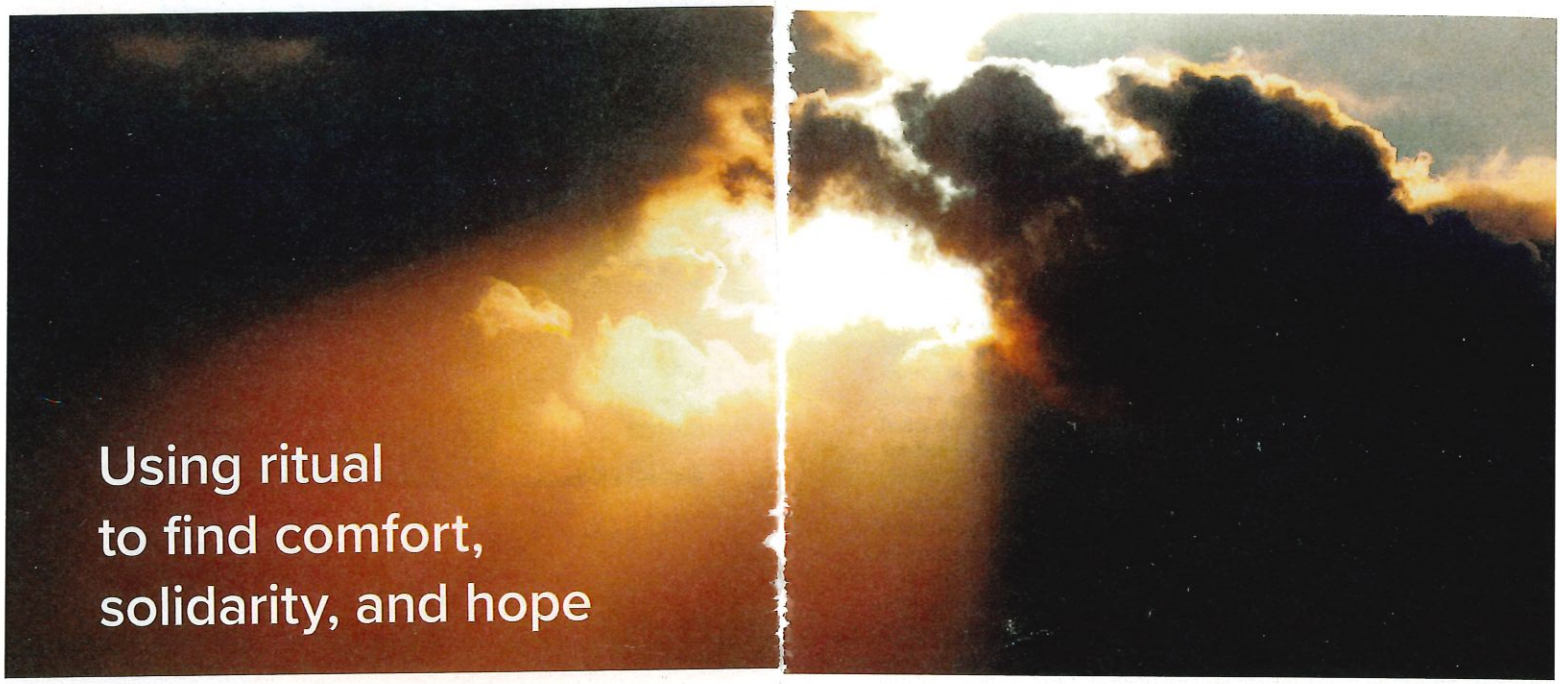

Using ritual to find comfort, solidarity, and hope

AS FALL TURNS to winter, I often think of the striking *midrash* that imagines the first human's first week on earth. According to tradition, humankind was created during this season, when the days grow shorter and the nights become longer, colder, and darker. Adam noticed this phenomenon.

The sages taught: When Adam, the first person, saw that the day was getting progressively shorter, he said, "Woe is me! Perhaps because of my offense, the world is getting dark around me, and will return to *tohu va-vohu*—primordial chaos and disorder." (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a)

Think about it—if you have no other context, if you have not yet experienced the annual cycle of the seasons, you would naturally assume the same thing: The days will keep getting shorter until nighttime completely overtakes daytime.

This year, this *midrash* speaks to us on an even deeper level. It has been a season of increasing darkness, between the brutal attacks on Simchat Torah in southern Israel, the calls for violence against Jews and Israelis around the world, and the prospect of a long and bloody war. It certainly feels, at times, that the world is sliding back into *tohu va-vohu*.

In the *midrash,* how does Adam respond to the frightening prospect of ever-increasing darkness and chaos? He institutes a ritual—an eight-day period of fasting and prayer. The sages of the Talmud understood that, in moments of despair and uncertainty, ritual can offer a "container" for our emotions, a set of actions to ground us and help us rekindle our connection to God.

Jewish communities today still turn to rituals in both difficult and joyful moments. Sometimes we rely on the age-old rituals of our tradition, and sometimes, as Adam found, unprecedented moments call for new ritual responses. The crisis facing Israel is indeed unprecedented, and new rituals are emerging as it unfolds.

The synagogue I serve, for instance, has added the "Prayer for the State of Israel," "Hatikvah," and relevant psalms to our daily services, rather than just Shabbat. In addition, like many other Chicago-area synagogues, we organized a community gathering in the days following the attack featuring prayer, song, video messages from our members in Israel, and children's activities. These rituals have offered our members solace and solidarity, even amidst our pain.

Hadar Institute, a center for Jewish learning, also instituted a ritual in the wake of October 7. Following the example of Adam, Hadar called for a *ta'anit tzibur*—a day of communal fasting—on October 12, in response to the more than 150 Israelis taken hostage as well as the thousands killed and wounded.

However, unlike Adam, the organizers were clear that our fast was not in response to a perceived offense on our part. Rather, as Hadar's Executive Vice President Rabbi Avi Killip explained to the JTA: "There's a longstanding tradition in Judaism of decreeing additional fast days in moments of communal crisis and need. In facing these attacks, which were so deliberately against Jews, it feels powerful to have an ancient Jewish ritual mode of response, and I just feel grateful to have that outlet." Over 800 rabbis and communal leaders, myself included, took part in the fast.

As I fasted that day, I felt a sense of purpose, unity, and even hope. This is what ritual did for Adam, and what it can do for us. In the *midrash,* after Adam's eight-day fast, the winter solstice comes, and the days start getting longer. So, Adam institutes a celebratory ritual: an eight-day feast, perhaps a prototype for Chanukah, our wintertime festival of light.

I pray that soon, calls for communal fasts will be replaced by communal feasts. Until that time, I hope that all of us can find—or create—the rituals that we need to get through this dark time. ✱

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