

Acts of Care in Times of Loss

Responding in Times of Disaster

Repair the World

This resource invites you to explore the profound intersection of Jewish teachings, acts of kindness, and communal care during times of crisis. Through reflections, texts, and guiding questions, you'll uncover the transformative power of compassion, even in the face of devastation. Use this guide to deepen your understanding of what it means to support one another, rebuild a sense of home, and nurture resilience within your community.

Framing

In times of crisis, especially during natural disasters, our actions—no matter how small—can make a significant difference. When homes are lost and communities are displaced, there is an immense pain that comes with the physical and emotional loss of place and memory. Yet, in that very displacement, there is also an opportunity to come together as a community, to rebuild with love and compassion. The sacred responsibility is not just to mourn, but to act: to care for those who are suffering and to support one another in the healing process. We can support our neighbors by offering what we have, whether that's food, shelter, or simply being present. The willingness to share our resources and time can be the difference between despair and hope for someone else.

Reflections on Home, from Amidst the Fire— Rabbi Sharon Brous, 1/11/25

Rabbi Sharon Brous is the senior and founding rabbi of IKAR, a leading-edge Jewish community, based in Los Angeles, and author of The Amen Effect. The link to the full sermon video and transcript are attached.

I immersed this week in The Warsaw Rabbi's collection of sermons from 1939-1942. Listen to this Torah: "When we studied the prophetic and rabbinic accounts of the destruction of the Temple, we thought we had some conception of what those troubles meant. At times we would even weep. Now we see how great the difference is between hearing troubles and seeing or undergoing them directly. One has almost nothing in common with the other. (Esh Kodesh, 193)"

Of course, he's right. While the devastation unfolding here and now is incomparable to the devastation of his time, the rabbi is right that when your vantage point is the very epicenter of loss, there is a different kind of sacred response and responsibility…

… As I say these words this morning, tens of thousands of acres of the most beautiful land in the country are burning all around us. And thousands of people have just lost their homes. When we lose a home, we lose a part of ourselves. A part of our story. "Home is memory, home is your history," wrote Toni Morrison. Even long after the building is gone, the sense of place persists…There is a physicality to the loss of a home. A sense of displacement. An ache that never goes away.

This is a deep truth: holiness, joy, beauty, connection, love… can be found everywhere. Even in displacement. Even in the midst of the destruction. These days are filled with pain and uncertainty. It is going to take a lot to rebuild this beautiful city, a dreamscape of sunshine and promise. A place for artists and activists, a place where everything is possible. Our shared home. We will need, in the days ahead, to lift one another from the ashes. Please, as we do, remember: a people who grieves our losses, and honors our absences, a people who turns toward one another in our pain and open our hearts and homes to each other, this is this is a people who—with our without our homes—will endure.

1. What does it mean to "lift one another from the ashes"? How can this concept inform our approach to service work in times of community crisis?
2. How can we actively create spaces for vulnerability and connection in the midst of communal grief and loss?

Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 21b:8, translation by Rabbi Avi Strausberg

Tractate Taanit ("Fast") is located in Seder Moed ("the Order of Festivals"). It discusses laws and stories relating to fast days, with a focus on fast days enacted by Jewish courts in times of drought.

The Talmud reports that there was a fire in the city of Drokart. While the entire city was impacted by a raging fire, we learn that Rav Huna's neighborhood miraculously remains untouched. Initially, everyone assumed that his neighborhood was spared because of Rav Huna's greatness, including the kindness he performed in tearing down and rebuilding crumbling walls. In the end, they learn it was in fact as a result of the actions of one anonymous woman that the neighborhood was saved. What did this woman do that merited saving her whole neighborhood? She would heat her oven and then lend it to others to use, allowing them to benefit from its warmth and prepare their foods. This unnamed woman did not have a golden carriage or large sums of money to rebuild city walls, but she had a warm oven she was willing to lend as well as the generosity to share it with neighbors in need. In this story, it is not the rabbis' prescribed fasts and prayers that save this neighborhood from a deadly fire; rather, it is the generosity of one woman, and her readiness to share with her neighbors, that spares the city.

1. How does the story of the woman with the oven challenge the idea that only grand gestures can make a difference in times of crisis? What is the significance of small acts of kindness during a disaster?
2. How can we identify the "ovens" we have to share within our communities—whether they are material resources or emotional support?

Framing

The word "home" can mean so many things beyond just a physical shelter. It is where we feel safe, known, and cared for; it's where we build memories and find identity. When disaster strikes, like in the case of wildfires, it is easy to feel that "home" has been lost forever—both in the literal sense of a house being destroyed and in the deeper sense of losing a part of ourselves, the memories, and the connections tied to a place. Home can also be the people who surround us, how we care for one another, and the kindnesses we share, even amid destruction. Our actions can help others reconnect to a sense of home that goes beyond bricks and mortar—one rooted in community, compassion, and shared humanity.

Reflection

What does the concept of "home" mean to you, and how can you support others who have lost theirs during this disaster?