

On Noah, Moral Injury, and Compassionate Return

There once was a man who was warned that a climate disaster was coming. He had a wife and three sons, and he was committed to being a responsible family member, but he had never previously concerned himself with global affairs. But, he was told, this coming disaster was his business, and he had work to do. He wasn't going to be able to stop it – of this he was assured by someone much more powerful than he. But if he did as he was told, he could save some lives. Not everyone's life – not most lives, even – but some. And thus instructed, the man got to work.

So begins what is arguably one of the more disturbing bible stories we routinely teach to pre-school-aged children – the story of Noah's ark. Two by two, the animals marched onto the ark, and a year later, when they were finally able to reemerge, everyone and everything they had ever known was gone. What must Noah have been feeling, at each moment in this story? And how did the other characters feel?

The Torah calls Noah "righteous in his generation,"¹ but for centuries after the flood story was first written down, readers have asked: how righteous **was** Noah, really?² Shouldn't he have at least *tried* to convince God to stop the flood, or maybe, tried to warn other people that the flood was coming? Noah is unfavorably compared to Abraham, in particular, because when Abraham heard that God wanted to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued back.³

In myriad large and small ways, Yom Kippur encourages us to ask ourselves, just as centuries of commentators have asked of Noah, ... how righteous are *we*, really? Or, as the prophet Isaiah asks in our Yom Kippur morning Haftarah – is *this* the fast [God] desires?⁴ Yom Kippur is in many ways a holiday with grand civilizational impulses. Yes, it is about our interpersonal relationships, and making amends with people in our lives. But it is also about taking responsibility for our society as a whole, and the way our society is operating. Who is dying by fire, and who by water? Who by hunger, and who by thirst? Who by plague, and who by weapon? And did any of this violence need to unfold?

Sometimes I find this holiday's urgent call to us to help build a better world galvanizing. So many of the problems in our world were created by human beings. And it can be empowering to think that we human beings are also the ones who can bring about meaningful positive change. But sometimes - and if I'm being honest, nearly every year in recent years - I also find Yom Kippur's focus on systemic change challenging.

Have you ever felt this way? Like Noah, and like his family and the animals on the ark, we are probably aware of violence and destruction that it is not fully in our power to stop. In fact, my

guess is that if we were each to pause now and make a list of the problems in our world about which we care deeply, but that we are not quite sure how to meaningfully transform, we might be here for a very long time. What does it mean to live ethically in a world like ours?

One thing that has been very helpful to me in the past few years as I have navigated this question is learning about moral injury. And so I wanted to share a little bit about it today, in case it is helpful to you, too.

Moral injury is a relatively new concept, which originally emerged in military psychology to describe a condition distinct from, but sometimes intertwined with, PTSD. Moral injury is when a person is significantly impacted by their experiences as a perpetrator, collaborator, witness, or victim of an action that violated their own moral beliefs. Perhaps, for example, they witnessed or participated in an action that resulted in civilian casualties. People carrying out orders that contradict their moral beliefs are more likely to experience moral injury than their commanding officers. But moral injury can affect anyone, at any level of a decision-making process or command structure. Moral injury is also a topic of interest in the world of policing, and education about moral injury is actually something Cantor Shochet has been involved in in his role as a police chaplain. He also recently completed a video interview with the Rev. Dr. Rita Brock, a national expert on moral injury who lives in our area; much of what I am about to tell you is based in part on her work.⁵

Moral injury can manifest as shame, grief, feelings of inefficacy, disconnection from others, anger and more. One of the key ideas in moral injury is that a person experiencing moral injury - whether they were the perpetrator, the victim, or the witness to a wrongful act - probably still believes in right and wrong. But they may have lost faith in their own ability, or the ability of other people, to do the right thing. And this loss of faith can be devastating, and profoundly disorienting.

Have you ever experienced something like this?

If we return for a moment to the Noah story, we can see that Noah himself – as well as everyone else who boarded the ark – are prime candidates for moral injury. Noah was ordered to build an ark that would save some living creatures, but not most of them – and he did. Noah *did not* bring the flood – in fact, he was the main reason anyone survived the flood – but he also watched as almost everyone he had ever known was killed. One of the interesting details about the ark that the Torah offers is that it had a window.⁶ What did Noah see when he looked out that window into the storm? How did it change his relationship with God, with other people, and with himself?

