

Elegy for Camp Mystic
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This week's Torah portion, Parashat Balak, is probably best known as the one about the talking donkey. You could describe it as a forerunner of the movie *Shrek*, except in this case it's not meant to be funny.

Our sages puzzled over the existence of a talking donkey in the Torah. Unable to explain it rationally, they taught that the talking donkey was one of 10 things God created at twilight between the Six Days of Creation and the first Shabbat. (Avot 6:5)

In the rabbinic mind, twilight, which they say is "no more than the blink of an eye," is a window into the realm of mystery.

Another one of those 10 things created at twilight, they say, is the rainbow, the sign of God's promise that there would never again be a flood so terrible that it would destroy the world.

But the Torah was wrong about that. God has broken this promise again and again, even in our lifetimes, even in this century: The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004; Hurricane Katrina in 2005; and now, the horrific flood in central Texas that washed away Camp Mystic and killed dozens of children.

"But those floods didn't destroy the world," you might say. But you would be wrong.

Yes, the earth endures, and we are still here. But the world *as it might have been* drowned in the flood waters.

The sages famously said that when a single life is destroyed, it is as though an entire world has been destroyed. Why?

We learn it from the story of the first brothers, Cain and Abel. After Cain kills Abel, God reprimands Cain: "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" (Gen. 4:10)

But there is a subtlety in the text: "Blood" is actually stated in the plural, "*bloods*." "Your brother's *bloods* cry out to Me from the ground!"

The Midrash says "*bloods*" is purposely stated in the plural because it refers to the blood of Abel *and* to the blood of his potential descendants. (Gen. Rabbah 22:9)

When children die, it is not only *their* lives that are lost. The children they might have given birth to, and their children, and their children, and on and on down the line to the end of time die, too.

The children who perished in the flood at Camp Mystic were 8, 9, 10 years old. Their lives had barely begun. All they could have become is lost forever. All their descendants that could have been—and all *they* could have become—is lost to oblivion.

Worlds upon worlds were wiped away by a flood that God promised would never happen again. The magnitude of this tragedy is infinite, beyond our capacity to know.

As I prepare to send my own son to sleepaway camp in a couple weeks, the images of the girls' faces and their brightly painted footlockers break my heart in ways that words cannot express. I know we all feel the same way. Our souls are shattered for their families.

We who were not directly impacted by this tragedy will eventually move on. But the pain that the parents and grandparents and siblings of the children who died will have to endure is forever. I don't know how they will go on.

We can only grieve for them, make donations to help them, and pray that their faith and their communities will hold them up. Somehow.

Infinite could-have-beens will never come to be—not in *olam ha-zeh*, in this world, the one we know.

I just hope, with all my heart, that our sages were onto something: that the realm of mystery does exist, and that the unknowable is real, and does indeed dwell there—somewhere, so to speak, beyond the rainbow.

This is what we pray for, anyway, in our traditional prayer for the dead:

El Malei Rachamim...

God, who is full of mercy and dwells on high, grant perfect rest under the wings of the Divine Presence among the holy and pure ones who shine as brightly as the brilliance of the sky, to the souls of the children and all the victims of the flood, who have entered eternity. O God of mercy, let them find refuge in the shadow of Your wings, and let their souls be bound up in the bond of everlasting life. God is their inheritance. May they rest in peace. And we say together: Amen.