

Learning from the Whirlwind

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5774

Let us begin with a familiar biblical story. It is the story of Adam and Eve. According to the Torah, God created Adam from the earth and Eve from his rib. God placed them in the Garden of Eden with only one instruction. You can eat from any fruit or vegetable you want except those from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. You know the ending. What is the first thing they did? They ate. “Shira and Ari, we are going to leave you home alone tonight. You can watch whatever you want on TV. Just no HBO after 1 am.” And if you believe that the TV was off and that my children were in bed by midnight, then let me tell you about a talking snake. And the Torah relates. The serpent said to the woman, “Did God really say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?” And so the snake convinces the woman to eat the fruit. It is not an apple by the way except for in medieval Christian art, but instead, according to Jewish tradition a pomegranate or etrog. She likes it and gives it to Adam and he eats it and also likes it. What’s not to like about a fruit picked fresh off a tree? Only one problem. God said, Don’t eat it. And now they ate. They gained knowledge, which I always think is a good thing. God confronts them. God says, “Ayekah? Where are you?” Do they admit their wrongs? No, of course not. Adam says, “The woman who You created, she made me do it.” Eve says, “It was the talking snake.” That’s a good one, Shira and Ari. “We forgot to turn the TV off.” Blame the talking snake. Own up. Take responsibility for your mistakes. Correct your failings. God banishes them from the garden and says, “Cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life.” (Genesis 3)

And now we know. Cursed be the ground because of us. Is there any lingering doubt? Do we dare reject science? Our world is no longer Eden. So let me state my claim at the beginning. Climate change is affecting our world. Is the memory of Hurricane Sandy already a distant memory?

Let me offer but a few reminders. Here are the numbers for our own Long Island. According to FEMA, over 95,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, most by the waters of the devastating storm surge. Nearly 40,000 of those suffered damage greater than 50% of their value. In the weeks that followed we volunteered to help our neighbors. Our congregation partnered with Nechama, a Jewish disaster relief organization, and helped a family with the ugly and messy task of removing waterlogged floorboards. This particular family lacked insurance and so we helped them with those tasks that involved unskilled labor. Ari and I pried up board after board of their dining room’s wooden floor and carted couches and chairs filled with water to the curb. Most remarkable of all is that we worked alongside not just other congregants but a young man who drove to Long Island from Minnesota and used his two weeks of vacation to volunteer and help out after Superstorm Sandy. Most nights he slept in his car. He worked each and every day of his vacation to help out complete strangers. He appeared motivated by nothing other than a deep sense of altruism. Would we have given up our

vacations to help his community if the situation were reversed? On another day I drove to Long Beach to volunteer at FEMA's disaster relief center. I was overwhelmed by what I saw. The beach parking lot was filled with mountains of trash and debris. The piles of cut trees at the end of driveways and those collecting in Huntington's parking lots was little in relation to all of these household belongings, furniture and appliances piled along what was only weeks before our beautiful Long Island beaches. 4.4 million cubic yards of debris had to be cleaned up from the Island following the storm. Many of us were without power for weeks. In fact over 1 million customers lost power. Who could forget the gas shortages that followed, the maddening frustration of having to wait in lines for such a basic necessity and then still being unable to find gas? Should I continue? Do we wish to relive those weeks? I ask, has our beloved island been effectively rebuilt? We have restored power and rebuilt boardwalks. But rebuilding is not the same as preparedness. I read that LIPA can now communicate better with repairmen when they are in the field. But better communication and improved emergency management is not the long-term thinking and planning I envision. We have repaired our beautiful beaches and carted away the debris. But the ocean and the Long Island Sound will find its way into our towns once again.

We require a fundamental shift in our thinking. Everything we have done as enormous as these tasks have been is still but small changes. We have eaten of the fruit. Have we gained any new knowledge? Have we learned something new? This is my focus for this morning. What should we have learned from Hurricane Sandy?

The hurricane should have been a wake up call that we can no longer live as we have, that our bargain with nature has failed. We look to generators as if they are permanent fixes, we write about tree removal as if it is redemptive, but so much more must change. We cannot buy a peace with nature. We cannot build walls high enough to protect us from the sea. Nature will win. And yet we go on as if our only plan is a prayer that this storm was in fact once in a lifetime storm. I am not a prophet but I remain convinced that it was not. I remain certain that such storms are the makings of a new and different future for which we are ill prepared.

