Hurricane Katrina – A Curse from God? – Re’eh 5765
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“Although the loss of lives is deeply saddening, this act of God destroyed a wicked city. From ‘Girls Gone Wild’ to ‘Southern Decadence,’ New Orleans was a city that had its doors wide open to the public celebration of sin.” That was the pronouncement of Michael Marcavage, the director of an organization called Repent America. On their website, Repent America has a press release that states: “Just days before ‘Southern Decadence’, an annual homosexual celebration attracting tens of thousands of people to the French Quarters section of New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina destroys the city.” It continues with this condemnation of New Orleans: “New Orleans was also known for its Mardi Gras parties where thousands of drunken men would revel in the streets to exchange plastic jewelry for drunken women to expose their breasts and to engage in other sex acts. … Furthermore, Louisiana had a total of ten abortion clinics with half of them operating in New Orleans, where countless numbers of children were murdered at the hands of abortionists. Additionally, New Orleans has always been known as one of the "Murder Capitals of the World" with a rate ten times the national average.” “We must help and pray for those ravaged by this disaster, but let us not forget that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in their city for so long,” Marcavage said. “May this act of God cause us all to think about what we tolerate in our city limits, and bring us trembling before the throne of Almighty God,” Marcavage concluded.1

Meanwhile, Salon.com reported that “a group calling itself Columbia Christians for Life [sent an email message out that] alerts us to the fact that a satellite image of Hurricane Katrina as it hit the Gulf Coast Monday looks just like a six-week-old fetus.”2 The email also suggested that the hurricane struck New Orleans because of the abortion clinics that operated there.

Then there is the “New Orleans-area resident [who] believes God created the storm as punishment because of the recent role the United States played in expelling Jews from Gaza. On Sunday evening, Bridgett Magee of Slidell, La., told the Christian website Jerusalem Newswire that she saw the hurricane ‘as a direct ‘coming back on us’ [for] what we did to Israel: a home for a home.’ Stan Goodenough, a website columnist, described Katrina as “the fist of God” in a Monday column. “What America is about to experience is the lifting of God’s hand of protection; the implementation of His judgment on the nation most responsible for endangering the land and people of Israel,” Goodenough writes. “The Bible talks about Him shaking His fist over bodies of water, and striking them.”3

Among the similarities between the pullout from Gaza and the evacuation of New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina, an article from an Israeli website4 noted the following:

• Bush pushed for the abandonment of Israel’s southern coastal region, and America’s southern coastal region is now in ruins as well.

• President Bush is from Texas, Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice is from Alabama. Together, they pressured Israel to uproot Gush Katif. Hurricane Katrina hit the states in between Texas and Alabama where Bush and Rice are from (Louisiana and Mississippi).

1 http://www.repentamerica.com/pr_hurricanekatrina.html
3 Deborah Caldwell “Did God Send the Hurricane?” Beliefnet website
4 “Katrina and Katif: some connections to consider” by Tamar Yonah September 2, 2005 Israel Insider
Many believe that U.S. President George Bush is selling out Israel to control the price of oil and keep it cheaper for Americans. Perhaps Bush thought that he could set the price for oil by appeasing the Arabs. Yet, this hurricane hit right at the oil refineries in America's Gulf Coast states, temporarily closing down these refineries, which brought up the price of gasoline. Is G-d telling us that He, not Bush, controls the price of oil?

One of the plans for the removal of the Gush Katif communities was to make room for and build casinos. Katrina destroyed a whole strip of casinos and casino boats on America's gulf coast.

So, you can take your pick: the Hurricane is the sign of God’s wrath executed on a city that was about to host a major Homosexual Celebration, or because the city has 5 abortion clinics, or because the Bush Administration pressured Israel into abandoning the Gaza Strip. I am sure that others who claim to have a “red telephone” to God have offered other explanations for this horrible disaster.

And in my humble opinion they are all blasphemous, sacrilegious, and highly offensive.

It does not take a “rocket scientist” theologian to see how utterly ridiculous and repulsive these claims are. The mere fact that so many different interpretations of this event can be offered by supposedly pious people should already tell us that this is really a theological Rorschach test. You read into it what you want to find. You already know the point you want to make, and so you search for the “clues” that “prove” your case. Like painting the bull’s eye of a target around the arrow that has already been shot.

