

Reflections on a Shavuot Microstorm- Naso 5779

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky
Congregation Shaare Tefilla

When we began the interview process for the YU- CJF Summer Beit Midrash at Shaare Tefilla, we promised all the participants an unforgettable summer experience. I can safely say that with the events of this past Shavuos, we have delivered that- in spades...our Beit Midrash fellows, and all of you, have been amazing sports throughout the ordeal of losing power after the Shavuos downburst. For those who are still without it, I reiterate our prayer that you go *סוס גדול מאפילה לאור*, from darkness to great light. Over the past several days, including the candle-lit nights we spent over Yom Tov, I had the opportunity to reflect on this events. We are not God's accountants; it is foolish and cruel to draw causal relationships between wrathful acts of God and potential sins that might have aroused them. However, Rav Soloveitchik writes that in the aftermath of a significant event, it is the Jew's *obligation* to engage in soul searching in an attempt to extract personal lessons that will lead to self improvement. With this caveat, I'd like to share a few ideas with you that I gleaned from this storm, and I hope they will be meaningful to you as well.

As I was sitting in the dark on Motzei Yom Tov, I could not help but think of the original plague of darkness- *makkat choshech*. Just a few months ago, I delivered a sermon here entitled "The Bo Box Challenge" in which I quoted a thought from

Chidushei HaRim, the first Gerrer Rebbe. The verse that describes the plague tells us that

לֹא רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו וְלֹא קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחַתְּיוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְלֹכֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֵתָם.

The Rebbe noted that when the verse reads "לא ראו איש את אחיו" - it doesn't just mean that they couldn't see one another physically during the three days of חושך, but also that they were unable to "see" one another, offering succor and assistance to others in pain. On Sunday afternoon and evening, and then throughout the day on Monday, I saw something I rarely see these days. Neighbors- often strangers- were walking up and down the streets, surveying the damage, but they were *talking to one another*- trying to get the latest rumors about when power would be restored and asking after one another's well being. This is what it used to be like in the "old days." People would sit on their porches and talk to one another, people knew their neighbors and there was a sense of community in neighborhoods. Our neighbor brought us lanterns to use, as they know we have young children, and offered to turn on or off any appliances should they come on or stay off on Yom Tov. No doubt, the power outage we experienced was, for many, a *makkat choshech*- deeply inconvenient at best, excruciating in many cases. But I hope it also brought families together. One member texted me "my children now get to keep the Shabbos feeling so much longer!" I certainly think it brought our Shaare family together. Thank God, we were able to continue our minyanim in the dark, in the foyer, and our attendance went unabated. Our davening on the second day of Yom Tov was just as heartfelt in the dark, if not more so, as it would have been in the light and air conditioning. Our children played beautifully outside on our new playground and enjoyed ice cream that would have otherwise defrosted, and

people stayed to talk and spend time with one another on the second day of Yom Tov even though the graduates kiddush was no longer taking place. It brought our community together, also. The very first call I received after Yom Tov was from Rabbi Feigenbaum, who told me that Ohr had power, and offered to host us for minyanim and anything else we needed. This was especially generous considering that he had his own personal power outage to deal with, and I'm not certain when and if he got back power. I will leave aside the theological question of why Ohr got their power back so much sooner than we did... I heard from so many people that they were bunking or breaking bread with other families, and that people lent each other freezer space . On the second night of Yom Tov, we sent people home early to daven Maariv by candle light rather than with no light, at shul. I acknowledge now that this was not an optimal halachic ruling on my part; what we experienced was the ultimate *sha'at hadechak*, extenuating circumstance, that would have allowed us to daven at shul at sundown. Regardless, our guests for dinner were the Beit Midrash fellows, Rabbi Lax and Batsheva, NCSY Advisor Daniel Nimchinsky and the Bnot Sherut. Together with my neighbor Mark Gothelf and Ben Fine, we had a lovely candle-lit maariv minyan in our living room and then, while Jessica put the finishing touches on a cold dairy dinner for 15, an impromptu kumzits broke out in our living room that only ended when I promised that if they wake the kids, they take the kids... I'm sure dinner would have been fun, but in the dark, it was *epic*. We couldn't see each other's faces well, but we connected on a deeper level. It sometimes seems that the proliferation of technology- which is often such a blessing and a source of literal light- leads to a paradoxical plague of darkness, in which people are too absorbed in their own virtual and vicarious worlds to actually

talk to other people without the intervention of a screen. Let us take the lesson of a power outage and connect on a deeper personal level, actually talking to people, especially our loved ones.

In reflecting on the power outage, I realized a second lesson I took from these events. The Torah warns us many times (Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 17):

פְּנִיתֶאֱכֹל וּשְׂבַעְתֶּם וּבָתִּים טוֹבִים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבַּת:

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in,

וּבְקֶרֶךְ וּצְאֹנְךָ יִרְבּוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבֶּה-לְךָ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-לְךָ יִרְבֶּה:

and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered,

וְרָם לְבַבְךָ וּשְׁכַחְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמוֹצִיאֲךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the LORD your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage;

וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ כִּחִי וְעַצְמִי יָדִי וְעָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחִיל הַזֶּה:

and you say to yourselves, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.”

