

“God is in the Whirlwind: The Tsunami of 2004”
* Parashat Va'Era: January 8, 2005 * Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

A few weeks ago probably the only people among us who knew the meaning of the word “tsunami” would be those who had taken an Oceanography class at some point in their lives. That is no longer the case. We now all know the meaning of the word and of the destruction it can cause.

I am tempted to say that you would have to be on a remote, deserted Southeast Asia island to not know what happened or what a tsunami is, but even there you would know, in fact, probably better than anyone anywhere else in the world.

Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost by the tidal earthquake and ensuing tidal wave. Whole communities have been destroyed and literally wiped out. Thousands of survivors will have to go through the rest of their lives without loved ones and friends who perished in the aftermath of the tidal wave.

The act seems to be of Biblical proportions. For the first time, we can begin to understand what the Biblical generation that experienced the Flood in the time of Noah must have felt. Words from the Psalms take on new meaning. The Psalm we proclaim on Friday mornings and evening, Psalm 93, speaks of the awesome thunder of the oceans, the pounding of the mighty waters over which the omnipotent God sits in majesty.

Another familiar passage is recited every Friday night:

Yismechu Hashamayim vetageil haAretz. Yiram HaYam umelo:

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad. Let the sea and all
it contains roar in praise.

In this week's torah reading, we read of the plagues in Egypt as emanating from the will of God. In our torah portion, we are left with the distinct impression that God harnessed the forces of nature in order to teach Pharaoh a lesson and to convey a distinct message. This is the way that the Bible and our tradition often responded to tragedy of such proportion and magnitude.

As a result, we cannot help but wonder what, if any, is God's role and what, if any, is the theological message of this horrific act of nature.

The great earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 led many 18th century figures of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, to question the existence of a God who would allow such things to happen. How will our generation respond and process these events?

The Pope has called it a severe test. Some clerics view it as punishment and then seek to ascertain what act or acts could have so provoked such a strong punishment. One Egyptian newspaper has a perfectly reasonable, scientific explanation: The earthquake

and wave is the result of Indian nuclear tests being conducted in the Indian Ocean with the cooperation of America and Israel – which would not be the first or last time the Arab press attempted to blame the Jews for a natural disaster.

The destruction poses the classic dilemma that has perplexed humans since the time we could think and reason. How could God, who is both omnipotent and benevolent, cause or allow such wanton destruction to occur?

An online poll at Beliefnet.com, a website about religion and spirituality, asked people what role they think God plays in natural disasters like the Indian Ocean tsunami. Five options were offered:

- (1) God is punishing us.
- (2) God is testing us.
- (3) The earthquake and tsunami were sent by God, but we don't know what the purpose was.
- (4) I believe in God, but the supernatural had nothing to do with this tragedy.
- (5) God does not exist; disasters like this are just forces of nature.

If you believe in a God of both creation and history – a God involved in the lives of individuals and nations and without whose existence our own existence would ultimately have no purpose, you would probably vote for number 3, as did about 1/3 of those who have responded to date.

While online polls are far from scientific, it is interesting to note that the answer that received the most votes, at 51 percent, is the one that says that God exists, but he had no connection to the tsunami. Many Americans who, after all, are a people who believe in God, nevertheless feel that God was not involved in this natural calamity.

Writing in The Wall Street Journal, Christian theologian David B. Hart sees in the tsunami only "the imbecile forces of chance that shatter living souls." The Reverend Hakon Langstrom, a Lutheran deacon in Stockholm, tells worshippers: "The God we believe in is not someone who lies behind everything. God did not make this happen."

This approach emanates from the writings of Rabbi Harold Kushner who about 25 years ago proposed this in his vastly popular book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." Kushner wrote that God does not cause the miseries brought on by illness, natural disasters and accidents, and is powerless to prevent them. Earthquakes, cancer, plane crashes – "these events do not reflect God's choices," he wrote. "They happen at random, and randomness is another name for chaos. . . . Chaos is evil . . . because by causing tragedies at random, it prevents people from believing in God's goodness."

When Pharaoh increases the Israelites' crushing workload, an outraged Moses challenges God: "Why have you done evil to this people?" When the blameless Job is afflicted with horrific suffering, he repeatedly demands to know why it is happening. "I speak out in the

bitterness of my soul," he cries to God. "Tell me why you contend with me. . . . Does it befit you to plunder?"

Elie Wiesel tells the story of three rabbis in Auschwitz who convened a court of law and put God on trial for allowing his children to be slaughtered. At the end of the trial, which stretched over several days, they pronounced him guilty of crimes against humanity. Then one of the rabbis glanced at the darkening sky. Now, he said, it is time to recite *ma'ariv*.

In other words, it is perfectly acceptable within our faith to question, challenge, express anger and even condemn God – as long as you still believe in God. I believe this to be a healthy response.

Writing in the Boston Globe, Jeff Jacoby recounted the Wiesel story and then goes on to write: "To wrestle with God is not to abandon him. To protest against unearned suffering is not to reject his message – quite the opposite. But having protested a seeming lack of compassion and justice from heaven, we are obliged to reach out to the victims and work even harder to establish justice and compassion on earth."

Rabbi Avraham Feder, a conservative rabbi in Israel wrote in the Jerusalem Post that we must recognize that we are part of God's creation and that creation is generally a blessing for us. Although creation can often be lethal, this should motivate and mobilize us – as believers – help God increase the blessings.

In Deuteronomy Moses tells the people that God has created a world in which humans are presented with the option of making choices, a world in which we can choose either blessings or curses, good and evil, life and death. It injures us with the Godly injunction: "*uvecharta bechayim*: Choose life!"

We come away from this disaster with a sense of humility in the face of the awesome power and might of nature. We are once again reminded of the fickleness as well as of the preciousness of life, which can be ended in a moment. We have now all heard stories of the seemingly arbitrary nature of instances where one individual was spared, while a loved one was not.

While the news media has done a superb job of bringing us information about this story, in the face of all this, we inevitably turn to our religious traditions to help to understand and to cope with the meaning, if any, behind these events.

The Torah does not disguise the dichotomous existence that human beings face in this life. We soon learn, moreover, that the curses, the evil, and death that afflict human beings are not only effectuated by a morally neutral Nature but by human beings themselves.

Part of the message is for us to respond to so much death by realizing that we must choose life. Surely God does not want us to be the source of death – and that acts of

terror and destruction are not in keeping with God's will or intent. A by-product of the tragedy is to remind us of what we humans share in common, our common fate, and of our power to bring about good, which ultimately is what we believe is the will of God.

We are left with the realization that while the theology of Noah may be lacking, the alternative of atheism is equally unfulfilling. It is possible that the vengeful God of the Bible has learned that it is no longer necessary or advisable to punish in this fashion. We can either still attribute it to being a part of God's world, but acknowledge that we may not understand the fuller picture, or we may conclude that God does not interfere in the affairs of His creation and recognize that disasters like the tsunami occur for the natural reasons scientists say they do.

As a believer in God, as a lover of God, but also as one who feels comfortable challenging, arguing, and being angry at God, for me the critical thing is to shift the focus from "Why did God do this to us?" to "How do we human beings choose to respond?"

The response of the world to this catastrophe is truly the bright spot in all this horror. The generous outpouring of aid from individual nations and individuals has been overwhelming.

On Thursday I participated in a conference call for North American rabbis delineating for us the unbelievable work of the Jewish community, as coordinated by the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief, an umbrella of 44 North American Jewish organizations, which is the central address and decision-making process for disbursement of Jewish relief aid. The infrastructure includes the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), American Jewish World Service, Magen David Adom, B'nai B'rith Humanitarian Relief Fund and many others. Suffice it to say, we Jews are well trained in the art of rescue and relief operations.

