

## Shemot: Tsunami Disaster

- Special Homer Lidrush from the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' office regarding the Tsunami Disaster.

Chomer Lidrush

There are times when tragedy reminds us how small we are. Job, in the book that bears his name speaks about earthquakes and tidal waves:

The pillars of the heavens quake,  
aghast at his rebuke.  
By his power he churned up the sea . . . (Job 26: 11-12)

David ha-Melekh said:

"The waves of death swirled about me;  
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me . . .  
The earth trembled and quaked,  
the foundations of the heavens shook . . .  
The valleys of the sea were exposed  
and the foundations of the earth laid bare . . . (2 Samuel 22)

Jonah, in his prayer in the midst of the storm said:

You hurled me into the deep,  
into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me;  
all your waves and breakers  
swept over me.  
Your wrath lies heavily upon me;  
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

This week, the world has relived the terror of those words. The scale of the tragedy brought about by the earthquake and tidal wave in the Indian Ocean have been massive. It is one of the worst natural disasters in living memory. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost; hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of lives have been dislocated.

Homes, towns, localities have been swept away. In many countries, people lack shelter, food, clean water, medical facilities. It will take years to rebuild what has been destroyed, and the lives lost will leave a legacy of grief. Today we send our prayers to the bereaved, the injured, the homeless and helpless, offering our tears for those who have suffered, and our hope and help for those who remain.

What can we say at such a time? We do not know, nor will we ever know, why such things happen. But in the very midst of such tragedy there are lessons to take to heart.

It was after an earlier Flood, the Torah tells us, that G-d made his first covenant with all mankind, the covenant of Noah. That great bond between heaven and earth is our eternal reminder that we are one humanity; that there is a covenant of human solidarity. In the words of the English poet John Donne:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.

But there is more – specifically in today's sedra, Shemot. The sedra tells several remarkable stories, including the rescue of Moses as a child from death by drowning. The first is the story of Moshe Rabbenu, the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Why was it he whom God chose to lead the Israelites to freedom?

The Torah sketches Moses' early life in three scenes. In the first, he sees an Egyptian taskmaster smiting an Israelite, and he intervenes. In the second, he sees two Israelites quarrelling, and again he intervenes. In the third, this time in the land of Midian, he sees shepherds mistreating Jethro's daughters, and yet again he intervenes.

Why we told about these three events? In the first, wrongdoer is a non-Jew, and the victim a Jew. In the second, both people involved were Jews. Had we known only this about Moses, we would have known that he cared for his people. He cared when they were victims. He intervened when they quarreled. But the third scene tells us something more. Moses cared for justice, whoever was involved. There was nothing parochial about his sense of responsibility. When he saw someone suffering, he got involved, whoever was the victim.

That is what made Moses great.

However, the sedra focuses our attention on another and in some ways quite unexpected figure. For it was the daughter of Pharaoh who saw an ark floating on the water, sent one of her handmaids to retrieve it, opened it and saw that it was a child. She guessed that it was a Hebrew child – she said *miyaldei ha-Ivrim zeh*. And she rescued it. That too took courage. After all, it was her own father who had issued the decree of death against the male children of the Israelites. Not only did she rescue it: she brought the child up in the palace, and gave it a name, Moses. Throughout his life, Moses carried no other name.

The Book of Shemot, the Book of Names, does not tell us the name of Pharaoh's daughter. But in *Divrei Hayamim*, the Book of Chronicles (I Chron. 4: 18), there is a reference to a Pharaoh's daughter called Bitya, which literally means 'the daughter of God.' On this, there is a beautiful midrash:

The Holy One blessed be He said to Pharaoh's daughter: 'Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I will call you My daughter.' (Vayikra Rabbah 1: 3)

On the face of it, no two people could be less alike than Moses and Bitya, yet they had one thing in common. Their sense of responsibility, their willingness to come to the rescue of those in danger, knew no ethnic or religious boundaries. They cared for human beings, whoever they were. They knew that tears are a universal language. They knew that pain is pain, whoever feels it. They knew that when lives are at risk, you don't stop to ask, Are they friends or strangers? They understood the covenant of human solidarity.

