

Re'eh: Reflections on Hurricane Katrina

- Meir Sendor.

It would seem to be a pretty simple principle at work here: if we keep the Mitzvos, things will go well for us; if we don't, they won't. The deceptive simplicity of this principle has led to widespread misunderstanding in the Torah community about how to read the moral and spiritual significance of events in our personal and communal lives.

Several people suggested I send my drasha from last Shabbos, on the Torah view of Hurricane Katrina, to our entire membership. I'm usually a bit bashful about this kind of thing, but since the issue is important, and I did put work into it, and many families were out of town over the Labor Day weekend, I've agreed to send it around. So here it is.

Parshas Re'eh - Hurricane Katrina - 9.2.05 Our parsha begins: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your G-d, which I command you this day. And a curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your G-d and turn aside to go after other gods, which you have not known (Dt. 11: 26-8)". It would seem to be a pretty simple principle at work here: if we keep the Mitzvos, things will go well for us; if we don't, they won't.

The deceptive simplicity of this principle has led to widespread misunderstanding in the Torah community about how to read the moral and spiritual significance of events in our personal and communal lives. This misunderstanding is not just a question of reading, it's not merely academic: it is a danger and threat to our very lives themselves.

For instance, a number of Rabbanan have issued pronouncements about the cause of the devastating Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath that has destroyed New Orleans and many communities along the Gulf Coast. One such Rav claimed in an Internet statement many of us received that the cause of the devastation was the evacuation from Gush Katif. He said that because 8500 Jews were uprooted from their homes in Azza at the instigation of Pres. Bush, 850,000 residents of New Orleans were punished with uprooting from their homes. Another Rav suggested that because New Orleans was a city of immorality, the Big Easy, especially because of rampant prostitution, it was destroyed and its people killed and exiled.

You find this kind of simplistic, childish, (and actually cruel) thinking on more personal levels, too. You find well-meaning people suggesting that if a person is suffering from a terrible disease, if we stop talking Loshon HaRa, or say certain Berakhos with extra kavvanah, it may prompt Heaven to heal them. It's always bad to speak Loshon HaRa, and always good to daven with kavvanah, but this kind of magical thinking is childish.

It's seductive, too. We all tend to narrow our range and focus in life, and hope that this narrow range of engagement will be enough to get us through. It's easier that way. Just like in our work, we tend to specialize, and hope that we will be found to be useful enough to others that people will pay us for our skill. So some people like to focus on Kashrus. They figure if I eat certain things and don't eat others I will be a Tzaddik and Ha-Shem will pat me on the head like a good boy or girl and protect me and help me in everything in my life. Kashrus is easy: it's not that difficult to comply with. Most of the animals listed in this week's parsha that are assur to eat you wouldn't want to eat anyway: vultures, bats, insects? Yum. Kashrus is pretty mechanical and

easy to systematize, it doesn't involve other people much, and most people are neurotic about food to start with, so Kashrus gets inordinate focus in Jewish life. But to pretend that this will earn you such standing with HKBH that it will entitle you to success and blessing in every aspect of your life is childish, magical thinking. And it's dangerous, because it lulls us into thinking that's all we have to do, our responsibility for ourselves, our communities, our world, ends with Kashrus; or just not speaking Loshon Hara; or just keeping Shabbos, as if that's all there is to Torah life.

This is not what the Torah tells us, it's not what our Parsha is telling us. If we read the whole first section of our parsha, it

concludes: "You shall observe ALL the statutes and laws that I place before you this day (Dt. 11:32)."

In Devarim Rabbah on this week's parsha Rabbi Elazar says, "from the time that HKB"H spoke this at Sinai, from that time forth `there shall not come from Him bad things or good (Lam. 3:38),' rather, evil things happen automatically to those who do evil, and good happens automatically to those who do good."

The Akeidas Yitzhak, R. Yitzhak Arama, in an extraordinary perush (he's consistently extraordinary) explains that what R. Elazar is saying here is that the Torah expects us to take complete responsibility for our lives and our communities and our world. He says we have to develop Ha-yekholes ve-ha-razon ve-ha-yediyah, the ability and the will and the knowledge to take responsibility for every aspect of our lives and the world around us. This is what the Torah is about. It is a complete system that addresses every aspect of life and all our relationships on every level. He observes that people tend to narrow their observance to a few easy, popular mitzvos. The goal of complete yediyah, complete and whole Torah knowledge, must encompass Ha-bilti nod'a im ha-nod'a ve-ha-meforsam - the lesser known together with the well-known and popular.

