

THE PROPER PREPARATION FOR THESE DAYS OF AWE
ROSH HASHANAH 5778
Rabbi Robert A. Silvers

As we all are too well aware, this is the season when we confront the destructive forces in our lives. To help us take heed and be mindful of these forces our sages have instituted an alphabetical accounting of them...

(Sing) Ay ya ya ya ya, ay ya ya ya ya, ay ya ya ya ya...

Andrew, Betsy, Charley, Dennis, Emily, Frances, Gustav, Harvey, Irma, Jose, Katrina, Lee, Maria, Nate, Ophelia, Philippe, Rita, Sean, Tammy, Vince, Wilma...

(Sing: Ay ya ya ya ya, ay ya ya ya, aya ya ya ya ya...

That's right Hurricane Season. You see, here in Florida these too can be "Days of Awe." And just like we prepare to weather our Hurricane Days of Awe, so must we prepare for the *Yamim Noraim*, our Jewish Days of Awe.

Amidst the running around and turmoil of the past couple weeks, I came across this email. It's a tongue-in-cheek checklist and guide for Florida Hurricane Preparations but it also contains

great wisdom for us about these *Yamim Noraim* – these High Holy Days.

The email reads...

You're about to enter the peak of the hurricane season. Any minute now, you're going to turn on the TV and see a weather person pointing to some radar blob out in the Atlantic Ocean making two basic meteorological points.

- (1) There is no need to panic.
- (2) We could all be killed.

Yes, this is a bit amusing but there is also a profound truth here especially when it comes to our Jewish Days of Awe. Consider this Chasidic teaching of Rabbi Bunam who said to his disciples: “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake the world was created,’ and in his left: I am earth and ashes.”

This teaching reminds us that yes, we are but dust and ashes, life can come to an abrupt end tomorrow, but let's not panic,

the world was created for us to enjoy, for us to live wholeheartedly. That is the precarious balance for these High Holy Days. We love our lives; we love waking each day knowing that life can be beautiful, be satisfying, be ennobling, and yet we sit here in *shul* at this season, acknowledging that the Judge who ordains life and death could choose to write us in or leave us out of the Book of Life in the year to come. It all depends on us. Will we choose to be repentant or not, will we choose to seek forgiveness or not. It all depends on us. How we behave. How we act.

The e-mail I received also points that if you live in a low-lying area you should evacuate. And how do you determine if you live in a low-lying area? You check your driver's license. If it says Florida, you live in a low-lying area.

The e-mail continues that it is also important to have an evacuation route to avoid being trapped in your home when a major storm hits. So, instead, you will be trapped in a gigantic traffic jam miles from your home, along with three hundred thousand other evacuees who have clogged the roads and run out of gas. But at least you won't be lonely.

Truth be told, it doesn't matter if you live in Florida, no matter where you live, we can all be brought **low** from **lying**. In fact over a fourth of the sins we confess to on Yom Kippur are for the sins of lying, deceitful speech, gossip, slander -- what we call *lashon harah*. Indeed we should evacuate from this behavior. And mind you -- you are not alone. All of us fall into the trap of speaking *lashon hara* -- that's why the confessional we recite on Yom Kippur is in the plural.

The e-mail also points out that when a hurricane is imminent, you should follow this simple three-step hurricane preparedness plan:

STEP 1: Buy enough food and bottled water to last your family for at least three days.

STEP 2: Put these supplies into your car.

STEP 3: Drive to Nebraska and remain there until Halloween.

What a great idea. What a plan. We all evacuate. We all run away from the destructive force winds of the hurricane. While

this may work for this particular Awesome Day, it really doesn't work for our *Yamim Noraim*, our Jewish Days of Awe. No matter how fast we go, no matter how far we travel, we cannot escape the *Ruach Elohim*, the Spirit of God. Another fellow tried that -- he failed. We in fact read his story on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. His name was Jonah. Perhaps you remember his story...

God called upon Jonah to go up to the city of Nineveh and preach against it, for the wickedness of its people had become known to God. Jonah, however, didn't do what God commanded him. Instead he tried to flee from God. He went down to Jaffa, paid his fare and boarded a ship bound for the city Tarshish.

Now, God wasn't too happy with Jonah, so He unleashed a violent wind, a tempest, upon the sea (sound familiar?), so that the ship was about to break up. All the sailors were terrified. They threw their cargo overboard to lighten their load; they even cried out in prayer -- each to their own god. Jonah, however, was fast asleep. The ship's captain shouted to him, "How can you sleep? Get up and call out to your God! Perhaps He will save us!"

Meantime, the sailors are casting lots to see who's at fault for this Hurricane. And guess what? The lot falls to Jonah. Jonah fesses up and admits he's trying to run away from God.

To help calm the storm, Jonah tells the crew to cast him into the sea. But being the *menshlikite* sailors they were, they didn't want to do that, so they rowed harder and harder trying to get to shore. Yet the harder they rowed the worse the Hurricane became, so finally in desperation, they threw Jonah overboard, and lo and behold, the seas grew calm.

