

Upending Creation: Reflections on the Earthquake and Tsunami  
(Genesis 1:1-13, 31; Psalm 148)

Today is the Jewish holiday of Purim. It's the closest thing Jews have to Halloween. Last night we dressed up in costume to go to the synagogue, read the story of Esther, yelled and stamped our feet to blot out the name of the bad guy, Haman and cheered our hearts out for the good guys, Mordechai and Esther. Some of the Purim traditions include making plates of sweets for neighbors and giving generously to the poor. But, perhaps the most unlikely religious mandate of this or any holiday is to drink until you can't tell the difference between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordechai." The description of the Jews of Persia defeating their enemies is replete with humor, exaggeration and fantasy. Purim, with its raucous behavior and pretense of power, comes a month before Passover, the holiday of the Seder, which in Hebrew means, "order." Indeed, some have suggested that, if Passover is the celebration of freedom through order, Purim is the celebration of freedom through disorder, of the imagined inversion of the way things too often are, of the upside down nature of the everyday, when too often injustice prevails over justice, the wrong people are victorious and innocents suffer.

I couldn't help but think literally about the disorder, the upside down nature of things while absorbing the images and descriptions of the aftermath of Japan's earthquake and tsunami. It was as if creation was upended or gravity stopped working. Cars on top of buildings. Buildings themselves upside down. The ocean disappearing, only to reappear as a wall of water.

I have long been fascinated by water. Ever since I was a child I have loved to swim, relishing the rhythms of the strokes and the buoyancy of the water. But water holds paradox and so I also have a healthy respect for water. After a particularly wet winter, one spring day, I plunged into my favorite swimming hole in the Merced River and was nearly washed away by the current. My quick-thinking husband George found and extended to me a downed tree limb, which I grabbed with panic and relief. We now refer to that episode knowingly and respectfully as, "my encounter with the river."

This fascination with water extended as well to academic pursuits. My rabbinic thesis was a study of water as a symbol of healing and redemption in

rabbinic literature. One of the texts I pondered in the quiet of the library now graces my office wall today. Covering one wall is a large canvas created by artist Carrie Ungerman. Painted in shades of blue, with pockets of waves, are inscribed the words “*mayim nikrau chayim*” --Water is called life.”

Water holds paradox. “Water is called life.” Because of the tsunami, water was for so many, a source of death. And still, water’s paradox continues. Haunting the humanitarian relief and recovery efforts in Japan is an ongoing crisis with Japan’s damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor. Fears abound. Does more destruction await? In order to minimize further destruction, scientists and technologists have been trying desperately to replace the water in the pools that hold the nuclear rods. Water, they tell us, not only serves to cool the rods, it also provides a shield against radiation. So we are faced with a profound irony—water, which on one day is a source of death and destruction, on the next day is a source of life. The seawater that sunders is the seawater that saves. *Mayim nikrau chayim*. Water is called life.

Water holds paradox. My daughter’s kindergarten class is studying the nature of matter. The children are learning that water can be liquid and flowing as in a stream or solid as in ice. They watch dry ice in water making fog. What is water, which takes many forms? What is water, which can be calm and serene or can generate electricity with its relentless power? The discoveries about water young children experience echo back to the very origins of creation.

Creation is ongoing, not just in the primordial past, but also in our own day. When we think of creation, we conjure up its wonder and life-giving richness. And yet, creation is also tied to destruction. A brush with death accompanies the miraculous moment of birth. The awe inspiring Sierras and Yosemite Valley came into being when glaciers destroyed much in their path. We are inexorably drawn to the awe of creation, even though we might intellectually recognize the power of its destruction. We look at eclipses, volcanoes, yes, even tsunamis. Last week, a man was swept out to sea on the California coast because he wanted to photograph the tsunami.

The paradox of attraction and flight, of water’s capacity for creation and for destruction is found even in the Bible. Genesis describes creation occurring when God the waters divide into heaven and into earth. Without the movement of the primordial waters, there would be no earth, no land, no soil in which to plant civilization.

But soon, that first civilization forgot about human dignity, so God tells Noah, "...the earth is filled with lawlessness, and I am about to destroy them with the earth."(Genesis 6:13) Just as creation was made possible by the movement of water, that first cataclysmic destruction, the flood, also takes place by the movement of water. Paradoxically though, that movement of water, too, can be seen as the destruction of lawlessness, the destruction of indignity, the destruction of division. Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller describes the Great Flood as a giant *mikveh*, a giant ritual bath, surrounding the earth, purifying, renewing it, cleansing it, if you will, so civilization can start again. Indeed, God promises, "Never again will I doom the earth because of humans...So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." (Genesis 8:21-22)

Not only does God promise perpetuity, but also simultaneously, God establishes a covenant with all humanity through Noah. "I will maintain my covenant with you; never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:11) God's promise is accompanied by human obligations. By rabbinic interpretation, the obligations consist of six negative prohibitions and one positive commandment. The negative prohibition: We steward the earth by refusing to engage in idolatry, in incest, in murder, in robbery and in eating live animals. In fulfilling the positive commandment, we establish courts of justice, to organize our society in a way that cultivates a civilization of fairness and equality.

