Post-Irene: Intellectual Looting

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I've been a culprit. Most bloggers have. Most of us have been a culprit in the most common post-disaster/mishap crime of opportunity: intellectual looting.

You know how it works. In the wake of some disaster or other, the airwaves, print pages, blogosphere and social media landscape are full of commentators on the rampage -- running hither and yon, eager to get their paws on any aspect of the story that will fit into their pre-existent narratives. Without any regard for sensitivity or dignity, without any regard for the fact that the stories they plunder might belong to Nuance and Complexity rather than to anyone with arms to carry them, the pundits stuff every vignette that isn't nailed down into the pre-fab frames they've been carrying for years -- no matter how ill the fit.

You can always count on Pat Robertson to get into this game. See **his response last week** to the earthquake damaging the Washington Monument:

> It seems to me the Washington Monument is a symbol of America's power. It has been the symbol of our great nation. We look at the symbol and we say 'this is one nation under God.' Now there's a crack in it... Is that sign from the Lord? ... You judge.

Given his track record, I fully expect to see a story over the next few days in which Robertson comes up with a neat and tidy theological reason that New Jersey, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachussetts and Vermont got it worse than New York.

But we don't need to wait for future intellectual looters to take advantage of Irene. It began before the storm even arrived.

Rabbi Lazer Brody **knew on Friday** exactly why the storm was heading for North Carolina:

> When Jonah tried to run away from Hashem, he boarded a ship at the Jaffa port. At sea, the ship was tossed and turned by monstrous waves... Hashem doesn't do things at random. Why is hurricane Irene advancing toward the good and decent folks of North Carolina? It's simple - North Carolina has its own Jonah: **Jona**t**h**an Pollard...
>
> ...The USA could save itself billions of impending damage and lives as well by freeing Pollard right now. There's no doubt in my mind or heart that Irene will just disappear if Pollard walks out of Butner.

See? Simple as that. We all bought water and batteries when we should have been staging a prison break. Of course, this Friday revelation to Rabbi Brody was a revision of the **Thursday revelation,** which explained the geopolitical-meteorological intersection we are witnessing:

> In Israel, we have the constant threat of Iran. Now, the USA is being

> threatened with Irene. "Irene" and "Iran" are spelled with the same letters in Hebrew - aleph, yud, resh, nun. If you scrabble those letters, you get nun-yud-resh-aleph, which means we must fear.

Of course, if you rearrange the English letters in "Lazer Brody" you get "Dry zeal, bro." Also "Led by razor" and "raze by Lord." Is Rabbi Brody's own name a message from the Lord? You judge.

GOP Presidential Candidate Michele Bachmann has also been blessed **with the gift of prophecy**. "I don't know how much God has to do to get the attention of the politicians," spake the Congresswoman. "We've had an earthquake; we've had a hurricane. He said, 'Are you going to start listening to me here?'"

Let us not indulge any fantasy, by the way, that only the religious, or only the politically conservative, play this game. Saturday's New York Times saw **this Op-Ed** by Frank Bruni, who sagely declared that "Nature hammered home the message that the Dow was sending as well. We had only so much control over our fates, and better hunker down."

Yes, Frank. Tell the families of nearly two dozen who have died that their loved ones have not died in vain -- no, they have died so that capital-N Nature can join the mighty god Dow Jones in endorsing ("hammer[ing] home") your summary judgment of the nation's summertime ills.

Timelines for these news cycles being what they are, I expect to see many more examples of post-Irene intellectual looting before this week is out. I expect to see them from left and from right, and certainly from Jewish communal leaders. Let's watch for them together, shall we? But as we do, let me stipulate that not every use of the storm as an opener to conversation is inappropriate. Sometimes there's a legitimate connection to be made.

For example: during the storm, a lot of Twitter users seemed angry that Fox News published **this opinion piece** stating that the National Weather Service is unnecessary. They may be right or wrong about the issue, but I must say this: it seems to me that this is a perfectly fair use of the storm to open a policy conversation which is genuinely and unambiguously related. Conversations about under- or over-preparedness in various locations, it seems to me, are likewise natural and necessary.

But for the most part, I fear we are in for an oratorical nightmare in days to come. Hide your anecdotes and lock your rhetorical doors. The intellectual looters are coming.