



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“The Flood, the Holocaust and 9/11”**

**by Sophie Silverstein**  
**May 9, 2009**

I have been devoted to the theater arts since I was two. I always knew what I wanted to do. I studied and performed at TADA! Youth Theater since I was five, and when I was applying to high schools, I searched for schools with substantial theater departments plus strong academics.

I took time off from performing this year to work on applying to high schools -- as complicated a process in New York as college application is for most people -- and to prepare for my *Bat Mitzvah*. It seemed inevitable that my main *Bat Mitzvah* project would be on Jewish theater. But as I studied my family history, I discovered that Orthodox Judaism was practiced by many family members. I also learned of the traumatic impact the Holocaust had on my father’s side of the family.

I found myself wanting to explore those topics. And when I approached it from a humanistic point of view, I found many similarities between the stories in the Torah and events of our time. In discussing the Torah with Rabbi Peter, I was intrigued by how the story of Noah and the Flood related to the Holocaust. And then I connected it to an event I experienced directly and am still growing up with: 9/11. These events are all linked, with lessons we can still draw from.

There are many ways to interpret the Flood myth. The writers intended it simply as a warning about how God will punish those who live corrupt and immoral lives. At the other end of the spectrum, present-day researchers have found scientific explanations of the flood myth told in various cultures, as a bar mitzvah student in this congregation wrote about a few years ago.

There are literary interpretations as well. Was God was simply throwing a temper tantrum? The same way a small child rips apart a drawing she does not like? Was God was just unhappy with the vast landscape he had created?

That’s what it sounds like in Rabbi A.M. Silbermann’s translation of the Torah: “[God] saw that the wickedness of man was great and he regretted that he had made man. ‘I will blot out the man whom I have created from the face of the ground; from man to beast to creeping thing and to the fowls of the heaven; for I repent that I have made them.’”

Then he decided to not destroy *everything*. He wasn’t completely unhappy with his drawing and wanted to salvage the good parts. Or maybe he didn’t want to have to start from scratch. He saw righteousness in Noah in a world of corrupt thoughts and immoral acts and decided he wanted to save him, his family, and his other creations so they could start over again the right way.

We all have moments when we want to take an art project or a research paper and rip it up, stomp on it, throw it in the trash. If God was having one of those moments, does that justify the harm he did –even if he did save Noah and all his passengers on the Ark?

Most Jews and Christians take it on faith that if God decided that the world needed to be destroyed to rid it of evil, then he must be right. But was God right to destroy *everything*? “I bring a deluge of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh wherein there is the spirit of life,” God said. “Everything that is in the earth shall expire.” Rashi, the 12<sup>th</sup> century French rabbinic commentator, interprets this as “punishment of an indiscriminate character [that] comes upon the world killing good and bad alike.” Was God right to destroy the good along with the bad?

The Nazis’ “Final Solution” was based on the same idea. The followers of Osama Bin Laden believe their holy war will rid the world of the “Great Satan” -- the United States. As their targets, as Jews and Americans, we see these causes as pure evil. But they saw their mission the same way God did with the Flood, destroying the good along with what they believed was bad, believing themselves to be a “higher entity” like God was when he brought on the Flood to rid the world of corruption.

From a Humanistic point of view, the moral of this story is that greed and corruption affects everyone. Our current financial crisis is an example -- the economy crashed is because people got greedy, they put together poorly thought-out financial packages with nothing holding them together, creating a flood of bad debt. Their greed caused the loss of thousands of jobs and a deep recession that affects everyone, not just the unscrupulous perpetrators.

Another event that parallels the Flood is the Holocaust, one that swept up my family. The Nazis cast themselves as a “higher entity”, as the “master race” who needed to cleanse the world of all others - especially the Jews.

In the course of my research, I found quotes from Nazi leaders about their massacre of the Jews. But I cannot bring myself to recite them. We all know their rationale, one that led to a huge war and 12 million deaths, about half of them Jews.

My grandfather’s family was a perfectly ordinary family living their everyday lives in Poland, when suddenly, out of nowhere, the Nazis came and deported them all, first to a ghetto and then to concentration camps. My grandfather was 12, getting ready to prepare for *his Bar Mitzvah*. I cannot imagine having my home invaded, my life destroyed, my family killed around me -- having my whole life change in just one day.

Actually, I can relate to that feeling because my life *did* change in one day, as it did for many people, though not as tragically for me as the holocaust was for my grandfather. September 11<sup>th</sup> is a date everyone in this room relates to since all of us witnessed it, are aware of it, or have been affected by it. And it relates to the story of the Flood in a similar way.

It was a nice day in September. I went to school that morning, just an ordinary day. Well, by noon, I was walking home from school, and the World Trade Center was just a column of smoke. My parents tell me I always shouted “Twin Towers!” every time I saw them. I went to the top once or twice. I saw Elmo and Bananas in Pajamas in the plaza between them.

I had just turned six. I remember one of my classmates being rushed out of school, her dad in a panic, telling the teacher what happened. More kids were taken home. My first thought was, “Why can’t I leave?” The school made my dad pick me up around 12:30 -- he insisted that it was safer for me there because we lived so close to the World Trade Center.

