

"THE STORMY WIND AS THE WORD OF GOD"

Afterthoughts on the Recent New England Hurricanes

(copy - 9/11/54)

The recent hurricanes which swept through New England left in their wake more than twisted tree-trunks, flooded homes, changed landscapes and human carnage. They also left behind a residue of doubt and perplexity and fear in the hearts and souls of millions of Americans, and particularly those of our State. They jarred us, frightened us, appalled us. The lashing gales and violent winds and furious storms set us thinking and wondering.

Primarily the question that was asked was of a religious nature, and it came from religious-minded people, and it was largely addressed to religious teachers. The question was: if *וְהַיָּם יִשְׁמְרוּ וְהַיָּבֵשׁ יִשְׁמְרוּ*, "the stormy wind fulfills His word", as David put it, then why did G-d do this? Why did G-d unleash such fury against us? Why this sudden eruption of peaceful, calm and tranquil nature into a diastrophic and brutal storm? Such senseless destruction cannot possibly have meaning. Does it therefore follow that this world of ours is a purposeless and meaningless place, ^{and} that senseless evil and cruelty predominate in life?

It is a hard question, but it is a fair one. What kind of answer can students of Torah give? We categorically reject the contention that this proves the predominance of evil. When the Arab philosopher Al Razi came to that conclusion, Maimonides (Guide, Part III, Chapter 12) referred to him in most unflattering terms. He called his ideas "mad" and "foolish". It is G-d's world, and hence an essentially good one. And perhaps we should think of the very infrequency and rarity of such hurricanes, and conclude that the comparative frequency of clement weather proves that Good is the Rule and Evil the exception.

But as for the basic question of "Why?", no one can give a really complete and satisfying answer. Just as scientists have not completely fathomed the physical causes and properties

A-1212

Published in RCPA
Manual 1956

A-1212

gales, hurricanes, typhoons and tornadoes, so are we incapable of completely understanding their spiritual implications. The weatherman, with all his expensive equipment, was unable to predict the hurricanes' courses. And teachers of religion are similarly at a loss to give full religious explanations.

However, while we cannot fully explain and justify this storm, we still maintain that it certainly was not senseless. While we cannot give causes, we can show some moral effects of an experience of this sort. We can give, as illustration, three morals of the hurricanes, three spiritually valid consequences which will be acceptable by the religious-minded person. The "stormy wind" performed G-d's will, and it was His will that we take to heart these three messages.

The first lesson should be obvious to anyone who has seriously thought of the spiritual implications of the hurricanes. They have tried to curb our arrogance and teach us humility. For are we not the most brazen generation since the builders of the Tower of Babel? Our jet-planes and our H-bombs, they comfort us. Our research and our inventive genius, they prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies. Our cup runneth over with the brilliant and intricate and powerful techniques that we have mastered. We have shortened space, condensed time and elongated the life-span. We are a race of technological giants and mechanized supermen. In short, we are convinced that we have conquered Nature and subdued her. And occasionally it occurs to some of us to wonder if, equipped and powerful as we are, we still need G-d. We have overpowered Nature, we think, and therefore do not have to have a deity to Whom to pray for protection against it.

If this is the arrogance and conceit which modern technology has given us, ~~they~~ we must be healed quickly, although the medicine be harsh and painful. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: (ב"מסכת סנהדרין פרק ט"ז הלכה א') "Storms were created to straighten out crooked hearts." The heart of modern man is crooked with arrogance, and a hurricane can straighten it out.

The convulsions of the heavens show us that

So we feel that we can now make rain? G-d is not impressed with our prowess. We have mechanized speed-boats? It is nothing for G-d to smash them into smitherns against the rocks. We have the knowledge and the machines for beautiful landscaping? G-d changes landscapes and the shapes of beaches according to His will. We have beautiful summer homes with all conveniences, the kind that can withstand all sorts of adverse weather? Foolish and arrogant piece of clay, cries G-d, I have just washed it into the endless ocean. So we have knowledge and power, we can split the atom and beat the speed of sound, we are great physicians? Silly creature, says G-d, here is a stormy wind for you. Let us see your medicine resurrect the drowned. Let us see your nuclear reactors stand up against the howling fury of my little winds. Let us see your supersonic generators contend with the screeching eeriness of the gales. Straighten out your hearts, do not be so proud and arrogant, your machines and techniques will not help you.

A word of G-d, and all man's achievements crumble into disorganized insignificance. And our first afterthought, after the winds have passed and the storm is spent, is: My G-d, I still need you. For I am only dust and ashes, helpless and weak and frightened. My G-d, your storms have taught me humility. Your words have straightened my heart.

Lesson number two, the second spiritual dimension of the hurricane, lies in the opposite direction. Now our afterthought is directed not to the destruction and devastation, but to the many who survived them and the fact that they are passed.

