

Natural Disasters and Elul's Lessons

- Berel Wein remembers hurricanes that struck while he was Rabbi in Florida, and sees in it, as well as in the talk not to rebuild New Orleans in its present location because of its vulnerability, a humbling reminder of how puny humans are in relation to natural disasters. He sees a reminder of the lessons of the month of Elul, the month of introspection and preparation for the Days of Judgment. The lesson of the High Holidays is humility. No text is necessary to teach that lesson. The hurricane itself is the greatest reminder of man's humility. God is not necessarily in the earthquake and hurricane itself. God is in the still small voice of humility and helplessness that follows. And only the humble can achieve true and lasting spiritual greatness.

NATURAL DISASTERS Rabbi Berel Wein
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I was in the United States when the disaster of Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and its southeast Gulf Coast. It seems that natural disasters are regular events in the lives of millions of human beings. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and hurricanes are all regular visitors, if not permanent residents on our planet. The overwhelming forces of nature make mockery of humankind's efforts at taming them. There is much public and political opinion afoot in the United States not to rebuild the city of New Orleans in its present location because of its vulnerability to flooding. In effect, this opinion proposes a twenty-first century surrender to nature and its wrathful and destructive unpredictability. Its admission of defeat is a humbling reminder of how puny humans are in relation to natural disasters. All of our great technological achievements and creations, gifted and wondrous as they are, still cannot overcome the forces of nature implanted by our Creator in our world. There is little room for human pride and hubris in the face of the devastation brought upon us by such a natural disaster as Hurricane Katrina. We stand in mute shock at witnessing the forces of nature beyond our control or even our imagination.

When I was a rabbi in Miami Beach in the late 1960's and early 1970's my family and I experienced three direct hits from hurricanes. Those hurricanes invariably occurred during the month of Elul, the month of introspection and preparation for the High Holy Days and the Days of Judgment. It was and still is customary in the world of the yeshivot to, during that part of the year, deliver mussar schmuessen – lectures on morality, ethics, ritual observance and the importance of serving God in our lives. These talks are powerful in content and delivery and are a wonderful tool in helping one enter into the true solemnity of spirit that mark the High Holy Days. But after my congregation's experiences with the hurricanes, I felt that any words that I might have said or lectures that I might have delivered would have been hollow and unnecessary. A hurricane is a pretty impressive and awesome mussar schmuess all by itself. No human being's words of wisdom can improve upon it. If one is not sufficiently humbled by the power of a hurricane's winds, rains and tides then the most inspiring of speeches will also avail nothing in conquering the unwarranted arrogance and haughtiness that infects many people.

The main message of Elul and of the High Holy Days is one of humility. The finite is limited and insignificant before the Infinite. The Psalmist states: "What is man that You should care to know him, human beings that You should deem them to be important?" Natural disasters remind us of this fact of mortality, of human failings and weaknesses. But it is only through humility that one can find true spirituality and a connection to God. God is not necessarily in the earthquake and

the hurricane itself. God is found in the still small voice of humility and helplessness that comes after the awesome display of His nature's might and fury. Only when hubris and haughtiness are conquered within a person's soul, mind, behavior and outlook, is there then room for the Godly spirit to enter that person's inner self. And in one of the strange but true paradoxes of human nature only the humble can achieve true and lasting spiritual greatness.

Why does God employ natural disasters to inform us of the importance of humility? Why does He allow for such great human suffering for so many seemingly blameless people? I certainly do not know how to answer or even deal with these troubling questions. Man cannot understand or fathom God's methods for dealing with this world. However, because we cannot satisfactorily explain something does not allow us to ignore its obvious lessons. The still, small voice is preceded by hurricanes, volcanoes and earthquakes. If we leave immediately after the display of noise and power and do not stay around to hear the small voice that can emanate within us from witnessing and experiencing such disasters, then it is truly only a random disaster that strikes us. However, if it allows moments of introspection and leads us to an understanding of the necessity of humility and kindness in our lives, then the natural disaster, unwanted and inexplicable as it is, may have value for each of us, especially in this month of Elul. Shabat shalom.