

**Against a Sea of Troubles:
The Storm of a Century and the Questions of our Lives
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Alone, at night, on a lonely country road. Searching for company, trying to stay awake and alert and aware of the reality around me as miles of pavement passed beneath my wheels, I pressed the scan feature on the car radio. Sample sounds come across the airwaves for split seconds at a time, then move on into the night. Country music, backwater preaching, frenzied crowds at games lost in oblivion. And then the following words, clear as a bell: “Agonizing existential desolation.” That’s it. And it was gone.

A different time, a different place. A story, from a day at the mall. A young father, pushing a baby’s stroller through a crowded store. The infant is shrieking at the tops of his lungs. The man seems beside himself. “Please, Jacob, control yourself” the father says. “Easy now, Jacob, keep calm.”

A woman unused to seeing a dad do child care was so impressed she went over to the man. “You really know just how to speak to babies,” she said, “calmly and gently.” Then, maybe sensing that kinship we just kind of know is there, she asked: “So, the baby’s name is Jacob?”

“The baby?” the man said. “He’s Sammy. *I’m* Jacob.”

And here we stand at razor's edge, between prayer and desperation, between what happens to us, and what happens in us, between external events...and the world we *can* control.

How much we want to make sense of the world! To fit events into a framework we can handle. We come together these Days of Awe aware as much as ever before... of the awesome power of nature. So strong is our desire for order, to make sense of the world and even the weather that we grasp at straws. A United States Senator asserts that God took aim at a city of sin – and adds that those who chose to stay behind should be punished for not getting out... presumably for their audacity in becoming a burden to the rest of us. A preacher thought that satellite images of Katrina, before it struck land, formed the shape of a fetus, and the hurricane was therefore divine retribution for legalized abortion. A former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel drew a causal connection between the newly homeless in Israel and in America. It was punishment, he asserted, for American support for the withdrawal from Gaza Strip.

One more level-headed rabbi noted that with all the nonsense we hear after cataclysmic events, catastrophe or attack, perhaps the most appropriate reaction would be that of Aaron, on hearing of the death of his two sons, and putting up with Moses' pat explanations for why it happened. "*Vayidom Aharon,*" we are told. "And Aaron was silent."

[Rabbi Marc Saperstein]

But if we are dumbstruck, at times – momentarily mute as witnesses who for too long forgot the raw power of the planet -- nevertheless we cannot, we must not remain silent.

My friends it is five fall seasons we have spent together; this is the fifth time I have stood before you on the High Holy Days. What have we seen in these five falls? Airplanes and anthrax. Snipers. Isabelle. Four Florida hurricanes last year. And Katrina. And Rita. Rage and madness from the hearts of men; fury from the heart of the world itself.

Still we stand, together against the night. With the Psalmist we say: “We shall not fear, though earth itself should shake, though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters thunder and rage, though the winds lifts its waves to the very vault of heaven...”
(Psalm 46:3, as paraphrased in *Gates of Prayer*, page 86)

It was the worst of times, it was the best of times. What these seasons have revealed about human nature confirms the ancient wisdom that we are lower than beasts -- and higher than angels. Look at the speed with which we take advantage of each other – assaults, arrests, scandals and scams, fake FEMA agents collecting social security numbers. And look at the outpouring of love and sweat and support and the rescue efforts of healers whose own homes were swept away...all enough to break our hearts, and touch our soul.

And now we stand in the wake of the storm of the century, just as the shofar calls us all to wake up from our spiritual sleep. Where are we, then, this new year, as we take arms, once again, against a sea of troubles?

Questions of God. Questions for us. Things to learn. And things to do.

So where is God, in the wind and the water? We are here this night. We are in a house of God. Either there is some power and purpose in the words we pray, or we should be honest, and put them away. No more prayers! No poetry at all! Banish these primitive promises of a world that makes sense! Leave only a prose parade of statements we can intellectually affirm, and politically endorse.