And what of Jonah? God sent a big fish to swallow him up. Finally, after three days and nights of praying to God for deliverance, God answers Jonah by having the fish spit him up onto dry land. Jonah then complies with God's command to go to Nineveh realizing that he can't escape from God.

So it is with us my friends, on these Days of Awe we cannot escape from God. Sanctuaries fill up all over the country, all over the world filled to capacity with Jews. Why? What for ... to hear the Cantor sing or the Rabbi speak on and on? In fact, we are here because we cannot escape our heritage and fate; we

cannot evade our *Eil Orekh Din*, the God who shall Judge us in this New Year.

So, if we stay and face this Awesome Day, according to the e-mail we must make the following preparations:

HOMEOWNERS' INSURANCE: If you own a home, you must have hurricane insurance. Fortunately, this insurance is cheap and easy to get, as long as your home meets two basic requirements:

- (1) It is reasonably well-built, and
- (2) It is located in Wisconsin

Unfortunately, if your home is located in Florida, or any other area that might actually be hit by a hurricane, most insurance companies would prefer not to sell you hurricane insurance, because then they might be required to pay YOU money, and that is certainly not why they got into the insurance business in the first place. So you'll have to scrounge around for an insurance company, which will charge you an annual premium roughly equal to the replacement value of your house.

At any moment, this company can drop you like used dental floss.

Thankfully for our Days of Awe, insurance is not necessary, but a well-built house is crucial. A story...

An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife enjoying his extended family. He would miss the paycheck, but he needed to retire. They could get by.

The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end his career.

When the carpenter finished his work and the builder came to inspect the house, the contractor handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said, "my gift to you."

What a shock! What a shame! If only the carpenter had known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently. Now he had to live in the home he had built none too well.

So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock we look at the situation and realize that we have to live in the house we have built. If only we could do it over, we'd do it differently. But we cannot go back.

You are the carpenter. Each day you hammer a nail, place a board, or erect a wall. Life is a do-it-yourself project. Your attitudes and the choices you make today, build the "house" you live in tomorrow. The best insurance against loss is to build wisely. Build it so that it might withstand the winds that blow through your life.

The e-mail goes on to explain the importance of not only building your house well but to protect it with hurricane shutters...

Your house should have hurricane shutters on all the windows, all the doors. There are several types of shutters, with advantages and disadvantages:

Plywood shutters: The advantage is that you can buy them at any conveniently located Hardware store, Home Depot, or Lowes, and because you put them up yourself, they're cheap.

Sheet-metal shutters: The advantage is that once you do stop procrastinating and call a company and have them come out and take measurements and drop them back off to you, these, in fact, will work well, once you get them up. The disadvantage is that once you get them up, your hands will be useless bleeding stumps, and it will be December.

Roll-down shutters: The advantages are that they're very easy to use, and will definitely protect your house. The disadvantage is that you will have to sell your house to pay for them.

Hurricane-proof windows: These are the newest wrinkle in hurricane protection. They look like ordinary windows, but they can withstand hurricane winds! You can be sure of this, because the salesman, who lives in Iowa, says so.

While it is indeed important to shutter your house for protection against hurricanes, it is just the opposite for our Days of Awe. We cannot continue to live our lives shuttered away from one another. The Chasidic sage, Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki best sums it up this way: “Being alone has a special value, but only when one is among others.” Though we fortify ourselves against an impending hurricane by shuttering ourselves in, the fact of the matter is that on our Days of Awe we fortify ourselves by being part of a community.

In *Pirke Avot*, Ethics of our Fathers, Hillel reminds us: *al tifros min ha-tzibur*, “Do not separate yourself from the community.”

Judaism is built on community. We are instructed to seek forgiveness from one another on these Days of Awe for the sole purpose of helping us live together in community. The prayers we recite from the *machzor* today and in our prayer books on a daily basis are in the plural. Judaism and the Jewish people will survive only if we build community. Rabbi Wayne Dosick writes: “In community, there is shared memory, unity of purpose, mutual commitment, reciprocal responsibility, and common destiny. In community, there is powerful energy that heightens

awareness, supports unfolding consciousness, strengthens cosmic connection, enhances prayer, deepens meditation, and affirms transcendent experience. In community there is sharing of tragedy amid triumph – joy enhanced, sorrow eased. In community, there is support for personal healing – the pain and sufferings of physical disease and emotional trauma tempered and soothed. In community there is encouragement and energy for global healing – the task of transforming and perfecting the world advocated and empowered.”

The e-mail continues...

If you don't evacuate, you will need a mess of supplies. Do not buy them now! Florida tradition requires that you wait until the last possible minute, then go to the supermarket and get into vicious fights with strangers over who gets the last can of cat food.

I hope that all of us have learned our lesson about waiting too long to buy hurricane supplies, but in the case of *teshuvah*, the *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer assures us: “Lord, it is not the death of sinners You seek, but that they should turn from their ways and

live. Until the last day You wait for them welcoming them as soon as they turn to You.” You see, God waits for us up until the very last moment to return to Him.

