

We Need Each Other: Hurricanes and Hope
Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg
Ohef Sholom Temple
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A true story: Jim McIngvale, a successful businessman known as Mattress Mack, began to receive calls as soon as people were forced from their homes by Hurricane Harvey. Without hesitating, Mack put out a notice on his Facebook page saying that anyone who needed it could take shelter in his warehouse sized furniture stores. Then, not only did he open his doors to hundreds left homeless by the storm, but also he sent out his delivery trucks to rescue them. Children, parents, grandparents, entire families, including pets -- his employees picked them up whether they were stranded on street corners, at 7-Elevens, or in fire stations. Mack then fed them and let them sleep on mattresses worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. He also put out the word to colleagues in nearby states that people needed cleaning supplies, diapers and other practical stuff. And as donations started to arrive by the truckload, he and his staff distributed them to those who had lost everything. Mack's daughter Elizabeth, who suffers from acute OCD, inspires his altruism. Her favorite saying is: "If not for our struggles, we wouldn't know our strengths."ⁱ

Another true story: New Houston transplants, Andrea and Greg Smith, conferred with hurricane-savvy folks and all agreed they had a good plan in place for the birth of their first child. As Andrea's contractions began to strengthen on Saturday night, August 26th, Greg thought he had plenty of time to drive her to the hospital the next morning by light of day; after all, it was barely drizzling and he couldn't imagine that there would be more than five or six inches through which to drive. But when they woke up Sunday morning to three feet of water, he knew they were in trouble. The baby was on the way, floodwaters were rising rapidly, he couldn't get through to 911 or the Coast Guard, and, although the National Guard answered their call, they weren't going to make it to them in time. Entrapped by the deluge, the couple began to prepare for a home birth, gathering towels, boiling water, and Facetimeing with an obstetrician-friend from out of town who was ready to coach them through it.

But unbeknownst to the Smiths, concerned neighbors, whom they barely knew, had been warily watching, and flagged down the first vehicle they saw that was able to navigate the deep waters -- a large garbage truck. The only problem was how to get the couple from their apartment into the truck with gale-force wind blowing and waist-high waters raging. They couldn't risk either one of the Smith's or themselves being swept away by the current and drowning. But together, their odds of success and survival were far greater. Very new friends and strangers alike began to link arms and literally formed a human chain, passing Andrea and Greg through the deep, swirling water from person to person until, at last, they got them to safety. Baby girl Adrielle was born hours later . . . healthy, but with some issues that required a stay in the Intensive Care Unit. A home birth might have put her in life-threatening danger, but the faith and courage of others assured her life.ⁱⁱ

A final true story:ⁱⁱⁱ With evacuation orders in place ahead of time, many lives were saved that might otherwise have been lost to Hurricane Irma. But in its aftermath, over half a million people, 2/3 of Florida's residents, were without power . . . some for close to a week. It was then that Boca Raton couple Marc and Jennifer Bell received a phone call from the SOS Children's Village saying that the orphan kids in their care were forced out of their emergency shelter and had nowhere else to go. Marc and Jennifer didn't hesitate. Blessed with a big, beautiful, and mostly empty home, they said, "Bring them here." And dozens came. Marc said of these poor kids who had so little to begin with: they were hungry; they were tired; they lived in a gymnasium for a week without electricity and hadn't showered once. But the Bells did more than give these kids shelter; they took care of them as if they were their own. They arranged manicures for the girls, engaged Bobby the balloon man to provide entertainment, and hired a musician who plays the guitar who came and sang with them. Jennifer Bell observed that, most of all, these kids don't have a mom or dad, so they're scared, and their house parents are scared, too. So to welcome these kids and make them feel safe, we know we're doing a good thing.

These are three stories of heroism by ordinary people who stepped up, at great risk and cost to themselves, to do the right thing and help others. For certain, my friends, a lesson of Harvey and Irma is that we are ill prepared for devastating storms; but we already know that our shorelines are insufficiently protected.

Absolutely, a warning of these natural disasters is that our climate is changing, our waters are warming, our sea levels rising, and the storms we experience more frequent and ferocious; but those of us who lived through Matthew last October, or Isabel, Gaston, or Irene before him, could tell you that from their first hand experiences of destruction. Without a doubt, a message of this deadly hurricane season is that stuff is replaceable and life is precious, even though it is painful to let go of our things; but we know that if we have our health and our loved ones, we have everything. The truth of what we have witnessed is that we can't prepare ourselves for, or protect ourselves from, every eventuality; but we know this because as much as we hate to admit it, life is incredibly fragile and too many things are beyond our control.

The real moral of our increasingly volatile world is that we need each other; we need one another now more than ever. And we don't just need the people with whom we share the same opinions, or those who share our faith, or the ones we already know. These storms prove that human suffering has no race, creed, class, or religion. In fact, this human enterprise of ours is hard and it is only getting harder. One article I read entitled, "Hurricane like Harvey would devastate Hampton Roads," began, "Yes, it could happen here;"^{iv} but we already know this, too. And we're already scared. But worrying and obsessing about its probability doesn't make us feel any safer; nor does it give us the spiritual tools we need to deal with what may come.