And yet tomorrow... Tomorrow we chant the words that chill our soul. *“U’netaneh Tokef K’dushat HaYom.* Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day, it is awesome, and full of dread. *B’rosh Hashanah Yikateivun, u’v’Yom Tzom Kippur Yaichataivun.* On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live, and who shall die? How many shall come to be? How many shall pass away? Who by fire, and who by water? Who by hunger, and who by thirst?” Who by violence and who by neglect? Who shall get out, and who shall get caught? Who shall reach out, and who shall we reach? Who shall cry, and who shall comfort? Who has power, and who does not?

The words are so raw, so real, so painful... that there are Jews who stay away altogether just to avoid that prayer, and there are some who, in a radical step of rationalist reform, plausibly argue in favor of leaving it out altogether. We don't literally believe that God snips the end or stretches the length of each life's thread. Why, then, imply that we do?

I don't know what you get out of these words. I can tell you that for me, it changes – every year, but that I tremble – every year. Facing five years of infertility I spit out the words “who shall come to be.” At other times with loved ones hovering between life and death during just these days, in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I shook at the words “who shall pass on.”

I have never taken these words literally. But I have always taken them seriously. They are our annual confrontation with mortality, the capriciousness of life, the vicissitude of our fortune, the slings and arrows of fate, and the abiding, uncomfortable, terror-filled fact that so much of what goes on in our lives is beyond our control.

And the ending? The promise that we have some measure of control? A misreading, at best. *U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roah ha'g'zeirah* – but repentance, prayer and righteous giving avert the evil decree? Earn us a place in the book of life? Will make us live longer? No, no, no. That's not what the words say.

The words don't work when we overextend their reach. But what they do say is powerful enough. It says *not* that what we do will prevent

bad things from happening *to* us, but that repentance, prayer and charity... temper the *severity* of the decree. This is not about what comes at us, but what comes from us. Not about what we must face, but how it can feel. The point is not even, as someone said recently, how long we live but how many moments of love and connection and awe and wonder there are in our lives...not how many breaths we take but how many moments take our breath away. [Rabbi Zoe Klein]

It's not a promise, but a prayer. A last, best hope for our lives. It is not about what God throws our way. Look, I think the insurance companies are just wrong. A hurricane is *not* an act of God. Maybe that is out of God's hand, too. But maybe this is all about a God who is *there for us* when the headlines fade and the attention goes away. The God of the long haul, and the lonely road. A God who is present through the good and the bad, the rich times and the poor, the easy and the hard, the sum and the fullness of all our days. "*V'hu haya, v'hu hoveh, v'hu yiyheh...*the one who was, and is, and will yet be."

Where is God? Elijah found out, in a distant cave long ago. For God was not in the storm, and God was not in the fire. Yet there is a stillness that echoes after the thunder, something that remains. There is such a thing... as a sound of silence. A pregnant pause. And emptiness that is full. A "*kol d'mama dakah,*" a "soft, murmuring sound," a "still, small voice."

"*Vayidom Aharon.* And Aaron was silent..."

**If God is found in the soft and silent, in the quiet and the calm,
the intangible and the aftermath, where, then does that leave us.
Indeed, where does that leave us?**

And we remember. Not so long ago, Rabbi Marc Saperstein recalls, we lived by the river, in the swampy and muddy places of the town. Not so long ago in the ghetto, in cramped quarters into which we were forced, all over the continent, in all the cities of Europe. The waters of the Tiber in 1660 reached the second story of the houses. The floods and the disease, the squalid poverty with no escape... not so long ago... only scant more than a century ago were European Jews in the same position as the African American poor of New Orleans. Not so long, in the sweep of history. We remember. It's not just "them." It was us. And we awaken once again, we see anew in forlorn faces... a core of common humanity. We are not so distant and different. We are bound together still with the fate of every human being. And in the open eyes of every soul sparkles a bright reminder -- or a fiery rejoinder to those who would forget -- we are *all* made in the image of God.

