

Rosh Hashanah 5782: Building an Ark
Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer
Judea Reform Congregation
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Recently my friend and colleague Bishop Clarence Laney asked me and other clergy a question. A question about faith. He asked: “*what does it mean [in my view] to be the faithful people of God?*” A powerful question.

Some regard the first figure of faith in the Torah to be Abraham. He’s certainly the most acclaimed in our tradition, but he’s not the first stalwart of faith. The first is 10 generations prior. Remember? When it rained and poured for “40 daysies daysies”? The first man of faith is Noah, in the age of the flood.

I’ve spent my life fascinated by Noah, perhaps because of my obsession with the weather. I joke with my friends that when I feel the urge to consult the Prophets, I first open up Isaiah and then... the Doppler Radar. What the two have in common is they both evoke what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called, “radical amazement.” From the word *nora* (נִירָא), as in *Yamim Noraim*, the 10 Days of Awe.

Nora is a loaded word, meaning “amazement” and “awe” and “fear” and “dread.” The emotional state of *nora* is inextricable from our experience of the natural world. Returning to Bishop Laney’s question, it dawned on me that the Torah doesn’t say all that much about Noah’s emotional experience of *nora*, of awe. In fact, that man of faith never says anything. Even after the flood, he doesn’t even give a *sigh of relief*.

We call our Torah the “Tree of Life,” and we turn to it when facing real life. We will soon face Noah again in the Torah next month. In preparation for our next encounter, I offer this letter.

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Dear Noah,

This has been a terrible week for water. Another dreadful hurricane that ripped through the South and far beyond. The images of flooding are gut-wrenching, and the number of lives taken or devastated is yet to be determined. We still don’t know the half of it. But when I saw this kind of water, these awful images, I thought of you. 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 ever. And after the storm, creation began anew. A rainbow arced across the sky, and a new Covenant was established, a promise between God and humanity

to move forward responsibly.

Your story teaches lessons in human purpose, devotion, and most of all, what it means to be *tzadik*, a righteous human being. However, knowing this, Noah, I have a complaint.

Sure, you've heard this complaint before, resounding within the ancient talmudic academies. The Sages wrote in Midrash Rabbah 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 six 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 ever to 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. Obviously, we are suffering from a horrific pandemic. No one is unaffected. Yet, even before this pandemic, natural disasters were on the rise. The data are unequivocal. According to the World Meteorological Organization¹, today we see on average five-times the number of natural disasters per year, killing hundreds of millions of people worldwide. 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 raging fires on the West Coast; the earthquakes in Haiti; tsunamis in Southeast Asia, and these hurricanes—most recently, Ida. It seems outrageous that Ida hit the same place on the same day as Hurricane Katrina hit 16 years ago. We learned more from Hurricane Katrina than from any other natural disaster. Perhaps now is a good to return to what we have learned.

Our leaders are quick to call these disasters, "acts of God." Noah, as you know personally, seeing floods, famines, fires, and plagues 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 among the Religious Right—to see every catastrophe as an intentional punishment issued by an

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1098662>

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 Black 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" was also how our own political leaders explain disasters. After Katrina, President Bush said, "God's purposes are sometimes impossible to know here on Earth." Last year the Governor of Alabama *begged* the *then* President to declare the pandemic an "act of God"—and not for religious reasons, but in order to help pump money into the oil industry. You see, the phrase "an Act of God" is also legalese, common with insurance policies, and referring to a natural catastrophe that no one can prevent... attributable to nature without human interference. In legal terms, it's an excuse for a failure to fulfill an obligation or a project.

Right now, there are countless cases in the courts, arguing over whether this pandemic is an "act of God," legally. There are also cases in New York and Pennsylvania around the question of whether or not the pandemic is technically a "natural disaster."

The one thru line between the religious and the legal "act of God" or "natural" disasters labels is they shift responsibility of the damage away from human beings—to God or nature.

As Trump said countless times, "there is nothing we could have done." Over and over. As if we never saw it coming. Well, as Bob Woodward showed us, he knew exactly what was coming. I recall how the head of the Department of Homeland Security during Katrina explained away the impact. He said, "that perfect storm...exceeded the foresight of the planners, and maybe anybody's foresight." He said, "Mother Nature trumped the playbook."

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 this pandemic so far, it's exactly what we learned from Katrina: it's that we had the playbook.

Historian and disaster studies expert Ted Steinberg, in his book *Acts of God* concludes of Katrina, "Rarely has a disaster been so accurately predicted." Not only was it accurately predicted, all the warnings were strategically ignored and FEMA was defunded. 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, age, health. It is human hands that rob the vulnerable among us of any hope for a *sigh of relief*.

A decade ago, 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. These scholars and policy experts concluded that the most disastrous effects of these catastrophic events are produced by particular social and political environments. In other words, there is nothing "natural" about these disasters.

We have the playbook. We've had it for time now. Experts now across the board agree that the great majority of the more than 650,000 COVID-deaths in the United States were preventable.

But you know this by now, Noah. This is old news...but it won't go away. What the pandemic reveals, again, is the consistent public *denial* that these disasters are manmade, and the refusal to take responsibility. Noah, we get that from you! The propensity to turn our backs to humanity. To deny from others a *sigh of relief*. You live among us, within us.

However, Noah, what I want you to know is that the story of Genesis goes on, and we have far better role models than you. We will find Abraham, who prays for compassion amid the disastrous conditions of Sodom and Gomorrah. We'll meet Jacob—who not only stands up to God, but actually *wrestles* with God! Jacob was renamed *YISRAEL*, meaning, “*one who wrestles with God*” because, unlike you, Noah, *Yisrael* advocates for human beings *above all*. This is why the Jewish people are 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 our Genesis, and each year we read and write our story anew.

Wrestling with the reality of the human condition, the Days of Awe beg us to remember, against all evidence otherwise:

that the human being can still build an ark;
bigger and better than Noah's;
an ark that affirms of human life.

With our own actions and choices, *we can build an ark*.
In our community, with love growing here, *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 pains or worries or passions;
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 housing;
for those who still experience hatred, Communities of Color, immigrants, the refugees whom we are readying ourselves now to welcome, *we can build an ark*.
For our delicate, broken natural world, in dire need of ecologically responsible stewardship, *we can build an ark*.

We can still build an ark for those *can still* be saved—
If and only if we act less like Noah..... and more like Israel, who will wrestle with *anyone*, even God,

for the sake Blessing.

Being a faithful people of God means building an ark.

In the year 5782,

May we build an ark.

May the ark we build bring a sigh of relief,

And may the light that shines from our actions refract colorfully
as a rainbow, arcing across the heavens.

Amen.