Indeed, our anxiety only feeds on itself, creating an echo chamber of increasingly louder and more hysterical cable news and isolating us further from one another when in fact, it is only in sharing our concerns, our deepest fears, with each other that we weather life's storms. If the Smith's neighbors, and Jim McIngvale, and Jennifer and Marc Bell teach us anything, it is that we are so much

more powerful together than alone. We can never do on our own what we can do together. Our courage, our capacity for kindness, our humanity -- these are the real power of a hurricane.

In truth, nothing is more healing or affirming than human connection and empathy. These can motivate us to make almost anything better. True, we may not be able to corral the winds or prevent the blows of life, but we do have the power to make a difference in each other's lives.^v

But empathy is a funny thing.^{vi} On the one hand, it is wonderful -- an emotion that inspires us to compassion and acts of loving-kindness. Empathy can be a force against selfishness and indifference. It can move us to be a good neighbor, do the right thing, and make the world a better place. And study after study has proven that helping others is associated with all sorts of positive physical and psychological outcomes, including a boost in both short-term mood and long-term happiness.

On the other hand, empathy requires us not only to put ourselves in another person's shoes, but also to feel his pain; in other words, our compassion for another is predicated on an emotion, on a "feeling," and, depending on who someone is, on what his or her particular need is, or our own circumstances or biases at any given time, we may not feel like being altruistic.

That is the premise of Yale psychologist Paul Bloom's best-selling book, *Against Empathy*. Bloom says, "If we want to do good and be good, to be the best human beings possible and truly better our world, empathy alone is a poor guide" because it is dependent on a feeling and not on the moral obligation to do what is right. So what should motivate us to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us -- the child who is hungry, the steelworker who has been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town? What should inspire us is our sense of justice, our obligation to do the right thing by our fellow human beings.

Not surprisingly, Bloom's findings are very Jewish. As Jews we live lives of purpose and meaning by doing *mitzvot*. Since God doesn't speak to most of us directly, the *mitzvot* are the closest direction we have for what God wants of us. And the amazing thing about the *mitzvot* is that they affirm another incredible Jewish teaching, that each of us has the capacity to make a difference one deed at a time -- that we and our actions matter. That is why we do all of us a disservice by teaching our children that a *mitzvah* is a good deed. It certainly can be. But a *mitzvah* isn't just a suggested path to doing good; a *mitzvah* is literally a commandment for what we are obligated to do in order to pursue justice -- do right and good by others.

For example, when God commands us, in this morning's Torah reading, to tend and till the earth, to be good stewards^{vii} and to protect it as a legacy for our children and their children and theirs since it is the only home we have,^{viii} that is not just a suggestion or a good idea. Maybe it does feel good to recycle and repurpose some of the accumulated stuff gathering dust in your house about which I spoke last night. Maybe you like the lower gas and electric bills that come from weatherizing your home, sealing off leaks, and having a programmable thermostat. Maybe the renewable energy sources you've chosen, like energy-saving LED or compact florescent light bulbs and energy efficient appliances, are the most efficient, nicest, and best products on the market anyway. Maybe you do want to do your part to

protect our Chesapeake Bay waterway and its ecosystem, to plant indigenous plants that are hospitable to our wildlife, to bring beautiful monarch butterflies to your garden, and to farm oysters that naturally clean our tributaries. Maybe you've elected to become one of our Temple's 75 River Star/Bay Saver Home or are planning to help our congregation attain its Green Faith Energy Shield by pledging to become a Green Faith Energy Home.

But, in fact, it really doesn't matter if you felt, or feel, like doing these things. It doesn't matter what motivates you to act. In order to not be guilty of the failure of justice for which we will confess on *Yom Kippur*, that of "poisoning the air, and polluting land and sea," we must do these things. And our Temple's Eco-Judaism committee is here to help you and could use your help as well. This is what I mean by we need each other . . . and, in the wake of these storms, we need each other now more than ever.

The same is true of coming together now to know and help each other here at Temple, to build relationships, and create a sacred community that will withstand the storms of life and the test of time. The commandment "to love your neighbor as yourself" is also not just a good idea - it is an imperative, a sacred obligation. According to Dr. Elana Stein Haim, the Director of Leadership Education at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America,^{ix} when the Torah talks about love, it is not talking about the warm, fuzzy feeling we associate with the word. After all, sometimes we are crazy about our neighbors, or other congregants, or even certain members of our family. Other times, these people drive us absolutely crazy and we do all that we can to avoid them, let alone to love them.

