

5779

Sometimes the only way to effect real and lasting reform is to suffer an unprecedented calamity. Historians view the transformation of post-war Germany and Japan that way; those countries' cultures and economies were totally remade after the Second World War, in ways so radical that they will never go back to the ways of the past. Those were positive developments, but there were only possible in the wake of catastrophic destruction.

The story of Noah in this week's parshah is an early example of the 'wipe the slate clean' idea. Despite the best of intentions in creating humanity, things had gotten so bad that God regrets having made people. The only way to improve the situation, God reasons, is to begin again with Noah, a kind of new Adam, and see if humanity would do better the second time around. It was a severe reaction but, given what we know about human nature, may have been God's only choice.

Noah was the tenth generation from Adam. After that amount of time, especially given the longevity of the people of that time that the Torah describes, we might have expected things to grown ever better. But the Torah describes the situation as one of total, global corruption, in which evil was normative. The flood came to restore equilibrium, but unless history would show that the flood did so, we might be left with the conclusion that humanity was only capable of degeneration over time.

As it turns out, God had it right. The tenth generation after Noah, mirroring the generations from creation to the flood, yielded Abraham and Sarah. Instead of finding a world that was yet again filled with chaos and evil, God found one with the seed of redemption for the world. The flood had worked. But even God has limits; the cost of scouring the world of rampant evil seems to have been too high. By promising never to destroy the world again, God acknowledges that the need to do so may arise again, but relies on humanity to right things instead of a catastrophe. In making us partners in creating a world that would please God, we begin to assume responsibility for that world.

This year, as hurricanes batter the southeast, we recognize our responsibility to help those who have suffered through them right now, as well as to address, in the medium term, the underlying human actions that are worsening such storms. By acting now, before it is too late, we fulfill our obligation to the world God has given us, providing us a chance to redeem ourselves in ways that Noah's generation did not.