

Hurricane Sandy and Teshuva

December 2012

With super storm Sandy, our city faced a disaster of Biblical proportions. What guidance might our Bible offer then as both the immediate victims, and G-d willing, all of America try to respond with wisdom and compassion?

You are familiar with Psalm 137, the dirge sung by the Judean exiles in Babylonia, after the destruction of the First Temple and the end of Jewish sovereignty 2600 years ago: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat, we even cried, as we remembered Zion."

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, in his writing on Teshuva, repentance, cites a Midrash which imagines Jeremiah, the prophet of that exile, scolding his fellow exiles: "If you had only wept for one hour in Jerusalem, you would not be here to weep over her destruction today."

In other words, the exiles had earlier forfeited the opportunity for self-reckoning and Teshuva, which might have prevented the disaster. Despite this harsh message, the Midrash sees in the words of Jeremiah hints of redemption. As terrible as destruction and exile are, Jeremiah implies that they can be powerful stimuli for Teshuva, repentance, and for starting over with deeper wisdom.

It is very hard for individuals and especially for societies to evaluate themselves fundamentally and to initiate basic changes. We are necessarily, and generally happily, creatures of habit. Day to day, we are intensely wrapped up in the minute to minute demands of our lives. We become accustomed to the good things in our lives, and also to choices and habits which are unhealthy.

In normal times, we also devise all kinds of rationalizations to defend what we do, and to protect us from the recognition that we may be acting harmfully.

You may recall that twice in the Torah we are given a Tochacha or "admonition" (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28). These include descriptions of the plenty which we will enjoy for keeping the covenant with G-d, and also the terrible plagues and destruction which will occur if we don't follow the Mitzvot of Torah. The punishments detailed for unfaithfulness are much more numerous, lengthy, and dramatic than the blessings promised for fidelity.

Why the difference? Our sages pointed out that when we see disaster coming, we usually decide that it is bad luck or chance. It is too painful to entertain the possibility that there may be connections between our actions and the dangers we face. The desire to avoid changing can be so strong that we cling to our behaviors even after repeated misfortune.

Catastrophes, however, force societies to recognize that things are not what they should be. This is not in any way to diminish or rationalize the great suffering which so many now endure as a result of Sandy, or any other disaster. However, because catastrophes overturn our affairs, figuratively and even literally, they destroy the routine of our lives. For this reason, they can be spurs for us to consider our

spiritual state and societal choices. They halt the flow of our lives, and give us the opportunity to stop, to wonder, and to ask serious questions.

What affects do our patterns of consumption have on the water, air, and soil from which we live? How are we eviscerating the natural protections of our environment? How well do our basic support systems-energy distribution, transportation, emergency services-serve all areas and all classes of our society? What pressures need to be exerted on our political, industrial, and financial leaders to save us from self-destruction?

Let us have the courage to re-evaluate, at the root, even what we consider "normal." With enough faith, candor, and courage, it is possible to refashion our values and practices, and to restore the unity of creation which we labor to preserve during the week, and celebrate on Shabbat.

We pray for the return of security, health, and dignity to all the victims of Sandy, and may G-d bless all, in our sacred community and without, who have given of their time, their hearts, their professional skills, and their resources to bring comfort and relief this past month. Amen.

B'Shalom
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