



Rosh Hashanah I 5778: Higher Ground

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Two hours northwest of Nairobi one can find Hell’s Gate, a Kenyan National Park. It is known for its hot springs, its rock formations, and the opportunity it offers to bicycle across the savannah beside zebras and giraffes, to have your lunch stolen by monkeys and your breath taken away by the view. You can hike through a gorge to a narrow break in the cliffs – hence the name of the park – and pass through water that was once a tributary of a prehistoric lake, sustaining early humans in the Great Rift Valley, where our shared story began.

You can imagine, I’m sure, why – on the one free day leading an intensive Jewish trip with the Israeli Consulate in Kenya – I chose to glory in God’s creation by going to the gates of hell. What else would a rabbi do in Kenya on Shabbat?

While hiking through the gorge, our small group noticed rope ladders at periodic intervals, leading up to the edge of the cliffs. “What are those for?” we asked our guide. “They are in case of flash floods,” he replied. “So people have a chance to get to higher ground.” Apparently, a Kenyan Christian youth group had been hiking there just five years before, when a flash flood swept through, and killed seven people before they had a chance to escape.

Back in the birthplace of humanity, we witnessed just how fragile life can be.

The story of creation – which we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah – is told within Judaism in a very particular way. In contrast, the Babylonian creation myth described a universe resulting from two gods, Apsu, the god of fresh waters, and Tiamat, the goddess of the salty seas. They had children, who Apsu decided to kill because they were keeping him up at night – something to which parents of young children as well as grown ones may relate. This led to a violent battle, in which Tiamat was killed by her great-great grandson, Marduk, who split her body in half to form sky and land. In this story, humanity was created by the blood of Tiamat’s general, mixed with clay from the earth and spit from the gods, and created to serve them.

If we were Babylonians, this would be our creation story. A universe created by a battle between gods, all related to each other. Humans created to do the gods’ dirty work. I’d like to think that if I were a Babylonian priest, I’d be able to give it a good sermonic spin, but given a choice, I’ll take being a rabbi.

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. The earth was unformed and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters. God said, “Let there be light!” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and



God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness God called night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.¹

Order over chaos; partnership over service; it sounds very good to me.

Though, as Rabbi Susan Silverman asks: “Why did God create an ideal, orderly universe and then make it impossible for me to clean my kitchen?”²

On a deeper level, though, we know it’s too good to be true. Because look closely; listen closely. *Tohu va-vohu* – the part of the world which is unformed and void – is primordial. It remains. And the *tehom*, the deep, is primordial too, an echo of Tiamat, that ancient mother god. Depending on how you look, the order can be seen as a thin veneer, over the chaos which remains. After all, what comes after creation? The next big story is the flood.

Our ancestors told a story of the world in which order prevailed over chaos. But they also knew the chaos stayed close.

In Jerusalem this past summer, Rabbi Michael Marmor gave a dvar Torah, a teaching about the passage in the book of Numbers which recounts all the Israelite journeys. The list includes this verse: “They set out from Mount Shepher and arrived at Haradah” (Num. 33:24). Haradah, he points out, means “anxiety.” Anxiety is an actual place, a place we come to, and with any luck, a place we leave. But it is on the map, our ancestors’ map and our own.

So when I think of the year that is now past, I think of the places on our map. I think of Charlottesville, where white supremacists marched past a synagogue screaming words of hate. Berlin, Paris, Barcelona, London... all the European centres hit by terror. Quebec City, where Muslims were murdered at prayer. The Rohingya villages burned to the ground. Police shootings of innocent African-Americans in New Orleans and Baltimore, Ferguson and LA. Missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, all along the Highway of Tears. Earthquakes in Mexico and mudslides in Sierra Leone. Texas and Florida, deluged with water, and BC and Oregon, consumed by fire. “Who by fire, and who by water” hits a little close, this year.

I think also of our personal maps. The moment in the doctor’s office when you heard the diagnosis, or a moment in your home when you knew nothing would be the same. The map that is written on our bodies and in our hearts. The knowledge that anytime and anywhere, a flood can come in and sweep away the very ground from beneath our feet.

