

HURRICANE SANDY, NOVEMBER 9, 2012

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A lifetime of memories washed away to sea. City streets knee deep in water. Exploding transformers. Manhattan gone dark. Over the past week and a half, we have been hearing and reading about the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy. In a matter of hours, people lost homes, businesses, and many lost their lives. What had seemed to be solid ground turned out to be no match for the surging waters of the hurricane. A transportation system we took for granted – subways and trains – were disabled for days. Power was cut off for 8 million people – and many still have none as the temperatures dip into the thirties. Another Noreaster this week undid some of the progress that had been made to restore power and transit to the region. Tens of thousands of people are homeless and there just aren't enough hotel rooms and trailers to accommodate everyone. All those electronic devices on which we have become so dependent cannot be powered when there is no electricity, so people have been cut off from their means of information and communications. The lesson we have been learning from this and other natural disasters is that our lives hang on a very delicate balance.

Indeed, that is what confronts Sarah in this week's Torah portion. You remember that last week's Torah portion presented us with Abraham's ultimate test: God asks him to take his beloved son Isaac to the mountain top in order to sacrifice him. Abraham obeys and only at the very last minute does an angel of God tell him to stop, saving Isaac's life. This week's Torah portion, Hayyei Sarah -- The Life of Sarah -- begins with Sarah's death. Because her death comes right after Isaac's near sacrifice, the rabbis of our tradition connect Isaac's ordeal with Sarah's demise, leading scholar Avivah Zornberg to suggest that Sarah is the real victim of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac.

In one midrash, HaSatan, the Prosecuting Angel, encounters Sarah telling her that Abraham has indeed sacrificed her son. Sarah, devastated, begins to "cry and wail." According to the midrash, "She cried three sobs corresponding to the three *Tekiah*

sounds of the Shofar ...Then, she gave up the ghost and died.”¹ Normally we associate the Shofar with redemption, says Zornberg, because the ram’s horn represents the ram that was sacrificed in Isaac’s place. Here, rather than connecting us to Isaac being saved, the Shofar calls attention to Sarah’s pain, and to her death.

In another midrash, Isaac himself returns and in response to his mother’s question about where he has been, Isaac tells her that his father was resolute in his plan to slaughter him. Were it not for the angel’s last minute intervention, the deed would have been done. Knowing how close her son came to being killed by his own father, and how close her husband came to be a murderer, Sarah wails, says the midrash, screaming “six times, corresponding to the six *Tekiah* notes [of the Shofar]. She had not finished doing this when she died.”² According to Avivah Zornberg, the joy that Abraham must have felt at having passed God’s test is undercut by his grief over Sarah’s death.

Why this focus in the Torah on Sarah’s death, and why the focus in the midrash on Sarah’s agony? For one thing, it addresses a large unanswered question in the Torah, that is, where was Sarah during Isaac’s ordeal, and what sort of response did she have upon finding out what occurred. Avivah Zornberg goes one step further and suggests that Sarah’s despair at the near-death of Isaac represent the anxiety, the despair, the “vertigo” we feel at the fragility of our lives.³ The fact that Isaac’s life might not have been saved had the angel’s call come a split-second too late causes us fear and trembling. It raises the question about what our lives are worth. Does our vulnerability to death and destruction mean that our lives have no meaning? If our lives can be snatched away so quickly, or saved in an instant, what is the purpose of our existence?

I’m sure we have all faced these kinds of questions, especially when we have lost a loved one or have suffered a serious illness. But neither the Torah nor our rabbis would leave us with this profound sense of meaninglessness without offering us some consolation, some way to move beyond despair.

¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, Three Leaves Press, A Division of Doubleday, 1995, p. 124.

² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

My colleague and friend, Rabbi Boaz Heilman, for example, suggests that Sarah's three cries are not cries of grief but, rather cries of defiance against the unfairness of life. With her last breath, he says that Sarah "railed against injustice teaching us of our unending responsibility to shake our fist, to remind all humanity—no less than God— that needless suffering must never be permitted in this world. And that is the legacy of *Sarah imeinu* [our mother Sarah]." ⁴

Another midrash tells us that, when his mother died, Isaac mourned her for three years. "Every time he entered her tent, and saw it in darkness," the midrash says, "he would tear his hair." But his mourning ends when he marries Rebecca. The midrash tells us that, "when he married Rebecca, and brought her into the tent, the light returned to its place...He was comforted and saw it as though his mother were still in existence." ⁵ "With Rebecca's coming," says Avivah Zornberg, "the energy of hope returns..." The midrash explains how Rebekah fills the role that Sarah once had. "You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent; when she died that cloud disappeared; but when Rebekah came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death that liberality [hospitality] ceased; but when Rebekah came, that openhandedness returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased, but when Rebekah came, they returned." ⁶

Rebecca is the embodiment of *hesed* – of loving-kindness, revives Isaac and his household, bringing love and life to his community. Indeed, it is the love and concern of other human beings that ultimately makes us feel that our lives are worthwhile, that we are not alone but part of a larger whole, that anchors us and allows us to glimpse God's grace.

During the tragedy of Hurricane Sandy, as has been the case in so many tragedies, people helped each other, opening their homes and their purses to help Sandy's victims. According to the New York Times, "Surfers with shovels fanned out in the Rockaways in Queens, helping residents clear their homes of mud and sand. An army of cyclists

⁴ Reform Voices of Judaism.

⁵ Midrash Ha-Gadol, 24:67, Zornberg p. 139.

⁶ *B'reishit Rabbah* 60:16

strapped packages of toilet paper to their backs and rode into Belle Harbor, Queens. Children broke open piggy banks, bought batteries and brought them to the parking lot of the Aqueduct Racetrack and Resorts World Casino, where a police inspector and his family set up a donation center for blankets, bottled water and other goods.

Many New Yorkers graced with power and heat in their homes on Sunday found it difficult to sit still as images of homeless and desolate city residents filled their television screens. They streamed into the hardest-hit sections of the city, at times nearly colliding with other would-be volunteers and overwhelming city relief centers. [As One New Yorker explained,] ‘It feels like we all had the same impulse: This is my city and I want to do something to help it,’ said Esther Pan Sloane, of Roosevelt Island, who drove a carload of supplies from Jackson Heights to a post office on Rockaway Beach where food and clothing were being handed out. ‘It’s just such a huge disaster and you know there are so many people in need,’ she added. ‘How could you not?’⁷ [Even those who came to town to run the canceled New York City Marathon helped out.] Hundreds of runners wearing marathon shirts and backpacks full of supplies took the ferry to hard-hit Staten Island and ran to stricken neighborhoods to help.”⁸

It is most often the loving kindness of other people that comforts us in times of tragedy. It was Rebekah’s compassion and kindness that helped Isaac heal after the trauma of his near sacrifice and the loss of his beloved mother. Here on the West Coast, we might not be able to invite a storm victim in for a shower or a hot meal, but we can at least send some tzedakah. There are still many people in need. Please consider sending a donation To the Union for Reform Judaism’s Relief Fund which you can access online at urj.org. You can also volunteer your time if you are able to travel East.

I would like to close with the words of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav:

“Kol ha-o-lam ku-lo, Gesher tzar me’od, V’ha-i-kar, v’ha-l-kar
Lo l’fa-ched, lo l’fached klal. The whole world is a very narrow bridge;
the important thing is not to be afraid.”

⁷ Catherine Rampell, “Volunteers Flock to Disaster Areas, Overwhelming City Relief Centers,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2012.

⁸ Foxnews.com