

**Kol Nidre 5766**  
**Nature vs. Nurture**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

Simon and Garfunkel introduced us to the idea that we can all be self-sufficient and independent through their song “*I am a Rock, I am an Island.*” It is an idea we embrace because of the strength that is embodied in the image of the rock. That is what a rock is, an object that is seemingly never changing, sturdy, rugged. It is an object that can withstand tremendous weight and never buckle. That is why one insurance company has as a rock as its symbol. Prudential has associated itself with the image of a rock because it wants the public to know that it will always be there, never changing, never bowing to the demands we make. In its *never* changing way, we find a sense of security because we know they will always be there. Prudential is selling a sense of constancy.

As a young boy I used to love to sit next to my father in shul. I would sit by his side. In his right hand was a siddur; in his left hand was mine. I would sit next to him rarely speaking because he was engrossed in his davening – but I would play with his hands. His hands were rough as if he had spent the day working the ground, even though I don’t remember him ever doing anything manual in my entire life. As a young boy I enjoyed the hours of learning his hands, and learning from his hands. From his side, I would watch his hands reach out to others with a kind touch or just a moment of connection through a handshake or even more dramatically through a hug. I watched him console others by holding their arms or show gentle affection when touching their face. His hands are rough in their exterior but kind in their use. I believe my dad’s hands to be the original “good hands.” Allstate Insurance must have gotten the idea from watching my Abba. So when that insurance company said we are in good hands, we all knew immediately what they were trying to get across. If you want safety and security, protection and refuge. you can always rely on “the good hands of Allstate.”

There are people, I am told, who love to go whale watching, and they tell me about the great strength and grace they find in watching those enormous mammals. They travel to far away places to find these creatures in their natural habitats. They go to see the magnitude and wonder about their worlds. They recognize the majesty of these great living things. I listen to the stories

they tell of their sightings: “it was a quiet still morning - the sun was coming up and all of a sudden an incredible humpback whale, the largest of all whales, emerged from the water leaping almost its entire body length into the air and then crashing down on its side,” leaving the spectators in awe. Now that I think about it, I don’t think I actually know anyone who has gone whale watching. In fact, I think I have made up the entire image based on a commercial I have seen many times for The Pacific Life Insurance Company.

Grand symbols, metaphors for power, constancy, protection are all better applied to God rather than insurance companies. Marketing geniuses have us believe that if we purchase certain policies and make certain preparations we can control the outcome of our lives. If we choose the right company to insure us, we can find some assurance that nothing bad will happen. If not that, at least we will be made whole again. So I agree with the metaphor, I just disagree with the application. I do place my faith in that which is powerful, constant and majestic. I trust in a God we refer to as a *Tzur*, rock, a God who protects us *tachat kanfei HaShekhinah*, under His divine embrace, and a God who is *melekh malkhei ham'lakhim*, the most majestic of all nobility.

The way He acts in our world has always been fodder for discussion. God acting in our world has always been challenged. This year the greatest sequence of natural disasters to happen in my lifetime and in the lives of many has occurred. Disasters labeled by the insurance industry as acts of God.

The Tsunami in Asia this year was an event of biblical proportions. Those images are quickly recalled as we see images of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita coupled with earthquakes in California, and now in Pakistan, as the entire city of Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistani side of Kashmir, has been completely wiped out. Each of these events have given us a taste of the power of weather. Katrina has left in its wake suffering and death, loss of property and loss of life. Katrina brought to our shores the reality of the overwhelming nature of nature. We watched the reports stream in of the homes destroyed and what the waters engulfed and we heard of the death tolls and the moments of heroism. The collective human memory immediately connects one natural disaster to another and we are thrust into the recurring emotions we felt when we watched the Tsunami unfold before our eyes. The devastation of the Gulf Coast is nothing compared to

that of the Tsunami of Asia, or even the earthquake of the region of Islamabad, India but they are a reminder of the overwhelming capacity of nature. If the Tsunami had taken place in biblical times, we would have read about it today as a massive flood. Then we would have ascribed to it a message and a meaning, a lesson and a warning. There is no doubt that as the generations unfold in the wake of these horrible natural disasters, there will be those who ascribe an explanation that goes further than science.

Today we join with those of the ancient world as we make sense of our place in the world and how God communicates with us. We are left to make a conscious decision about how we understand the tsunami, earthquakes, flooding and overwhelming storms. How we do we teach those lessons to our children. In the biblical account of the flood, Noah builds an ark and the rest of the world is destroyed. The Midrash and later rabbis try to portray Noah as trying to convince others of what is coming. The sages explain Noah's drive to help his fellow human beings, but he fails. The message of the text is clear. The Torah teaches the lesson of the flood as a simple case of, if you are evil and can't live in concert with each other, then there is no place for you in this world. In the book of Genesis, God washed the earth of the lawlessness but then promises *never* to do that again. The analysis of the event, whether correct or not, brings us to an understanding that we must act differently. God will not wipe us out again, *and we* must now take responsibility for our world regardless of the challenges placed before us by our environment. If there is natural catastrophe, then *we* must respond and when we do, it is God working in the world through us.

Our theology dictates from our sacred canon, the Torah, that God no longer works through the miraculous in the supernatural because miracles have a short shelf life. God through Moses splits a sea, and the next day people are complaining there isn't anything to eat. God through Moses draws water from a rock, and the Jewish people turn around a day later and complain there isn't enough food. We are people who are used to asking, "what have you done for me lately?" Those days are over. The days of prophecy are over and the days of miracles have ended. It is now on us and if we are to hear God, then it will be through our actions. If we show kindness, then we will feel Celestial kindness. If we show mercy, then Heavenly mercy will be evident; if we show fairness, Divine justice will shine through.

