

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2017

As a young child lying in bed, I would often think about planets and stars, our solar system, galaxies far away, time, light, distance and other possibilities of existence. It's understandable that we have not figured out some of the complexities that are literally light years away. As I got lost in thought, and confused by the infinite nature of the universe, I would always find comfort and calm by speaking directly to God. God listened, often responded and we always ended with my singing the *Shema*, a sacred ritual reminding me of the oneness of God, an omnipotent, omnipresent, completely just and good God. *Baruch Shem Kevod malchuto laolam vaed...* May God's glorious kingdom reign forever and ever.

Many of us sing the *Shema* in unison at temple, alone before bed, or muttered silently when we are nervous, afraid or looking for strength. Sometimes, the most familiar ritual is the one we think about least. It becomes second nature; the meaning is so innate that we don't even pause to question its purpose.

And then something in our world shakes and we start to look for answers. If God is completely just and good and omnipotent, how can God allow for catastrophic flooding? I am still in shock about Hurricane Harvey. Typically Houstonians laugh at hurricanes and tropical storms. We hunker down and prepare for power outages, flooded streets and flooding in the flood-prone neighborhoods, but this was worse than anything before in my lifetime.

This flood was indiscriminant, affecting more homes than ever before. It didn't spare white people, Democrats, men, the rich or the elderly. After days of torrential downpour, much of the city was underwater. Like most native

Houstonians that have moved away, I followed developments mostly through social media and constant calls and texts with loved ones. Many friends were scared, moving up to their second floors, without power and eventually having to evacuate by boat. A close family friend with chronic health problems was separated from her children, lying on her kitchen counter in her one story home waiting for a helicopter to evacuate her and her husband. By the time the helicopter arrived, the water was chest deep. They were transported to a temporary helipad on the top of a freeway and later to a shelter where a family member was finally able to rescue them and later reunite the parents with their children.

More of my personal friends than I can count lost their homes, all of their possessions, their photographs and their heirlooms. Heartbreaking pleas of grandmothers needing to be rescued were constant. The Jewish nursing home had to move their first floor residents up and elderly residents were sharing rooms and sleeping on the floor. Numerous synagogues including the one I grew up in were completely flooded. The JCC where I spent countless hours as a child, is devastated. The first floor was filled with water, reaching about 4 feet high in their second floor. There is still piles of soggy sheetrock lining cracked, pothole filled roads all throughout the city. So many plans are still uncertain.

Among countless devastating photos, videos and statistics are twice as many stories of community, caring and heroism. A locally owned beer company sent their huge commercial truck into neighborhoods to rescue stranded people. A human chain on the interstate rescued an elderly man being swept away by the current, a pastor checked submerged cars to make sure no one was stuck inside and Mattress

Mac opened his showroom doors as a shelter from the storm. Thousands of people with boats, canoes and jet skis rescued the stranded– the stories are countless.

These stories are undeniable evidence of the divine spark that lives within each of us, traversing polarized politics, racial divides and social classes. Texas is not typically the most “kumbaya” place. There is still racism along with social divides and vast wealth disparity. Hurricane Harvey was not at all versed in these cultural paradigms.

Harvey didn’t care; he just wiped out everything in his path. Just as indiscriminant as Harvey was, so were all the people helping the strangers around them. This is a reminder that we are one... our voices are one, our spirits are one, helping each other to make it through each crisis and each day. We needed to be reminded.

At Jewish weddings we often hear that a light rises from every human being reaching straight to heaven. And when two souls, destined to be together, find each other, the streams of light flow together and a single, brighter light illuminates from their united being. They, in turn, go forward, brighter still, day after day.

The same is true for communities coming together. The moment that challenging events like this shake our core and challenge our theology, we see that we are one: our divine lights come together, our community comes together and our voices come together.

One people, one voice
A song for every one of us

This is the sound of one voice