

All in the Same Boat

Thought for the Day

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It's strange how sometimes the literal and the figurative can come together. When I asked a few people what they thought the main news stories have been for the last week or so – that's what's called research for this slot! – almost everyone mentioned floods or earthquakes or tsunamis. But not everyone meant the same thing – some were referring to the potentially catastrophic natural upheavals in New Zealand and Japan, while others were commenting on the political convulsions in the United States and France.

As it happens, the portion of the Torah that was read in synagogues that week tells two well-known stories that have something to teach us about both. The first is the story of the great Flood, when not just humanity, but all living creatures, are saved from extermination when Noah takes the animals into the Ark that he had built, not just two by two as in the song, but some of them seven by seven. And when the waters recede, the dove signals, by returning with an olive branch in its mouth, that it's safe to leave the Ark and start to rebuild the world.

The second story is about the Tower of Babel, when humanity's arrogance is punished by losing the ability to communicate in the same language, so that their attempt to reach the heavens is frustrated.

Both stories teach that some things are unwise to challenge and some powers can not be overcome, but they also teach us we are all in the same boat – literally in Noah's case! It doesn't matter whether you believe that climate change is caused by human fecklessness with the environment or is part of a recurring natural cycle – either way we can see for ourselves that it's happening. So before mutual incomprehension and mistrust lead us ever closer to destruction, if there are things we can do to slow it down or make it less severe, then surely we have an obligation to work together to mitigate its effects.