

Vaera: The Tsunami Relief Effort

- Nisson Shulman.

Water, in its devastating effect, and how it can give life, Mayim Hayim. Suffering must be relieved, as best we can. Pity that newspaper bias prevents letting people know of Israel's heroic efforts, and appreciation of some countries of SE Asia. Two instances of setting the record straight: Sri Lanka, and Honest Reporting.

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By Nisson Shulman

We are shown by the current tragedy in South-East Asia, the devastating effect of water. It can totally destroy, and we who have the tradition of Noach and his flood can surely understand it. And perhaps we can also understand the devastating effect the plague of DAM must have had in Egypt.

We are also told, in this week's Parsha, that water can save. Besides its life giving properties, besides the newspaper photos of bottled water dropped to dehydrated victims by helicopter, we also know that Moshe was saved by the Nile. And that life-giving water is the metaphor for Torah.

The Tsunami is a human tragedy of literally earth-shaking proportions. And all men of good will must respond appropriately. In some countries sworn enemies are making common cause to help. Jewish organizations and individuals are seeking ways to help. Someone snidely remarked, "Where were they when the holocaust killed so many more than the Tsinami?" But there is no comparison. Suffering should have been better ameliorated then. Now we must be sure not to fail any fellow human being, even though the world had failed us then.

It is a pity that the newspaper bias against Israel remains strong in the face of the Tsunami relief efforts. Here are there we hear reports that Israel's aid was rejected by some, and more often the aid Israel is giving goes unreported. We should set the record straight.

I reprint for you two items from which you can select material.

1) First from Sri Lanka:

Text of an Embassy of Sri Lanka press statement dated 31 December 2004 :

"The generous assistance readily given by the Government and people of Israel at this hour of need is highly appreciated by the Government and people of Sri Lanka.

"Sri Lanka and Israel enjoy friendly and close diplomatic relations, and the Sri Lanka Embassy in Tel Aviv is functioning since October 2000, while the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi is concurrently accredited to Sri Lanka.

“Allegations in certain media reports that Sri Lanka refused help from Israel is factually incorrect.

“Due to the destruction of many hotels along the coastal area, large numbers of tourists stranded in the affected areas were brought to Colombo. Therefore, the Sri Lankan authorities are currently faced with a huge shortage of accommodation and other amenities due to the severe damage caused to infrastructure.

“Furthermore, the generous response by the international community to the Government’s appeal for help, immediately following the disaster on Sunday, has resulted in an overwhelming pouring in of assistance in the form of relief goods and personnel. The arrival of planeloads of relief goods and personnel is causing parking problems at the Colombo airport.

“Therefore, the Sri Lankan Government was constrained to request delaying the arrival of the 150 member Israeli rescue and relief team, while the medical supplies and food offered by the Israeli people were accepted. This was due to the lack of accommodation available in the country at this point and skilled manpower required for medical attention becoming adequate for the present in many areas.

“10 Israeli medical experts are already working in Sri Lanka rendering valuable service. Authorities in Sri Lanka would also keep the option open of inviting relevant Israeli expert personnel to come to Sri Lanka at a time of need.”

2) And the Honest Reporting item as follows:

ISRAEL AID UNREPORTED

All major media outlets ignore Israel's massive humanitarian aid to South Asia - an indication of a national ethos of caring.

When disaster strikes anywhere in the world, Israelis can be counted on to help. So it's no surprise that within hours of the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the following humanitarian missions all departed from the tiny Jewish state:

- The Israeli organization Latet ('To Give') filled a jumbo jet with 18 tons of supplies.
- A medical team headed by four doctors from Jerusalem's Hadassah Hospital arrived in Sri Lanka on Monday night (Dec. 27), carrying medicine and baby food. The doctors specialize in rescue operations, trauma and pediatrics.
- An IDF rescue team is now on its way to Sri Lanka with 80 tons of aid material, including 10,000 blankets, tents, nylon sheeting and water containers, all contributed by the IDF.
- A ZAKA rescue-and-recovery team arrived in the disaster areas Monday night, armed with its specialized equipment for identifying bodies.
- A Health Ministry contingent left for Thailand on Monday night to aid in rescue efforts. The group includes doctors, nurses and four members of the IDF.
- Israel has also offered its assistance to India — a search-and-rescue team from the Home Front Command, as well as consignments of food and medicine.

Yet, with the exception of UPI (as of this writing - Tues. 4pm EST), none of the major news outlets have dedicated an article to this remarkable Israeli humanitarian effort. This, despite the fact that the IDF sent all Israel-based journalists a press release Monday evening (Dec. 27), inviting them to the airport to cover the departure of one IDF group.

This is all the more surprising given the fact that the major news agencies have entire teams of reporters in Israel, who submit at least one 'Israel-article' each day.

So what did the Associated Press send out today to its 15,000 subscribing news agencies? A dreary story about the construction of a new IDF base near Jenin. AP sarcastically remarked in this 'news' story that the base's 'elaborate color scheme and landscaping shows that the army is not planning to pull its forces out of the area anytime soon.'

The lack of media interest in this Israeli humanitarian effort means that Israeli benevolence toward other peoples is not fairly conveyed to the western world. Perhaps if it were conveyed, observers would come to understand something else — that Israel's response to Palestinian violence is also motivated by the highest ethical concern for all human life, and is not (as the media so often portray it) driven by an oppressive, mean-spirited national ethos.

HonestReporting encourages subscribers to write a letter to your local paper, praising the massive Israeli humanitarian mission to South Asia — which the major media have apparently deemed 'not newsworthy.'

UPDATE 1/1/05: Two days after this communique was published, Associated Press released an article on the Israeli aid to tsunami victims, and followed up with another article the next day.

Thank you for your ongoing involvement in the battle against media bias.

Batya, bas Pharaoh, with Miriam's help, credited with saving Moshe, actually saved, thereby, our entire people. It is in the Jewish heart and in our blood, that where tragedy strikes we stand ready to help save others, with or without credit. But how much more gratifying if the truth of Israel's efforts were to be published properly.

P. S. If you do not get Honest Reporting, I suggest you sign up for it immediately. It is a resource that helps us help keep the media closer to a fair track - or at least, keeps it from straying too far. See resources for the web-site.