In recent years, the framework of moral injury has been applied to a number of life situations outside of the military, too. For example, a few recent studies have explored the moral injury experienced by some medical professionals in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ Many professionals felt they could not live up to their duty to save lives, both because they didn't know enough about the disease they were treating, and because they often lacked the resources to keep themselves safe, let alone to engage in even those treatments they did think could help. I also found myself thinking about moral injury this summer after the Dobbs decision, when I listened to interviews with people who worked in abortion clinics in states where abortion suddenly became illegal. Many expressed that they felt helpless and heartbroken to no longer be able to help people in need of the medical care their clinic provided.⁸ Turning away people in need felt like a serious violation of their own moral codes, their own sense of duty, even though, legally, they had no other choice.

Part of what the study of moral injury illustrates is that wrongdoing – and healing in the wake of wrongdoing – is often complex. The medieval scholar Maimonides famously suggested that we will know our atonement is complete when we can return to the same situation in which we once transgressed, and make a different choice than we did the first time.⁹ But, not all wrongdoing boils down to individual choices.

It is hard to be a person alive in the world and not break your own moral code, sometimes, especially when part of your moral code stipulates, as Jewish tradition does, that you should not stand idly by another person's suffering¹⁰ - let alone contribute to it. We literally and metaphorically walk by people who are suffering all the time. And sometimes *we* are the person suffering who *others* walk by - which is a type of moral injury, too, especially when the people or groups walking by us are leaders or institutions that we trusted to take care of us.

It may not surprise you that recently, some moral injury scholars have wondered about the extent to which moral injury might be a useful framework for us as citizens of democratic countries to think about the experiences we have had when our governments have committed harm, or stood idly by, in our names.¹¹ Many of us were raised to believe that the idea of democracy is that every person of voting age can be part of a nation's decision-making process - that we have responsibility for what our government does, and we also have agency. Functionally, however, it can sometimes be hard to believe in our own agency - *even* when we continue to believe in our own responsibility.

So what should we do when we feel deeply in touch with our own responsibility - and perhaps complicity - but not at all in touch with our own power? Put differently, what does *teshuvah* - return, repair, repentance, healing - look like in the wake of moral injury?

Research on healing from moral injury is ongoing. But, as my teachers Rabbi Nancy Weiner and Rabbi Kim Geringer have taught,¹² much of what we do know - or suspect - about healing from moral injury dovetails with Jewish tradition, and specifically Yom Kippur traditions, in interesting ways.

One of the things that we know helps a person live with moral injury is talking about it - or writing about it, singing about it, drawing about it, dancing about it ... expressing themselves, in some way. Silence and isolation can be tempting, especially when we feel like we have done something that makes us unacceptable to other people, but silence and isolation do not facilitate transformation.

The Rev. Dr. Larry Kent Graham, a Christian theologian who passed away a few years ago, connected this secular insight about healing from moral injury to the practice of lament, which exists in many religious traditions - including Judaism. Dr. Graham wrote that lament – speaking out or crying out about wrongs we perpetrated, witnessed, or experienced - can be healing because it allows us to “shar[e] anguish, interrogat[e] causes, and reinvest ... hope.”¹³ It is only by expressing what has happened to us, or what we’ve done or seen, that we can begin to find community with shared experiences, begin to name and sort out what might have caused what happened, and ultimately, come to a place – with others – where we can begin to see ways to prevent similar wrongs from occurring in the future.

Dr. Graham also argued that one of the reasons that lament can be healing in situations of moral injury is because when we lament a wrong, we also assert our values or morals – by naming the way these morals have been violated, we assert, implicitly, that we do believe in justice, in goodness, in mercy, and love. And this can be powerful especially in moments when we might be feeling like we are cut off from justice, mercy, goodness, and love, like the world around us or we ourselves seem to lack it.

Read through the lens of moral injury, we can see Isaiah’s words in the Haftarah we will hear a little later this morning not just as a chastisement, but also as a kind of lament ... Isaiah looked out at a society rife with inequity, in which people went through the motions of piety – doing things like fasting and making offerings to God – but didn’t help each other, and he spoke out against this. He might not have known how precisely his society could become more just, but he spoke of the need for this to occur, and asserted that it was the right thing to do – which started a conversation, one we are still having today.

My teachers Rabbi Nancy Wiener and Rabbi Kim Geringer have suggested¹⁴ that the Vidui, the collective confession that comes near the end of the Yom Kippur morning and evening services, is also an excellent model of lament, because it is very specific, and also gives each of us an

opportunity to identify ourselves not as sinners, as people who are inherently wrong or bad, but rather as people who *sinned* - who did wrong, and are now willing to change.