Just as the original destruction yielded the outlines of a society in which humanity can triumph, so as we survey the damage and pain caused by this recent tsunami and earthquake, the possibility of the triumph of humanity is with us again.

Theologian Rabbi Harold Schulweis teaches<sup>i</sup>, that in the biblical narrative of Creation, the name for God, which appears throughout the seven days of Creation is *Elohim*. *Elohim* is the author of Nature, the God of gravitation, of physical laws. This aspect of God is not only soft breezes and sunlight, but also as the psalm we read today proclaims, the God of fire and hail, of snow and stormy winds. *Elohim* is the aspect of the God of fires, earthquakes, tsunamis and natural physical destructiveness. In the narrative of Creation, *Elohim* creates the world as it is.

The other name for God, found throughout the Hebrew Bible, is *Adonai*, defined as the God of what ought to be, the God of Morality. *Adonai* is the God who allows us to respond to adversity by calling upon the divine powers within the human community and within ourselves. It is *Adonai* who enables us to reach out to others in relief and aid, helping the frightened, the homeless, the thirsty and the hungry.

As we respond to the tsunami, we encounter both aspects of God at once. *Elohim*, who creates the laws of plate tectonics that lead to earthquakes and tsunamis, and *Adonai* who creates compassion within human beings to move from tragedy to recovery. In the face of these two attributes of the Sacred, the question is not why something has happened—but now that it has happened, what will we do?

A theologian friend said that in the face of such tragedy, there are three things that we must do: 1) Avoid easy answers. 2) Pray and 3) Lament. I would add a fourth, and that is to act.

*Adonai* is present when we act with the understanding that all of us are, in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's words, "...tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." On Tuesday, many of you were with us here when we gathered in vigil, people of all races and cultures, all ages and walks of life came slowly up the aisle to light a candle of hope for those suffering from the earthquake and tsunami. That single garment of destiny was woven in an array of colors and patterns. Yes, this tragedy was plate tectonics and the incomprehensible power of the movement of earth and walls of water. But it was also an emphatic reminder once again of how small the world is, a reminder that we are all brothers and sisters. We are one family. The Talmud Sanhedrin teaches, "God created Adam as one human being so that no one could claim, 'My father is greater than your father.'"

Inexplicable tragedy teaches us about our shared humanity. I know this from the grief and bereavement group I lead for students here at Stanford. However different we look on the outside--male, female, black, white, yellow, red-- on the inside, our hearts recognize one another, our tears console one another, our dashed dreams speak to one another.

*Adonai* is present when we turn our understanding of our common humanity into action. *Adonai* is present when we apply the dignity of our knowledge and technologies to minimize harm. *Adonai* is present when we

remember that what it means to survive destructive waters and to be civilized is to protect and care for one another.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav teaches, “*Kol haolam kulo gesber tzar me’od. V’haikar lo lefached clal.*” “All the world is just a narrow bridge. And above all, is not to fear.” On one side of that bridge is the unfamiliar and the foreign, the unthinkable and the terrifying. On the other side of that bridge is the comfortable and the known, terra firma and calm. But as life pulls us into its maelstrom, we must reach across that divide with an open heart and with an outstretched hand.

In Tuesday’s vigil, in this sanctuary, we stood together and reached out our hands to one another. Whether we have come to this sanctuary today for solace, for challenge or for celebration, aware of personal struggles or lamenting global disorder and division, I invite you this morning, to stand and do the same, responding to this affirmation with the words, “Give me your hand.”

When all seems dark and the darkness is harsh, *Give me your hand.*  
When we cannot see light even in the brightest day, *Give me your hand.*  
When we are tired and every breath is heavy, *Give me your hand.*  
When our words do not grasp the depth of yearning in our soul, *Give me your hand.*  
When our feelings are overwhelming or dulled, *Give me your hand.*  
When we are confused and don't know what to do, *Give me your hand.*  
When we need to rebuild, *Give me your hand.*  
When we need to sow the seeds of hope, *Give me your hand.*  
When we find in one another the promise of comfort, *Give me your hand.*  
So that we affirm our community together, *Give me your hand.*

Rabbi Eric Weiss, based on the Talmudic text,  
*Brachot 5a*, inspired by Rabbi Susan Lippe

May each of us help one another across that narrow bridge, with hands outstretched in generosity, with hands outstretched in recognition and with hands outstretched in affirmation of the human family.

*Baruch ata Adonai, Elohenu Melech haolam, oseh, maaseh bereshit.*

Blessed are You, Eternal God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made the work of Creation. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> “Where was God in the Earthquake?” The Jewish Journal, January 21-27, 1994