

RABBI'S MESSAGE

...and the Rains Kept Tumbling Down

As I write this message, it is still raining. The flowing water that was at least three feet deep in front of my house has now dropped to an almost-drivable level. News reports say that more storms are coming, more flooding will happen, some will lose almost everything and the recovery time will drag on for a long time. I see national news reports with faces of people I know. Facebook posts show flooding and rescues and pleas for boats and other means to help those in most desperate need. A neighbor of mine who has a boat pulled it out to look for people to help. For now, my family and I are safe and dry; we have food, water, supplies and each other.

It's hard not to think about the time of Noah, recounted in Torah, when the world, except for one family and representatives from the animal world, was destroyed by a flood. At the end of it all, with a dove carrying an olive branch, Noah, his family and the animals began the process of rebuilding. GD promised that the world would never again be completely destroyed, and the promise is repeated whenever we see a rainbow. And what is a rainbow? It is a mysterious blend of sunlight and raindrops that we can see, but not touch, and includes **EVERY** color. The rainbow is a reminder of the inclusive nature of GD's promise. It includes the **OPPOSITES** of sun and rain; and while including every color, the rainbow also reminds us that GD's promise includes the entirety of human, plant and animal existence. There is no color that is not part of the rainbow prism in some way, and no living creation that is outside of GD's world.

So, the world will not be completely devastated...but in reality, some lives will be. As we approach the ominous liturgy of Yom Kippur, I personally struggle with the passages about "who shall live and who shall die...who by fire and who by water..." After this powerful and frightening paragraph, we conclude that section of the liturgy by saying, "*repentance, prayer and charity shall temper judgment's severe decree.*" The next line: "*And GD pardoned in response to our plea.*"

The "tempering" of a severe decree can be confusing. Each of us has experienced severity in one form or another, and the recent losses and devastation of the Harvey storm make it even more real. Does the liturgy suggest that those affected by tragedy, this one or others, are "punished" by not repenting well, praying poorly and giving inadequate charity?

I've come to look at the notion of a Yom Kippur "decree" a little differently than a judgment about "who shall live and who shall die." I find a hard time fully accepting that repentance, prayer and charity can *change* anything that is happening. It won't remove a cancerous tumor, patch a broken leg, raise the value of your stocks, get you the job or the relationship of your dreams, find you a parking space, cause the light to turn green at the right moment or make rains blow into your neighbor's house rather than your own. But it may change how we experience our difficulties. When we concentrate on our own mindful worship, our ability to help others in need and our capacity to ask and offer forgiveness, we may just be able to handle difficult times with a different kind of ease. When we focus on what we *have* rather than what we lack, we fulfill the saying from *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of our Ancestors), "*Who is rich? Those who are happy with what they have.*" We can see those beautiful prisms of color between the raindrops, and let it support our confidence that, no matter how bad the storm, we can make the world whole again.

Ready to start over...again...for the New Year 5778? Me, too!

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon