

At the beginning of my career, when I was an assistant rabbi in Minneapolis, a member handed me a copy of a modern Midrash. It went like this:

- A year after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were given a second chance. They found their way back to the gate to Eden and the cherub extinguished his flaming sword. Adam and Eve hesitated. “What are you waiting for? Don’t you want to come in?” the cherub asked. “Adam said that they weren’t sure. “What’s it like out there in the wilderness,” the cherub asked. Adam said, “It feels like being alive.” But the cherub didn’t understand what that meant because he’d always been a cherub and had never been alive. So, Adam tried to explain.
- “We’ve been in the desert for one year. That’s what it’s like to be alive.” But the cherub lived in eternity and did not understand the meaning of ‘year.’

- Adam tried again: “We’ve walked twenty miles this morning and suffered bloody feet. That’s what it’s like to be alive.” But the cherub didn’t know about suffering and was surprised that anyone would walk that far in a day since one had all of Eternity to see the Garden.
- Adam tried one last time: “Out here in the desert every place is different and one never knows what tomorrow will bring. That, above all, is what it means to be alive.” “But what does different mean; and why is there any need to worry about tomorrow?”
- Adam and Eve gave up because the cherub was more innocent than a child. They turned their backs on the Garden and walked back to the wilderness because they knew it was better to be alive.

We all felt the uncertainty of being alive last week. Most people evacuated; a few stayed in their homes. Some slept in the upper stories of office buildings. Some went to a hotel or shelter only to be told there

was no space or they had to evacuate again. Many were in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the highway. The 10-hour drive to Atlanta took 16 hours if not longer. One woman, who was in a shelter and heard the storm raging said that that Sunday night was the most terrifying night of her life. And then, when the storm passed and we knew we were safe, we worried about our homes and the possibility of storm surge. Would we have homes to come back to?

- Leni and I were in San Antonio for her mother's funeral. We watched as the path of the hurricane shifted from the east coast of the state to the west coast and saw the line going right through Fort Myers. Hearing about an evacuation of everyone west of 41, we did not know what we'd come home to find.
- Like many of you, but not all of you, we found that our house was fine. But like most of you, it took several days for power to return. We ate peanut butter and jelly, slept in a very hot house and took showers wherever we could.

I am sure there are stories of callousness or selfishness coming out of this storm. I know a couple of them. But I've heard about many more expressions of unexpected kindness.

- I've heard three separate stories of neighbors showing up with chain saws to clear fallen trees from driveways. ... And then coming back with some kids to clean more debris. In all of these stories, the homeowner offered some money or gift and the person who gave the kindness said, "absolutely not."
- A friend in Tampa told about a church that sent out groups of teenagers to walk the neighborhoods and ask people if they needed any help.
- I heard of a man who took a family of six and some pets into a one-bedroom apartment.
- Some kindnesses were simpler. My next-door neighbor, who I see rarely, came to me and said, "Marc, our back-up generator has an extra outlet. Do you want to run an extension cord from your

refrigerator to the generator?” And we did. We were not the only ones.

- I had emails and phone calls from rabbis and friends around the country – people from whom I had not heard in a long time – asking if Leni and I and our shul were okay. My guess is that most of you had the same experience.

There are so many of these stories and, for me, they are most important.

Many of you know that Leni lost her mother on the Sunday before the storm hit. For the last month of her life, Freida was in a semi-private room in a skilled nursing facility. In the bed next to her was a young African American woman who seemed to have had a serious stroke. She could not move much and could only say a few words. All day long, this woman listened to loud church music. She had few visitors but someone from her church called every day to pray with her. You could hear the woman saying again and again, “Yes, yes, God, God.” Thank God,

Freida didn't hear very well. The music and praying didn't bother her.

Leni and I were not so patient.

But when Freida left the nursing home, the woman took Leni's hand and prayed with her. And when I went back to get some of Freida's things, the woman blew me a kiss. For most of that month, I felt sorry for that woman but I also felt how little my family had in common with her. And then, with her kindness and faith, she reminded me that, when it comes down to it, we are all just God's creatures. That what we have in common is just as important as what divides us.

Rosh HaShanah gives this message. The Torah reading is about God remembering Abraham and Sarah and miraculously granting them new life. It's about God giving life to our people. But after we blow the shofar during the Musaf service the machzor talks not about the Jewish people but about God creating the world. *Hayom harat olam*, "Today the world was created," the machzor says. **The holiday wants us to**

remember – at the same time - that God has a special relationship with the Jewish people and with all humanity. We should feel our connection both to our people and to the world outside our community.

As time goes on, we will remember this storm; but memories of the terror will fade into the background. Most importantly, I hope we remember the acts of kindness, the acts that reaffirmed our belief in the goodness of people.

- The home of a young couple in Everglades, Florida was completely destroyed by the storm. I don't know what kindnesses were extended to this family but the woman said, "Our home was lost but we found humanity."

I believe in that strand of Jewish thought that says that it is human beings who bring God's presence into the world, that we are *shutafim im haQadosh Barukh Hu*, partners with the Holy One.

If there is anything we take away from Hurricane Irma is that someday it will be our turn to extend that kindness to others. We know, from the kindnesses extended to us, and from the stories that so many people have told, that these acts of kindness not only bring relief to those who are struggling. They bring God's presence into the world. And it is for that purpose that we were created.