I am convinced that much of the changes that we see are due to climate change. Perhaps there are among you skeptics, so let me offer some evidence. This past year CO2 measurements in the atmosphere surpassed the scientific red line of 400 parts per million and yet again there was just an article in the day's papers. According to climate scientists our environment will become increasingly unstable the longer it remains above 350 ppm, a number we passed in 1985. Everyone is aware of the science. True, some discount it. But the evidence is nearly unanimously accepted by scientists. These greenhouse gases make for an increasingly unstable world. Weather patterns change. Ocean levels rise. If they rise only by inches catastrophic consequences can follow. An inch more added to the oceans can mean the difference between a storm surge flooding a city or not. I recognize that some might still be unaccepting. Only last week there was an article that insurance companies are beginning to factor climate change into their risk

models. They are beginning to look to complex computer programs to model the future rather than historical examples. In assessing their risk, and of course their investment, they are factoring climate change into the equation. But still we go on with our lives as if Hurricane Sandy is but an aberration the likes of which we will never see again even as our friends on the South Shore are still struggling to lift themselves out of this disaster. If you are still unconvinced, I would refer you to the Harvard School of Public Health. I had the privilege of having dinner with its director, Dr. John Spengler, and a number of its faculty this summer. I was impressed with their strategy. Too often questions of science and reason become mired in politics. This school remains singularly devoted to science. It evaluates the risks, costs and benefits of energy production in scientific terms. Read their paper on the costs to human health of coal power. Learn there that coal generates almost half of the nation's electricity, but 4/5 of greenhouse gases caused by utilities. In case you still wish to read more, there are flyers at the usher's table with more information.

Science, and even businesses, are tilting towards the need to change our ways. What lags behind? Our political system. And even more importantly, ourselves. Mayor Bloomberg is pushing a plan for how New York City will deal with climate change yet I still have not read of such a plan for Long Island. Here we need one grand plan not hundreds. We remain fractured into towns and villages. Let me say this loud and clear. Unless we find a way to transcend the divisions and the interests of a Long Beach and a Brookville, a Syosset and a Fire Island we will never be ready for nature's next storm. When it comes to addressing these environmental changes there should be no small local interests but instead unified, communal gestures. Why did we spend millions of dollars to fill in the newly formed breach on Fire Island? This served only a small, local interest. There are days when I feel as if Long Island politics have become akin to my halcyon days when my brother and I would furiously try to stay ahead of the ocean's waves as we dug tunnels in the sand. The sand of course kept collapsing our tunnels no matter how hard we worked, no matter how high we built the sand castle's walls. Unless we are able to develop a new approach for all of Long Island nature will win again. Let me correct myself. Nature will always win. But if we make strategic decisions that are in the interest of all of Long Island we will be able to continue to call this place a home. Otherwise all we will leave for our children and grandchildren are private islands powered by personal generators. How I wanted my own generator during the days and weeks following the hurricane. And I do remain grateful to all those who offered us help during the storm, from a hot shower to warm bed, from Wifi to TV's football games. But a generator is not a communal solution, except perhaps if it is mandated for all gas stations. It is only a private inheritance. Long Island desperately needs a grand, strategic plan. I continue to believe that we are called not to preserve our own private way of life but to make our lives, and the lives of our neighbors, and our world, even better.

What can we do? It is not only about advocating for clean power over coal or LED light bulbs over incandescent. It is not only that every new building project should be green.

It is not only about driving less and car-pooling more. Of course small gestures can help. How many times do we meet friends at restaurants rather than sharing a ride? The notion that our lives are independent and private, that community is only an assemblage of “likes” is erroneous. We are bound to each other. No fence, no town borders will create a safe home for ourselves and our children. We require instead a change in attitude. It is a fundamental shift in how we lead our lives.

Let us take counsel from our tradition. For thousands of years our Jewish tradition has taught that we are custodians for our world. It begins with the command to Adam and Eve. While we are certainly allowed, and even encouraged, to enjoy the blessings of this world and while we are obligated to improve our world, we are also commanded to care for nature, to protect the world for ourselves and future generations. The tradition calls this *baal tashchit*, do not destroy. We are forbidden from wasting or destroying anything. It begins with the food that we throw out after meals and especially parties. It moves to the unnecessary extra miles we drive in our cars. The Talmud argues about the location of factories and in particular tanneries. They must be placed a significant distance from town and never on the west from where the prevailing winds in Israel blow. Even though this industry was crucial in the ancient world, but our rabbis recognized their fumes were also dangerous. (Baba Batra 2:9) The parallels are obvious. The concern of the ancients should be our own. Advances in technology and knowledge should not mean a diminution of concern for nature but instead a heightened awareness of our attachment to the natural world.