Because it is written in the “we” voice, the vidui also encourages us to take responsibility for wrongs in our society that we have not personally perpetrated – for example, hopefully not all of us have robbed someone this year, but a little later today, we *are* all going to say *gazelnu*, we have robbed. And so the vidui (like so much of our Yom Kippur liturgy) is a tool for affirming our interconnectedness, and the mutuality of our lives.

In recent years, a number of people have written very powerful creative viduis that focus on systemic injustice in our society. For example, there have been creative viduis about racism¹⁵ – naming the damage caused by systemic racism in our society, and our collective responsibility to address it – as well as about environmental justice, including one that you will see in our prayer book later today based on a composition by our very own Cantor Rachel Rhodes.¹⁶ We name the harms we have done to each other and the earth not to feel badly about them, but to affirm we know we can take part in transforming these harms, first by naming them, then by analyzing their causes, and then by acting.

What would you most want to lament, if you could pick a wrong that you have witnessed, experienced, or even perpetrated? A few minutes ago, I suggested that if we were to each start listing the things in our world that distress us that we don’t know how to change, we’d probably be here a long time – and this is true! – but scholarship on moral injury, and thousands of years of accrued Jewish wisdom, would also suggest that when we are deeply bothered by something we do or see, or something that is done to us, expressing our distress is often the first step to, in Rev. Graham’s words, “sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting hope.”

Yom Kippur is fundamentally a call to connection and community, a call to life.

Another important part of the Yom Kippur liturgy that connects to what we know about living with moral injury is its compassion – specifically, God’s compassion. One of the most powerful responses to moral injury, and especially shame, is cultivating compassion – for oneself, and for others.¹⁷ Compassion is not an exit ramp that helps us avoid the need to work to repair harm in our world; rather, it can be an important motivator, a reminder that we are capable and that we have a place in the world, no matter how broken or how powerless we may sometimes feel.

One way we can lay the groundwork for the cultivation of compassion is by asserting that we believe that all people are worthy of compassion, and all people are capable of change. This is essentially what our prayers do when they state, over and over, that God is loving and kind, and when they ask, over and over, for God’s mercy.

Depending on your theology, the God language in these prayers may or may not be resonant, but the fundamental idea imbedded in them – that mercy is just as central to the world as judgment, that lovingkindness is something we all deserve to be able to offer and receive – is a crucial part of the way Judaism views repentance. This is not to say that people who have been terribly harmed by others are required or even encouraged to forgive or offer mercy to the ones who harmed them – but rather, that mercy and love are things we can work to offer each other, as a society.

How might we do this? A year ago on Yom Kippur, Rabbi Michael Marmur, a Jerusalem-based Heschel scholar who was (at the time) the chair of the organization Rabbis for Human Rights, offered an exploration of what it might mean for a society to “return in mercy” that drew on the story of Noah’s ark in a new way. And I’d like to close today by sharing a piece of his teaching. He said:

“I remember first coming to Israel decades ago, short on Hebrew vocabulary but fascinated by Hebrew. I wanted to buy a return bus ticket, and was interested to hear that the Hebrew expression for this is *haloch vashov*, meaning ‘going and returning’. I later discovered that this is a Biblical phrase, taken from a verse in the Book of Genesis describing the gradual retreat of the waters following the flood.”¹⁸

Rabbi Marmur went on to argue that maybe, as we think about collective repentance for injustice in our society, we should think of ourselves as analogous not to Noah, but rather, to the waves after the flood, engaged in a slow, deliberate, and collective movement away from harm, and towards mercy and love.

And we could also say this: water is not good or bad, it just is. It is capable of terrible destruction, as many of us whose hearts and minds are with family and friends in Florida and further south right now are all too aware. But water is also necessary for sustaining life. Water that harms does not become evil, or any less necessary to the future of life and growth on our planet. When we commit harm, or stand idly by while others commit harm, or when we *are* harmed, we do not become any less necessary to the future of *our* community – or our planet. We also do not become less capable of working for goodness, healing, and love. We just might need a little help, a little compassion and a little mercy, in the process of return.

May this be, for all of us, a season of connection, and a season of return.

¹ Genesis 6:9 (“צדיק תמים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו”).

² See for example BT Sanhedrin 108a.

³ Genesis 18:23-32.

⁴ Isaiah 58:5.