While I was in Israel this summer I visited my Orthodox cousin, as I do just about every time I travel to Israel. My cousin is truly a pious person. He is the right hand man for Rav Eliashiv, who is today the leading rabbi in the world for the Haredi (or “ultra-Orthodox”) community. I rarely talk theology or even religion with him because I know we will disagree on many things, and I am not interested in having a fight with my cousin in the little time we have to visit. So I asked him about politics – a safe topic! What did he think about the Gaza withdrawal? To paraphrase, he thought it was foolish – not because God promised the Jews that piece of land, and not because it would cause terrible disruption of families (though he knew that and felt badly for those families), but because Israel was not getting anything in return. There was no contract or treaty with the Palestinians that they would dismantle the terrorist organizations, or that they would cease their belligerence against Israel. It was a unilateral decision by Israel that would surely be interpreted by the Palestinians as a retreat in response to the terrorism. In other words, it would serve as a signal to them that terrorism works and they should keep it up. On the other hand, he certainly understood the cost in Israeli lives and resources for defending the Gaza Strip, and felt it was not a great loss for Israel to leave there.

You can agree or disagree with his political analysis. I think it is unfortunately fairly accurate – though I understand the Israeli government’s decision to leave Gaza anyway because of the tremendous cost of keeping it until a negotiated settlement could be reached. But the point is, my pious cousin only analyzed the withdrawal from a political point of view – not a religious/theological one. So I specifically asked him if he or any of his associates saw in these events any fulfillment of Biblical prophecies, or any warnings in Biblical prophecies that related to the withdrawal. And he flat out said, “No.” He explained his answer with the usual Orthodox perspective that “we are so far removed in this generation from the great Prophets of the Bible that we cannot pretend to perceive any prophetic voice one way or another.” In short, it would
That seems to me to be true piety. And all the more so in the face of such cataclysmic disasters as Hurricane Katrina. If you believe that everything happens in this world because of God’s will, that God specifically controls every event that occurs in the world, the most pious thing you can say about why tragedies like this happen is – absolutely nothing!

Nothing explains why God would cause such misery to hundreds of thousands of people. If God was angry at New Orleans because of its annual “Southern Decadence” event, sometimes called the “Gay Mardi Gras,” why was there so much devastation and loss of life in Mississippi and Alabama? Why were most of the serious victims the elderly, the poor, and the sick?5

Five abortion clinics caused God’s wrath to come down on New Orleans? What kind of God are these people talking about?

Evacuating the Gaza Strip caused God to force the evacuation of New Orleans? Only a perverted mind could imagine such an equation. Like the Rorschach test, all of these pronouncements say much more about the people who made them than anything else.

My first year of Rabbinical School I was in Los Angeles at the University of Judaism. In January that year, the Northridge earthquake shook the city violently. While we were busy trying to get our apartment put back together, picking up the fallen bookcases, putting the books back on the shelves, cleaning the glass out of the kitchen and putting food and dishes back in the cabinets, and while we are doing all of this, I am listening to the radio talk shows. Sure enough, here come the religious prognosticators telling us what was on God’s mind: “Los Angeles is a wicked city.” “Hollywood makes sinful movies.” “Sunbathers on the beaches are lewd and indecent.” I have news for these folks: Los Angeles is a city built on several major earthquake fault lines. If you live there you have to expect the ground to shake from time to time - and sometimes it’s unfortunately going to be devastating!

In any case, the assumption of all these folks (and even my cousin) is that God does indeed control everything that happens in this world and therefore everything that happens is – in some way – God’s will, even if (as with my cousin) we don’t understand why. Passages in the Torah like the one we read this morning support this idea. You need look no further than the opening verses:

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God … ; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God …” It would seem at first glance from these verses that if we do what God wants we are rewarded with blessings in life, but if we disobey God’s will, we will be cursed in this life. So if something terrible happens in the world – a flood or an earthquake – it must be a punishment from God.