Evil? Was there evil here? Yes, I think, there was evil here. And just as with the tsunamis the evil was not in the water, but the waste -- the warning that could have been given in the Indian Ocean, the orders that could have been given in the Gulf States, the order that should have come more quickly. The disparity between rich and poor. The question is not where is God but where are we?

Look and behold: the Arctic ice is shrinking, the ocean water grows warmer, the storms come more often, the marshes and wetlands and coastal plains are cleared of native growth to make way for development. We abandon our role, our God-given duty as guardians of the Earth. And our charge, our planet itself, grows restless in response.

Katrina and Rita may be part of a surge of storms, a cycle of Atlantic intensity coming upon us once again. But it is also possible – and we cannot say for sure – that we had a hand, that what we do has made things worse. That this was not “just” a natural disaster.

I remember Tova. It was years ago, during my junior year in Jerusalem, and Tova was the Israeli girlfriend of one of my flat-mates. She was also the daughter of an Israeli diplomat. Her father had been stationed in Ethiopia, in the years before 1967, before all African nations broke off ties with the Jewish state.

Ethiopia! I remember my first impression. Famine and draught, suffering and depravation. What a place for a diplomatic assignment! But Tova’s father had pictures from his posting. It was a green and verdant land, lush and ripe, rich and productive.

What happened? First came the wars, which cut down the trees. Then came the rain, which washed away the soil, which had nothing left to hold it in place. And then, as the land changed, the weather... changed with it. That drought was *not* a random event. Nor was it an

“act of God.” Let us look in the mirror. It was the consequence of human actions.

And we... we have more power, to turn our lives, to affect our fate, to change the world... more power in these hands than ever we realized before. We can do more than we know – to till and to tend, to harm or to heal.

What do we learn, then, from the storm and the sea?

Two subjective impressions, beyond the pressing moral questions of poverty and race we will continue to face – and address -- in the days to come.

The first is a renewed sense... of the power of water. The scholar Rachel Adler notes that there is something primitive and essential about our relationship with water. It is a source of great anxiety. It is a question of balance. Too little and we cannot live. Too much and we cannot live either. We know, she says, that water transforms: it is life-giving and death dealing. God’s first creative act is the imposition of order and balance and limits on a watery mass of chaos. Our lives -- all life on land – emerges over millions of years from the waters of our birth. A sign of coming life is, indeed, that the waters break. Salvation comes, Moses is pulled...from the water. Traditional Jews and Jews-by-choice step into the living waters of the *mikvah*. We prepare our bodies for burial through the cleansing act of *taharah*; we return from the cemetery,

and pour water on our hands. And in the prayers we recite on Simchat Torah and the first day of Pesach, the borders and boundaries of the rainy season in the land of Israel, prayers for rain and prayers for dew, our ancestors pleaded that the waters would be... *“livracha v’lo liklalah, l’sova, v’lo l’razon, l’chayyim v’lo l’mavet...* for blessing, and not for curse; for sustenance, and not for destruction; for life, and not for death.”

And for me, I felt anew in these past few weeks... the intertwining of our lives, the intimacy of the world we live in, how dependent we are on one another. For now the connections are laid bare for all to see:

In the economy, between what could have been seen as someone else’s storm, and the price of gas and grain and coffee in our own stores.

In the environment, between development and the denial of global warming, on the one hand, and the frequency and intensity of the storms on the other, between, as one writer put it, “the erosion of the shore lines and the erosion of the idea of the common good.”

In our priorities and pursuit of security, between our adventurism, our misplaced obsession with Iraq and our abandonment and, yes, our glaringly exposed fatal weakness on the home-front. Between being stretched too thin, and getting hit hard.

In politics, between rewards for the rich, and consequences for the poor.

In geography, as we see that nature recognizes no national borders, and offers for help come to a country that prides itself on helping others.

