

Re'eh: Our Response to Hurricane Katrina

- Haskel Lookstein.

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From: Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

Subject: Our Response to Katrina

This past Shabbat, my d'var Torah in shul was entitled "Thoughts After A Catastrophe." It was, as you can imagine, an expression of concern over the disaster that has befallen our fellow Americans in the Gulf Coast states in general, and particularly in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. My wife and I had experienced Hurricane Katrina as a Category One storm in the Hollywood/Ft. Lauderdale area over the previous Shabbat. What we experienced, however, was discomfort and dislocation; what has been experienced by others over the past week is nothing short of a catastrophe.

What are we to do in the face of such enormous and uninterrupted pain and suffering on the part of all those people whom we have seen on TV and read about in the press? For the city, state and federal authorities there is a huge job of rescue, rehabilitation and restoration, a job which unfortunately began at a frighteningly slow pace, though it has picked up speed recently. Our job may not be to carry out immediate relief efforts, but this will be a long-term effort and you and I must play an active part. We cannot enjoy life here in the New York metropolitan area without sharing our possessions with Jews and non-Jews who are so desperately in need of assistance.

This past week's Biblical portion contains the command "Lo t'amez et levavecha," cautioning us not to harden our hearts against the less fortunate. In elucidating this verse, Rashi describes a person who is agonizing over whether he should or should not give. The answer of the Torah is very clear: Don't agonize. Let go!

There are those who, as Rashi describes, start to extend their hand and then pull back. Therefore the Torah says "Lo tikpotz et yadecha - Do not hold back your hand." Let go! The Torah then reinforces the command to give by using a double language "Patoach tiftach et yadecha" - "Open, you shall surely open your hand." Rashi comments "Even 100 times."

What the Torah is telling us is that giving aid when it is needed does not always have to make sense. We don't even have to be absolutely certain that our efforts will help. Maybe the needy person will be supported from some other quarter. Nevertheless, I have to give because I am not allowed to go about my business while somebody lives in desperation, without food, clothing, shelter, transportation, etc. I cannot sit back and be a bystander to suffering. My gift may or may not help but I cannot simply go about my life, spend money, buy food and clothing, go to the movies and theater, dine out, order-in, or anything else without first giving generously.

The first question, therefore, that we must ask ourselves in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is not: "What is President Bush doing?" or "What are the state and city officials doing?" Our first question in the face of such misery must be "WHAT AM I DOING?"

The answer to that question is: I must give. Audrey and I therefore have already sent \$1,000 to the United Jewish Communities (UJC), and \$250 to the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. The UJC is gathering funds from all the Federations around the country in order to provide direct relief on the ground. That relief will be provided in conjunction with local Jewish and non-Jewish agencies in the affected areas. It will include, among others, the American Red Cross, Catholic Charities, the Salvation Army, and others. The goal is to provide food and clothing, temporary housing, and cash assistance. In the days ahead the aid will provide health care for those not covered by insurance, respite care for evacuees, and mental health counseling.

The OU has joined with the Rabbinical Council of America and Yeshiva University to establish a fund to provide direct assistance to Jewish communities and families affected by the hurricane. For example, the Orthodox synagogue in New Orleans, Beth Israel, is under eight feet of water. Thousands of Jews are displaced. Help is essential.

The way to give is as follows:

1. Through United Jewish Communities: Send a check made out to UJA-Federation of New York and mail to: UJA-Federation, 130 East 59th Street, Room 1145 - Attention: Katrina Relief Fund, New York, NY 10022.

Or call the donor center at 212 836-1880 and provide your credit card number.

2. To give through the Orthodox Union, make out your check payable to Orthodox Union. Send it to the Orthodox Union, 11 Broadway - 14th Floor, New York, NY 10004. Please write "Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund" on both the check and the envelope.

If you would like to make your gift through the Benevolent Fund of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, send your check payable to: KJ Benevolent Fund and mark it "Hurricane Relief." Send it to Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, 125 East 85th Street, New York, NY 10028. We will divide that check 80 percent for general relief (UJC) and 20 percent to Jewish relief (Orthodox Union). At the end of each day we will send out those checks so that the money does not sit in our account more than 24 hours. This is above and beyond what the Benevolent Fund of the Congregation will do on its own.

Remember: Don't ask "What are the federal and local governments doing?" Ask only "What am I doing, before I continue to go about my life and take care of my own affairs?"

If we all give generously, we can then pray to God for salvation and consolation for all those who have been so devastated by this terribly destructive act of nature.

Haskel Lookstein

P.S.: I would like to give credit to Dr. Asher Kornbluth, an 8th grade parent at Ramaz who, while he was about to conduct a routine medical procedure on me last Thursday, suggested to me the urgency of a response on the part of our community. He was absolutely right. I hope that my visit to him will stimulate many tens of thousands of dollars of philanthropy from the KJ/Ramaz community.