

Bamidbar 5781 Meron

There's a Jewish saying, *kol Yisrael aravin zeh b'zeh*, all Israel is responsible for one another. Jews are very rare: we account for a mere .2% of the global population. That means out of 1,000 people on the planet, only 2 are Jews. That may be why all of Israel is not only responsible one for the other, there's also a feeling that we're all *mishpacha*, we're all part of one great big sometimes dysfunctional family.

So when tragedy strikes and members of our large family are killed, it is felt by all of us. The tragedy in Israel on Lag b'Omer where 45 Jews were crushed to death on Mount Meron has been felt around the Jewish world.

After such a tragedy, it's both important and traditional to examine our deeds, to consider what went wrong, to try and prevent future tragedies from occurring.

The vast majority of the Jews who died in Meron were haredi, so one would expect the haredi community to be at the forefront of trying to find ways to prevent a similar tragedy from occurring in the future.

Sadly, no one in the haredi world seems to be prepared to accept any responsibility for what happened. A few have blamed the police or the government. But far worse than that is the approach of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, at 92 one of the leaders of the non-chasidic haredi world in Israel.

Rabbi Kanievsky said it was a decree from Heaven, and we can't know the considerations of Heaven. He said first and foremost, women should dress more modestly. Furthermore, we must strengthen ourselves in Torah, and people are not diligent enough with ritually washing hands before eating.

Sadly, this is a common response in the haredi world, based on an approach to life that fails to take the reality of the outside world into consideration, and only seeks answers in sacred texts. Haredi theology believes in *hashgacha pratit*, in the idea that despite the fact that people have free will, everything that happens – absolutely everything – is an expression of the Divine will.

This attitude comes from a teaching in the Talmud, in tractate Brachot:

Raba, and according to others R. Chisda, said: "If a man see that troubles are coming unto him, let him search his deeds, for it is said, (Lam. 3, 40) Let us search through and examine our ways and let us return unto the Lord.

There's a teaching in the Talmud Yerushalmi where earthquakes are attributed to a variety of spiritual causes: one rabbi says it's because people fail to properly separate tithes for the Kohanim and Levites. Another says it's due to disunity among the Jews. But Rabbi Acha says earthquakes happen because of homosexual activity.

That one minority opinion has led a number of haredi rabbis to blame various disasters on gay sex. After the disastrous earthquake in Haiti, Rabbi Yehuda Levin of Brooklyn said,

Thirteen months before 9/11, on the day New York City passed homosexual domestic partnership regulations, I joined a group of Rabbis at a City Hall prayer service, pleading with G-d not to visit disaster on the city of N.Y. We have seen the underground earthquake, tsunami, Katrina, and now Haiti. All this is in sync with a two thousand year old teaching in the Talmud that the practice of homosexuality is a spiritual cause of earthquakes. Once a disaster is unleashed, innocents are also victims just like in Chernobyl.

An Israeli haredi rabbi, Meir Mazuz, said that the deadly coronavirus was divine retribution for gay pride parades. He claimed, wrongly on both counts, that Arab countries had no coronavirus because they don't have homosexuality.

Why pick on homosexuality? Why not blame the tsunamis and earthquakes on our failure to separate tithes because the Temple is no longer standing? Or on the disunity in the Jewish world? There are plenty of things you could choose, with equal standing Talmudically, that would not involve homophobia.

Even more horribly, there are some rabbis who say if a tragedy befalls a family, such as losing a child, God forbid, they need to check their mezuzahs. Personally, I

wouldn't want to have anything to do with a God who would take a child's life because there was a non-kosher mezuzah on the house.

Not all Orthodox rabbis hold such odious views.

A 19th century rabbi, Rav Ashkenazi asked how could the rabbis offer spiritual reasons for earthquakes when we can explain them scientifically? He answered by saying spiritual reasons could be the cause for earthquakes that have no scientific reason – those earthquakes must have been because of divine intervention. Pretty much all earthquakes can be explained scientifically nowadays.

In fact, it's kind of strange that the haredi rabbis don't turn to other, more logical reasons for the tragedy, because we certainly have plenty of sources in the Torah, Talmud, and halacha charging us to take steps to protect human lives.

The Torah commands us in Deuteronomy chapter 22: When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.

If someone falls from your roof, it's not an act of God, it's not because your mezuzah wasn't kosher, it's because you failed to take steps to protect people. That's in the Torah. The Talmud and halachic codes expand this teaching to all sorts of other ways we are obligated to take steps to protect people from harm.

Experts have been saying for ten years that the crowds at Mount Meron on Lag b'Omer were a disaster waiting to happen. The NYTimes reported:

Time and again, across decades and governments, officials, ombudsmen, politicians and rabbis have tried to sound the alarm over safety issues at the site of the country's largest annual religious festival...

A former mayor of a nearby town said that Meron is "a place without law. Everybody could do or build what they wanted." No government ever intervened for fear of upsetting the politically important haredi community.

In this case, it's very appropriate to follow the teaching of examining your deeds if troubles befall you. But it's clear that the deeds that led to this disaster had nothing

to do with gay sex or how modestly women dress, or whether we are sufficiently particular about washing our hands. There are clear, easily understood reasons why people died in a space that could not hold that many people. What's needed is the will on the part of both the government and the haredi community to put health and safety above convenience and political pressure. Shrugging and saying a preventable disaster is "the Divine will" is a way to ensure that there will be more such expressions of "Divine will," Divine will expressed in the laws of physics.

May the tragedy inspire the government and the haredi community to work together to metaphorically build parapets at Mount Meron, to put in place protective measures. There's also a teaching from this week's parsha, Bamidbar, that could help. In this week's parsha we shown that very large camp of over 600,000 men was very highly organized, each tribe in its place. Instead of allowing the chaos that has reigned at Mount Meron for years, greater organization could save lives.