



Building Our Boat

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778/2017 – Rabbi Zoë Klein Miles

Creation. Genesis 1:1-2.

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

What would that look like, if you were to paint it, the Spirit hovering over the waters? Van Gogh's somersaulting spirals, a sky-born Chagall figure, cherubs hovering over Venus as she lies across the surf?

I love the word 'hovering' here, the Hebrew, *merachefet*, connotes a fluttering, a disturbance of air caused by wings, the rippling of gossamer gowns.

Hovering takes enormous energy. The hummingbird's wings beat furiously. It takes immense movement and speed to appear still. The disappearing blades of a helicopter. Imagine the neutronic force it would take for God to suspend over the waters for immeasurable eons, a colossal zeppelin consumed in infinite black.

The opening of Genesis speaks nothing of noise, just darkness, until the word is spoken, "let there be," a rippling of air, and a bolt of light, and Bang...

An eye is opened, colors emerge, squid-ink blue, spearmint green, there is light, and sight, the original Holy See, meets the original living sea. God sees the mirror below, as Narcissus hovering over a lake, enraptured by what looks back. And God said, "It is good."

Genesis is careful not to call the sun or the moon by their names, rather Torah refers to one simply as the greater light and the other, the lesser light, to dissuade their worshipers. Torah was intent on debuting one God, Orchestrator of all of Creation. God set that luminary to hover over the day, and that one to hover over the night, mere ornaments suspended in space...but the waters are something else entirely.

The waters were there from the beginning, *darkness upon the face of the deep. The Spirit of God upon the face of the waters*, God and the elemental ocean, face to face, Lord and Leviathan. One could argue that in Torah, the devil is the deep blue sea.

The water is frightening. An 18th century aphorism reads, "Those who would go to sea for pleasure would go to hell for a pastime."

Yet it calls us. So much of our language is born of our experience on the sea. To be groggy, three sheets to the wind, to get on board, to get underway, to overhaul, to know the ropes, a loose cannon, hand over fist, feeling blue, toing the line, a square meal, to be pooped, to let the cat out of the bag, to be dressed down or held over a barrel, tacky, tipsy, slush fund, scuttlebutt, swamped. Our encounters with the sea put an indelible mark on our psyche.

Our people were reborn as a nation when they emerged from the Sea of Reeds. Our prophet Jonah was reborn when the mouth of the sea spew him out. Moses's name means 'Drawn from the water.' When one converts to Judaism, one is reborn through the waters of the *mikvah*.

The ancients knew the power of sea and storm. They were rightfully afraid. It is a place of birth and a place of death.

In Panama Beach, Florida, earlier this summer, in July, two boys, 8 and 11, were swept away by a deceptive rip current churning below the surface, screaming and flailing 100 yards from the shore, a young woman and her wife, strangers to the boys, were the first to try to reach them, soon the boys' mother, father, nephew and grandmother were in the water, also caught in the rip current. There was no lifeguard on duty. Amidst crashing waves, and gulping seawater, the family was sure they would die. After struggling for twenty minutes, people on the beach started shouting to form a human chain. Eighty people, of all races and nationalities, some of whom couldn't swim, linked arms, and one by one started pulling people toward the shore. After an hour, the grandmother, still in the water, had a massive heart attack, her son-in-law and nephew struggling to keep her afloat while keeping their own heads above water. As the sun was preparing to set, at last, all ten of the stranded swimmers were safely back on shore. Everyone survived.

In Sierra Leone, this August, flash floods ravaged the land, leaving over 400 confirmed dead, over six hundred still missing. One of our temple guards, Mohammed, who is from Sierra Leone, showed pictures and video his brother sent him from home, our heads over the screen of his phone, we watched Muslims and Christians create a human chain to rescue people in an SUV balancing on a ledge, as a mud river roared underneath.

Insurance companies call floods, hurricanes, hail, tsunamis, wildfires, tornados, earthquakes, Acts of God. An "Act of God" is defined as any accident or event not influenced by man, although claimers might reconsider man's influence when it comes to the catastrophe of climate change. How billions of careless acts of man accumulate to cause a so-called "Act of God."

In this increasingly polarized political climate, littered with the tweetstorms and mudslinging, it is in the midst and aftermath of real storms and mudslides that we see acts of godliness. When our fortresses are stripped of walls, and our foundations upended, we are reacquainted with the power of humanity to help, linking arms. Act of God giving way to acts of good.

And we cling to the images of people helping people the way a flood victim clings to the side of a boat. Look! An undocumented immigrant helping his family just like a white American helps his family! Look, we are the same! Look, Christians and Muslims! Look, a black man carrying a white child, and a white woman carrying a black child! We cling to these images for dear life, as if therein lie all the evidence we need that we are all going to be okay. The angry torch carriers, the barbed wire border walls, the erosion of human rights, the eruptions of violence and hate, the shooting deaths, it's all going to be alright, because look, black, brown, white, holding each other up, that's who we really are. We can form a human chain and save this family after all.

However, all it really proves is that we are good at helping each other in a crisis. But we already knew that. That's nothing new. The deeper message, that we keep forgetting, is the need to prepare *before* the crisis.

We need to be both Jonah and Noah. Jonah who told the people of Ninevah to repent, saving them from a flood of wrath, and Noah who built an ark for when it came. We need to work to prevent the next flood, while at the same time, building our boat for when it inevitably comes.

