

Where Is God in a Hurricane? Eve of Rosh Hashanah, 5778/2017
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The past month has seen three record hurricanes in the Atlantic, record monsoons in Southeast Asia, record high temperatures and wildfires out west, and two major earthquakes in Mexico. To paraphrase one wiseacre: “We’re going to have a national day of prayer: God, can you please save us from any more acts of God?”

Behind the joke is a profound discomfort. We are in the Days of Awe. But “Awe” is a concept almost lost in our modern secular society, the recent solar eclipse being a notable exception. Normally, the constant barrage of news on our smart phones either keeps us in perpetual shock or threatens to make us numb. It seems impossible to live our own daily lives and yet truly feel the suffering of humanity. In the face of natural disasters, we are jolted into action. Such events are awesome in their power, almost beyond our comprehension. What God do we worship, who has such awesome power to destroy as well as to create? This is the emotion that our ancestors spoke of, *yirah*, a combination of fear and awe.

Throughout the ages, theologians have tried to make sense of why a benevolent God allows human suffering. To account for human evil, we can say that God gave us free will to make good of bad choices, but how do we explain those “acts of God” as coming from a benevolent deity? One traditional rabbinic explanation of why nature is not always kind comes from the two main names for the Divine in Jewish tradition: Elohim (which means “God”) and Adonai (which means Lord or Eternal). Throughout the Bible, these two names for God that recur again and again: Elohim and Adonai.

Tradition equates Elohim with God’s attributes of judgment and Adonai with God’s attributes of mercy. In the opening chapter of the Torah, creation is described as the work of Elohim.

Hassidic thinkers pointed out that the name Elohim is equal in gematria, Hebrew numerology, to “*Hateva*,” meaning “Nature.” When we say “Nature,” we really mean God’s creation, which is filled with God’s Presence. So how is that equivalent to “judgment?” Nature is beautiful and uplifting. Many if not most of us find God, experience the Shechinah or Divine Presence, when we commune with nature.

But nature can also be awesomely destructive. Nature has its laws, laws which are fundamental to our existence. Laws like gravity or chemical reactions are morally neutral. As the Talmud points out on several occasions, regardless of our moral intentions, *Olam k’darko noheg*, the world follows its natural course. Nature has its own processes that are based on natural laws set in motion with the process of creation.

At the same time, Judaism has another name for God, “Adonai,” translated “Lord,” or “Eternal.”

Actually, Adonai is the substitute name that Jewish tradition uses for God’s four letter sacred name, the *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*—the breath of life, the ground of all being—a Hebrew name which we no longer pronounce aloud out of reverence for its sanctity. Adonai represents the transcendent aspect of God. Our lives are not limited by the laws of nature. We always have the possibility of transformation, of transcendence, of mercy and kindness, represented in the name Adonai. Adonai inspires the overflowing of love, courage, caring, and goodness that often follows the worst disasters. Which is just what we have seen in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

In the Genesis story, when human beings are created, the names of Adonai and Elohim are joined together as Adonai Elohim, the Lord God. Likewise in the Shema and in our blessings we join the two names and aspects of God by saying, *Adonai Eloheynu*, Adonai is our God. We bring the two aspects of the divine together in our prayer.

In Unetaneh Tokef, a central prayer of the High Holidays, which we will recite at our stirring Musaf service tomorrow, we catalog the list of natural disasters that might overtake human beings in the year ahead: “who by fire and who by water.” These mighty forces of nature represent the aspect of Elohim, the aspect of reality that is beyond our control. But we conclude with the phrase, “But *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah*—repentance, prayer and righteousness—shift the evil of the decree.” This doesn’t mean that we can change nature through these means, or that we can rid the world of all disasters, but that through changing our human behavior we can bring healing and transformation into almost any situation.

For now, we must turn to human responsibility. While natural disasters originate in nature, they are also inextricably linked to human society. They are not just “acts of nature,” but nature inter-acting with human society.

