

The Montecito Disaster: The Mountains Melted Like Wax

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Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

Tonight Jews all over the world are chanting these words from Psalm 97 :

הָאֵירוּ בְרָקִיו תִּבְּלוּ רֶאֱתָהּ וַתַּחַל הָאָרֶץ:
הָרִים כְּדֹונָג נִמְסוּ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה

A lightning bolt flashed like the sun in the night; the earth saw and trembled.

The mountains melted like wax before the Presence of God.

Harim kadonag namasu. The mountains melted like wax.

Those ancient words record an unforgettable moment, about 3,000 years ago, in which a group of mountains, universal symbol of power and stability, became liquid, melting and flowing like candle wax. That image has always struck me as wonderfully evocative, but I have never quite been able to picture the awesome event in nature that the poet was describing. When do mountains melt like wax?

In the early, dark hours of the morning last Tuesday, the mountains above Montecito melted like wax, in the geologic phenomenon called a “debris flow,” or what in Japan, they call a “yamatsunami,” a “mountain tsunami.” While those of us living in Goleta and Santa Barbara slept peacefully in our beds, our friends living in Montecito were awakened by a pounding, earth-shattering, house crushing river of mud, boulders, trees, cars, and...heartbreakingly... human bodies pouring down through Montecito. Wherever we were that night, our lives will never be the same.

During the past several days, members of our community have told me that they cannot get out of their heads the words from our High Holy Day liturgy, “Who by fire, and who by water?” Others have murmured, seriously, about the plagues of Egypt.

Tonight I would like to speak of our inner lives, where our minds go and what happens in our hearts and our bodies, in the presence and the aftermath of this devastation. I would like to speak of our need for each other. I would like to speak of our grief, and I would like to speak of hope.

Before anything else comes fear. The terror of that night. A mother in this congregation, at home alone with her three children fighting desperately to reassure them, to save their lives, and to control her own rising panic, during the most terrible night of her life. Another member of this congregation, pinned down by a tree for four endless hours, fully expecting to die, as he watched his beloved wife swept away by the mountain tsunami. That was a night of terror. And we also face the lingering fears about what will happen in the next intense rains. And fears about what all this means for the long-term future of our beloved community, which feels so profoundly vulnerable now, after the fire and the flood. Of all the confused emotions we feel right now, first is fear.

There is also exhaustion. Families who were evacuated for two weeks because of the Thomas fire, whose neurochemical pathways were flooded two weeks ago by the intense emotions of relief and gratitude. Then, just when it felt safe to let down their emotional guard, the people of Montecito have been assaulted physically and emotionally by this catastrophe. It

just feels overwhelming. And exhaustion applies to the rest of us also. We all raised our glasses on New Year's eve bidding good riddance to 2017 and declaring emphatically that 2018 would have to be a much better year. So much for a fresh new beginning. We are all exhausted, and there is so much work to be done.

What work, exactly? I still remember reading the newspaper reports after the earthquake in Mexico City, about how people came pouring out of their homes and apartments, immediately after the earth stopped shaking, and began digging....with whatever tools they had, or with their bare hands....in the urgent search for survivors. That is the natural human response to disaster. When we know that human beings nearby are in trouble, and especially our friends and neighbors, we are genetically programmed to rush to help.

But we cannot go to Montecito. We have been told, repeatedly, in case we did not realize it already, that we would just get in the way. I get it. I cannot handle tools; although I think I could handle a shovel. But it's not possible. So what is there for us to do? We know that we can write a check, to the Food Bank, or to the Red Cross, or Direct Relief International. And we will write checks. But what **work** is there for us to **do**?

I have a few suggestions.

Our work in the coming weeks is not physical but soul work. Friendship. Human connection. Most of us have friends who have been evacuated; many of their homes have been damaged or destroyed. When we are uprooted from our home, from the physical ground of our lives, precisely **then** the intangible, emotional ground becomes even more important. Our relationships. Our community of human connection. A simple note, a call, an email, even just a thumbs up or heart on a facebook posting to those we know who are displaced...these have all become part of our new human fabric of connection. Coffee dates. Invitations to meals. Most of us will not be repairing the physical infrastructure of Montecito; but strengthening, deepening, enriching the fabric of friendship and love is **our** work this week, this month, this year.

Secondly, also in the realm of the spirit: our work includes resisting the bitterness and finger pointing that bubbles up after a tragedy. I know that I feel within me; we all do. Something within us wants to find someone to blame. The warning should have come sooner. Why were some evacuations voluntary and not mandatory? Why did people stay and not leave? These are all questions to be addressed, in the right time and place. But our work, yours and mine, now and in the coming weeks, is to resist our baser instincts, including our tendency to assign blame. We need each other right now. To be gentle with each other. To have compassion. This is our work, tonight and in the days and weeks to come.

Finally, there will be many opportunities, soon and after time passes, to join hands and to come together...with others in our congregation, but also with the rest of Santa Barbara and Montecito. We all need each other: Jew and Catholic; Muslim and Protestant, Unitarian and Evangelical. Montecitans and Goletans. Carpinterians and Santa Barbarians. (correction from the congregation: Barbarenos!) To comfort and to strengthen each other. I just learned of a vigil at the courthouse this Sunday at 5:00, in memory of those who died in the mudslide. Let's be part of that. On Monday morning it's the annual Martin Luther King march starting in De La Guerra plaza at 10 and then a program in the Arlington. Let's be part of that! On Monday evening, we are holding an action meeting here, at CBB, at 7:00, to put our heads together and

to learn and discuss and to come up with ideas for how we can act to rebuild our community. Come, and be part of that!

I would like to take a moment right now to recognize and to welcome Rabbi Gross Schaefer and Laurie, and Rabbi Goodman and Lori. It is great to have you here tonight; for this work, we need to be one Jewish community. I want to share with you that I have been hearing today from rabbis all over California and the United States, asking what they and their congregations can do to help us. Here is what I have told them:

Just hearing from them, that they are thinking about us, helps.

In this time of sadness, of fear and exhaustion, human connection heals the heart.

Many centuries ago, after a time of terrible destruction, our ancestors sang a song which we have never forgotten, Psalm 126, which is sung after every meal on Shabbat, and it includes one verse in particular, a good verse for us tonight: *hazorim b'dimah b'rinah yiktzoru*. Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. Simple words, and a simple song, that can heal a broken heart. The Cantor will lead us in singing it now. Let's stand up, and put our arms around each other. Tonight we need physical contact. Shabbat Shalom.