¹ Genesis 1:1-5.

² Susan Silverman, *Casting Lots: Creating a Family in a Beautiful, Broken World* (Boston, 2016), p.141.



One of my favourite New Yorker cartoons from this past year shows the proverbial prophet on the sidewalk, holding up a sign. Except instead of “The End is Near,” the sign reads, “This Time for Sure.”

What a year, my friends, what a year. The end is always near. But this is a day of beginnings. And creation, in our tradition, is intentionally incomplete; God has left work here, for you and I to do.

So where is our ladder, to escape the floods that may come? How can we reach that higher ground?

A story: God told King David that he could not build the Jerusalem Temple, because of his role as a warrior. It was impossible, God said, to build a house of peace with blood-filled hands. So instead of building up, David, ever stubborn, decides to dig down, to at least build the Temple’s foundations. And when he digs deep, he uncovers the abyss; the deep; the *tehom* – that primordial chaos which, the Talmud tells us, is only kept down by a rock. David, being David, against all warnings, lifts the rock, and so, the Talmud tells us, “the deep arose and was about to submerge the world.”³ One of David’s enemies, Ahitophel, is forced to give the solution which brings the waters back down. And then, David sings a series of songs – known as the Songs of Ascent. “Shouldn’t they be the Songs of Descent,” Rav Hisda asks, since the waters went not up, but down?

The passage goes on to give an answer, but I want to offer my own. The water goes down, but we must go up. The Songs of Ascent are for us. It’s like the joke about the guy standing on his roof praying to God to be rescued from a flood, and he turns away help from a rowboat and a helicopter and finally he dies. He goes up to heaven and asks God why God didn’t help. “What do you mean?” asks God. “I sent the rowboat, I sent the helicopter...” We are not meant just to sit in the synagogue and pray. God made us to be partners, to help each other and to take help when it’s offered. Like the lines of people passing buckets of rubble to save victims from the earthquake, or reaching out into a dangerous current to pull someone back to shore, our own actions, together, are what bring us to higher ground.

We did that. Two years ago, on this day, I asked you to help bring two Syrian families to safety. This past February, I sent you all an update that the two families of Syrian refugees that Temple had sponsored were soon to arrive. We brought them out and we brought ourselves up, reaching across difference to live our values and save lives. I was proud then, and continue to be, of Temple’s tremendous generosity on their behalf; and of the dedicated efforts of our team of volunteers who have done everything since, from welcoming the families at the airport to finding them apartments, from helping the parents find their feet, to helping the children

³ Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 52b, and Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 53a. Taken from a teaching by Melila Hellner-Eshed, “Ancient-New Myths of Jerusalem,” at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, July 11, 2017.



navigate new schools. We have gotten to know their eagerness to integrate and work and give back – so if anyone can offer part-time employment, or volunteer opportunities where they can practice speaking French, especially in the fields of pharmacy or nursing, please do let me know. Some of you have met the families already, when they were volunteering at Mitzvah Day in May, or apple picking with us last weekend. But there will also be a chance to share food and stories at a congregational lunch in November, and I hope you’ll come.

There is much to be proud of; many ways in which working together on this has been a powerful response to the *tehom*. But it’s not always obvious. It’s not always easy. There’s one response I received to that message last February, and I want to share it with you now:

Dear Rabbi,

It is with very mixed feelings that I follow the progress of our Temple’s very generous human undertaking.

As a former soldier in the IDF, I cannot forget the deep enmity of the Syrian people towards Israel, Israelis and particularly the IDF. While it sounds like a broad generalization, I have bitter and disturbing memories of witnessing personally the barbarous treatment of our fallen pilots who had the misfortune of parachuting over Syrian-held territory from downed planes. Not a single one made it down alive!

Our ground forces retrieved some of their flying jumpsuits riddled with bullet holes obviously fired at them as they descended.

I cannot erase this memory, much as I would like to.

Yet, I know the people we are now helping to find a safe harbor in our great country are suffering and we are doing the humane and Jewish thing to help. The part of me that is an undamaged human with feelings, myself a refugee from Egypt, is struggling to embrace Temple’s gesture.

