might mean to have faith. I don’t mean that we trust that God will make everything turn out okay, as that is clearly not true. Anyone who has lived a human life knows that not everything turns out okay. Rather, this trust or faith might be an experience of grounding myself in some sense of support even in the midst of challenge and threat. My trust and faith might be a deep trust in my ability, as an expression of divinity, to be present with whatever arises. That is, I’m not trusting that this circumstance will turn out all right. Rather, I’m trusting that I can hold this circumstance in something wider and deeper, which is both beyond me and part of me, so that I can be with what is happening in this moment, even if it is not all right.

A second approach is to in some ways step out of the continuous search for safety and the illusion of control. This is not to say that we should not try to make ourselves and others as safe as possible; we should. Rather it is trying to recognize that no matter how safe we try to make ourselves and others, there is no way to achieve complete safety. Ultimately, we cannot control our experience. However safe we try to make ourselves, we could be hit by a bus, struck by lightning, or have a heart attack in the next moment. But still, we constantly tell ourselves, *If only X would happen* (I would get that job, get that person, have that baby, have those people like me, make more money, be successful), *then I would finally be truly safe, finally all right.*

When we recognize, however, that nothing we ever get or achieve, no fortress no matter how strong, will ever give us total safety, we can start to relax a little bit. Our desperation and rigidity can recede, because we see that they do not serve us, leaving a wise concern for our and others' well-being and prompting us to act in a reasonable and balanced way to protect ourselves and others. Once we accept, for example, that there is no way to be 100 percent safe from Covid-19 (or from losing our job), and that we do not have complete control, we can stop frantically obsessing about eliminating all possible risk and instead focus on taking smart precautions. Through both of these approaches, we can start to touch a basic *all-rightness* which is less dependent on how the world reacts to me or what happens in the world, but is rather more connected to something deep and essential within my being.

Conclusion

Building ourselves an ark through the practices we have explored can help us not only escape the flood, but perhaps even to delight in the vast waters which surround us—to see new possibilities and to release old ways of being. The Psalms tell us that the Leviathan, who swims in the “great and wide sea,” the vastest of waters, was “created to play” (Psalms 104:25-26). What an extraordinary image. God creates the Leviathan for play. This is not the terror of Hobbes, but a vastness that invites our own majestic whimsy, creativity, and openness.

As we experience the terror, uncertainty, suffering, and loss of this plague, we can flood ourselves and get lost in the overwhelm. Or we can find presence, love, and beauty; discover support in the midst of fear; and unleash our creativity, responsiveness, and playfulness. This ark of wholeness can carry our joy *and* grief, our love *and* fear, our pleasure *and* pain. The invitation of the ark is to create buoyancy, vitality, love, and presence amidst what feels like an overwhelming flood—and so transform that flood into life-giving water. Afloat now on these waters, we can appreciate the sacred beauty of the vast ocean and sky which surround us.

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