After the Flood

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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 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 have brought the work of your hands to naught, uprooting all that You planted, tearing down all that you built. Why did you not show compassion for Your creatures?

God then replied: O faithless shepherd! Now, after the destruction, You come to me and complain. But when I said to you: Make an ark for yourself, for I am going to flood the earth to destroy all flesh, you did not plead for your neighbors! How differently Abraham will act; he will pray on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And

Moses, when his people anger Me with their calf of gold, will offer his life for them. But you -- when you saw that judgment was about to strike the world -- you thought only of yourself and your household, while all else perished by fire and water!

Then Noah understood that he had sinned.

(*Midrash*, cited in *Gates of Repentance*, p. 240)

When I saw the aerial footage of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Harvey and now Hurricane Irma and the aftermath of flooding in Houston, I thought of this Midrash, this ancient rabbinic spin on the biblical story of Noah.

I imagined that what I was seeing on my television screen was exactly what Noah saw when he looked out from the ark, after the rainstorms stopped and the flood waters began to recede. And, as I began to hear the tales of heroic efforts by ordinary citizens, of flotillas of private boats and armies of civilians linking hands to pull people from the rushing waters. As I saw public officials who did

not abrogate their responsibilities I the interest of politics or party, but instead listened the experts offered calm and reasoned instructions I realized why Noah is the architype of Jewish hero and Abraham and Moses are.

There is no arguing that we have been beaten down this year. Not only by firestorms, hurricanes, drought, war, famine and earthquakes. We have been knocked off our feet by the people in the news as much as the events.

Its been hard to find a hero, someone to look up to when everyone is putting each other down. Our politics have become a blood sport, civility is but a quaint nostalgia and the societal norms and conventions that helped maintain at least some semblance of social order and mutual respect have been blown up with 140 character tweets, Facebook trolls and fake news about Fake News.

Its been hard to have faith in humanity when everywhere we look people are acting in human.

So if every cloud has a silver lining, then in the midst of the pain and devastation, the loss of life and property of these storms, fires and earthquakes have also exposed a treasure trove of goodness in ordinary people, ordinary

people who have done extraordinary things.

Something changed for me this past week, watching the devastation was heart breaking, I have friend and colleagues in Houston who have only the clothes on their backs, but when I looked past the stuff and saw the people helping each other I felt a little better about the state of our world, if not its present then the potential that lies in each of us for its better future.

The rabbis of the Talmud understood this as well, it is why they declared quite prophetically that whoever destroys a single life it is as though he had destroyed an entire universe, and whoever saves a single life is as if he had saved an entire universe. (Sanhedrin 5:4)

We spend a lot of energy focusing on the first part of that verse the destroying and taking of life, and yet the second part is where godliness lives. In the saving of a life we not only save the life of the person in jeopardy but we uplift and save the soul of those who looking out on a world torn asunder may have lost hope and faith.

In the Talmud Rabbi Judah taught: "Ten strong things have been created in the world. A mountain is hard, but iron

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cleaves it. Iron is hard, but fire softens it. Fire is strong, but water quenches it. Water is strong, but clouds bear it. Clouds are strong, but wind scatters them. Wind is strong, but a body bears it. A body is strong, but fear crushes it. Fear is strong, but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it off. Death is stronger than all of these. Yet tzedakah saves from death, as it is written, 'Tzedakah delivers from death.'" [Proverbs 10:2] (Talmud, Bava Batra 10a)

What those extraordinary ordinary people have done in all the danger zones around our planet these past weeks are acts of tzedakah. Tzedakah is not just giving money, and it is not even a benign good deed' Tzedakah is an act of justice.

Through their multiple acts of tzedakah they have shown me, and you and all of us that we are not in the times of Noah, the world does not need to be swept clean, the table reset. There are good people amongst us, kind people, generous people. We are not all left and right, we are not indifferent to the suffering of others, we are much more Abrahams and Moses than we are Noah. The floods

and fires and earthquakes remind us that we are all in the same boat and we will sink or swim together. This past week it may just be that a hurricane saved us.

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