

Rosh HaShanah 5772: Build an Ark for Unnatural Disasters
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This summer I suffered from the rabbinic torment of High Holy Day writer's block. I had the sermon topic picked out for months actually, but every time I sat down and tried to write the words escaped me. So I went down the shore, to Margate, NJ to relax, clear my mind, and hopefully begin writing. Each day I'd sit on the sand with a beach chair and a book and wait for something to come. And one day, it happened—something that completely shook me: an earthquake. Maybe you felt it too.

My wife, my aunt, my cousins and I, our feet buried in the shaking sand, turned to each other: *what's going on?* Lifeguards were evacuating swimmers, our cell phones were down; we looked around and noticed everyone else looking around, as the social walls that normally divide neighbors from neighbors instantly dissolved—*what's happening? Is everyone okay? Our family and friends elsewhere, are they alright?* We soon learned, and thanked God, that this immense earthquake, among the strongest to ever shake the east coast, was somehow benign. *Yes, they were all okay.* A sigh of relief.

Nonetheless, as I stared out upon the water, I remained a bit shaken. For two reasons: first, I'm pretty sure that on the list of safest places to be during an earthquake, "by the ocean" isn't on the top. A sigh of relief. But there was another reason why I was shaken. The topic that I had chosen to write about months prior, the subject I had research in the pages of 5 books, 3 journals, and countless newspaper articles that I brought with me was "Natural Disasters." I went inside, gathered my research, and I wrote this letter.

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Dear Noah,

I just felt my first earthquake. As I looked out on the water, I thought of you. And I write this letter with deep concern over your story. I know you well, we read your story every year. We know that you lived in an age of corruption, and that the book of Genesis describes you as an *ish tzadik tamim b'dorotav*, a righteous man, blameless in his generation. I'm sure that's why you were singled out by God to build a boat. You worked tirelessly. You gathered the finest wood and supplies in order to weather the worst storm imaginable. And after the storm, creation began anew. A rainbow arched across the sky, and a new Covenant was established, a promise between God and humanity to move forward responsibly.

Your story, Noah, is what biblical scholars call our "etiology," our myth-of-origin. Enduring throughout the generations, yours is among the most influential narratives, certainly the most pervasive flood myth, to span the millennia. Your story teaches lessons in human purpose, devotion, and most of all, what it means to be *tzadik*, a righteous human being. But knowing this, Noah, I have a complaint.

Sure, you've heard this complaint before, resounding within the ancient talmudic academies. The Sages wrote this Midrash:

A story that imagines that after the Flood, Noah, you opened the ark and looked out. You saw the earth desolate, forests and gardens uprooted, corpses everywhere. No grass, no vegetation; the world was a wasteland. In dismay, you cried out to God: "Sovereign of all creation, in 6 days You made the earth and all that grows in it: it was like a garden, like a table prepared for a feast; now You Yourself O God have destroyed the work of Your hands, uprooting all that You planted, tearing down all that You built. Why did You not show love for Your creatures?" The Midrash tells us that God then replied to you, Noah: "O faithless shepherd! Now, after the disaster, you come to Me and complain. But when I said to you: *Make an ark for yourself*, you did not plead for your neighbors!

This ancient complaint about your story, Noah, continued echoing throughout the ages. You heard it again in the 11th century from Rashi, perhaps the smartest reader of Torah to ever walk the earth. Rashi read the phrase "*ish tzadik tamim b'dorotav*" not as "a righteous man, blameless in his generation," but rather as "a righteous and blameless man *only* in the context of his generation." Noah, Rashi was siding with the Sages who read your story in Genesis and were deeply disturbed by your example of a *tzadik*, a righteous person.

You heard it from the Sages; a millennium later you heard it from Rashi. And now, a millennium after Rashi, I believe that today your example poses a greater existential threat to righteousness and human dignity than ever before.

