

Noah, Canute, and the Presidential Election

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

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In an eerie coincidence, last week's reading in synagogues throughout the world was the story of Noah and the Flood. It's such a familiar story that I suppose not even the most hardened literalist would be inclined to treat it too seriously – after all, boats ending up on top of mountains? How could that be?

Well, yesterday we saw a tanker washed ashore on Staten Island, just one example of the devastation in New York, New Jersey, and other parts of the north-eastern United States, reminding us of the untameable power of nature: Manhattan under nearly 14 feet of water; hospitals evacuated; the subways turned into sewers; business at a standstill; and tens of thousands of people fleeing their homes. Imagine being on the 80th floor of a building with no power!

Meanwhile, it's less than a week till the Presidential election. Both candidates have had the good grace to stop campaigning, but only the President has the opportunity to look presidential! Will that help him? Or will a country that can't quite grasp the credibility of climate change turn on him for not preventing it?

Is Obama the new Canute? We have to remember that the hero of that story was not the sea but the king who commanded the tide to stop. He was deliberately setting himself up to fail, to demonstrate to his sycophantic followers that neither he nor they were powerful enough to control the forces of nature.

So how might what has been said to be the most powerful and destructive hurricane in US history affect the future of the country? Suddenly Republicans who opposed public spending want a share of the rebuilding programme; Democrats point out that the poor and disadvantaged need most help – but they are also the least able to get out to vote.

I don't know whether the US President really thinks of himself as the most powerful man in the world, but with the election at the mercy of wind and water, whoever wins should first toast the modest wisdom of King Canute!