But modern Jewish philosophers have taken an entirely different approach. They assert that God created the Universe in an extraordinarily complex but highly organized way. There are laws of physics, laws of nature, which allow us mere mortals to understand the world we live in. These laws make many things predictable, stable, and understandable. And we need that. We need to know that if we drop a rock it will fall to the ground – and not fly off into outer space. Imagine a world in which we could not predict that if someone throws a baseball it will go in the

5 See also “Hurricane Katrina: God’s Punishment for a Wicked City?” Urban Legends and Folklore blog August 31, 2005 at http://urbanlegends.about.com/b/a/198493.htm
direction he threw it. Our entire lives would be utter chaos. (Not to mention that the game of baseball would become utterly impossible!)

But a consequence of these very laws is that **once in awhile** these laws themselves bring chaos to our lives. The same forces of nature that create beautiful mountains also shake the earth. And if you happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time that can be disastrous for you. The same forces of nature that bring rain to grow crops so we can eat, also sometimes bring storms that wreak havoc in people’s lives. The same force of nature that keeps our feet planted on the ground, also causes people to fall from a cliff if they slip over the edge. Should God interfere with these laws so that no one ever gets hurt? But then, these laws would soon have no meaning. And our lives would **always** be chaotic.

From this perspective, God does **not** control everything that happens in the world. Sure the laws of Nature were part of God’s design, but once having designed this magnificent Universe, the specific events, their timing and location, happen according to these laws, not because God intends a specific tragedy to occur to specific people.

And we modern Jewish philosophers also have Jewish sources **we** can cite. The Book of Job relates the story of a righteous person who suffers **despite** his obedience to God. His friends insist his misery must be the result of his own wrongdoing – much like these modern preachers who tell us Katrina is a punishment for some terrible sin. But Job **knows** he has done nothing wrong. Finally at the end of the book God vindicates Job, agreeing that he is a righteous man, but challenging Job – and us – to try and understand the laws of Nature that God established.

The prophet Elijah defeated the prophets of the foreign god Baal, only to be threatened by the wicked Queen Jezebel. Elijah had to flee for his life even though he did exactly what God wanted. When he went down to Mount Sinai he encountered God. The Bible tells us, “There was a mighty wind, splitting the mountains and shattering the rocks – but God was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake – but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire – but God was not in the fire. Finally after the fire, Elijah hear a **kol demama dakkah** – a still small voice whispering.”

Where are the preachers today, preaching from this passage: God is not in earthquakes! God is not in mighty hurricane winds! God is not in terrible floods! We must seek out God’s presence in the quiet voice we hear in our consciences: There is suffering. Human suffering. Do something about it!

At the end of the *Birkat Hamazon* – the grace after the meal – we recite a verse from Psalms: *Naar hayiti v’gam zakanti, v’lo ra’iti izaddik neezav; v’zaro mevakesh lahem.* “I was once young, and now I am old, and I have not seen a righteous man abandoned and his children also begging for bread.” The literal meaning of this verse, if it is read in the context of the Psalm, is that good ultimately is rewarded if only we could see the big picture. Over a generation or two things work out. We might well see a righteous person abandoned, **but** his children will not also be begging for bread. But why is this verse quoted in the grace after meals, after we have fulfilled the commandment from **last week’s** Torah portion “v’akhalta, v’savata, uverakhta” “you shall eat, and be satisfied, and bless the LORD”.

Perhaps the rabbis put this verse in the grace after the meals to remind us of another passage from **this morning’s** Torah portion. “There shall be no needy among you – since the LORD your God will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion – if only you heed the LORD your God and take care to keep all this instruction that I

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6 Deborah Caldwell made this connection in her Beliefnet article referenced above.
enjoin upon you this day. … If however there is a needy person among you, … do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy brother. Rather you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.” Perhaps the rabbis are telling us – just as we have finished a nice meal and our bellies are full – we must remember our obligation, our duty, God’s commandment, to take care of our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings, and make sure that they, too, are not abandoned and searching for bread. Why would we not see an abandoned person searching for bread? Because we have invited him or her to our table to join us in our meal. They are not abandoned. They are not starving for food. They are taken care of – by us!

No. Hurricane Katrina is not an act of God. It is a natural disaster that was unfortunately all too likely to have happened. Our scientists and weather forecasters told us such a storm would come. This is no punishment meted out by God to anyone. Rather, the acts of God can be found in our response to this tragedy by reaching out our hands to help. When we listen to that still small voice that tells us we must respond, we are doing God’s work. Shabbat Shalom.