Noah, in our world today, our exposure to natural disasters is on the rise. The data are unequivocal. According to the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters, in the year 2010 we witnessed 385 natural disasters, killing nearly 300,000 people worldwide, affecting 217 million. This is exponentially higher than past annual averages. Now more than ever, humanity is praying for a "sigh of relief."

We all have taken painful note of these disasters. The tsunamis in Southeast Asia, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, and month later in Chile; the storms in southeast United States and Missouri; and of course, the mostly benign 5.8 earthquake that shook the east coast earlier today; and now I read about Hurricane Irene, which is hitting the outer banks in the coming hours.

Many of our leaders are quick to call these disasters, "acts of God." Noah, as you know personally, seeing floods and storms as God's work is an age-old way of making sense of these events. But did you know that still today, this is a widespread reaction by many on the Religious Right—to see every catastrophe as an intentional punishment issued by an Almighty and micro-managerial God-figure. I was in Israel

during Hurricane Katrina, when the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, blamed Katrina on the New Orleans African American community, saying they weren't studying enough Torah. According to Yosef, "God said....let's bring on a tsunami and drown them." An "act of God."

An "act of God" is also how our own political leaders explained Katrina. Then President Bush said, "God's purposes are sometimes impossible to know here on Earth."

The phrase "an Act of God" is also legalese, common with insurance policies, and referring to a natural catastrophe that no one can prevent such as an earthquake, tidal wave, tornado, or volcano, and which is generally considered attributable to nature without human interference. In legal terms, it's an excuse for a failure to fulfill an obligation or a project. In the wake of catastrophe, this "Act of God" language is a way of deflecting the cause of disaster, as *completely outside of human control*.

Former Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff explained away Katrina's impact in this way: "That perfect storm...exceeded the foresight of the planners, and maybe anybody's foresight" The disaster, he said, was "breathtaking in its surprise.... Mother Nature trumped the playbook." But Noah, I'm not writing to you about "Acts of God," or "Mother Nature." Let's talk about you, about human beings. Because if we learned anything from Katrina, it's that we had the playbook.

Historian and disaster studies expert Ted Steinberg, in his book *Acts of God* concludes, "Rarely has a disaster been so accurately predicted." Not only was it accurately predicted, all the warnings were strategically ignored. In the years leading up to Katrina, the Bush Administration labeled the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) an "oversized entitlement program," drained FEMA of its relief funding, and fired the experts in disaster relief. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Katrina was a complete disaster in disaster relief, and there is not a credible social scientist or policy expert in the world who will deny that it wasn't God or Mother Nature that handpicked victims along unequal lines of race, and class, and age. It was human hands that robbed the most vulnerable among us of any hope for a *sigh of relief*.

Noah, you may have heard that just this past July, a group of scholars within the growing academic field of Disaster Studies gathered for a conference hosted by the International Institute for the Sociology of Law. What these scholars and policy experts have concluded is that natural disasters are not just weather events; the disastrous effects are produced by particular social and political environments. In other words, what we call "a natural disaster" is not so natural after all. And to understand this clearly, let's consider Chicago, in 1995.

If you ask most people on the street what happened in Chicago in 95, few would even

recall. If you asked Chicagoans about '95 many would recollect that around 100 or so people died in a Heat Wave. But in fact the true numbers are startling. At least 521 people died within this week-long heat wave. Some experts calculate a death count of more than 700. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg, in his book *Heat Wave*, offers a “social autopsy” of the disaster. Klinenberg finds it shocking how little attention heat waves receive—they’re not even considered by most to be “natural disasters.” Yet in the United States more people die in heat waves than in all other extreme weather events *combined*.

Why is there so little coverage? The truth is jarring: because unlike other weather events that wreak havoc on infrastructure and across the socioeconomic spectrum, in a heat wave the victims are almost exclusively the most vulnerable, the powerless, the alienated. Heat waves are, “silent and invisible killers of silenced and invisible people.” In Chicago, most of the victims were elderly and poor. The majority of these victims died alone. 170 human beings were never even claimed at the Public Administrators Office. The unclaimed victims were carted off to a mass grave, and two civilians attended their funeral.

