

# Let's Not Follow Noah's Example: A Call to Action

A Kol Nidrei Sermon

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*[When Noah came out of the ark] he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said "Master of the world! If you destroyed Your world because of human sin or folly, then why did You create them? One or the other You should do: either do not create the human being or do not destroy the world!"*

*How did the Blessed Holy One respond? "Foolish shepherd!"... [Before the flood] I lingered with you and spoke to you at length so that you would ask for mercy for the world! But as soon as you heard that you would be safe in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch your heart. You built the ark and saved yourself. Now that the world has been destroyed you open your mouth to utter questions and pleas? (Zohar, translation by Daniel Matt)*

In an era of Internet and mass media, we are bombarded with news of injustices ravishing our world. With Hurricane Katrina, we could watch the horrific events unfolding before our eyes. We could see the rising water, the people crying for help—for water, for food, for medical care, for evacuation and relief. We could listen to our elected officials' response—and we could hear the silence in their lack of response. We could read the accounts of people battered and hungry, displaced and bitter, betrayed by a government they thought would provide them with relief.

We cannot say that we did not know.

Unlike Noah, the evil of the world did touch our hearts. We were horrified, appalled, outraged that a catastrophe of this magnitude could occur in our country. We stared at each other in disbelief, and we asked each other how, in the richest country in the world, the emergency response could have been so slow, so pathetically inadequate. We shuddered in the face of such desperation and suffering.

We were struck by incredible acts of bravery, of human courage and compassion that defied cynicism at its very root. Of local community members who carried out the sick, elderly, and disabled; who prepared communal meals for hundreds of stranded people; who organized rescue missions on boats and in cars. Of relief workers and medical care providers who traveled down to New Orleans from all over the country and even from all over the world to help. Of people all over the country who opened their homes to evacuees and who raised money to help them meet their basic needs.

Perhaps these human acts of bravery, courage, and compassion partly off-set the disgrace we felt as we learned that Michael Brown, the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, had been appointed to the position with no credentials

in disaster relief. It was this very agency that actually blocked relief efforts by turning away trucks from the private sector carrying food and water, teams of firemen, and a convoy of 1,000 boat owners who were prepared to rescue victims. It was also this very agency that listed on its web site Pat Robertson's evangelical organization, Operation Blessing, as one of only three relief organizations that the government recommended for individuals who wanted to donate to relief efforts. This is the nonprofit organization that Virginia attorney general concluded in 1999 had diverted money it raised for Rwandan refugees to transport mining equipment for Robertson's own diamond mine in Africa.

Perhaps these human acts of bravery, courage, and compassion partly off-set the disgrace we felt as we learned from Human Rights Watch that about 600 prisoners in one building in the Orleans Parish Prison were abandoned in their cells without food or water for days as the waters rose toward the ceiling. Five hundred and seventeen of these prisoners have not been accounted for. These were people who had been arrested but never charged or convicted for misdemeanors such as criminal trespassing, public drunkenness, and disorderly conduct. Meanwhile, inmates taken to the Jena Correctional Facility claim that officers beat, kicked, and hit them while shackled; forced them to stay kneeling for several hours at a stretch; and forced them to hold their faces against walls sprayed with chemicals, wiping their faces and hair in the vomit when they became ill. Of these prisoners as well, the majority were pre-trial detainees. As Human Rights Watch noted, "The number and consistency of the reports inmates have made about their abuse makes their claims extremely credible."

Perhaps these human acts of bravery, courage, and compassion partly off-set the disgrace we felt as we learned that Alphonso Jackson, President Bush's secretary for Housing and Urban Development, remarked, "New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again," advising Mayor Nagin not to rebuild the mostly black Lower Ninth Ward. As private business interests dominate the reconstruction efforts, the needs of the long-time residents are hardly being considered. Jimmy Reiss, chairman of the New Orleans Business Council, told *Newsweek* that he has been brainstorming about how "to use this catastrophe as a once-in-an-eon opportunity to change the dynamic." The dynamic he refers to? Getting rid of the high percentage of poor people in the city. Not by ameliorating or eradicating poverty, but by moving it outside New Orleans and radically changing the demographics of the city. Instead of reintegrating displaced residents and allowing them to take part in the reconstruction efforts, they are being sent to trailer parks—with no jobs, no community, and no future.

*"As the Blessed Holy One responded to Noah: You built the ark and saved yourself. Now that the world has been destroyed you open your mouth to utter questions and pleas?"*

The Torah describes Noah as a *tzaddik*, a righteous man. Yet, how righteous could he be if he watches the destruction of his entire generation in silence, without a word of protest.

Rabbi Yochanan argues that Noah may have been righteous in *his* generation, but had he lived at a less corrupt period, he would not have been considered righteous at all. In the Hasidic tradition, Noah is accused of being a *tzadik im pelz* – a righteous man in a fur coat. Surrounded by others who are freezing, he warms himself without thought to their needs.