We don't have the luxury of wondering if the next floods will happen. We know they're coming.

Genesis 6:14. Make yourself an ark... you shall make the ark with compartments.

We need to build our boats now. And everyone needs a different kind of boat, to stay afloat on the particular flood that's coming for them.

For some, it's the flood of financial debt, compounded by new regulations, compounded by inflated healthcare, or lack of accessible healthcare, compounded by debts and loans, or crushing mortgage, or job loss, caught in rip currents of delinquency notices and collection calls, struggling to keep one's head above water while the heart is seizing up, with no strength or will or dollar left to buoy one up. But we are less motivated to form that human chain to reach those who are drowning in debt.

For some, the flood is deportation from the only home and family they know to a wilderness in which everything is foreign, including the language. They need a boat, and the boat is made of pro-bono help with filing DACA renewal paperwork for those who qualify, and for those who don't qualify, their boat is built board by board, with every call placed to senator or congressperson, the boat is sanctuary, the boat is policy, the boat is a clear path toward security and protection. But we are less motivated to form that human chain to reach the undocumented.

For some the flood comes in the form of the rising tide of anti-Semitism and racial prejudice. Wrathful people adrift on the face of a deep sea of rage and misinformation. Angry men and women, some with swastikas, some waving confederate flags, people unmoored by their own fears, insecure, lashing out against anyone they perceive as threatening a nostalgic way of life that never truly existed. They need a boat, too. A board built of education, and relationships, better anchoring. But we are less motivated to form that human chain to reach those whom we hate.

For some, the flood is anxiety, blood pressure rising as flood waters rising, who can't look away from coverage of every terror attack, every defacement, every new intimidation, every new menace, they need a boat as well. A sense of appreciation for all that is going right, a sense of purpose, a path to apply oneself to make a difference, the tools to cope, and to transform fear into creativity and productivity.

Our boats are built in part by belonging to a community that values one another. And the more you participate in that community, to more you fortify the boat you are building, and the stronger and more flood-ready it becomes.

When you come twice a year, you have built for yourself a Jewish raft, two logs and some hasty boards, and a raft can save your life to be sure. But it is in the continuity of connection that turns a raft into an ark, tapping into the ancient blueprints, supportive hearts and hands, shared values, every relationship securing another sailor's knot, so that the rigging can weather any storm.

Our first boat is constructed by our parents. Then it's up to us to continue to live in the boat and make improvements, or, when we discover the boat cannot meet our beliefs, construct a new boat.

Make yourself an ark, Torah says. With compartments. Not just for oneself, but to bring onboard others who need help.

Make yourself an ark. Make *yourself* an ark. You are the ark. We are the ark.

And when we build our boats, we include rudders and sails. Tides change and winds shift, and our boats need to be versatile enough to move with them. We all need more resiliency. We need to be able to steer, and to adjust the sails when needed.

I have been captain of the good ship Isaiah for ten years, and I have loved it. And together we've navigated rough and calm seas peacefully and successfully, sharing leadership with phenomenal temple presidents, staff and volunteers. It has been a privilege and an honor to be at the helm. I was on the crew before becoming captain for seven years. This is my eighteenth year at Isaiah.

A good captain knows how to read the weather. Temperature, cloud formations, surf. Red sky at night, sailor's delight, red sky at morning, sailor's warning. I have spent a long time studying and charting the path of this congregation, reflecting on my own path, in concert with the community. In the past two months, since relocating from the large and spacious captain's quarters to the vibrant bustling education suite, I have learned so much, from a different vantage point, everything looks different, and I find it thrilling, invigorating, wind in my hair, an explorer.

I love looking at the horizon through my fellow clergy's eyes, and I love having the opportunity to be creative with programming, to find the demographics who may be underserved and lift them up, to have the space to contemplate the long-term future of our holy community by building its endowment, to learn alongside lifelong learners, to write, to share ideas. I am content, deeply content with having completed one significant leg of this voyage with you, and being part of preparing for the next. Together, we are adjusting our sails, to move gracefully with changing tides and shifting winds. With star-charts and weather apps, some good soul intuition, deeply wise co-captains, and each other, we are bound to discover great things together.

The word 'shana' in Hebrew means year, but it also means 'change.' So when we say, 'Shana Tova' to each other, we are not only saying "Have a good year," we are also saying, "Have a good change." What change will you work toward this year?

Make *yourself* an ark.

We are the ark when we build not borders, but bridges. We are the ark when we build not separations, but support. We are the ark when we build not contention, but confidence. We are the ark when we build not sarcasm, but security. We are the ark when we build not towers, but trust. We are the ark when we build not feuds, but friendships. We are the ark when we build more compassion, more kindness, more generosity, more understanding, more patience, more joy, more thoughtfulness, more equality, more love. We are the ark when we build upon our best values, when we reflect on ourselves, adjust our sails, make room for others, support and celebrate each other, practice equanimity so that when the floods do come, our inner waters remain calm.

We are sailing over some choppy seas. Darkness on the face of the deep. We don't always know what lurks beneath, but together we can be prepared for any adventure, until that day when the ark comes to rest, arms linked not to save but to sing, God's Spirit hovering over us with all the colors of the rainbow.