

**Katrina**  
**Rosh HaShana 5766**  
**Rabbi Neal Gold**  
**Temple Shir Tikva**

Each of us comes into this sanctuary tonight with a different need. Some offer prayers of gratitude for the blessings of the year that's past. Some look to the new year with excitement; others face the unknown with anxiety. Some of us are simply praying for strength to survive.

But for all of us, it's hard not to come into Shir Tikva this Rosh HaShana with thoughts of Hurricane Katrina on our minds. The images have been so graphic, the stories so brutal, that they are seared into our memories. And over and over again, there was the mantra from the media: "In America? How could this happen here? How could this happen in America?" As if there is a special fence that keeps the winds and rains and other disasters that subsume the rest of the world away from America's blessed shores.

We know how the people of the Gulf Coast have been scattered all throughout the country. We even have several guests -- some honored guests -- who are sharing the holidays with us here at Shir Tikva, instead of back home in their New Orleans temples. To you, we offer a very special welcome, along with our prayers for your families and your neighbors.

In the wake of Katrina, as you know, people dispersed everywhere. Some went to the Superdome in New Orleans. Others went to Houston, or Atlanta, or even to Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod. There was a magazine article that described the refugee situation in a civic center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the following way:

In the River Center's lobby, tacked to an information board, there were numerous notices offering the refugees new lives in faraway places. Said one: SPACE TO HOUSE 6 FAMILIES WITH UP TO 6 PEOPLE EACH. IN SOUTH DAKOTA. Said another: COLUMBUS, OHIO: WE HAVE FURNISHED APARTMENTS (FREE/YEAR) AND JOBS FOR FAMILIES INTERESTED IN RELOCATING. CALL DAVE. And, every few hours, an announcement was made over the public address system that a bus bound for a distant city -- like Indianapolis, Indiana, or Lansing, Michigan, or Helena, Montana, where jobs would be lined up and housing would be provided -- was at the River Center getting ready to roll out. Sometimes, those in the shelter had less than an hour to decide whether they wanted to get on the bus.<sup>1</sup>

It pains anyone with a heart to hear words like those, but as Jews we know those words a little more personally than our neighbors.

As Jews, we know about starting over... how many times in our history have our ancestors been forced to start over? How many times were they faced with an ultimatum to leave home in an hour or less? (We know, of course, that on Pesach the Matzah in our mouths reminds us of a such a time. If you wanted to leave Egypt, there was not even enough time for bread to rise... Grab what you can and go, just go!) How many of us are here today because someone in our family in the not-so-distant past (two generations? Three? Four?) made a similar decision, and got on that ship crossing the Atlantic?

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1. Jason Zengerle, "Gulf Stream," *The New Republic*, September 19, 2005, p.27.

Perhaps there are people in the room tonight who can point to a time when they were forced to... start over.

As Jews, our response to the victims of Katrina was rooted in something more than, "I can't believe this could happen in America." We look into the faces and see our reflections.

הַיּוֹם הֵרַת עוֹלָם says the Shofar service: "Today marks the beginning of the world." Well, maybe that's not exactly what it says. Hebrew readers will pay close attention to those words הַיּוֹם הֵרַת עוֹלָם and hear the absence of a definite article. "Today marks the beginning of... a world."

After all, there were others. The Midrash teaches that when G-d began to create the world at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, there were many prototypes that didn't make the cut.<sup>2</sup>

In one attempt, says the Midrash, G-d creates a world to be treated with a strict sense of justice: every misdeed is instantaneously punished; all good is rewarded; no exceptions for context, no learning curve. And this world implodes on itself: no one, nothing in Creation, can live up to such a standard.

So G-d makes another attempt, and creates a world marked by complete mercy: every trespass is forgiven; everything is excused. This world, too, self-destructs, as must any society without an ounce of justice in it.

There were other tries, says the Midrash, until G-d found a formula for balance that allowed the world and its creatures to live and endure.

You know what comes next in the story: Adam and Eve, who leave the Garden of Eden, fully aroused and with eyes wide open, who go forth to populate the world. The Torah tells how for ten generations the world quickly filled with people.

And then the story starts over, as G-d presses the cosmic reset button and reboots.

Once there was a man named Noah, who was righteous and without blame -- at least in the context of his neighbors. For the Torah tells us that in the ten generations since Adam, something had (again) gone terribly awry. The world was full of hatred and violence -- the Hebrew word, provocatively, is *hamas* -- and another of G-d's Creations seems to have broken down.

G-d, as you know, comes to Noah and instructs him to build an ark. "For My part, I am about to bring the Flood -- waters upon the earth -- to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish," G-d tells Noah.<sup>3</sup>

How did Noah feel upon hearing those words? Incredulous -- as if to say, could this really happen, or is it a trick? Or grateful -- "Thank you, G-d, for saving me alone"? Maybe Noah felt a little vindicated, thinking to himself: "Finally, they're going to get what they deserve!" The Torah text is silent; each of us has to imagine for ourselves what went through Noah's mind that fateful day.