What could Noah have done? A midrash explains that it took Noah 120 years to build the ark so that the people surrounding him would see what he was doing and change their ways. Yet in all that time not one person does so, and Noah simply boards the ark with his family and the chosen animals. Perhaps the people did not change their ways because Noah never spoke up, never challenged the injustice around him.

Even in the last moments when Noah boards the ark, he is silent. What if instead, Noah, like Abraham, argued with God? Or asked God for mercy? Or refused to board the ark?

As we look around at our world we see unbearable suffering. We witness war and poverty and environmental destruction. We witness political leaders privatizing our resources and widening the gap between the rich and poor. We witness the unraveling of social reforms designed to support the neediest in our society.

We are fearful. We are fearful of where we are headed. We desperately want change—real change. We want to live in a world where every person has nourishing food to eat, clean water to drink, and unpolluted air to breathe; where every person can live a life free from war and torture and other acts of violence; where every person has control over her body and has his basic medical needs cared for; where every person is given a good education and is treated fairly before the law.

If there is anything we can learn from Noah it is that our silence will not protect us. Noah may have been saved by the flood, but he, along with his family, witnessed the destruction of the entire world. When Noah emerged from the ark he immediately planted a vineyard, drank the wine, and became intoxicated. Perhaps he could not handle the barrenness of a destroyed world. Perhaps he could not handle knowing that he was, to some extent, complicit in its destruction.

I don't doubt that, in this community, we feel the need to speak out against the injustices of our world. Yet we think to ourselves, "How dare we look at our world and think that we can make a difference? It is hopeless. We are headed in a direction that is too dangerous. We do not have the power to change the trajectory of the world. Our work is so insignificant. We are not intelligent enough, creative enough, committed enough to do make our efforts worthwhile."

A different question might be, "How dare we look at our world and think that change is *not* possible?" We look historically at how people have come together against enormous odds and have made change, however small. We do not know where our actions will lead. We write an editorial that reaches someone who had never really considered the issue. We work on a project that touches the life of another person. We join with community members to create an initiative that grows into an important organization. Isolated acts that are joined together can take on a life of their own. No action is too insignificant. Every action has the potential to be holy, to connect us to something greater than ourselves.

Regardless of our desire for change, many of us, myself included, are not as involved in the work as we could be. I wonder, what would it look like if each one of us was fully engaged in serious, long-term, activist work? What would it look like if we were to gather here next Yom Kippur full of stories about the work that we did, the people we met, the projects we created, the change that we made?

Looking around I see extraordinary talent; I see a room full of committed, intelligent, creative people. So what is it that we should do? What work is the most important, the best use of our time, the most effective, the most likely to create change, the most fulfilling?

I wish that I knew. I suspect that the answer will be different for each of us, as we have different talents, interests, and political inclinations. For some it might be education. Or legislation. Or litigation. Or demonstrations. Or building alternative institutions. Or focusing on the needs of one particular community. For some of us it will be working within mainstream institutions trying to create change internally. And for others of us it will be working on more radical projects, trying to create change externally.

As a beginning, let's start with imagination and articulate a vision of a world and of social change that excites us. Let's talk to each other about how we balance our own responsibilities of work and raising kids with our yearning for activism. Let's talk to each other about feeling overwhelmed, about feeling as if we are drowning in our own waters of despair. Let's talk to each other about what works, and what does not work. Let's talk to each other about how we express our own values and beliefs in our daily life, in our work, in our neighborhoods. Let's talk to each other about how to find meaning even in the midst of terrible destruction.

Let's not do it on our own. Let's use our community as a resource, to nurture each other, push each other, support each other, keep each other honest, help each other avoid burn-out. Let's put aside our egos and let ourselves tread on uncomfortable terrain. Let's talk to people who are different from us, who have different perspectives and different life experiences. Let's learn from their wisdom, even if they are too radical or too mainstream, even if they are too intellectual or not intellectual enough.

Let's challenge ourselves not to feel guilty, not to fall into the trap that we are not committed enough, smart enough, dedicated enough; that we do not have enough time, that we are not creative enough, that we do not have the correct skills. Every one of us has a tremendous amount to offer. Every single person's contributions are essential to this work. We will never live up to our own expectations, so instead of chastising ourselves, let's do what we can do and feel good about what we are doing.

Jewish tradition, during this period of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, teaches us repeatedly that next year has the potential to be a better year. Human beings *can* make change, *can* raise their voices, *can* work for a more just world. Where we are now is *not* where we must remain. Even as we gather here tonight, grassroots organizations in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast are organizing their own reconstruction efforts. They are providing their own relief, and they are speaking out in favor of creating communities that are more equitable, more democratic, and more responsive to the needs of all people.

The most troubling aspect of the story of Noah is that he was not powerless. He was obedient. He remained silent. We too are not powerless, and we have a tremendous capacity to create change. When we mix the right amount of hope, courage, indignation, persistence, strength, anger, inspiration, ingenuity, and patience together, we can do extraordinary things.