

A-120
"AFTERTHOUGHTS ON THE RECENT NEW ENGLAND HURRICANE"

"Hurricane Carol" which recently swept through New England, left in its wake more than twisted tree trunks, flooded homes, changed landscapes and human carnage. It 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. It jarred us, it frightened us and it appalled us. The lashing gales, the violent winds and the furious storm 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: if RUACH SE'ARAH OSEH DVARO, 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 really an evil place, that senseless evil and cruelty predominate in Life?

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It is a hard question, and it is a fair one too. What kind of answer can students of Torah give? That this proves the predominance of evil, we categorically reject. No, it does not prove that the world is evil. When the Arab philosopher Al Razi came to that conclusion, Maimonides (Guide, Part III, Chapter 12) referred to him in the most unflattering terms. He called his ideas "mad" and "foolish". It is G-d's world, and hence a good one. And perhaps we should think that the very infrequency and rarity of such hurricanes, and the frequency of calmness, clement weather proves that Good is the rule and Evil the exception.

But as for the basic question of Why, no one can really give a complete and satisfying answer. Just as scientists have not completely fathomed the physical causes and properties of gales, hurricanes, typhoons and tornadoes, so are we incapable of understanding their spiritual implications. The weatherman, two weeks ago, with all his equipment, was unable to predict Hurricane Carol's course. And teachers of religion are similarly at a loss to give full explanations.

However, while we cannot fully explain the meaning of this terrible storm, we still maintain that it certainly was not senseless. And we can give, as illustration, three morals of the hurricane, three reasons for it or effects of it. The RUACH SE'ARAH performed G-d's will, and it was His will that we take to heart these messages.

The first lesson should be obvious to anyone who has seriously thought about the spiritual dimensions of the hurricane. It has 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. We have mastered brilliant and intricate and powerful techniques. 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 conquered Nature, we think, and therefore do not have to have a G-d to whom to pray for protection against it.

If this is the arrogance and conceit which modern technology has given us, it has to be cured and cured fast. And a little hurricane is just what the Divine Doctor ordered. LO NIVRE'U RE'AMIM, says R. Yehoshua b. Levi (Brachot 59), ELA LIFSHOT AKUMIOS SHE'BA'LEIV. Storms are created in order to straighten out crooked hearts. The heart of modern man is crooked with arrogance, and a hurricane can straighten it out.

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So we feel we can now make rain? Well, G-d can make it better. We have mechanized speed-boats? It's ^{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 shapes of beaches the way HE wants to. We have beautiful summer homes with all conveniences, the kind that can withstand all kinds of weather? Foolish and arrogant piece of clay, cries G-d, I've just washed it into the endless ocean. So you have knowledge and power? You know medecine, can split the atom, can beat the speed of sound? Well, here's a little storm to think of. Let's see your medecine revive the drowned. Let's see your nuclear reactors stand up against the howling fury of my little winds. Let's see your supersonic generator contend with screeching eeriness of the gales. Straighten out your hearts, don't be so proud and arrogant, your machines and techniques will not help you.

G-d just blows, and all Man's machines 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. You have starlightened 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 it and the fact that it 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 Heaven, supremely aloof and uninterested in his fate and destiny; a hurricane comes to show us how G-d is with us throughout its duration, and with us by calling an end to the ruination. In short, a hurricane of this sort highlights Judaism's ever-present optimism and its reaffirmation of Hope. Nature may go beserk, but G-d's love for us, and the spark of G-dliness within us, that remains 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 life. The Divine in 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 by a mere hurricane.

That same message of shining hope lies in today's Haftorah. Isaiah sees his people engulfed in the tragedy of exile. Their sun has gone down, their sky is blackened, 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 reassures them: KI MEI NOACH ZOS LI, For this is as the floodwaters of Noah to Me; and as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I ^{will} not be wroth with thee or rebuke thee. KI HE'HARIM YAMUSHU VE'HA'GVAOS T'MUTENA, says G-d, though mountains may be wiped away and the hills be leveled down, VE'CHASDEICH ME'ITACH LO SAMUT, my kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed. Tragedy has its redeeming features. Exile has its promises. The black cloud has its silver linings. The hurricane has its good points.

