

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon Rabbi Bloom – September 20, 2017

Just imagine the moment when the Flood receded in the Biblical account of Genesis 8. We read, “The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, 3 and the waters receded from the earth continually. At the end of 150 days the waters had abated, 4 and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. 5 And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen.”

Only Noah and his family were left, and, of course, all the animals of the earth remained. Noah sent forth a raven and a dove but both returned to him, indicating there was no dry land. Eventually the last effort by Noah to send out the dove turned out to be successful, for the dove returned with a leaf from an olive tree. Another trip followed and the dove did not return. So Noah knew it was time to open the doors and he saw his boat was on dry land. At that point in the flood story Noah sent his sons and their families -- along with the rest of the animals of the earth-- to repopulate it. Immediately afterwards, Noah built an altar to the Eternal One and offered up sacrifices. God smelled the offerings and said,

“I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

Noah and the Flood is a powerful story. It begins with destruction and concludes with a covenant that God makes with human civilization. Do we literally believe that God purposefully sent a hurricane, flood, storm surge or wind storm to punish us? Or was the real challenge after the near-death of human civilization to rebuild society with a moral base? The story is about what human society has been facing after hurricanes, earthquakes, fires and floods, ever since this story was first written down in the Torah, and ever since many other ancient flood stories began to appear.

Must we learn the same lessons over and over again when it comes to surviving a disaster of nature? What have we, in fact, learned this time with the advent of Hurricane Irma? How does our religious tradition guide us in coping with the challenges from these natural disasters ahead of us?

My recent newspaper column criticized how some in our society tend to perennially use the flood story to scold humanity for its moral failures. On the other side where is the stress on the healing and renewing aspects of the story? Too many times theological and political theories overlap first blaming one group, then another as the “real” reason why such natural disasters occur. This is divisive and draws us apart. Hurricane Irma should inspire us to unify and focus instead on core values. Do we have enough insight, humility and common sense to know what are the core priorities in life? Is there the wisdom to comprehend that life cannot return to the way it was after a disaster such as a hurricane or earthquake?

The High Holy Days, like the hurricanes, remind us that life is fragile and that despite the Torah telling us in Genesis that we are stewards of God's world, our existence is temporal. The prayer Unetaneh Tokef intones language like, 'Who shall die by fire and who by flood. Who shall live and who shall die?' The rabbis tried to teach us that we need religion as a source of faith and consolation when a disaster of any kind falls upon us. Religion helps us pick up the pieces, just like we see folks doing in Houston, Florida, the Virgin Islands and so forth. Religion also sheds light on the fact that, that despite our self reliance, our pride, our mind, our own business approach, we need community to get through the tough times in life. Religion is all about community and supplies the fuel that propels us to create that community and overcome those challenges. Is this not the best of the partnership between the Divine and humanity?

This is the second time within one year we have faced mandated evacuations in our own community. Last year we missed Yom Kippur because of Hurricane Matthew. We spread out to many communities. We found High Holy Days services as guests or we watched services live streamed from our computers. We emailed and texted and spoke with loved ones. We returned to our community in shock as we witnessed trees falling on streets or lying upon our houses and sometimes inside our homes, the electricity out, the people looking to make a reasonable profit and help us out with the cleanup and those who tried to exploit suffering for their services. How did we emerge out of this experience from Matthew? Did we do enough to help others when we could have done so?

Many reported to me in the following months feelings that resembled death and mourning, exhausting stress on body and mind, frustration, lack of patience, gratitude and many more emotions. I know that I felt a sense of loss, not just at the property damage to our house, but also over the loss of our beloved dog Emmi and the anxiety over dealing with insurance people, tree cutters and roofers. It was chaotic and draining.

The other side of the story was receiving the hospitality and loving kindness from all kinds of folks. I will not forget the appearance of the Mormon work crew at our home one day who took away a huge tree and cleared out the backyard of our home. In the Jewish community we shall not forget the kindness of Augusta's reform congregation. Its rabbi invited me to give remarks on Kol Nidrei, and that that blessing fortified my spirit, so that the next day I could lead services at the Ramada Inn for Jewish evacuees from Tide Pointe. I am sure we all have many stories of kindnesses and compassion bestowed on us. So did we learn from them?

Did the good things bring us wisdom and a generous spirit? Or did we simply and purposely forget and move on with life as usual?

Does Hurricane Irma represent both an opportunity and a challenge? Our damage this time is minimal compared to what we experienced with Matthew. We will resume our lives, but, what about those who are not as fortunate as we are? I heard about our congregation's heroic efforts during Hurricane Katrina and the story of driving a truck full of desperately needed supplies to New Orleans. Is it time for us to come together to help those suffering in places that have taken a direct hit from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma? Do we owe them that given our experience? Aren't we performing this kind of mitzvah because we are Jews and because we are human beings? Is

this the kind of Social Action we can all unite on? Proverbs chapter three says, “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.”

How many times have I heard it said, “People never change.” Is it true? If it is then why are we here in the synagogue? Religion and the power of teshuvah is about the principle that people, if they sincerely desire it, can change. They can be better. They can learn from their experiences. They can admit that change is an imperative whether that comes from suffering or wisdom. Helping others is the perfect chance to show we have grown in wisdom.

Many climate experts say that the higher temperature of the water and its rising nature is, in part, the result of our own refusal to be good stewards of God’s planet. If the science is correct then aren’t we, as a society, supposed to reflect and change our ways? Isn’t this the time to pull together to help other synagogues and the rest of the community at a time of profound need? Hasn’t the time come for us to see clearly our responsibility to be good stewards for ourselves?

And so if someone asks us, “What have we learned from these two hurricanes coming one after the other,” the way we answer them and ourselves may make the difference in saving someone’s life.

Let me conclude with the wisdom of our sages who reminded us through lessons learned about our role in this world. It is not to bring down terror that God allowed a flood. Rather it is to heal the world as God did after chaos of the Flood.

Rabbi Haninnah taught that humans are supposed to imitate God’s qualities and make them their own. For example, God clothes the naked because he gave clothing to Adam and Eve. So too are we supposed to clothe the naked.

Visit the sick. The Eternal One appeared before Abraham. (Tradition says right after he circumcised himself). You too should visit the sick.

Comfort the mourners. After Abraham died, God blessed his son Isaac. You too should comfort the mourners.

Bury the dead. “God buried Moses on Mt. Nebo. You too should bury the dead.

The upshot is this: “The Torah begins with an act of kindness and it concludes with an act of kindness. Remember that in Genesis God clothed Adam and Eve and in Deuteronomy he buried Moses.

A hurricane like Harvey, Irma or Mathew reminds us that lessons learned do not mean anything unless we practice the wisdom of experience.

L’shana Tova Tikatevu v’Tikatemu