Rabbi Miriam Wajnberg
Yom Kippur 5786 - October 2, 2025

Moral Grief
Yom Kippur 5786

My heart has been heavy this last year.
Maybe yours has too?
What is weighing on your heart?
I am holding this past summer's report on Antisemitism in Ontario's K-12 Schools, a provincial report that included stories of families and children in our Temple Shalom community being bullied and harassed at school for being Jewish.
Today, my heart holds anguish for those Jews in Manchester whose Yom Kippur was violently ruptured by antisemitism and hate.
My heart has held fear for the safety of family, friends, and loved ones in Israel, huddled in bomb shelters during attacks by Iran and the Houthis - and I know those of you who have siblings, parents, children, and grandchildren in Israel hold all of them in your hearts.
My heart holds the 48 hostages, living and dead, who are still in atrocious, inhumane conditions underground in Gaza, and their families who are doing everything they can to bring them home.
My heart holds the pain, fear, and frustration of Israeli reservists and their families, seeing the neverending impact of combat trauma on their mental health, as they get called up again and again to fight.
I hold increasing despair for Israel to be a beacon of peace and justice, as I've watched the humanitarian crisis in Gaza worsen by the day, and as the war continues without end.
And now, I am holding uncertainty and wary hope, as we wait for a Hamas response to President Trump's peace proposal.

I'm holding in my heart all of you, who are looking at the world and living in the world with despair, fear, and anger.

Over the past year, I've heard from many of you. You are scared for loved ones in Israel. You are angry about Israel's actions, but are proud to be Jewish, and are trying to figure out how to hold both of these truths. You feel guilty for the actions taken in your name - and you feel guilty for being in the relative safety of Diaspora, without putting your life, or your children's lives, on the line for the defense of the State of Israel. You are unsure about what to say as a Diaspora Jew, wondering when or whether you get to have a voice. You are enraged about how Israel has been vilified in the international arena and by friends in interfaith work, and about how Canada has responded. You are worried about your children's experience at school, both on university campuses and in K-12 schools.

As Fannie Lou Hamer, African-American civil rights activist famously said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." The weight of all of this anger, fear, despair, and guilt is too much. It is just too much to bear. We have been holding it for nearly 2 years now, and I don't know when we will be able to put it down. Across the political spectrum, as a community and as individuals, we are holding too much.

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David Pfrimmer, professor emeritus for public ethics at Martin Luther College right here at Wilfrid Laurier University, names the enormity of this unceasing feeling as "moral grief." "Moral grief is principled sadness or righteous sorrow stemming from witnessing injustice, unfairness, unwarranted violence and the world's seeming moral incoherence. It exposes deep conflicts with our moral compass."[1] Pfrimmer names that our sense of moral grief flares "when wrongdoing is accepted - even celebrated - as normal." Are we offbase - or is society offbase? How has everyone around us become immune to the wrongdoings that we see? Does the apparent silence of our friends, our family, our teachers, our newspapers, maybe even our synagogue and our rabbi - does that mean we've somehow got this wrong? That we shouldn't be as upset as we are? No, Pfrimmer continues. Our moral grief is not an overreaction. Our "outrage is a reminder [we] have a moral conscience. People *should* be angry at what we are witnessing. Warranted righteous anger is part of our humanity." We are in good company with our moral grief. Our biblical forebears offer us multiple pathways for how to respond to the utter brokenness of the world. Moses and his anger, Job's despairing sadness, Noah's impulse to turn inward and protect his loved ones, and Esther's urgent action are examples to us. Their world may have been simpler, with a smaller circle of concern and without a 24 hour newscycle and constant deluge of social media, but their moral grief was just as raw as ours.

One morning last month, Rafi came to me before school to tell me he couldn't get his dresser drawer open to get out his pants and needed help. I tugged, I rearranged the items in the other drawer, I shook the whole dresser in an attempt to dislodge whatever was stuck, and became increasingly agitated and frustrated. Beni comes in to see what all the noise is, and at this point, I'm pretty much wrestling with a piece of furniture, and am on the verge of taking a hammer to the thing in order to get poor Rafi a pair of pants to wear to school. Friends - it wasn't about the dresser. The weight of the world, the moral grief we hold in our hearts emerges as anger - sometimes a productive, righteous anger, and sometimes, an impotent, frustrated rage.

