

Noach: The End of the World?

- Do we really worry about the end of the world? Day to day fears are harder to bear. Two crises with two lessons, Dor Hamabul and Dor Haflaga. Lesson one, immorality can corrupt absolutely. Lesson two, the importance of human life. The start of the Holocaust, financial distress.

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In 1992 newspapers in stark headline foretold the end of the world on the 14th of August in the year 2116 when a Swift-Tuttle's comet would strike the earth and wipe out most or all of humanity, like the dinosaurs of old were wiped out by a similar event. The exact time is not known, whether in the morning or the afternoon.

Nowadays, most of us don't think much about the possible end of the world, but we were used to hearing about fears of harm to the world, whether to the ecology, the Ozone Layer, or simply through miscalculation of damage through radiation, or toxic waste disposal, or even Chernobyl type disasters. And now all these fears recede when considering the damage terrorists can do to large centers of humanity called cities and even states, and - to our horror - relatively easily and cheaply.

Some years ago, when the Cold War was still a reality, there was a conference of psychiatrists on teen-age fears, and they at first ranked the fear of Nuclear holocaust high on the list of things bothering young people; until a scientist who knew something about statistics indicated that they asked their questions all wrong. If at that time, you asked anyone, teen-ager or adult, are they fearful of Nuclear War, they would answer yes. But if you ask them, have you talked about Nuclear war with friends or family recently, let us say in the last year, they would most likely answer no. Because to most people it was really a nonevent. We weren't really worried about it. But now if you asked people whether they talked about the bombing the world trade center, using humans in an airplane as the ultimate weapon, you will find that people are talking about it, and in fact, one third of the populace are unable to sleep properly because of it.

Why? Because most people aren't thinking about the end of the world, so much as they are thinking of the business of living in it, which consumes an awful lot of energy. Like the man who says, I make all the big decisions, my wife makes all the little ones. The little ones: where we will live, who will be our friends, what luxuries we will buy, what schools our children will attend, what investments to make, what house we will buy. My decisions, the big ones, are: will there be a collision of worlds, will the unrest in the world's trouble spots get worse or diminish, and so on. But now things have changed, and the business of living without danger has become a household concern, everywhere.

The day-to-day fears that Israel has faced for at least a year's time, have now gripped most people in the United States, Britain, and other countries that are sincere allies. And now the effort all people here must make is - as far as it is possible - to concentrate on everyday living and return to as much of normalcy as we can, instead of reliving the horror of the catastrophe and dwelling on the fears of further terrorism. That is not easy to do. In fact, there are some freedoms we are used to which we must sacrifice for greater surveillance and therefore greater safety.

Yet, one of the issues of today is how much liberty we may sacrifice while still retaining the bedrock principles upon which this country is founded.

Comes our Torah reading and portrays two world crises of long, long ago. And each of them with lessons, not for a possible Armageddon, a new ending of our world, but with real lessons for day to day life, and warnings for the every-day business of living, though the messages are presented in the unfolding of those two ancient crises, the flood and the Tower of Babel.

Just two examples among many other lessons, will suffice.

From the flood we learn that immorality can corrupt the very earth on which we live, till civilization can perish self-destroyed from it. But that dishonesty is even worse. Because *lo nehtam gezar dinam ela al hagezel*, as Rashi pointed out, the Bible clearly states that Lord finalized His decree of doom only because of their dishonesty. And honesty and decency are demands for every-day living.

And from the Tower of Babel, among other lessons, we learn of the importance of human life; that the State is formed to protect the individual, and that the individual is so important that his life must be protected even if it harms the State. For consider: Here were people who sought to build a great tower. And man is commanded to build and create in this world where he was placed, *leavda uleshamra*. So what went wrong?

Our Rabbis tell us they were impervious to human suffering. A person would fall from the scaffold to his death, and they would continue their frenzied work, which they felt was too important to interrupt. For after all, weren't they building for the sake of the State? Their government's name would spread everywhere. Their project was all-important. So that if a brick or stone would fall from that tower, that was a call for weeping indeed, and presumably for punishment harshly meted out, if it happened because of someone's negligence.

They placed the State, their alliance, their organization, above human worth. And so their intent was judged evil, and they were dispersed over the earth. For nothing is more important than human worth.

Society's needs are not more important than human life. That is why today, the allocation of scarce medical resources and scarce funds for medical purposes is so serious a human and societal problem. It goes to the very root of the system of values by which we live. And the triage centers at ground zero and near it, brought the issue of allocation more clearly before our eyes. Scarce resources for combating bio-terrorism is the next question on everyone's mind. For it isn't the numbers that are infected at the moment, small though they are, it is the fact that each of them is a potential world.

In fact, in modern times, this perverted and wicked value system of the people of the Tower of Babel, has appeared in various forms.

It appears in the form of State worship, not only in communist states like China, but in Fascist

states like Germany of the Third Reich and like the one neo-Nazis would like to recreate in what they call the Fourth Reich, wherever the individual is considered secondary to the State; wherever a single person is considered expendable for the good of all. We Jews know, to our cost, how much suffering this attitude has produced.

It is found in the callous attitude to human life found in many of our hospitals as well as in the halls of governments. So that in many countries of the world, euthanasia, mercy killing, is not considered murder, but is in fact made legal.

A very respected member of the medical community has recently written a book calling for legalizing mercy killing. And a respected governor of a mid-western state of the United States not very long ago issued a statement that it is the duty of the old to move over and get out of this world in order to make room for the young!

This callous attitude to human life is also found nowadays in some places where there are some women who are actually having their babies aborted because they are not the sex they would have preferred. For when human life becomes cheap, it can even come to be sacrificed for such trivia as this.

And finally, it appeared at the time of Hitler, yimach shemo, in the most cultured of all nations on earth becoming the most beast-like, and in the willing participation of many members of the most respected of intellectual humanitarian professions, that of medicine, in mass murder. Dr Leo Alexander was present at the Nuremberg trials. He wrote an article in the New England Journal of Medicine entitled "Medical Science Under Dictatorship", (New England Journal of Medicine, 1979; 241:39.ff). He was shocked that cultured university graduates with the highest standard of learning in the world, members of the most honored and humanitarian medical profession, could allow themselves to do what Mengele, yimach shemo had done. How could German medicine have degraded the human organism as never before? He explained that it was a factor of supply and demand. There wasn't money to treat everyone. That is how it started. Germany was in financial stress. And they had learned from the German philosopher Neitzche about the idea of a Master Race; and they had also accepted his philosophical propositions that human life of other races was not as significant as that of the Master Race. When the lesson that human life was cheap and expendable became part of their culture, then the first medical decision was not to treat the incurable. Then, the undesirable became expendable. That decision, Alexander says, ended up as: "Don't treat anybody who disagrees with me". The next decision was, "kill everybody who disagrees with me".

This is not a lesson of the last days! It is a lesson for life, for although the events in our Sidra are catastrophic, the lessons are commonplace! It is just that commonplace violations can lead to catastrophic results, today too, just as yesterday and long ago....

So, it is true that we require vigilance and extra surveillance. Because we are defending the freedom of a country that cares for every human life, from the terror that has no regard for human life. That is what is meant when we say this is a war between good and evil.