So, as important as knowing what to eat and what not to eat, is knowing that you should also not waste food or any other resource of this planet. So if you end up with a food item that is not kosher, try and find an appropriate use for it - it can be given or sold to a non-Jew, as it says in our parsha (Dt. 14:21, and see Pesachim 22b). And make sure that after you eat your kosher food, you recycle its packaging properly. That's also a mitzvah De-Oraysa: bal tashchis, not to wastefully destroy things. As important as davening and certain personal, ritual mitzvos ha-taluyos be-guf, mitzvos that depend on the body, like putting on tefillin, are the vast and complex mitzvos of ethical business dealings and proper moral relationships with all the people we come into contact with (which, frankly, are often much harder to fulfill). Along with the Mitzvos of Devotion and Time (like Tefillah, and like Shabbos and Yuntif), Ahavah and Zemanim in the categories of the Rambam, there are Mitzvos of Ethics, of other modes of worship, of proper thought, Mitzvos of relations between men and women, Mitzvos of personal sanctity and communal sanctity, Mitzvos of proper speech, Mitzvos of agriculture and proper land use, and of Tzedakah and care for the needy and disenfranchised, Mitzvos of communal holiness and offerings to Ha-Shem, Mitzvos of purity and hygiene and medical care, Mitzvos of business and professional life and property dealings, Mitzvos of due legal process and proper legal systems and politics and good government. And these are just some of the categories. There may be 613 Mitzvos in the Torah, but the ramifications and implications that demand our responsible engagement with every creature and every situation in the world are endless. As David ha-Melekh says: le-kol tichleh ra'isi keitz, rachvah mitzvaskha me'od - for everyone finite thing I have seen a limit, but Your Mitzvah is exceedingly vast (Ps. 119:96). The whole point of Torah,

Kol ha-Torah Kulah, the wholeness of the whole Torah, is to wake us up to our full responsibilities in life.

Let's do an exercise together. For instance, why was New Orleans devastated by Hurricane Katrina? From a Torah perspective? We can begin at the end of the 15th century, when the Spanish settled the area, followed two hundred years later by France. (sources: Internet site: New Orleans History, including

www.gatewayno.com/history/History.html; www.new-orleans.la.us/history.asp). The original settlement at New Orleans made some sense: the first settlement was a strategic port at the mouth of the Mississippi, on hilly land some 8-12 feet above sea level.

In 1717, France granted a business monopoly to a guy named John Law in order to stimulate development of New Orleans and the surrounding area. His so-called "Mississippi Scheme" was intended to draw investment in what he claimed was "a land of fabulous mineral wealth." Europeans were lured to New Orleans having been sold land that was swampy or even under water. This land development swindle fell apart in 1720, but the territory increased in population as a result of the advertising.

As people were drawn to this settlement, they expanded out from the hilly land into those swampy areas they had been sold, and built levees to hold back the water. So the flood-vulnerable parts of New Orleans were founded upon land originally sold through an unethical business venture. Expansion continued, and the levees were extended, until, over time, much of the city was developed below sea-level.

Already, at that point, New Orleans was based upon a whole set of irresponsible decisions.

Then you have the destruction of wetlands by irresponsible land development, wetlands that would have offered a buffer zone to flooding. Instead, the dried-out land on the dry side of the levees weakened the levee system.

You have the legacy of slavery and racial, social and economic inequalities in American society, such that poorer, mostly black, people settled in the cheaper, dangerous zone well below sea-level, while wealthier whites moved to higher, safer ground. The inner city became mostly poor and black, and the political establishment did not take responsibility and did not care about developing its transportation infrastructure. Work on maintaining and strengthening the precarious levee system was under-funded, and even those funds were cut in the last few years due to the fight against terrorism and the War in Iraq.