⁵ See especially Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering From Moral Injury After War*. Boston: Beacon Press (2012). Dr. Brock has also given a number of interviews about moral injury (dealing with moral injury in general and moral injury in various specific contexts), many of which are available on YouTube or in print online.

⁶ Genesis 6:16 and Genesis 8:6.

⁷ See for example: D'Alessandro AM, Ritchie K, McCabe RE, Lanius RA, Heber A, Smith P, Malain A, Schielke H, O'Connor C, Hosseiny F, Rodrigues S, McKinnon MC. Healthcare Workers and COVID-19-Related Moral Injury: An Interpersonally-Focused Approach Informed by PTSD. *Front Psychiatry*. 2022 Feb 14;12:784523. doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2021.784523. PMID: 35264983; PMCID: PMC8900218.

See also (amongst other studies): Borges, L. M., Barnes, S. M., Farnsworth, J. K., Bahraini, N. H., & Brenner, L. A. (2020). A commentary on moral injury among health care providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1), S138–S140. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000698>.

⁸ See for example: “Inside Four Abortion Clinics the Day Roe Ended,” (*The Daily*, June 27 2022), audio and transcript accessed online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/27/podcasts/the-daily/roe-v-wade-abortion-clinics.html>. See also Isaac Chotiner, “What Ethical Health Care Looks Like When Abortion is Criminalized: How Can Physicians Meet Their Obligations to Patients After Roe?,” published online by *The New Yorker Magazine*, July 8, 2022: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/ethical-health-care-after-ro>.

⁹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 2:1.

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:16 (and subsequent commentaries on the verse).

¹¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Kelly Brown Douglas, “Can we heal the moral injury of our nation?,” January 8, 2022, accessed online at <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/588875-can-we-heal-the-moral-injury-of-our-nation/>. See also Brenner, Grant (2017). “Considering Collective Moral Injury Following the 2016 Election,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 53(4): 547-560.

¹² Rabbis Wiener and Geringer have published together on moral injury (Kim Geringer and Nancy H. Wiener, “Insights into Moral Injury and Soul Repair from Classical Jewish Texts,” *Pastoral Psychology* 68 no.1 (February 2019); pages 70-73 in particular discuss Yom Kippur), and they also teach a class at HUC-JIR about Moral Injury, which I took in the Spring 2021 semester. They coordinated a conference about Jewish perspectives on moral injury (the session descriptions for which can be found here: <http://huc.edu/moral-injury-soul-repair-jewish-perspective>), and they have also given presentations that are available on video, as this May 2022 presentation entitled “Jewish Resources for Caring for Jewish Servicepersons and Veterans Affected by Military Moral Injury:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rRX5ezNdOo>. (Their work undergirds much of my understanding of this topic – a huge thank you to both of them).

¹³ Larry Kent Graham. “The Healing Power of Public Lamentation,” talk delivered at *Pathways to Hope Conference*, Soul Repair Center, Kansas City, KS, October 30, 2015. Revised for Distribution December 29, 2015. This quote is from p. 8 of the document revised for distribution. Rev. Graham later discussed these ideas at more length in his 2017 book *Moral Injury: Restoring Soul Wounds* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), which approaches moral injury (and healing) through a Christian, and specifically Methodist, lens.

¹⁴ Kim Geringer and Nancy H. Wiener, “Insights into Moral Injury and Soul Repair from Classical Jewish Texts,” *Pastoral Psychology* 68 no.1 (February 2019), pp.70-72.

¹⁵ See for example “A Communal Al Chet for the Sins of Racism” by Yavilah McCoy: <https://www.bj.org/waze-to-the-light/yom-kippur/vidui/a-communal-al-chet-for-the-sins-of-racism/> and “A Vidui for Racism” by Samantha Thal: <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/vidui-racism/>.

¹⁶ “Vidui for the 21st Century,” on p.307 of the Yom Kippur *Mishkan HaNefesh*, is based on “Environmental Tachanun” by Cantor Rachel Rhodes (unpublished).

¹⁷ Carrie Doehring. “Resilience as the Relational Ability to Spiritually Integrate Moral Stress,” in *Pastoral Psychology* v. 64 (2015).

¹⁸ Michael Marmur. “Toward a More Complete Return.” Yom Kippur D’var Torah Composed in 2021 for *Rabbis for Human Rights*. Jerusalem, Israel. Accessed online at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MYo6s4t50AS9oGzo2h5zCTaFo9UT2lxA/edit?usp=sharing&oid=106981278040655643968&rtpof=true&sd=true>.