Moses was no stranger to this impotent rage. On two different occasions in the Torah, as he is leading the people through the desert following the Exodus from Egypt, he hits a rock in order to coax forth water from it.[2] Immediately before this moment of explosive frustration, Moses is listening to his people arguing, kvetching, demanding. While it's not admirable, it's certainly not surprising that Moses' anger and frustration at the enormity of responsibility on his shoulders bubbles up at that moment, in such a physical and visceral way. This anger, anger that manifests like mine did, or like Moses' did - in physical ways, is unproductive and doesn't respond to the actual problem at hand. Moses faces real consequences for his anger, and isn't allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, observing Moses' anger, comments, "The moral life is one in which we grapple with anger but never let it win."[3] Yes, anger is an understandable reaction to our moral grief at the world today - but we must grapple with it rather than letting it take over our lives, bringing physical and moral harm to those around us.

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[1] David Pfrimmer, "The Moral Grief of a World at War," 23 July 2025, *Hamilton Spectator*.
[2] Exodus 17:1-7, Numbers 20:2-13
[3] Anger Management | Chukat | Covenant & Conversation | The Rabbi Sacks Legacy

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With the deluge of bad news, it is all too easy to sink into our moral grief and despair. Job experiences both actual grief - the death of all of his children - and moral grief, as he seeks to understand God's justice in the universe. The Book of Job serves as the Tanach's, the Hebrew Bible's paradigm for understanding theodicy - why do bad things happen to good people. At its core, theodicy is a question of moral grief. Job is a wealthy and pious man, with a large, loving family, who loses everything and everyone thanks to God entering a deal with a mysterious being, the Adversary, that Job will maintain his faith in God even when tested in the most unimaginable ways. After tragedy strikes, Job sinks first into silence for seven days. Maybe you've had dark days of silence this year - when it was all too much to do anything more than sit on the couch and scroll mindlessly. After that week of silence, Job emerges into despair and self-loathing. Bible scholar Dr. Adriane Leveen notes that "Job objects to being alive."[4] Job curses the day of his birth, using the biblical language of lament. Job's words are "a poetry of despair and of nonbeing," as he wishes for death.[5] Job's moral grief pervades the text, as he comes to realize "that to believe in divine justice, cause and effect, sin and punishment, means to be blind to what actually takes place in the world."[6] Sometimes, silence and despair are the only reactions we can summon when our eyes are opened, like Job's were, to what actually takes place in the world.

Last night, Jay spoke about the impact of turning towards Jewish community as a response to the brokenness in our world. In Torah, Noah is one of the first characters to have to confront the brokenness of the world on a grand scale, and his response is to take care of **his** people, of **his** community. Noah is confronted with the worst challenge to his sense of moral integrity, the destruction of all living things. When God is ready to destroy the world with a flood, God commands Noah to build an ark and enter it *with his household* - with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives. Noah does not expand his circle of concern to the entire world, or even to his next door neighbours - and in fact, our tradition often compares him unfavourably to Abraham as not being quite as righteous as Abraham - who was willing to argue with God in an attempt to save Sodom and Gomorrah. But perhaps we can look at Noah in a gentler light. When our inner sense of justice is being challenged, of course we want to turn to our loved ones and care for them first. No matter how much we believe in the greater good of public education, when it is our children who are being bullied and harassed for being Jewish in their schools - of course we put their needs, their safety, and their learning first. Even the stories of suffering that we take into our hearts test this boundary. Earlier this year, on that dark week in February when the bodies of Shiri, Kfir and Ariel Bibas were returned to Israel, my heart - and my newsfeed, and my Instagram stories - were filled to the brim with the heartbreaking images. A dear friend shared that she had mentioned it to her husband, who isn't Jewish - and he had no idea what she was talking about. Not because he didn't care, but because this heartbreaking story wasn't in his newsfeed. That's a problem of the algorithm, not the human heart. For all of the times we've been frustrated and angry that loved ones, friends, co-workers, and neighbours who aren't Jewish seem to not care, don't speak out, are oblivious to our particular Jewish suffering -