In fact, Dr. Haim says that there is a fine line between love and hate, between affection and rebuke. If we truly care about someone, we owe them honesty and loyalty, the foundations of any relationship we value. To love our neighbor, or our fellow temple or any family member actually means to care enough about them to take responsibility for them in their time of need. Haim calls this kind of love -- loyalty, a fidelity to our neighbor, whether friend or stranger, whether we feel like it or not. And why ought we do this? Out of a sense of justice and right -- because they are our fellows, also created in the image of God, each with infinite worth, and, so, worthy of justice.

Here at Temple we have a *Tikvah* Group, part of our Caring Committee, that checks in on our fellow congregants in need with calls and visits, with light errands like grocery shopping or rides to doctor's appointments and with meals when they or loved ones are recovering from surgery or serious illnesses. *Tikvah* means hope. It is only in forming this human chain of connection, like the one the Smith's neighbors and Mattress Mack did in Houston, or the Bell's did in Boca, that we truly fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor. Why not join them? And not just because it will feel good, for it certainly will; but because it is the right and just thing to do, because we need each other.

I will say more about loving our neighbors who are different from us on *Yom Kippur*. But in the wake of Charlottesville, how much more critical is the command to know and understand our neighbor, to stand with those who share our values, to protect those whom others hate just for who they are. Hasn't this been our Jewish story? Are we not all part of one human family? As such, we are obligated to respond

to the pain of our fellows and to use our individual talents, time, and treasure to forge a just, caring, and compassionate society on this planet.

Natural disasters like Matthew, Harvey, and Irma, like the recent earthquake in Mexico and wildfires in California, have the capacity to challenge our ideals, to make us turn inward, out of fear, and to think only of ourselves. But these catastrophic events also have the potential to strengthen our commitment to each other and to our planet, to *tikun olam*. We could find the strength not only to repair our world, but also to recreate it. As our prayers say, events like these can help us to distinguish between that which is real and enduring that which is fleeting and vain. Of course, our houses, our cars, our boats, our furniture all mean a lot to us. They represent years of work, and pride in what we have achieved. But all these things are "fleeting and vain." How we choose to use whatever is in our means, and whatever opportunities we have, to help one another -- these are the real and enduring foundations on which we can build a meaningful future.^x

For now, our hearts and our hands and our financial support must go to those people who have suffered severe trauma at the hands of these storms. Their fate might have easily been ours. As God's partners on earth, we must validate and respond to their pain. We can feel badly for them, we can pray for them, but then we must move forward and act. Right here, we can worry ourselves sick about 'what if it happens to us', or we can take responsibility for our own environment and make small changes and big differences in how we treat our local eco-system and planet today. We can leave taking care of our temple family members to others, those same folks who always do, or we can step up and reach out our hands in compassion and caring. We can love our neighbors and the stranger in our midst by getting to know them simply because they are the precious human beings beside whom we weather the storms of this life.

Consider the following alternative to the *Unetane Tokef* prayer we offered earlier this morning:^{xi}

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
That this year people will live and die,
some more gently than others
and nothing lives forever.
But amidst overwhelming forces of nature and humankind,
we still write our own *Book of Life*,
and our actions are the words in it,
and the stages of our lives are the chapters,
and nothing goes unrecorded, ever.
Every deed counts.
Everything you do matters.
And we never know what act or word
will leave an impression or tip the scale.
So if not now, then when . . .

My friends, we need not wait for a catastrophic storm, or something worse, to come together, to shape a better future for ourselves, and our children, and for

theirs. In this New Year, may we join together to do so out of duty and empathy, out of justice and goodness, out of loyalty and, yes, out of love. Amen.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Peter Weber, "Jim 'Mattress Mack' McIngvale, one of Houston's Harvey Heroes, doesn't want to be called a hero," *www.theweek.com*, August 31, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Andrew deGrandpre, "A woman in labor was trapped by Harvey's floodwaters. Then neighbors formed a human chain," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maxine Bentzel, "Boca Raton couple takes in foster children following Hurricane Irma," *www.CBS12.com*, September 12, 2017.

^{iv} Dave Mayfield, "Hurricane Like Harvey would devastate Hampton Roads, so planners are taking notes," *The Virginian-Pilot*, September 9, 2017.

^v Matt Gewirtz, "why I still focus my sermons on spirituality even when the world news is intense," *www.thewisdomdaily.com*, September 13, 2017.

^{vi} Paul Bloom, "Against Empathy," *Boston Review.net*.

^{vii} *Genesis* 1:28 and 2:15.

^{viii} *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah*, 1 on *Ecclesiastes* 7:13.

^{ix} The Shalom Hartmann institute is a pluralistic center of research and education deepening and elevating the quality of Jewish life in Israel and around the world.

^x Rabbi Stephen Lewis Fuchs, "In the Wake of Irma: Starting with Silence to Rebuild," *ReformJudaism.org*, September 15, 2017.

^{xi} Written by Rabbi Joseph Meszler.