In Hurricane Harvey, massive forces of nature collided with a huge city sprawled on concrete highways, fringed by huge chemical plants and oil refineries. Meanwhile Monsoon rains flooded parts of India, Bangladesh and Nepal, affecting 16 million people. Those floods got a lot less news coverage here, but constituted one of the worst regional humanitarian crises in years. If you think that natural disasters are getting worse in recent years, you are right, according to a United Nations website on the environment. But it’s not simply that there are more such events, but that there are more people living in the most vulnerable areas, and outside the developed world it is particularly people who are poor or live in flimsy housing that is easily destroyed.

In addition, we human beings are drastically degrading the environment by cutting down forests and destroying wetlands that protect from flooding, and releasing carbon dioxide that leads to global warming and climate change, making weather disasters more severe. It is hard to say how much global warming contributes to each and every storm, but meteorologists explain that warming seas fuel hurricanes. Meanwhile, out West, this summer, forest fires raged as temperatures soared.

Dramatic one-time events grab the headlines, but probably the greater environmental threat to our planetary future comes from slow changes like deforestation, melting polar ice-caps, destruction of coral reefs, extinction of species and depletion of natural resources, and the ongoing ravages of wars and conflicts that are often exacerbated by droughts and famines. These slow natural disasters are acts of humanity.

Some people in our congregation have lived through natural disasters or witnessed the aftermath firsthand. A few years ago, my family and I were stranded for three days while on vacation in the Texas hill country when a massive flood took place. (Ironically, the Torah portion was Noah.) What I saw then is that natural disasters can bring out the worst in some people, but surprisingly they can bring out the best in far more people. They bring out the quality inspired by Adonai, the transcendent power of compassion and caring. Thus we have seen that in recent disasters, such as Hurricane Harvey, there has been an incredible outpouring of tzedakah, or charity and good deeds to help others.

I think that the most dramatic picture was a human chain of people who put themselves at risk to save one person from a flooded car. We saw the selfless generosity of scores of people from all walks of life, the kindness, gentleness and selfless giving that restored faith in the American character. Just a few weeks before, Charlottesville, a small group of haters inspired fear and rage. In Houston, by contrast, thousands of people shared love as they reached out across all barriers of race and religion to help one another. One of my friends in Houston whose home was flooded wrote about the recovery efforts: “Spent the day amazed at the volunteers who appeared from out of nowhere to help. First came the Baptists. Then came the Catholics. Then came the Mormons. Then Chabad. Then Young Israel. Then the Israelis! That is Houston Strong!”

If you have a mystical disposition, you might see that goodness of human beings is an expression of our godliness. Back to tonight's opening story about the man on the roof: God doesn't usually redeem us through supernatural miracles but rather through the transcendent impulses in human nature. The aspect of Elohim was experienced in the vast forces of the storm and in the harsh consequences of floods meeting chemical plants. The aspect of Adonai was felt in the thousands who rushed to Houston with their motor boats to rescue people, in the people who worked around the clock helping strangers.

Rabbi Ranon Teller of Congregation Brith Shalom in Bellaire, Houston said these words on the Shabbat after the Hurricane: "We don't pray for God to work for us. We pray for us to work for God. We don't pray for God to modify the laws of physics and the science of meteorology. We pray to God to help us intensify our response and our compassion and our empathy."

What the Torah and prophets will tell us over these Days of Awe is this: don't wait for a dramatic event to do these mitzvot. If we human beings in God's image can practice empathy, compassion, and giving to others on a daily basis, if we reach out every day to lift people from poverty, mend society, heal the environment and stop the "slow natural disasters" that are going on behind the headlines every day, then we can reach the Messianic state of "heavenly days right here on earth." May these Days of Awe be a time for us to find and do our part for Tikkun Olam. May we interact with nature for the good, and may we act in God's image, as God's partners, as God's hands bringing healing and transformation to society and to our planet. Amen