

The Calm Before the Storm

My son, Joshua, and I traveled to Long Island to keep watch over my 95, almost 96-year-old mother in advance of Hurricane Irene. For a day and a half we watched and waited. Although I grew up in the New York Metropolitan area and have seen other hurricanes before, I do not remember a time when it was so quiet before the storm. I do not remember an occasion when time seemed to move so slowly. At this point in my life I normally think time moves too quickly. Here I was in New York with time creeping at an imperceptible rate. Watching, waiting and listening to the constant broadcasts about the torrent that was about to engulf us. I am reminded of a book, and later a movie, that was popular in my older sister's generation entitled "On the Beach." The story was about Australia after a nuclear exchange. The Australians are waiting for a fallout to arrive in Australia where everyone would die. The calm before the storm, so to speak. I was reminded of the theme of "On the Beach" while waiting for Hurricane Irene to strike.

When I was a young child, the love of my life was a girl named Irene. Unfortunately she died at age 27. She was my friend, a marvelous person, and she insisted on typing all of my applications to law school. She really was neither fickle nor violent, unlike the storm.

So, we sit and wait. We keep company with my mother and make frequent trips to the grocery store. In the morning on Saturday, I went to Synagogue at the Young Israel, only 6 blocks from my mother's house. The Synagogue was packed. No one seemed to have any concern about the onslaught of the coming weather or its implications.

What was amazing about the New York City Metropolitan area was the incredible preparation, the constant announcements, the evacuations, and the robo calls to every house in Nassau County. I was delighted to know that my tax money has been well spent for emergency preparedness. Thanks to 911 and Hurricane Katrina, no public official wants to be blamed for the slightest mishap in connection with disaster preparation. It looks like the political system worked. Those we elect are afraid the public will be angry with them if they do not do everything possible to assure public safety and an orderly response to the inevitable disasters that arrive from time to time.

While New Yorkers still honked at each other and tried to speed past their colleagues on the road, the atmosphere on the street was different. People talked, they tried to help each other, and there was a genuine concern about what would follow next.

I tried to convince my mother that she should travel back to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, with me but she was assured by her faith that G-d would protect her. G-d must have been listening, because my mother was the only person on her block, in the neighborhood, and in most of the town who did not lose her electrical power. She lost her cable service for about 24 hours.

The first half of the storm was in my home town, a rain event of 7 or 8 inches. No flooding in mom's neighborhood occurred. However, after the eye came through, the wind shifted from the south-southeast to the west. It is a straight shot of 16 or 18 miles from New York City to Great Neck and the winds howled down the East River with fierce anger. My son and I went down to the docks where I was once a Coast Guard licensed launch operator, and we marveled at the boats fighting the wind and the current. The saturated land gave up her trees, which toppled over like a house of cards in the strong winds that arrived with the last 12 hours of Hurricane Irene.

The day after the storm, Monday, August 29th, was almost as remarkable as the Saturday before was frightening. The air was as clear as I have ever seen it, and although Long Island Sound was full of debris, the sun returned in all its glory and it was as though the land had been reborn anew.

We survived the storm, although most of the rest of my family and friends are without electrical power and will have to do without modern conveniences for days or perhaps longer.

Normally during a natural disaster, crime increases four or five-fold. New York is different. On a normal Saturday night in August there are 345 arrests in the five boroughs. On Saturday night, August 27th, when the storm first impacted the region, the number of arrests dropped to 45. The weather was just too nasty for crime.

Our first responders, the policemen, firemen and emergency management people deserve a handshake and a “thank you.” I personally thanked all of those who I saw around the streets of Great Neck as I left to return home. The politicians also deserve a rare “thank you” for making sure that a system was in place to safeguard the interests of those who elected them.

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