The text simply tells us that Noah started hammering. The ark went up, according to G-d's exact specifications: this long, this high, this deep, with a window and a door and three decks. And Noah goes forth and starts collecting animals. He brings them into the ark, along with his family. G-d closes the door to the ark personally, and then the rains start falling.

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2. See Rashi to Genesis 1:1 ברא אלקים

3. Genesis 6:17

The hurricane gales slam hard into the countryside. The rains fall from the sky with such force that it seems as if the waters are also coming up from the ground, as the very moorings of the earth give way. The levees burst; the streets and valleys fill with water, as life is squeezed out from every nook and corner where it may be hiding.

So it goes:

The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters. When the waters had swelled much more upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered...And all flesh that stirred on earth perished -- birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all humankind. All existence on earth was blotted out... Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The waters swelled on the earth one hundred and fifty days.<sup>4</sup>

And then the day arrives when the rains stop. The clouds move on, the sun beats down once again. The dove returns to Noah's window with an olive branch in her beak, as if to demonstrate that life has resumed once more. The mountain peaks protrude from the waters, and the ark sets down upon one of them.

Noah and his family peel off the covering of the ark. You would think, that with civilization wiped out and all life drowned away, such technicalities as recording the date of this event wouldn't really matter. But that's not the case. The Torah records exactly when this event happened:

בְּרֵאשׁוֹן בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ  
חָרְבוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ  
וַיִּסֶר נֹחַ אֶת-מִכְסֵה הַתְּבֵה, וַיֵּרָא...  
*In the first month, on the first day,  
the waters began to dry from the earth,  
and Noah removed the covering of the ark.  
And he saw...*<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the Torah tells us quite clearly: **The day when Noah and his family came out from the ark... was Rosh HaShana.**

Noah is one of those Torah stories that we all learn as children. And that's the problem: we grow up; it stays a children's story. It's not. It tells the theologically challenging story of G-d's imperfect attempt at Creation -- a world that goes awry and devours its inhabitants.

After Katrina, I shied away from Noah when I sought out Jewish texts. Let's be absolutely clear with one another about where the parallels between the two end.

In the Torah, the floodwaters are an act by G-d to retaliate for the *hamas* -- the violent hatred -- that has filled the world. In no way, shape, or form do I subscribe to the blasphemous idea that Hurricane Katrina was a punishment for anyone's sins. We'll leave that interpretation to the Pat Robertsons of the world, or to al-Qaeda and their ilk. Or to the like of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, the head of the Shas political party in Israel, who said that Katrina was G-d's response for

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4. Genesis 7:18-24

5. Genesis 8:13

America's support of the Gaza withdrawal.<sup>6</sup> Civilized people respond with one voice: All of them -- Robertson, Rabbi Yosef, al-Qaeda, are wrong. Dead wrong.

But we return to the story of Noah, the most famous Flood of all, to see what it has to offer us. And there is plenty.

The Torah's picture of Noah's story is purposefully ambiguous in many places. For instance, the text remains silent on these questions: When the waters receded, and the door to the ark flew open... what did Noah see?

Film the movie in your mind. The ark has come to rest on dry land. The door opens. Noah and his family take those first tentative steps in the sunlight of the new world... What did it look like? Was it the Garden of Eden all over again? Was the autumn sun shining over blossoming flowers and frolicking animals? Or was it something else?

What if, when Noah stepped out from the ark, he saw scenes like those that we've seen from the diminishing floodwaters in Louisiana? The houses were not all washed away; debris and skeletons of buildings still stood, pockmarked with mold, waterlogged and decaying. Did Noah go back and visit what remained of his old neighborhood?

And where did all the bodies go? We've seen the nightmarish pictures from the Gulf coast -- bodies strewn at random, facedown in the flooded streets. Were there bodies strewn all around for Noah to see when he went back out into the world?

The Rabbis of old teach that Noah went out and saw all this devastation, so very similar to what we've seen in the papers these many weeks. And the Midrash picks up this thread of the story:

After the flood, Noah opened the ark and looked out. He saw the earth desolate, forests and gardens uprooted, corpses visible everywhere. There was no grass, no vegetation; the world was a wasteland.

In pain and dismay, he cried out to G-d: "*Ribbono shel Olam!* In six days You made the earth. Now you have brought the work of Your hands to nought, uprooting all the You planted, tearing down all that You built. Why didn't you show compassion for Your creatures?"

And G-d responded to Noah with these words: "Excuse me? O faithless one! Now, after the destruction, You come to Me and complain? But when I told you, 'Make an ark,' you didn't plead for your neighbors! How differently Abraham will act in the future!" -- says G-d to Noah. "He will pray and plead on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. But you -- when you saw what was about to happen to the world -- you thought only of yourself and your family, while everyone else died by the fire and the water!"

And then -- says the Midrash -- Noah saw that he had sinned.<sup>7</sup>

In this midrash, G-d gives Noah a clear answer: Where was I? Where were you? I tell you that your neighbors are about to be devastated, and your first instinct is to start building an ark?

A story: Once a woman stood before G-d in prayer, tears coursing down her cheeks, her heart breaking from all the world's pain and injustice and brutality. "My G-d!" she cries out, "Look at all the suffering, the anguish, and distress in Your world. Why don't You send help?"