The e-mail further details that in addition to food and water, you will need the following supplies:

Flashlights.

At least \$167 worth of batteries that, when the power goes off, happen to be the wrong size for the flashlights.

Bleach. (No, I don’t know what the bleach is for. NOBODY knows what the bleach is for, but it’s traditional, so GET some!)

A big knife that you can strap to your leg. (This will be useless in a hurricane, but it looks cool.)

A large quantity of raw chicken, to placate the alligators. (Ask anybody who went through Hurricane Andrew; after the hurricane, there WILL be irate alligators.)

And, \$35,000 in cash or diamonds so that, after the hurricane passes, you can buy a generator from a man with no discernible teeth.

Now, a flashlight may very well dispel the darkness caused by a hurricane, but often our world is dark and our way confused. The Riziner Rabbi cited the following parable: “A man walked on a country road one moonless night. From time to time flashes of lightening illumined the path. Once when he looked towards the sky to observe how the flash split the heavens, he fell into a pit. He climbed out with difficulty, and henceforth resolved to avail himself of the light from the flashes in order to see the road clearly.”

We too need to avail ourselves of a Source of Light to see clearly our path. What is our source? Proverbs (6:23) tells us: *kiner mitzvah v'Torah* or, the *Mitzvah* is a lamp and the Torah a light. As we pray in our daily liturgy: *ve'ha-eir eineinu b'toratekha* – enlighten our eyes in Your Torah [O God]. Through the light of Torah the correct path for us to follow is illumined; we can't get lost, and the best thing is there are no batteries to replace when it comes to Torah.

In regard to bleach, the fact of the matter is that those of us who live down here do know the purpose of the bleach...for purification.

And that's what our Days of Awe are all about... purification.

On Yom Kippur Eve, Rabbi Schmelke said: “We are taught [in a Baraitha]: ‘Grains that have become unclean and are planted, become clean.’ Thus when the grain which came out of the ground is reunited with mother earth, its source, it becomes [Leviticallly] clean. “Our souls come from God, and when they become unclean and impure, we may cleanse and purify them by returning them to their Source. Our souls must cleave entirely to the Fountain of Holiness. [Then we may hope that the promise of the Lord may be fulfilled (Deuteronomy 4:4): ‘But you that did cleave unto the Lord, your God, are alive every one of you this day.’”]

After a hurricane, bleach may purify our drinking water, but on our Days of Awe our souls can only be purified when we choose to return them to the Source of Life, to God. This, friends, is true *teshuvah*.

The knife – it might look cool in a hurricane, but the importance on this Day of Awe is not in appearances. It's not in how we look, or how we're dressed; it's not about how it looks to others that we are here, but rather it's in the true *kavanah*, the intent and focus that we bring here in our *tefillah*, in our service and prayer.

The Chasidic Rabbi known as the “Yud” said: “Do you wish to know what is proper prayer? When you are so engrossed that you do not feel a knife thrust into your body, then you are offering prayer aright.”

The chicken -- did you know that for our Days of Awe you also traditionally needed a chicken? That's right a chicken for *Kapparah* – a ceremony of atonement where one would symbolically transfer their sins to the chicken by swinging it over one's head and saying: “This in lieu of me, this be my substitute and exchange.” The chicken was then slaughtered and given as *tzedakah* to the poor. Today, we may very well forgo the chicken, but the giving of *tzedakah* is an essential part of our Days of Awe.

And finally, the generator. Without power our life and existence after a hurricane is indeed difficult. It is true of this Day of Awe as well. Said the Psedburzer Rabbi: “If we realize that our very existence is only by reason of God’s grace and mercy, we may easily understand that God will grant us other mercies as well. God’s **power** is endless and His mercies are without limit.” On this day God’s power is incalculable and invaluable to us. And it won’t cost us an arm and a leg; just the turning of our hearts and souls over to *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father and King who will indeed be merciful to us.

The email concludes that these are just basic precautions. As the hurricane draws near, it is vitally important that you keep abreast of the situation by turning on your television, if you have a generator that’s working, and watch the TV reporters in rain slickers stand right next to the ocean and tell you over and over how vitally important it is for everybody to stay away from the ocean.

So, good luck and remember: It’s great living in Paradise.

I must tell you, I understand and totally identify with the ridiculousness of this situation. I feel like the television reporter telling all of you how to prepare for these Days of Awe all the while standing here in danger myself. After all, I'm human too, capable of the same foibles and shortcomings as each and every one of you.

So let us all take to heart the lessons from these hurricane preparations for our Days of Awe...

Remember, we can't run away from God, so let's use these Days of Awe to return to God.

Let us build our lives wisely in the choices we make.

Let us take care in how we speak and act toward others.

Let Torah be our guide in life.

We all need to join in and be part of the community.

And though we don't need bleach, a knife or a chicken, we do need *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* to avert the severity of this Day of Awe that we might continue to enjoy our paradise - inscribed and sealed for the coming New Year in the Book of Life.

Amen.