So when the category 5 Hurricane was bearing down on New Orleans, a Hurricane whose ferocity may owe something to Global Warming, due to the excess burning of hydrocarbons and petro-chemicals, to which every one of us contribute, and this Hurricane roars toward New Orleans, in a scenario that had been predicted over and over again, wealthier people with cars could get out of town, and even that was a slow, chaotic process. The majority of the poor and the black citizens didn't even have trains or buses to get them out or any public transportation to get them out, and government officials did not sufficiently plan, or sufficiently care, to provide transportation for them. Many weren't warned with sufficient urgency and didn't take the warnings seriously enough. And their own reactions were chaotic and in some cases immoral, stemming from the undisciplined, irresponsible culture of the Big Easy: looting, robberies, rapes, shootings and all kinds of hooliganism, which aggravated the situation and made it even harder to offer rescue.

And the response of the State and Federal government was half-hearted and lacked a sense of responsible urgency to match the situation. The US looks like some Third World Banana Republic in its inept response to this crisis. And probably Thousands of lives are lost and being

lost. Thousands.

So what is the cause of the devastating Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath that has destroyed New Orleans and killed and continues to kill probably thousands of Americans? It's not the evacuation from Gush Katif. It's not the Red Light district or Bourbon Street. It's a whole overlaid, overlapping set of irresponsible decisions in relation to the environment, to morality (including the Red Light district, yes, and instant gratification and lack of impulse control, but much more), to business ethics and corporate irresponsibility, to lack of support for the poor and needy, to social inequalities, to political decision-making that goes back hundreds of years, and has continued to this day. The Torah, the Whole Torah, Kol ha-Torah Kulah, reminds us and attunes us to becoming aware that there is a vast, elaborately-complex, interconnected world and cosmic Eco-System, that is physical and moral and spiritual, every detail of which calls forth from us a sense of awareness and responsibility.

Hurricanes happen. They are violent natural phenomenon, but they are not necessarily a punishment. Everything is directed by Rezon Ha- Shem, by Divine Will: in the case of Hurricanes, as part of the natural order, Rezon Ha-Shem al derekh ha-Teva, Divine Will expressed through Nature. Our job, as Jews and as human beings, is to respond appropriately to the challenge of the natural order.

If a community and a society is morally corrupt and spiritually dead, it leaves each person to fend for themselves and not only abandons them but takes advantage of them and oppresses them, and the impact of a natural disaster is magnified enormously.

If a community and a society is morally and spiritually healthy and resilient, which means not just that they eat Glatt meat or say berakhos with kavvanah or avoid Loshon HaRa in a pious, self-absorbed, self-congratulatory way, but that people care for each other and take care of each other, and that we take care of the environment and the world we live in, and are awake to social and environmental problems and on the lookout for the weak and the vulnerable - if we live this way, we protect each other and help each other and limit the impact of natural or human-created disasters. This has been the direction of human development and human society ever since we first learned to get in out of the rain.

But in the United States of America this week, we still look alarmingly, agonizingly primitive. It's inexcusable for thousands of people to be killed in this way in 21st century America. It's inexcusable for people to lack water and food and sanitation this way for this long in 21st century America.

In our parsha it says when it comes to Tzedaka: ".You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and to your need, in your land. (Dt. 15:10,11)". As the Gemara Gittin (61a) says and the Rambam paskins, (Matnos Aniyim 7:7): "We sustain and clothe non- Jewish poor along with Jewish poor for Darkhei Shalom." The United Jewish Communities and the National Council of Young Israel are raising money for Hurricane victims. See our email listserve for addresses. This is OUR responsibility and responsible response to this crisis.

This is what R. Elazar means in Devarim Rabbah: "from the time that HKB"H spoke this at Sinai, from that time forth `there no long came from Him bad things or good (Lam. 3),' rather, evil things happen automatically to those who do evil, and good happens automatically to those who do good."

And this is what our parsha means when it says "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your G-d, which I command you this day. And a curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your G- d and turn aside to go after other gods, which you have not known (Dt. 11: 26-8)". We are responsible

for the blessing and the curse.

We are responsible for every creature in our world, for every event in our world, and when we live up to the call of Torah, "es kol ha- hukim ve-es ha-mishpatim - all the statutes and the laws (Dt.

11:32)," we bring true blessing on ourselves together with the whole world, and this doesn't and shouldn't have to wait for the coming of the Moshiach, and should be speedily, in our days.