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6. "Shas Rabbi: Hurricane is Bush's Punishment for Pullout Support," Associated Press, in Ha'aretz, September 7, 2005.

7. See Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Repentance*, p.240 and Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Gates of Understanding 2: Appreciating the Days of Awe*, p.200; "unidentified midrashic source."

G-d replies, "I did send help. I sent you."<sup>8</sup>

Noah is the prelude to Abraham. At the end of the Noah story, G-d famously sets a rainbow in the sky and makes the following promise: "Never again will I destroy the world in this way. Now it is yours, to preserve or destroy as you will. But that's not quite the whole story, because, as your loving Parent, I can't quite bear to remove myself so completely from your destiny."

So G-d tries Plan B. "This time, I will appoint a man and his family to serve as a levee against the floodwaters of hate and cruelty. His name is Abraham. His specific job is, by living in covenant with Me, to stand in radical opposition to callousness, injustice, apathy, and cynicism. I'll try him -- hard. I'm going to try the 'Noah Test' on him, by telling him that certain cities are so completely evil that I'm going to wipe them off the face of the earth. But, as we'll see, he's going to pass that test by arguing and wrestling with me to not allow that fate to happen. I figure" -- says G-d -- "that if Abraham and his family are willing to wrestle with Me, then they'll never let a human tyrant allow wanton injustice and brutality to overrun the world."

The day that Noah looked and saw and understood this was Rosh HaShana. Rosh HaShana launches the Season of Reflection, of looking closely at ourselves, our lives, our community, our world. On these Days of Awe we stop lying to ourselves; we ask ourselves the hard questions about our reality. We ask ourselves: Are we a community of Noahs, or a community of Abrahams?

Hurricane Katrina, striking America's shores at the beginning of the month of Elul, the final month of the year, was like a shofar blast that arrived early. The great sage Maimonides taught the the shofar is like an alarm clock, waking up sleeping souls to the reality.

Part of this reality is that Katrina should prompt us to ask hard questions about the real nature of class and poverty in America.

As we now know, 80% of the people successfully escaped New Orleans before the storm hit. Left behind were the disproportionately poor. Left behind were people whose voices are not heard nearly as well as our more privileged voices. How could any of us not feel rage and frustration when we heard about the the victims, trapped in the New Orleans Superdome, going days without food?

And how could any of us not be outraged by certain irresponsible public voices, not just the ones who claimed Katrina was G-d's will, but also the ones who claimed that, for the victims, "this was the best thing that ever happened to them."

All the signs are out there that Katrina can and should be a wake-up call to America's big problems of the gaping chasm between her rich and poor. We should all lose sleep at night contemplating some of the lessons.

But that's not the whole picture. There's another part of this reality as well. That is discovering the incredible generosity of our neighbors. How could any of us not be moved by the volunteering, the reaching out, the sharing that has been taking place nationwide?

Part of my introduction to our Shir Tikva community was our hurricane relief project. When we joined together with the Reform Jewish movement nationwide to bring supplies to the Jacobs Camp in Mississippi, our social action leaders and I looked at each other and said: Do

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8. Steven Leder, *The Extraordinary Nature of Everyday Things*, p.39.

you think we're going to find someone in our community to drive a truck from Wayland to Mississippi on such short notice? To take time away from work or school and shlep across the country to do this Mitzvah? On a Friday afternoon we put the word out, not knowing what to expect. And by the following Monday, I'll tell you what we had: over a dozen people from Shir Tikva had contacted us, saying, "I'd be honored to drive the Temple's truck to Mississippi."

And so, two weeks ago, on a Thursday morning, we sent David Lustig and Ron Clarke off, driving the 26-foot truck that all of us filled to capacity. They were our שליחי מצוה -- our Mitzvah-messengers, who enabled us to reach out to our neighbors in need. And that was just part of our Temple's quite wide response to the disaster.

So the tensions remain in these subsequent weeks. There is a human reflex to be like Noah -- to not see the pain and suffering of anyone but ourselves, to build our own personal arks and to seal away the rest of the world's cries.

And there is a very real instinct to be like Abraham -- to go to extraordinary lengths to reach out to one another, to defend the defenseless, to strengthen the poor, and to care for those who have been storm-tossed.

Today we are called upon to ask: Which impulse will prevail in the year to come? Are we a community of Noahs, or a community of Abrahams?

הַיּוֹם הֵרַת עוֹלָם says our Machzor. Today is Rosh HaShana. Today marks the beginning of... a world. It might be a world of estrangement from one another. It might be a world where people are willfully blind to each other's suffering, saying, "I've got *tzuriss* of my own."

But our stubborn insistence on these Days of Awe is that, while there may be much about nature's winds and waters that we cannot control, there is much about our destiny that we can. Together we can determine that the New Year ahead of us will be one in which we re-emphasize that we are all interconnected and, indeed, responsible for one another.

In making that affirmation, we choose life and blessing for ourselves and our ravaged nation. And then we will have inscribed our own names into the Book of Life for the year ahead.

Amen.