

Sermon by Rabbi Denise Eger, January 14, 2005

Shabbat Shalom

With the horrendous events of recent weeks—the killer tsunami in Asia, the flooding rains and deadly mudslides here in our own neck of the woods, much has been written about the power of nature. Our hearts have gone out to the suffering of those who lives have been ended through no fault of their own but simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing more innocent than sitting in his or her own home or even vacationing on a faraway beach. And yet death and destruction have been visited upon thousands and hundreds of thousands of people.

So too with the series of hurricanes that battered the Caribbean and Florida early this past fall. The power of nature was on display for all the world to see. Still there are people without homes in which to dwell.

We can't help but be moved to compassion as the television camera peers into the faces of orphaned children and crying and grief stricken family members—wandering dazed, with little hope or plans for the future. Even in our own backyards—as homes are demolished as they slide down hills, our hearts break as bodies are dug from the mud in Ventura County.

In an instant lives were changed.

And we realize that there are forces much stronger and powerful in the world than our own. While modern technology might have helped avert the numbers of deaths in Southeast Asia if there had been a tsunami early warning system—we, mere mortals are still unable to stop or redirect the power unleashed by the magnitude 9 earthquake that caused the giant killer wave to wash upon Indian Ocean shores. We human beings with all of our electronic wonders still must stand in awe and perhaps even dread of the power of nature.

Jewish tradition teaches that each of us must remember two things and that we are to carry in two pockets on our person the following messages. One, “The whole world was created for my sake alone.” Two, “I am but dust and ashes.”

These two dialectics—are constantly in play. The raw power of natural forces of recent weeks cause us to be reminded of number two—We are but dust and ashes. Lest our egos grow too large.

The ancients, our ancestors, knew all too well of the power of nature. They wrote in the Tanach of earthquakes, and floods. They wrote of their fear and awe. They wrote their deepest questions. In the book of Psalms (107) we read:

By His word He raised a storm wind that made the waves surge.
Mounting up to the heaven, plunging down to the depths, disgorging their misery,

They reeled and staggered like a drunken man, all their skill to no avail.
In their adversity they cried out to Adonai
And God saved them from their troubles.
God reduced the storm to a whisper,
the waves were stilled. They rejoiced when
All was quiet and God brought them to the port they desired.

Or this from Psalm 77...
The waters saw You, O God,
The waters saw You and were convulsed;
The very deep quaked as well.
Clouds streamed water; the heavens rumbled;
Your arrows flew about.
Your thunder rumbled like wheels; lightning lit up the world;
The earth quaked and trembled.
Your way was through the sea,
Your path through the mighty waters;
Your tracks could not be seen.

Yes, our ancestors knew the terrors of the earth, and their writings tried to make sense of it. Just as we try to make sense of it.

Some Christian preachers have taught in recent weeks—that these people, especially those of Asia, are being punished for their ways. This to me is nothing more than hatred and blasphemy. Pat Robertson said the floods of recent days here in California is because we were a blue state. How absurd is this? Does this theology hold true—that these natural events are punishments by God? Then explain how Florida considered a red state, succumbed to such destruction this fall?

And yet, this is the “theology” that makes the news—the you read in the headlines.

I believe God is present in the suffering—but rather than the cause of it all I believe that God is suffering and crying with those whose lives are devastated by the recent events. I believe that God offers us strength to manage difficult and painful times such as these.

If we return to Psalm 77 that I read to you from—It concludes with the verse—You led Your people like a flock in the care of Moses and Aaron. This verse reminds us of the need to unite together as one people. That in times of dire trouble, that when we come together to help and heal that is the gift from God.

Although we are dust and ashes, we too know the world was made only for me. And that is why we must go out of our way to help all those for whom the world was made—those in Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Florida and yes, here at home.

The Jewish response to suffering of such magnitude comes in the way we care for and bring forth our humanity.

In our corner of the world, market forces, does all it can to take your individuality, your freedom and your humanity away. Consumerism degrades our spirit, and economic justice seems but a dream. And yet, our tradition teaches us that there is no more important lesson than to uphold human dignity. To offer a hand to our neighbors—Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. To reach out to those who in our midst are the most vulnerable in society. The Torah wrote about them as Orphans and women and slaves, but we can understand this to mean all those who need protection in society—especially those who have fallen victim to natural disasters.

In our Torah this week we read of disasters. Disaster brought upon the Egyptians by God. Indeed this is what the right-wingers base their interpretations upon. God interferes in the natural order of our world to impress upon Pharaoh that indeed there is a greater mission for the Israelite nation; That his continued oppression of the Hebrew slaves will bring disaster upon his nation.

Pharaoh ignores the warnings and most importantly hardens his heart to the pleas of Moses and Aaron, to the signs and wonders of the plagues, and to the pain and suffering of the Hebrew slaves.

Pharaoh had free will. He could have overcome the hardening of his heart and averted the disasters of the plagues culminating in the death of his first-born. This too is a message for all of us. Let us not be cynical and harden our own hearts. For when we harden our hearts to the plight of others, be sure it will come back to haunt us. And when we open our hearts—to the suffering of others, and try to reach out and care for them in some way, when we take the emphasis off of the self and focus it on someone else—then truly—we can find God's presence and healing.

That is the message in the Torah, the message to teach us how to understand the events of recent days and weeks and a message of hope for us and for the world. Let us truly learn to care for each other—and care for those who are suffering. Go out of your way—give and then give some more, of your time, yes, of your tzedakah, but most importantly of your capacity to love.

Then indeed we will know as Rabbi Akiba taught –that the greatest message of the Torah –is Love Your neighbor as your self. Ken Yehi Ratzon. So may it be God's will.