The prophet Elijah (I Kings 19:12) remarks *Lo b'ruah Adonai, ...v'lo b'ra'ash Adonai*, God is not in the wind and God is not in the thunder; *Lo ba'aish Adonai elah b'kol d'mamah dakah*, God is not in the fire but rather God is in the still small voice. If you want to hear God's voice, God's *kol d'mamah dakah*, God's still small voice, listen to the actions of the doctors and the nurses and the rescue workers who rushed to the aid of drowning victims of the natural catastrophes this year. If you want to hear the still small voice of God, listen to the people who raised billions of dollars to rebuild and reconnect those separated by the waters and earthquakes.

Nietzsche declared God is dead. In the face of such horror – we could easily join the charge, but I prefer the response of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who gathered the people of his community to announce some incredible news. Something so radical they all had to hear it for themselves. And when all had assembled he announced, “God is in the world.” We have the choice in our lives on how we interpret events in our world. We can be like Nietzsche declaring God is dead or worse, that God has executed this devastation in order to punish the wicked. Or equally painful, that God has turned his back on humanity permitting people to act lawlessly and without regard for others, as some did in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Or we can say God is in this place. Adonai, God, is in this place and is suffering alongside humanity. God is in this place in the skilled hands of the doctors and the gentle touch of the nurses, and on the backs of the workers who pulled children to dry land and in the hands of the people who carried food to the starving and the shelter to those without homes. HaKadosh Barukh Hu, God is in that place. God is in the people who gave blood and money so lives could be saved and homes rebuilt. The Shekhinah, God is in the eyes of those who care, those who saw the suffering and responded.

Marx said religion is the opiate of the masses, and Freud said religion is an illusion. I say religion, when done right, brings about meaning in the face of chaos, understanding in the face of incomprehensible suffering, and then it is neither an opiate nor an illusion. We ascribe the meaning and purpose to the patterns we see and that is a conscious decision we make.

We work diligently to discover where the pieces go because our curiosity demands it, our sense of control longs for it and our world continues to challenge us if we are engaged in living a life of consequence.

This year the challenge to our theology and philosophy was the horrible weather, this past summer in the human evil found in the subways of England and four years ago it was 9/11. When we are faced with a flood of massive scope, we too must find a way to make sense of it. The insurance industry seizes the moment to lay blame in general and specifically on God. Instead of finding solutions and remedies, there are those who seek to assign responsibility to others, and that too is a reflection of who we are.

Of the nearly 10 to 20 billion dollars of damage caused by Hurricane Katrina, the insurance industry – the companies that promised to stand by us and hold our hand – will take responsibility for about one-third to one-half. So the rest is up to us. We must find an alternative to manage the event and explain it. We must not be a generation of people whose single greatest identifying characteristic is our ability to assign culpability. Rather we must be a generation that makes constructive meaning out of the events of our world and then acts on that meaning in order to repair the world.

In a wonderful piece of gemara, the rabbis argue about whether sins overshadow the goodness we perform. As the text unfolds, we see a subjectivity that creeps into the discussion when the gemara suggests that a single good deed can overshadow a lifetime of evil behavior and vice versa, a single evil act can overshadow a life of kindness. We know this to be true both about the world and about people. We know that a single act can completely alter the way we see another person or in the way we see the world. A tsunami wipes out masses of people and in a single wave we are overcome with questions about the nature of the world. A series of simultaneous attacks occurred in England this summer and immediately we were reminded of the global nature of terrorism and the fragility of life in a place that seemed to have been unaffected by the hatred that is ever-present in the rest of the world.

We too find ourselves caught in the relativism generated by the incongruity of life and we can relate to the gemara that seeks the patterns and the rationales. We too feel the helplessness of the sacred text to make sense of the anomalies of existence in a real world. Thankfully the gemara does not end there. Rather it finishes by saying, *Talmud gadol, sheh-ha-talmud mevi liy'dei maaseh*. (Kiddushin 40b) The greatness of learning, of applying meaning to circumstance, is when that meaning brings us to action. Analysis is good but analysis has value when it furthers achievement. Interpretation is important, but elucidation for the sake of achievement is better. We must be engaged in the world and not separate ourselves by simply observing. The gift and the challenges of the tsunami, earthquakes and Katrina is in our response, both as we seek recovery and healing and in the meaning we ascribe to the event.

After a chapter about his struggle with non Hodgkin's lymphoma, Gene Wilder, in his memoir *Kiss Me Like a Stranger*, remarks that as he sat next to five and six year old children who had lost their hair to chemotherapy, "The old urge to pray came over my mind when I saw them, but I gave that up a long time ago. What is God, but something inside me? What I wish for those children is just some good genes, and a very skilled doctor – that is what I wish for them." It is sad and lonely that for Gene Wilder finding God inside himself and praying are mutually exclusive. God *is* in us *and* we should never give up on prayer. We can have a caring God *and* skilled physicians.

Today I ask you to reframe the discussion of nature versus nurture and commit to nurturing in the face of overwhelming nature. May this year bring greater insight into the nature of God working in ourselves and may that realization bring us renewed energy and empowerment to better the world. *Shanah Tovah* .