The Torah warns us that when we are blessed with lives of prosperity, it is easy to feel a sense of hubris- as if it is through our hard work and genius all that is around us succeeds. We then take for granted the amazing technology at our fingertips and the bounty which is available to us. Fresh produce at the supermarket flown from all over the world, condiments lining our fridge doors, internet access to keep us informed and employed and electricity available at all times to power all the

above- these are things we just assume will be available to us, and which disappear in a non-discriminating power outage. Perhaps a lesson we might learn from this is not to take any of it for granted. First of all, there are plenty of people in the world who don't have access to electricity ever, or at least not regularly; there are major cities in developing countries that only have it for several hours a day. But it is not just the miracles of technology for which we should be thankful to Hashem. Its is for the miracles of prosperity as well. Our lives are prosperous by many measures, and certainly by relative ones- but our lives are wasteful as well; we often violate the prohibition of *bal tashchit* with impunity. Many of us felt compelled, for safety reasons, to discard the contents of their freezers and fridges, quantities of food that many in the developing world- and indeed, in our own country- would yearn to have, at levels of freshness they could only dream of. One member of the shul told Jessica, "Hashem did not mean for us to have that food, or that money." No doubt that is correct, and I found that a helpful frame of mind to be in when going through our own fridge on Tuesday night, but the question is why? Perhaps a lesson we should take from this storm we should also be mindful of the waste and excess we generate as well. This week, we had the privilege of reading the Birkas Kohanim, the priestly blessing, in its original context. In the first part of the tri-partite blessing, the Kohanim bless us:

יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

The LORD bless you and protect you!

If you think about it, this language is somewhat redundant. After all, if God is blessing us, isn't He protecting us as well? Rashi and others explain that the first

half represents the blessing of abundant property, while the second half represents the protection from looters and thieves who would lay it waste. Rabbi Mordechai Willig, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University and Rabbi of the Young Israel of Riverdale, elaborated on this further that the second half represents the inoculation against the first half¹. God will bless you with prosperity, and He will also protect you against its pitfalls- the pitfalls of arrogance in the face of blessing, of taking the blessing for granted, and of wasting it. If we apply this lesson to our experience, hopefully Hashem will apply this blessing to us.

Finally, I've been thinking about the microstorm itself. The prophet Yirmiyahu (1:14) tells us

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי מִצָּפוֹן תִּפְתַּח הַרְעָה עַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ.

And God said to me, “The evil will develop from the north that will encompass all the inhabitants of the land.”

Certainly that came true here; the evil originated, as so much evil does, in Oklahoma. It moved south, introducing cold air into the warm, humid atmosphere over Dallas. The result was a downburst including straight-line winds and 71 mph (114 kph) blasts recorded at Love Field. Indeed, this was the reason why the sirens did not go off. Technically, the city of Dallas only sounds the tornado sirens on the recommendation of the weather service, which says that the siren should be sounded for *sustained* winds of 70 mph, and not *gusts* of wind of 70 mph. This is certainly a lesson about how precise language can lead to serious ramifications.

¹ http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2005/parsha/rwil_naso.html

Aside from the cataclysmic event, featuring hail and high velocity winds, what was amazing to me (and perhaps entirely unsurprising to native Texans) was how quickly it was over. All it took was about 30 minutes. The storm started while we were out for lunch, and by the time we went home, there was not a cloud in the sky! And I began to think about the power of 30 minutes. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov² taught:

”אם אתה מאמין שיכולים לקלקל תאמין שיכולים לתקן”

If you believe it is possible to destroy, believe that it is possible to repair. If a storm can burst through Dallas and wreak havoc and destruction in half an hour, think what kind of *positive* effect we can achieve in the same amount of time. Perhaps we might consider starting our day earlier and dedicating 30 minutes to daven- and for men, to lay tefillin. Maybe it is coming 30 minutes earlier to shul on Shabbos morning. Our minyanim - Shacharit and Mincha/Maariv- are often about 30 minutes in duration, and we'd love to have you. If we are prepared to wake up earlier to exercise our bodies, our souls should receive the same treatment.

Another suggestion, in no way to the exclusion of the first, is based on a beautiful interpretation of the Medrash Rabbah (Bemidbar 11:13) of the second blessing in the Birkat Kohanim:

דָּבַר אַחֵר, יָאֵר, זֶה מְאֹר תּוֹרָה, שְׂיֵאִיר עֵינֶיךָ וְלִבְךָ בְּתוֹרָה וְיִתֵּן לְךָ בְּנִים בְּנֵי תּוֹרָה

God will enlighten our eyes and hearts through the Torah and will bless us with children who follow in its ways. The way to ensure the latter is through the former; we will have children who follow the ways of the Torah if we study it ourselves-

²ליקוטי מוהר"ן (תנינא קיב')

and with them. Perhaps the fact that this storm that happened on the holiday celebrating the Torah presents us with a challenge to dedicate 30 minutes more a week- or, even better, a day- for Torah study, with our children if relevant.

In the final part of Birkat Kohanim, Hashem blesses us-

יְשֹׁא ה' אֶת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵיךָ יְיָ שְׁלֹמֶךָ: (o)

The LORD bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

Rabbeinu Yosef Bechor Shor explains

וישם לך שלום. שלא יתגרה בך יצר הרע ושטן ואומות העולם ושום פגע ושום מזיק:

You will not be subject to the depredations of the evil inclination, the Satan and the nations of the world, and you will not be subject to any attacks or destructive forces. May we extract valuable lessons from this event that will lead to meaningful personal and communal change within us, and may this blessing come true for us, always.