Lest man think that he is forsaken, alone and miserable in his all too short journey through life; lest he think that G-d remains in the heaven, supremely aloof and uninterested in His creatures' fate and destiny; a hurricane comes to show us that G-d is with us throughout its duration, that He is with us by calling an end to the ruination. In short, hurricanes of this sort highlight the optimistic faith of Judaism and its affirmation of Hope. Nature may go berserk, but G-d's love for us, and the spark of G-dliness within us, they remain constant and enduring.

Some of us may recall the deeds of heroism that were recounted the day after the storm struck. Here a woman showed great courage and saved countless neighbors. The G-dliness

of her character bucked the winds. There a youngster saved a young friend at the risk of losing his own life. The Divine within him would not be drowned by the swirling waves. And many others found that their substance, their homes and their persons were saved as if by a miracle. G-d's love for us cannot be beaten down^W by a mere hurricane.

The words of the 'rophet reecho that affirmation of Hope taught by the hurricanes. Isaiah sees his people engulfed in the tragedy of exile. Their sun has gone down, the sky is blackened with impending doom, chilling winds begin to howl, and the people are despondent. Who knows, they think, but that G-d has forsaken us. And so the Prophet ~~Lee~~ reassures them (Isaiah 54:9-10), "For this is as the waters of Noah unto ~~Me~~^{us}; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall My covenant of peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath compassion on thee." Tragedy has its redeeming features. Exile has its promises. The black cloud has its silver linings. The hurricane has its compensations.

Hope, therefore, is the second moral. The hurricanes, in destroying allelse, cannot budge G-d's love or ^{man's} G-dly character. There is no greater hope for man than that knowledge. It is the knowledge that G-dliness makes a man stable even in the midst of turbulent change.

The third spiritual dimension of these past storms is one of timely yet timeless significance. And its essential message lies hidden in a Talmudic text of immeasurable beauty and simplicity. Our ^{ages} wondered about the origin of these cataclysmic disturbances. And, like as not, our Rabbis would suggest an answer which is completely moral in character and beautiful in narrative..They explain:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַח אֱלֹהִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמַח בְּאֱלֹהִים
וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמַח בְּאֱלֹהִים וְאֱלֹהִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
(ב"ב פ"ג ה"א)

When G-d remebers His children, Israel, who live in agony amongst the nations of the world, He sheds two tears which fall into the great sea, and the splash is heard from one end of the world to the other.

Well, there you have it. Hurricanes Carol and "Ana and every other storm are the splash of G-d's tears as He remembers and reminds us of those less fortunate than ~~ourselves~~ we are. In a word, the third and perhaps strongest dimension of the hurricane is: Sympathy.

For certainly that is one of the main things a natural calamity of this sort was meant to accomplish. It is an unpleasant reminder to us of those who must spend not several hours but a lifetime fighting violent storms and hell-bent winds. It is a reminder of G-d's tears, a reminder of our brethren who are "living in agony". It is a momentary taste of what they have to endure. It is a challenge to creative sympathy.

Let us therefore think of the recent hurricanes as the Almighty's weeping, causing us just enough unpleasantness to jostle us out of our complacency and remember the less fortunate. Let the dark storms remind us of so many hundreds of thousands of our brethren behind the Iron Curtain, who must weather the violence of an atheistic police-state, the thunder of Communist propoganda, the stormy threat of slave-labor, and the deluge of anti-religious and anti-Zionist teachings which threaten to engulf all their youth. Let the catastrophe-packed clouds make us give a second thought to the terribly precarious condition of the State of Israel which has been denied the shelter of international law and protection. Let the utter devastation caused by these mighty explosions of the heavens lead us to think of our fellow Jews in the melahs of Morrocco, where they are blinded by trachoma and accept it as casually as we accept a drizzle; and where they live under perpetual fear of pogroms. Let us think of all the men and women who must live entire lifetimes fighting the storms of hate, the winds of hostility and the raging violence of man's ~~hostility~~ meanness towards his fellow man. We lose our summer homes ^{perhaps} ~~maybe~~ once in sixteen years. Let our hearts now turn to those who have never had even an ordinary winter-home, to those who live in tents or Maabarot, or just noplac.

Look at our hurricanes that way, and they have had a most constructive and creative effect. By accepting them as G-d's reminder of ^{182 million}, they evoke our sympathy and direct our attention to ways of bettering the lot of those less fortunate.

In conclusion, then, no one can fully fathom the will of G-d in sending these storms upon us. But as afterthoughts we find three distinct moral teachings which we may acquire as a result of these hurricanes. They are the lessons of Humility, Hope and Sympathy. They are the three "words of G-d" uttered through the "stormy wind".

May we, in full cognizance of our own inadequacies, place our hopes in the goodness of the Almighty and, so doing, keep our hearts constantly open to His children, our fellow-creatures, who need our assistance.

If Hurricanes Carol and Elna can accomplish that, they may have been worthwhile.