

Re'ei 5765 Hurricane Katrina
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

I happen to love nature. I find it inspirational to look out upon an open vista, study the colors of the trees and the enormity of the sky. This summer, my family enjoyed some of New England's natural beauty from the beaches, sand and wind on the Cape to the Berkshire mountains and even the cool water of Walden Pond.

But for memorable moment would did not even have to leave our house. A few weeks ago I was lying on the floor with Talya staring at the sky through a skylight during a thunderstorm. We counted the seconds between seeing the lightening strikes and listened for the thunder to tell how far away the storm was. I shared with her the *brakhah* for witnessing wonders of nature – *oseh ma'she v'reisheet* – Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe who renews the work of creation.

But then, the power went out, reminding us of the destructive side of nature as well. It seems that inherent in the act of creating is destroying something else. This week we saw that all too well.

On Monday when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, it was a terrible storm that caused loss of life and great devastation. But on Tuesday, when the levees in New Orleans failed, we saw just what horrible a tragedy this storm had wrought.

How can we understand this disaster and what can be learned?

Over the week, TV commentators spoke of natural disasters and acts of God. Are these acts of God? The Torah made a change in the world's understanding of evil. While ancient pagans saw natural evil as an independent force, the Torah did not.

A famous example is the ancient Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish. In it, Tiamat, the goddess of the oceans, wars with the rest of creation. She is defeated only after a prolonged battle against the god, Marduk. Monotheism presented a different approach.

Maimonides explained it well. Natural disasters, he explained, have no explanation. By placing us in a corporeal world, God set life within the parameters of the physical. While matter and life are formed, hurricanes and tragedies occur.

The opening verse of our parashah is instructive: "*Reih anokhi notein lifneikhem hayom brakhah u'klalah* – See, this day I set before you blessing and curse." God asks us to look around and see the world. It is a world of incredible beauty and terrible suffering: *brakhah u'klalah* – blessing and curse. The same forces that made for an inspiring lightening storm unleash horrors upon others.

There are two key words in this sentence. The first is *lifneikhem* – God bequeathes blessings and curses to you, meaning to us. It is a strange formulation, but it emphasizes our partnership with God. It is up to us to steer the world in the direction of blessing. In the case of the continuing tragedy in New Orleans, they were many moments in the past century where decisions were made that lead to this tragedy. Many of them related to not heeding the mitzvot about the environment. One could question the wisdom of building a major metropolitan city on the coast below sea level. (Of course, having read an email article sent to me Stuart Leshin that explained the economic significance of the port of New Orleans transporting the agricultural products from the middle of the country, I have a better understanding.) But beyond that, many choices were made that hurt the environment and helped contribute to this situation.

An article in Scientific American from 2001 predicting the New Orleans scenario. (An op-ed in this morning's New York Times touches on this.) A colleague of mine grew up in northern Mississippi on the banks of the Mississippi river. The levee system further north made life there possible because the river meanders and is prone to flooding. Now we learn that the system that protected Northern Mississippi prevented sufficient sediment from reaching the river delta and is part of the reason New Orleans has been sinking.

In addition, over-development of the coastal areas and the destruction of the natural coastal marshes that would have helped control flooding and temper the effects of this type of hurricane helped produce this calamity.

In addition, as the New York Times reported, taking away funds from the levee system in New Orleans and not creating a real contingency plan for this type of disaster is inexcusable. Even this week, too little was done too late for too many people.

What kind of evacuation plan is it when 25% of the people who live in New Orleans live below the poverty line? Where were they going to go and how could they afford to get there? Buses and trains should have been ready to take them on Sunday.

Thus, it is up to us to create a world of blessing and this is as much a man-made disaster, as a natural one.

The second key word in the opening verse is *Reih* – see! We must open our eyes and see the pain. My cousin is from that area and while her family is safe, her college roommate who was supposed to have gone to her parents' home has not been heard from.

I remember when I visited New Orleans some 20 years ago on USY on wheels program, such a beautiful city; one of those on the trip was Ted Lichtenfeld. Ted eventually received his ordination at JTS. This summer he became the rabbi of Shir Chadash, the Conservative synagogue in New Orleans. Fortunately, he and his family are now safe in Atlanta, but they have a two-year-old, his wife is 7 months pregnant, and they don't know the status of their home or synagogue which is still surrounded by water. Can you imagine just moving to a city that now lies in ruin? It reminds me of the opening of the book of Lamentations that we read a few weeks ago: "*Eikhah yashva vadad ha-ir rabati am* – Alas, lonely sits the city once great with people!" We have students of our own congregation who attend Tulane who are safe, but left behind their belongings.

Another colleague of mine lamented the behavior of some who took advantage of the situation to loot and to vandalize his brother's business; everything that wasn't nailed down was taken. While in desperation, we can understand that one would loot a store for food, but looting for gain, committing rape, trying to hijack a hospital supply convey, shooting police officers and helicopters is more difficult to justify. These acts have also hampered the rescue operations.