Hope, therefore, is the second moral. The hurricane, in destroying all else, can not budge G-d's love or 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 ~~time~~ spiritual dimension of this past storm is one of timeless and yet timely significance. And its essential message lies hidden in a Talmudic text of immeasurable beauty and wonderful simplicity. Our Sages wondered about the origin of these cataclysmic climactic disturbances. And, like as not, our Rabbis would

suggest an answer which is completely moral in character and beautiful in narrative. They explain: B'SHA'AH SHE'HAKADOSH BARUCH HU ZOCHER ES BANAV SHE'SHRUYIM B'TSAAR BEIN UMOS HA'OLAM, MORID SHTEI DMAOS L'YAM HA'GADOL, VE'KOLO NISHMA MI'SOF HA'OLAM VE'AD SOFO. (Brachot 59). When G-d remembers His children Israel who live a life of pain 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. Hurricane Carol, and every other storm, is ~~G-d's way of remembering Himself, and reminding us~~ the splash of G-d's tears as He remembers Himself, and reminds us, of those less fortunate than ourselves. 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 SHRUYIM B'TSAAR. 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 hurricane as the Almighty's weeping, and 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 strange winds of communist propaganda, and the deluge of anti-religious and anti-Zionistic propaganda teachings, backed by the threat of slave-labor, which threatens 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 now that our State Department has cynically announced that it has found no proof of Arab aggressive intentions and is therefore going to arm them. Let the utter devastation caused by these mighty explosions of the heavens cause us to think of our fellow Jews in the melas of Morocco, where they are blinded by trachoma and accept it as we accept a drizzle; and where they live under perpetual fear of pogroms. Let us think of all men and women who must live entire lifetimes fighting the storms of hate, the winds of hostility and the raging violence of man's meanness towards his fellowmen. We lose our summer-homes once in sixteen years, if that. Let our hearts now turn to those who have never had even an ordinary winter-home, to those who live in tents or Maabrot, or just no place.

Look at our hurricane that way, and it has had a most constructive and creative effect. By accepting it as G-d's reminder of BANAV SHRUYIM BE'TSAAR, it evokes our sympathy and directs our attention to ways of bettering their situations.

In conclusion, then, no one can fully fathom G-d's will in sending this storm upon us. But, as afterthoughts, we find three distinct moral lessons which we learned as a result of the hurricane. They are the lessons of Humility, Hope and Sympathy.

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

If Hurricane Carol can accomplish that, it may have been worthwhile.

INTRODUCTION TO HURRICANE SERMON

(Used in delivering Hurricane talk in 1961)

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At the very outset, we must limit the question that we have posed as the theme of this sermon. Our question is not why the hurricanes occur. First, we do not even know the physical causes of hurricanes, despite our weather satellite, certainly we cannot know the spiritual reasons. Secondly, "why" is a fruitless question. It sounds more like a complaint than a quest for information.

In one of the moving psalms of King David, he cries out Eli, eli, lamah azavtani - "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Rabbi Samson Raphael Hersh offers a comment on this verse that is most relevant to our theme - and, in fact, pertinent to all our lives at any occasion or crisis. He directs our attention to the fact that the word for "why," lamah is in the Masoretic Text, recorded as having the accent on the second rather than on the first syllable. It is not Lamah, but laMAH. The first form of that word, Lamah, is indeed, the word "why." It is a Plaintive demand for information and explanation. But the version laMAH means not "why" but "wherefore". It is not a demand that God explain his reasons for visiting suffering upon us, but rather a prayer to God to teach us what to do with our suffering, what lessons to learn from it, what good to derive from these experiences. So, each of us, when faced with crisis, trouble, difficulties, or problems - must ask ourselves "wherefore?" rather than turning plaintively to God and demanding of Him, "why?"

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