My dad then explained to me that the Twin Towers, the beloved buildings that were visible both from the corner of my block and out of my parents' bedroom window, were hit by airplanes and fell. I later caught my parents watching the news, where I saw a full-on shot of the plane crashing into the World Trade Center. That's when it hit me: the buildings were gone.

I initially believed it was an accident, but when I went to a memorial service in Strawberry Fields -- a section of Central Park dedicated to my role model, John Lennon -- I understood that it was done on purpose. A New York 1 news reporter interviewed me, and that's what I told him.

I have since learned that 9/11 was another example of a "higher entity" wanting to cleanse the world of evil and corruption. Al Qaeda has cast themselves as the higher entity, Americans as the "Great Satan" that needs to be erased from the Earth. They believe America must die *or* conform to their principles.

And because we do not, they attacked us. The 9/11 Commission Report, says, "In February 1998, the 40-year-old Saudi exile Osama Bin Laden and a fugitive Egyptian, al-Zawahiri, published a *fatwa*, an interpretation of Islamic law, claiming that America had declared war against God and his messenger. They called for the murder of any American, anywhere on earth."

My personal experience with September 11<sup>th</sup> may not be the most interesting, but I remember it like it was yesterday. And the aftermath affects me -- as it does all of us -- to this day. When traumatic events like the Flood, the Holocaust or 9/11 happen, the aftershock is real and lasting.

After the Flood subsides, God tells Noah to come out of the Ark, that all is OK. But Noah is not so sure, so he makes God promise that there will not be another flood before he comes out. The Torah tells of God's promise. Rashi fills in the details: "He said this because Noah feared to fulfill the duty of propagating the species until [God] promised him that he would not again destroy the world."

Like Noah, Holocaust survivors were emotionally scarred. I can't fathom how terribly difficult it was to cope with the deaths of so many loved ones, as my father has said of his father. How could people be sure it would not happen again? Some Jews adopted the motto "Never again" to symbolize their determination to prevent this tragedy from ever recurring.

The state of Israel was created in part as a response to the Holocaust, and an army had protected it ever since from those who still want to finish the job the Nazis started. People rose above their fear and acted to prevent another Holocaust. This was our promise to ourselves, to never let it happen again, the same way Noah made God promise not to cause another flood.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence describes the need for a "home base" for Holocaust survivors: "The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people — the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe — was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the community of nations. Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continue to migrate to Israel, undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their national homeland."

My father's parents were able to find a safe haven in Israel and were able to start a new life after their lives in Poland were destroyed. My father was born there before they came to the United States exactly fifty years ago.

Taking Humanistic point of view, I concluded that people realized the Holocaust was perpetrated by people. They didn't just pray, "God, protect me and my soul should this happen again." They took action by building the state of Israel. The understanding that this tragedy was NOT God punishing the Jews or trying to teach them a lesson ultimately helped Jews become stronger.

After 9/11, America tried to protect itself from further attack. But the rules of the game had changed. As one expert wrote, "How do we wage war on non-state actors who hide in states with which we are at peace? How do we work with allies whose territory provides safe haven for non-state opponents? How do we defeat enemies who exploit the tools of globalization and open societies without destroying the very things we seek to protect?"

Just nine days after the attacks, then-President Bush said, "We are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done. We have seen their kind before. They're heir to all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. They follow the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. We will direct every resource at our command -- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war -- to the destruction and to the defeat of the global terror network."

Noble words that everyone agreed with. But things went wrong. Vowing to never let another 9/11 happen again, Bush took steps to make the country more secure. But in the process, he subverted some of our strongest principles. He invaded Iraq under the pretense of fighting terrorists there rather than here -- more Americans died there than on 9/11, as have countless Iraqis. The use of torture and illegal imprisonment was sanctioned under the pretense of getting information to prevent attacks. They even tapped phones and E-mails of ordinary Americans in the name of creating a sense of security.

Where Noah became the model for a new world that was not corrupt, the Bush administration *became* corrupt in the process of coping with 9/11.

But ordinary Americans took a different route. As Noah reconstituted their world after the Flood, as the Jews revived their culture and created a homeland, we have taken charge of our destiny with renewed spirit and focus.

Immediately after 9/11, no one was able to cope with the devastation. People were afraid to walk outside, to go places, and NO ONE wanted to talk about it. But eight years later, we have a new president who has started to reverse the worst abuses the Bush administration perpetrated in the name of national security. It will take him longer to get us out of Iraq. And the members of Al Qaeda are still out there planning their next attack.

The story of Noah and the Flood, its interpretations and meanings, have taught me about things that still happen around us today. I believe the Torah was written to explain the explainable, with emotions and lessons that have withstood the test of time. For Humanistic Jews, stories like the Flood help us interpret our own world, natural disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes, and man-made events like the Holocaust and 9/11. And it can hopefully help us avoid the next actual flood, which could be one of the consequences of global warming if we don't take steps to change the way we live.

It may be scary to live in what is actually an unsafe world, but we go about our lives all the same. We accept that this is the reality of our world and not a punishment by God or any other higher power. There may be things we wish did not exist, such as terrorism and war and melting polar ice caps. We must teach ourselves and our children that it is a fact of life, and also how to deal with it and not be afraid.

I have been able to understand these lessons and re-interpret them through a humanistic lens. This perspective has a lot to say about the resilience of people in the face of terrible adversity, and the power of human beings to plan for a better future.