[4] Adriane Leveen, "Job's Traumatic Breach," in *The Sacred Struggle: Jewish Responses to Trauma*, 27.
[5] *Ibid.*, 28.
[6] *Ibid.*, 29.

our algorithms feed us very different stories of pain and suffering. And the same goes the other direction as well. My social media is full of the impact of the ongoing war on Israeli families, and the fierce pain of the hostage families. But the stories of Palestinian families in Gaza have a harder time making their way to my awareness.We turn towards our loved ones, our own community first, just as Noah did. These tactics have helped our ancestors and countless communities withstand moral grief, suffering, and oppression for centuries. Arline Geronimus, in her book *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society* lifts up turning to extended families and friends in "reciprocal and mutually affirming networks" as one of the secrets to survival.[7] Her Jewish immigrant ancestors supported each other, sometimes with one family member taking on extra work so an academically gifted sibling could pursue higher education. This "collective ethos is an essential pillar of survival, resilience, and resistance."[8] Turning inwards towards our families and our communities, being a Noah, is one of the ways we can respond to that moral grief within us - we pour our energy and our resources to building communal spaces and networks that *don't* compromise our sense of moral integrity, our sense of the way that things are supposed to be in the world. We may not have the power to do this for the entire world, but we can make things right in our corner of the world.

Our last biblical example this morning is Esther. After all, Yom Kippur is connected to Purim, through a Hebrew play-on-words: Yom Kippurim, which can be understood also as a yom k'Purim - a day like Purim. One of the themes of Purim and the book of Esther is *v'nahafoch hu*, which literally means, "and it was reversed," or, "the opposite happened." The phrase appears at the end of the Purim story, when Haman's evil decree to rid Shushan of its Jews is upended, and the fate that awaited the Jews instead befalls Haman and his family. This theme pervades the entire Purim story - things are not how they should be. The Jews *should* be safe in Shushan - just as Jews *should* be safe in their schools, neighbourhoods, supermarkets, synagogues, museums, farmers' markets, and university campuses. Haman and his hate-filled agenda should not have the ear of the most powerful leader in the land, just as bigotry throughout the world should not be enshrined in the halls of power.

Esther, like us, looks at the world around her, at all of the "not-rightness" within it, and wonders what to do with her moral grief. She could act with blustering, impotent anger that doesn't reach those who are responsible for the injustices she sees. She could despair, curling up in a ball on a couch in her royal suites, giving up any possibility of change. She could turn towards her community, reclaiming her Jewish identity and nurturing her family. But she goes one step further. She claims her agency and her power - hesitantly at first, unsure if it's worth the risk. Esther's cousin Mordecai shakes her out of her complacency, exhorting her, "And who knows, perhaps you have attained royal status just for this moment."[9] Esther then acts - she bravely speaks to King Ahashverosh of the injustice being perpetrated against her people, and averts disaster.

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[7] Arline Geronimus, *Weathering:The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*, 110.
[8] *Ibid*., 125.
[9] Esther 4:14

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Our choices for action when faced with the moral grief of today are not as obvious as they were for Esther. We do not have the direct ear of those in power. It is easy to sink into the disempowering swamp of moral grief when there is seemingly nothing we can do on a large scale to end antisemitism here and around the world, to bring the hostages home, to end the relentless human suffering and starvation in Gaza. But, like Esther, we can speak our moral truth. We can listen to the voices of others speaking moral truth, whose hearts and minds are aligned with ours. We can support the work of Israelis and Palestinians trying to build a better future for their families in ways that honour the dignity and aspirations of both peoples. We can build vibrant Jewish communities and live full Jewish lives, without letting antisemitism define who we are or force us to downplay our Jewishness.

Sometimes, we will be like Moses - full of pent up fury at the injustice of the world, with nowhere to direct it.

Sometimes, we will be like Job - despairing of any possibility of the world being different than it is.

Sometimes, we will be like Noah - nurturing our own families and our own community, carving out a corner of the world where a sense of moral order and rightness prevails.

And sometimes, we will be like Esther - bravely speaking our moral grief into the world, and taking actions, both small and large, to bring about the world-as-it-should-be.

G’mar chatimah tovah.