The parashah states (12:8), "*lo ta'asun k'khol asher anahnu osim po, eesh kol hayashar b'einav* – don't behave like we do here, each person doing what he thinks is right." Is that the state of affairs in New Orleans? In the absence of law and order, chaos ensues and people "do what is right in their eyes" or revert to cruel behavior? Later on, the parashah juxtaposes this with "*Ki ta'aseh hatov v'hayashar b'einei Adonai Eloheikha* – do what is good and right in the sight of Adonai your God." (12:28)

Are people naturally selfish and need to be kept in line, or was Anne Frank right about the basic humanity of all people? Perhaps a little of each, some have risen to the

occasion and performed great acts of kindness and others have done the opposite. The Mishnah (Pirkei Avot 3:2) remembers this danger: “Pray for the welfare of the government, for if people did not fear it, they would swallow each other alive.”

One colleague wrote: “Tragically, most of my family and friends in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast have lost everything. Everyone is financially, physically and emotionally distressed and exhausted. They are truly homeless and have no idea when they will ever be able to return and rebuild -- homes and lives. We are thankful that all survived. That is the most important thing. But all need help to become whole once more. The family established a fund to collect and distribute any help offered to our family and friends. Your generosity and that of your congregation would be gratefully appreciated. But please, in your largess, do not neglect the faceless multitudes that do not have anyone to speak for them as well. Anne Frank wrote in her diary, ‘How wonderful it is that no one need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.’ Please do not wait another single moment. Thank you so much.”

Seeing the horrible conditions that the poor, mostly African-American population is suffering compels us to act – to, in the words of the parashah – *reih*, see and then make this *klalah*, this curse into more of a blessing.

The parashah reminds us to do this: “If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsman in any of your settlements [...], do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him enough for whatever he needs.” (Deut. 15:7-8)

As it states in the book of Proverbs: “Tzedakah – charity saves one from death.” (10:2) A Hasidic commentator, the Kli Yakar,¹ comments on this week's parashah has some beautiful words about Tzedakah and its ‘double nature.’ For example, when the Torah discusses giving the tithe for the poor, it states “*aser ta'aser* – you shall surely tithe” and “*patoah tiftah* – you shall surely open your hand.” While biblical scholars point out that this doubling is a poetic device that Torah utilizes for emphasis, the Kli Yakar teaches us that the doubling refers to the double openings of heart and hand. First, we must open our hearts and feel another’s suffering to move us to open our hands and help them.

I was glad to learn that in the American Jewish community, fundraising drives immediately went into place to help victims of the hurricane. Organizations include our local Federation, other local Federations around the country along with UJC; the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and local synagogues, not to mention countless other relief agencies. We need to give financial support to answer this crisis.

We spoke with friends of ours in San Antonio who are raising funds, food and finding home hospitality.

Last March, the Rabbinical Assembly convention was held in Houston. We spent an evening at the largest Conservative synagogue in the US: Congregation Beth Yeshurun; it has some 2500 families. It is so big you need a map to find your way. While at the time, its enormity seems overwhelming, I can now appreciate what its numbers can do in a time like this.

¹ Kli Yakar, Horev edition, P.581, dibbur hamathil: “Alh lefi shematzinu.”

The synagogue's president, Gary Swarz, sent out the following email: "Many of the Jewish families from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast have come to Houston. We have had calls from some. We are offering home hospitality for any or all that we can find. We have set-up a shabbos dinner at the shul for tomorrow night. During next week and into the future, we can arrange for kosher meals for any individuals or families that need them. We have put together welcome packages that include toiletries and snack foods and beverages.

Our large day school is prepared to accept all students for as long as they are in Houston.

If you hear of anyone who needs a place to stay, eat, or whatever – let us know. Beth Yeshurun is a big family and our "welcome sign" is out.

We can take care of all our "cousins" from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

We have over 250 volunteers who are going to the Astrodome next week to help serve the masses of evacuees from the Super Dome in New Orleans.

We have offered to go to an offsite shelter and provision, cook and serve meals to an additional large group of about 500 victims of the devastation. We are waiting to hear from the American Red Cross and

Houston Food Bank. They were startled to hear that we had arranged for a truckload of 40,000 pounds of chicken to be donated and that we have offered to cook 800 pounds at a time and then serve for however many meals it lasted."

[To help this congregation, send checks earmarked for "Hurricane relief" to Congregation Beth Yeshurun 4525 Beechnut Street Houston, TX 77096]

Another colleague, Rabbi Naomi Levy, excerpted from Psalm 69 the following prayer:

Save me, God;
For the waters have reached my soul.
I sink in deep mire,
Where there is no place to stand;
I have come into deep waters,
And the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary of my crying;
My throat is parched;
My eyes fail while I wait for my God.
Rescue me from the mire,
And do not let me sink.
Don't let the floodwaters sweep me away,
Or the deep swallow me up,
Or the pit shut its mouth over me.
Answer me, God;
Turn to me in mercy.
Do not hide Your face from me;
For I am in trouble;
Answer me quickly.

Let us all be partners with God that we may help God fulfill the words that God promised Noah, "*Veloy yihyeh mabul od Lashaheit et haaretz* – never again shall there be another flood to destroy the earth." Amen.