In our lives, between the hands that reach out in need, and those who are moved to reach out in return. Indeed, although I was taken aback – I was almost offended – the first time I heard a sad story about a lost pet while there were yet human beings to be saved, still the tales of abandoned animals remind us that we are bound up not only with people of all colors and creed, but with all the creatures on earth as well.

Katrina packs a punch in what it has to teach... about the unity of the universe, the oneness at the heart of the world.

And so what can we do?

Rabbi Israel Salanter, founder of the Musar movement in Judaism, a nineteenth century emphasis on the primacy of ethics introduced into the world of European Orthodox yeshivas, teaches that *“For yourself, give precedence to the soul, but for others, never forego the demands of the body. Your neighbor's physical needs are your spiritual affairs.”*

Our neighbor's physical needs. And so our congregation, our community, responds.

On the table in the foyer you can find the following yellow sheet of paper. On it is an updated outline of our efforts to work for those near and far whose lives have been turned upside down by the water and the wind.

- In the coming days, we will work with the Silver Spring Interfaith Housing Coalition, to take on the needs of at least one

family, providing a home, shelter, basic needs... and we ask that you begin now, to look around your own home, to think of furniture you no longer need, items you can donate as we make a new home and welcome new neighbors, in our own backyard.

- Well, as of 11am this morning I was going to read the following words: “Temple Shalom, in cooperation with Temple Beth Ami and with the Reform movement Jacob’s Ladder Project, will be sending a truck to the stricken region. Information about what items are needed, and details about the pick up time, are on the sheet in the foyer.” The only problem is: there has been such an outpouring of generosity already, that Jacob’s Ladder is closing to deliveries on October 19. Our truck was scheduled to arrive on October 21. And so, we urge you instead to watch for further details about this... and know that what you would have donated can go to local needs, which leads me to the next point:
- Finally, we urge you to not forget the poor and the needy in our own midst. In the wake of a world-wide outpouring of love after the Tsunamis, charities took a hard hit... in places out of the limelight of the moment. We felt for Asia. And Africa suffered. Tomorrow you will be receiving the bags for the Manna Food Drive we support every year at the High Holy Days. Let us respond to the needs we see and feel off to the south. Let us remember, though, the ongoing needs... that are right next door.

We live in a world that is full of change and fury. It is almost as if it is alive onto itself. We yearn for what was, for the comfort of the familiar, for hearth and home, for safety and security. For yesterday's warmth, for childhood's dreams. But this, too, will slip away someday. It always does.

We must answer the emptiness, we must fill the void, with renewed purpose. With new love. With a vision of tomorrow.

We Jews have always held out a hope, for the world the way it can be. For a sense of wholeness and integrity and meaning. For redemption. For the day of the Messiah.

When will it come, asked the rabbis in the Talmud? When?

"*Hayom*," we were told. "Today. *Im b'kolo tishma'u*. If you but hearken unto God's voice." (from Sanhedrin 98a, quoting Psalm 95:7)

Or maybe... maybe the Messiah is already at work.

Where is he, they asked? Where can we find him?

He is there, at the edge of the city. He is there, among the wretched and the sick. He is there, tending to the injured, and binding up their wounds.

A mother and a son, alone in the wilderness. The boy is thirsty, and he cries. The mother, not wanting to witness his death, puts him down, and tries to turn away. But she cannot. She sits out of sight, but

still nearby. She bursts into tears. And it is just then, we learn, in this story of Hagar and Ishmael, traditionally read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, just then... “*Vayishma Elohim et kol haNa’ar*, And God heard the cry of the boy.”

He’s Sammy. We’re Jacob.

Hevel havalim, said Kohelet, “vanity of vanities.” Or, better: A breath of breaths, air of air.” A wisp beyond words. Or, as a prophet of these latter times said it anew in his own words of wisdom: “The answer,” he said, “is blowing in the wind. The answer is blowing in the wind.”

L’shanah Tovah.