As part of its long-term relief efforts for victims of the December 26th tragedy, the group is working with partner organizations in the region, including the Sanghamitra Service Society in Andhra Pradesh, India, which helps local fishing communities with sustainable development and disaster preparedness. The philosophy behind the group's post-tsunami effort is to seek not just quick fixes, but long-term efforts through collaboration with groups in the region. As a result, we learned on the call of efforts to procure fishing boats, nets and other equipment to get people back on their feet. The old adage about teaching a person to fish is applicable – only this time, we are not doing the teaching, but rather providing the boats, the nets, and the equipment.

The Jewish community's outpouring of support for tsunami relief has already reached over \$10 million from federations, the Joint Distribution Committee, national and religious groups and synagogues.

I cannot help but mention that, unfortunately, the response of the Moslem world to this tragedy which has afflicted primarily Moslem regions of Indonesia and elsewhere, has

not been anywhere near what it should be, and pales in comparison to what the Western nations of the world have done. Saudi Arabia has no trouble dishing out hundreds of millions of dollars to fund fundamentalist terrorist organizations or to hold a telethon to raise money to support the families of suicide bombers, but for some reason, this oil-rich nation can only see fit to contribute \$30 million to the world effort, about the same as the Netherlands. And they are the leaders among Arab and Moslem nations so far! Peter Bergen of the New America Foundation wrote in this past Saturday's New York Times, "This anemic effort on the part of the richest countries is emblematic of a wider political problem in the Islamic world. For all of the invocations by Muslim leaders of the ummah, or the global community of believers, they typically do little to help their fellow Muslims in times of crisis." I guess it is easier to condemn Israel than to actually try to offer real help to real refugees.

"Everybody comes in to provide emergency relief, and then they all leave and there's nobody left behind to help rebuild the infrastructure," JDC's executive vice president, Steven Schwager commented. "While a portion of our money will go for short-term emergency relief, a larger part of our money will go for infrastructure to leave something behind that the Jewish community can get credit for." In other words, long after the issue moves off the front pages, our impact will be felt, and we will still have people on the ground offering assistance.

Within hours of the disaster, the Israeli government dispatched more than 80 tons of food, water, medicine, medical equipment, teams of doctors, nurses and body bags to Thailand and Sri Lanka.

In Israel a group of primarily ultra-Orthodox Jews, Zaka, collects body parts at bombing scenes and after terrorist attacks to ensure complete burial in accordance with Jewish ritual law. That experience has helped them identify corpses faster than many of the other 20 or so forensic teams that have come to Thailand, making them much in demand by grieving families, as Zaka has been working round the clock to identify bodies in Thailand.

Magen David Adom intends to build a self-standing field clinic in the disaster zone, and this time its workers will be able to wear their uniforms, adorned with a red Jewish star, when they arrive in the region next week. The three Chabad Houses in Thailand have served as crisis centers for Israeli survivors of the disaster.

The story about the leaders of the world's great monotheistic religions being summoned by God comes to mind. He tells them that the world will be destroyed by a great flood in three days. The Pope goes on international television and addresses the world via satellite. He admonishes the non-believers of the world, and tells everyone of the extraordinary meeting and message from God. He concludes his message with a call to the world to accept the word of Jesus and to convert to Christianity in the time remaining so that all will know true salvation.

The ayatollah, who is recognized as the leader of the Moslem world, is offered the same venue. Using the international television hookup, he calls upon the world to become believers in Allah and to submit to the teachings of Islam and the Koran.

The Chief Rabbi of Israel addresses the world and says, “Friends, we have three days to learn how to live underwater.”

The point is that we must immediately harness our resources and energies to offering help and aid. Later, we can sort out the theological implications and message behind the disaster. In the meantime, I urge you to join with our partner, the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, and contribute to the fund it has established for this purpose. In this manner, we can affirm through our deeds that we choose life, and, in so doing, align ourselves with the goodness in God and in nature.

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