

We Plant Again After the Flood

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This October marks what would have been my thirtieth wedding anniversary. My beloved wife, Marlene (z'l), passed away in 2023, and in the years since, I have found myself focused on a strange detail that is in this week's parashah (Noah)—one I never noticed until I needed it. When the floodwaters finally recede, and Noah steps out onto dry land, the Torah tells us almost nothing about what he felt. There is no accounting of everyone or everything now gone—no crying or description of grief at all. We are simply told of what he did next: he built an altar, and later, he planted a vineyard (Gen. 8:20, 9:20). Before feeling came building. Before understanding came planting.

I've come to think that's not an oversight in the text. It's the text's quiet wisdom about how rebuilding actually works.

Noah emerges from the ark into a world nearly empty of everyone he once knew. The rabbis are troubled by his silence; unlike Abraham, who will later argue with God over Sodom, Noah says nothing in protest, offers no eulogy for the world that drowned. Instead, he does something smaller and, I think, more instructive. He builds an altar (*vayiven Noah mizbe'ah*, Gen. 8:20), an act of dedication before he has any language for what he has survived. And later, we're told, "Noah, *ish ha'adamah* (a man of the soil), was the first to plant a vineyard" (Gen. 9:20). A vineyard is not a quick harvest. Grapevines can take three to four years before they bear usable fruit. To plant one in a ruined world is to make a quiet declaration: I am building toward a future I may not fully see and for people who are not yet here.

The story does expose a complicated side of Noah and his experience with grief. His drunkenness from the fruits of his planted vineyard and interactions with his sons is painful and unresolved (Gen. 9:21–27), a reminder that grief and trauma can lead to unhealthy and destructive behaviors and that rebuilding is not a clean line of progress. But planting does offer us an investment in the future and is, in itself, an act of hope.

This is not a uniquely modern reading. The rabbis captured the same instinct centuries later, in a teaching attributed to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who lived through the destruction of the Second Temple: "If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone tells you the Messiah has come, first plant the sapling, and then go out to greet the Messiah" (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan* B:31). Even world-ending news does not excuse us from finishing the planting. Grief and hope, it turns out, are not sequential. We do not have to resolve one before the other can begin.

I think about this because three years ago, my own world went quiet in the way I imagine Noah's did. Marlene and I built thirty years of life together, a family, a home, a community, a thousand small rituals that only the two of us fully understood. When she died, I did not have language for what had happened, and I am not sure I do now. What I had, instead, was work: the "altar-building" of getting through each day: of showing up for our children, of showing up for my colleagues and community who had shown up for us over so many years, of staying inside the routines she and I had built together because they were the only ground steady enough to stand on. Moving forward never meant forgetting. If anything, choosing to

move forward and build on the foundation we started has become one of the clearest ways I know to honor what Marlene and I built together, rather than move past it. Hope, I've come to believe, doesn't require leaving someone behind; it just asks you to keep moving, with them folded into everything you build next.

Last year I began a new chapter, joining the administration of The Jewish Theological Seminary after eighteen years working at Camp Ramah California. I did not experience it as leaving the foundation Marlene and I built. I experienced it as doing what Noah does in the second half of the story — not merely rebuilding what was, but reinforcing it, so that it could hold new growth I could not have planted alone. God's covenant with Noah, sealed with the rainbow, is notably not a promise that the world will never again hold loss (Gen. 9:12–17). It is a promise of ongoing presence, a sign meant to be seen again and again, by generations not yet born, that the story continues.

Most of us will, at some point, step out of our own version of the ark: a marriage ended by death or divorce, a career we built for decades now behind us, a community we loved that no longer exists in the form we knew it. Parashat Noah does not ask us to make peace with that loss before we're allowed to build again. It suggests something gentler and, I think, more honest: that the altar and the vineyard can come first, that hope can be an action taken before it is fully a feeling, and that reinforcing a foundation someone else helped lay is itself a form of love that continues.

This October, I will mark thirty years since I stood under a chuppah at Park Avenue Synagogue with my beloved, three years since I stood beside her grave, and nearly two years since beginning this new chapter at JTS, an institution she knew and whose values she lived every day. Like Noah, I don't have a tidy word for it all. But I know what I'm doing next. I'm planting.