

Re'eh: The New Orleans Tragedy

- David Gutterman.

The New Orleans disaster has caused a large Jewish response because of our compassionate nature and the overriding mitzvah of Tzedakah. There are 12,000 Jews in the New Orleans Jewish Community and landmark synagogues, as well as a Yeshiva University organized Kolel. But the community at large needs our help in an overarching way. Yeshiva University has joined in the effort. Lubavitch is right on the spot. American Jewish Congress has launched an appeal. So have other national Jewish organizations. Many rabbis will join in offering help and in appealing to their congregations this week. Rabbi David Gutterman of the Philadelphia Jewish Federation has posted an appropriate dvar Torah which can help in creating an appeal for this great need, at a time of a great American tragedy. Here it is (Very slightly amended).

Athens and Jerusalem

The philosopher Tertullian dismissively remarked, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem" In his book, Where Judaism Differs, Abba Hillel Silver, wrote: "Though the Greeks taught the world the holiness of beauty, it was the Jews who taught the world the beauty of holiness". Indeed, scholars of the field divide the world between Hellenism and Hebraism; the former associated with Athens, the latter with Jerusalem.

I would like to share one wrinkle on the beauty of holiness that is the Judaic quest. But first, an old Yiddish joke. The rabbi comes home from shul and the rebbitzin asks "Nu, how was your sermon today?" He answered, "I was half-way successful. "Half-way?" she asked. "Well, the poor are willing to accept," he answered.

Apparently, the sermon exhorting to and calling for tzedaka was never an easy sell. But, it is a hallmark of the "beauty of holiness" that is at the core of Judaism's yearning.

Let's analyze this word for a moment and come up with a working definition. Tzedaka is not charity. Charity comes from the Latin *caritas* and is more an emotional state. Tzedaka is from the Hebrew *tzedeq* and is a legal state. Or to put this differently, I give charity because I want to: I give tzedaka because I have to.

Listen to the words of Maimonides. "We are obligated to be exceedingly careful in this mitzvah of tzedaka more so than any other positive command (in the Torah and Tradition); And now these very significant words. "For the engaging in tzedaka is proof positive that one is truly a descendant of Abraham (who was chosen by G-d) to teach his children in the ways of tzedaka: (Based on Hilkhos Matnot Ani'im 10:1)

So fundamental and foundational is this idea that it is the litmus test, so to speak, of one's lineage. In fact, there is a nuance to this mitzvah that is truly amazing. Even a poor person, even a recipient of tzedaka is himself obligated to engage in tzedaka. It is crucial and a key concept of being a Jew. And I deliberately use this term. Watch. Key Patoach Tiftach (Deut. 15:8) "If there

be a destitute person living in your midst" don't harden your heart or close your hand". "Key Patoach tiftach"; but rather, open your hand. (The verb: p-t-ch, meaning "open" is repeated twice for emphasis)

As Britain's Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks writes in, *The Dignity of Difference*, the notion of tzedaka, arises from the theology of Judaism which insists on the difference between possession and ownership. Ultimately, all things are owned by G-d, creator of the world. What we possess we do not own. We merely hold it in trust for G-d.

Whether you live in the Key-stone state, or not as a Jew, and for a Jew, we must all enter the "key" state of "Key Patoach Tiftach". Engaging and doing tzedek and tzedaka is at the core of Jewish spirituality. This is, no doubt, why the Sages so boldly declared: "The Jewish people will be redeemed solely on account of the merit of tzedaka".