The Chicago medical examiner called the heat-wave deaths an “Act of God.” The commissioner of the city’s Department of Human Services said, “people.... died because they neglected themselves.” Mayor Richard Daley said, “let’s not blow it out of proportion...every day people die of natural causes.” Left out of his “eulogy” if you will, is *this* so-called “natural cause”: months earlier, Congress passed the largest budgetary cuts at that time in US History. What was the target of these cuts? The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, leaving the impoverished without utilities. The House leadership sent a letter to President Clinton declaring, “it would be their policy from now on to pay for natural disaster...with budget cuts.” And President Clinton signed-off. These victims in Chicago were literally *powerless* just in time for the heat wave.

These very words we now hear today, Noah, as Hurricane Irene approaches, echoing in the halls of a Congress that is now debating, once again, which programs will be cut in order to fund disaster relief.

The Chicago Heat Wave reveals the consistent public denial that so-called natural disasters are anything other than the weather, or nature, or an “act of God” at play. What’s at play here reminds me of you, Noah: the propensity for a human being to turn his or her back to humanity. To withhold, to exclude from others, *a sigh of relief*. You live among us, within us.

But Noah what I want you to know is that the story of Genesis goes on and presents us with better role models than you. With Abraham, who prays for compassion amid the disastrous conditions of Sodom and Gomorrah; with Moses, who advocates for the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf. The culmination of this story is, of course,

Jacob—who not only stands up to God, but actually wrestles with God. Jacob was renamed *YISRA-EL*—“*one who wrestles with God*” because, unlike you, Noah, *Yisrael* advocates for human beings *above all*. This is why the Jewish people were named *Yisrael* or Israel—to do what you failed to do, to clean up your mess, to provide that *sigh of relief*.

So I sign this letter with the great hope that we will live and act in this world, less like children of Noah, and more like – who we truly are-

Sincerely,
The Children of Israel.

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The 10 Days of Awe are a gift to us, designed to symbolize Life. Rosh HaShanah is a birth, and Yom Kippur is a death. But in the end, the shofar is sounded—we awaken, we are pulled out of the depths, pushed forward into the next year with a new perspective on Life itself.

Rosh HaShanah is our Genesis, and each year we write a new chapter of the story. We move beyond the myth of Noah *who could have done more* and beyond the myth that *there's nothing more to be done*. We move beyond the myth that disasters are all-natural and beyond that myth that “poverty has nothing to do with me because I don't live there.” For indeed, the social depravity, the “savage inequality” that causes the unnatural disasters in New Orleans and Chicago, describes our own situation in our communities today: the unnatural disaster of poverty, the unnatural disaster of institutional racism, the unnatural disaster of an unbridled market “pricing” people out of their human rights.

Wrestling with the reality of these conditions that we are living among, the High Holy Days offer this hopeful message: We can build an ark.

Bigger and better than Noah's. An ark that affirms of human life.

With our own deeds in the year ahead, we can build an ark.

In our congregation's Ohel Tzedek, our tent of justice, open for all to enter, we can build an ark.

In the hours of our chosen careers or in our free-time, we can build in ark.

By joining others who share our passions and pains,

By habituating acts of lovingkindness,

By speaking out for those who have no voice: we can build an ark.

For those who are “priced out” of food or healthcare or education—basic human rights—

For those who still experience hatred and discrimination—we can build an ark.
For those whose lives can be saved, if only we act less like Noah and more like *Israel*,
one who wrestles—we can build an ark.

Because each year we begin with the refreshing Jewish conviction that we are here on
earth for a purpose, as the children of Israel, the ones who stand up- even to God- in
order to build an ark for humanity.

May the ark we build bring a sigh of relief upon the earth,
And may the light that shines from our actions refract colorfully as a rainbow arching
across the heavens.

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