The second paragraph of the Shema speaks of the rewards and punishments for not observing the commandments. For years the Reform movement removed this from our prayerbooks. But on closer examination we discover an insight from our tradition that is sorely needed for our own age. “If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill.” (Deuteronomy 11) The rewards here all have to do with nature. If we observe, it will rain when it is supposed to rain. Our tradition is intimately tied to nature. So many of our holidays are tied to the seasons and to agriculture. Passover is for example not only our redemption from Egypt but also about the barley harvest. Now that we are no longer farmers we have lost this connection embedded within our beloved tradition and we are poorer for it. We have come to believe that our holidays and our celebrations are divorced from nature, that we can live an isolated existence celebrating our sacred occasions, comfortable in our homes, protected from the storms. Hurricane Sandy changed that. Superstorm Sandy should have awakened us from our slumber and shocked us to change.

To be fair I also discovered something that was good in the midst of the whirlwind. I rediscovered the value of *hachnasat orchim*, hospitality. Our patriarch Abraham is viewed as the model for hospitality. Three strangers come to visit him. They will soon

announce that he and Sarah will become parents. He welcomes them in and prepares for them a meal. Ok, truth be told, he instructs Sarah to cook for them. He slaughters the calf himself, but she had to do all the cooking. The Torah reports: "As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, 'My lords... Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves...'" (Genesis 18) And what does our tradition make of this? The Rabbis teach: "Hachnasat orchim is greater even than welcoming God's presence." (Shabbat 127a)

Once the storm clouds receded from our island, we ventured into the streets. Many of our neighborhood streets were impassible. We walked and visited with neighbors with whom we had only waved when racing down our blocks in our cars, hurrying to our next scheduled activity or meeting. Now, the power was off. The TV's were silenced. The Internet was muted. There were no schedules to keep. There could be no meetings. All we had was our small neighborhood. We met people for the first time. On those cold evenings there was nothing to do but gather at the one house that had a warm fire and good wine. There we talked and of course complained. There is nothing like complaining to bind people together. And yet as soon as the power was restored we returned to many of our old ways.

Like Adam and Eve, we seem to think we can forever live in Gan Eden. God asks again, "Ayekah?" Where are we going? Back to the talking serpent. The lesson of the Torah is not that snakes can talk, but that nature has a voice. It speaks. It tempts us with its beauty and grandeur. It lulls us into thinking that we can tame it, that we are its master. It deceives us like the serpent. Now we have new knowledge. The storm has passed. The floodwaters have receded. We should have learned that eventually the ocean will always win. We should have known that the winds will beat us back. "And then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind..." (Job 38) Have we listened?

Like many I traveled to the beach this summer. More often than not I find the ocean's water and waves restorative. But this year I noticed something different. Each morning when we arrived at the water's edge, carrying our beach chairs, coolers, footballs and towels, I discovered that the beach had been remade. One morning the sands were flattened and we could tip toe into the salt water. Another morning there was a small shelf at the water's edge from which we could jump into the waves. And still another morning the high tide had left a small pool in which my young niece could comfortably wade. I thought to myself, "If this is the power of the sea on a calm day, if the beaches' sands can be remade day after day when its waters are calm, how much the more so when whipped up by the winds of a tropical storm." Who are we to think we can fight its fury and waves. The psalmist declares: "The ocean sounds, O Lord the ocean sounds its thunder, the ocean sounds its pounding. Above the thunder of the mighty waters, more majestic than the breakers of the sea is the Lord, majestic on high." (Psalm 93)

Still, even the power of King David's words will not still my worries. Thus the only question that should remain on our lips, "What new knowledge have I gained? How must my life change? How must our community change?" We know the future will be different. But we only want to rebuild. We want it to be just like it was. Will we continue to build castles of sand or will we summon the courage and fortitude to build something different, and greater, although perhaps smaller, for our children? Will we respond to the thunder of the ocean's fury and not once again offer the soothing mantra "We will rebuild!" but instead join together to build a new and different and even greater future? I offer this prayer. I cannot pray that the every storm will veer out into the open sea and will never again touch our shores. We do not pray for what is impossible. Instead I pray, may we summon the strength to build something even greater, and safer, and more lasting of our home, of our Long Island.

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