I spent much of this week with a group of my colleagues at the Brandeis Bardin Institute in southern California. We convening as part of the Clergy Leadership Incubator, a fellowship I've been part of for 2 years and that hear at TBI has provided the framework for me to launch Project Aleinu, the engagement campaign that has led to, among other things our new Arts Havurah, Interfaith Committee and a senior social group. Good stuff.

But nowadays when rabbis get together, a big question we can help discussing is, "What are we supposed to *do* about everything?" "Everything" being the possible collapse of democracy, devastating climate change, or pick your other catastrophic issue. How are we supposed to provide moral leadership that might help get us all through? And since we're rabbis, we look to Torah, and his week's parashah is Noach, it is natural that we kept coming back to the lessons that we might glean from this story of devastation, survival and renewal.

Tomorrow, Leila is going to be comparing the Biblical destruction of the flood to the contemporary climate destruction we face nowadays, and pointing out the ways in which we need to be a little more like Noach, who saved all of the species of the earth.

And that is important perspective. But Torah is like a kaleidoscope; if we turn it a little, we see something different – not more true, not less true, just a different angle.

So this evening I hope you'll bear with me as we consider the pitfalls of setting up Noach as hero in a time of destruction. Noach did save himself, his family and every animal that he was commanded to save. But he didn't succeed in saving humanity. Arguably, this is because he didn't at any point try.

Our sage Rashi, citing the Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Sanhedrin 108b, teaches: "There are numerous ways by which God could have saved Noah; why, then, did he burden him with this construction of the Ark? So that the men of the generation of the Flood might see him employed on it for 120 years and might ask him, "What do you need this for"? and so that he might answer them, "The Holy One, blessed be, is about to bring a flood upon the world" — perhaps they might repent."

But that goal may not have been as apparent to Noach as it was to the Holy One. As my colleague Dan Millner pointed out to us a few days, ago, Noach does not actually invite anyone to repent, for this is how Sanhedrin 108b itself relates the interactions:

Noah the righteous would rebuke the people of his generation, **and he said to them statements that are harsh as torches [*kelapidim*], and they would treat him with contempt. They said to him: Old man, why** are you building **this ark?** Noah **said to them: The Holy One, Blessed be, is bringing a flood upon you."**

As Rabbi Millner put it, Noach implicitly says, "I'm building this ark for me and my family. Y'all are doomed." Which is not exactly an invitation to introspection or collaboration. It's almost natural that instead of repenting, the people surrounding him would mock him.

My colleague Ari Averbach suggests that Noach was like the person holding up a sign in Times Square that says, "Armageddon is coming!" Even if the end of the world is coming, even if we all know that we are in this midst of disaster, that guy is not helping. It does not matter how right you are if you don't have a constructive way to bring others along.

Or turn the kaleidoscope and see Noach as a contemporary prepper, the equivalent of someone who gets a vast tract of land nowadays in Montana or Colorado and builds a bunker where they can survive whatever apocalypse they think is coming. Perhaps this person is prescient, perhaps this person will save themselves, but we would hardly call such a person a hero.

Or turn the kaleidoscope and see Noach as someone who takes his life off the grid – goes out and finds a homestead, sets-up a well and solar panels, raises his own organic garden and basically tries to do no harm in a world full of harm. Torah does refer to him in the first line of the parashah as איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו – a righteous blame, blameless in his generation.

Either way, Rabbi Dr. Erin Lieb Smokler, points out that after the flood ends, Noach waits extra weeks to leave the ark, until God commands him to. She comments, “And herein lay his downfall. For the moral hero does not wait to be granted permission to take action. She seizes it. She steps out away from shelter toward shaky ground, because that is where the work needs to be done, where the rebuilding needs to take place.”

Noach seeks safety in the surety of doing exactly what is commanded of him, no more and no less. He seeks safety in innocence as sufficient virtue. Both before and after the flood, Noach seems to have limited imagination of what might be possible – of what others might be capable of, what he might be capable of, and even of what God might be capable of. He accepts the instruction to build the ark and prepare for destruction without question or argument – without going out of his way to urge others to repent or even prepare for the worst, without inviting others into the building work – and without challenging God to give the world another chance, or to choose a less destructive course correction.

I wonder how much Noach felt despair, the same despair that many of us feel when we look at the world around, when the newspaper announces four different versions of impending doom just on the front page. The problems are so big and our capacities are so small.

Maybe it was enough for Noach to have the vision and fortitude to save himself and his family – not to mention an ark of every animal species in creation. It's no small feat, especially to have a clear vision of what must be done when no one else can see it.

But it is not enough for us, nowadays. Because the problems that face are not the kind that can be transcended by building an ark, or even, realistically, a bunker in Montana or Colorado. They cannot be solved even just be refraining from doing harm, though that would certainly be a good start, and Leila will give us guidance in that direction.

Moral leadership requires more than innocence. It requires, as Rabbi Dr. Smokler wrote, a willingness to step "out away from shelter toward shaky ground, because that is where the work needs to be done. . ."

That might look like reaching out to have conversation with people whom we have written off as incapable of change. That might look like civil disobedience and agitation when our government moves too slowly or hypocritically. That might look like organizing with others, campaigns against powerfully polluting and abusive corporations. All of which demands that we be capable of imagining that other outcomes than our direst fantasies are possible, that even at this late date, we do not have to accept catastrophe as inevitable, that we can make a difference – and we don't have to do it alone.

Shabbat shalom.