Will this be held as an example of our kindness to the stranger, appreciated for all it means by the very people we so generously extend a helping hand to?

I know it is done for what it means to us as a Temple and as a Jewish community, and for that, I commend you and our committee. It is still doing what’s right, so, I also feel proud if conflicted.

Respectfully...⁴

That message has stayed with me. I am grateful to be part of a community where difference of opinion is possible, and where mixed feelings can be acknowledged. In the world’s current

⁴ Personal correspondence, Feb. 15, 2017. Shared with permission.



political climate, this is not to be taken for granted. To recognize that living our values is not always clear. To realize that in a world riddled with chaos, and in lives that have been hurt by hate, there is a very human desire to close ranks and play it safe.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman taught this summer about why his Institute in Jerusalem is not just a place of study, but a place of action.⁵ They operate a day care centre for African refugees in Tel Aviv, providing a safe and nurturing space for the children from Eritrea and Sudan, ages three to six, who have sought safety in the Promised Land.⁶ He spoke of the slippery slope of dehumanization; how, in times of danger and instability, the commandment to love the stranger as oneself is perilously fragile. At such times, he says, every group feels threatened, and the liberal, democratic frameworks on which we usually rely no longer suffice. They have to be buttressed by morality and spirituality – by the ways in which our Judaism guides us. This is true of the political and the personal alike. When we are scared, when we feel threatened, our instinct is to turn our backs. It is vitally important, Rabbi Hartman said, not to harden our hearts; not to ignore the knock at the door. To find the higher ground.

It sounds good and it sounds right. But I want to acknowledge that it's not easy. To live a thoughtful life is to struggle, on matters personal and political alike: When to give the benefit of the doubt and when to stay on guard. When to make an issue of something and when to let it go. When to open your mouth and when to close it. When to be carried by the current and when to climb up to higher ground. To know when we see justice, rolling down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream⁷ - and to know when the waters that are rising are not the waters of righteous indignation but the waters of destruction, the primordial *tehom*. Ecclesiastes was onto something when he said that to everything there is a season... but ah, if we only knew when!

It's comforting, perhaps, that the Talmud teaches: the person who makes a mistake and repents, stands even higher than someone who never sinned.

Also, and this must be said: There is also absolutely no guarantee that this higher ground strategy will always prevail. Sometimes you go high, and the flood reaches you all the same. Sometimes you go high, and someone else goes low and they win. But whether your struggle is with a neighbour or with a loved one, with resurgent right-wing nationalism or the face of global terror, this we know to be true: at the end of the day, and the beginning of the year, all we can control is our own actions.

⁵ Rabbi Donniel Hartman at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, July 12, 2017.

⁶ For more information and to contribute:

https://hartman.org.il/About_Us_View.asp?Cat_Id=544&Cat_Type=About&Title_Cat_Name=Refugee%20Day%20Center

⁷ Amos 5:24.



I think of Elie Wiesel, who said: “There are victories of the soul and spirit. Sometimes, even if you lose, you win.”

I think of Reb Shlomo Carlebach, who taught: “If I had two hearts, I could use one to love and one to hate. But I only have one heart... so I use it to love.”

And then I think of Rabbi Avraham Feder, the rabbi with whose sermons I grew up, who every now and then would take a petrified bar mitzvah kid by the shoulders and look him in the eye and shout: “You thought it was going to be easy, being a Jew?!”

Our Judaism commands us to make order out of chaos; and when the chaos resurges, to counter it by going higher.

One of our volunteers, who has gotten to know the Syrian families well, writes:

I want to say thank you... For the extraordinary education this has been. For the privilege of getting to know these people. For the opportunity to do a small act of *tikuun olam*. Thank you as these Days of Awe come around again, for the chance to be awed by the connection I have felt to these people from another world and another culture that I have sometimes felt so alienated from. Thank you for the chance to see that on a more profound level, we are in fact all trying to make our lives have meaning and purpose. We are all trying to do our best.⁸

Please join me in reaching for that higher ground. Please join me in saying: amen.

⁸ Personal correspondence, Sept. 17, 2017. Shared with permission.