



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeira

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 3, 2012

Vayeira

Sandy, Sodom and Stalin



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of a historic storm which pummeled the Northeastern Seaboard this week, wreaking havoc for millions of people, some are wondering whether we can draw parallels of this disaster to the destruction by fire of Sodom and Gomorrah which, eerily, we read about in this week’s Torah portion.

But can we even compare the two? Can we say, as some religious fundamentalists argue, that natural disasters (interestingly called “acts of God” by insurance companies) are a punishment for our sins? (Interestingly, when it come to saving money God is suddenly invoked and turned into a scapegoat...)

On the other hand, divine providence clearly indicates that we must learn lessons from every event, especially calamities (as Maimonides writes).

What lessons can we learn from Hurricane Sandy?

A Torah class at the height of the storm last Monday night which was not cancelled due to the teacher’s surprising text message; the various times that “wind” is mentioned in the Torah (in the narrative of creation, in the story of Adam and the story of Jonah) – all teach us personal lessons carried to us by the ferocious winds of Hurricane Sandy.

SANDY, SODOM AND STALIN

1. Sandy's Lighter Side

Our hearts go out to all those that lost family or endured damage due to Hurricane Sandy earlier this week. Even if many of us were not affected by the worst storm on record to ever strike that region, Torah teaches us that we need to be sensitive to all who suffer. Indeed, we are all in this together, and when anyone is affected it affects us all. We therefore need to pay attention to events and calamities, especially ones that impact many lives.

Yet, there was also a lighter side to the event.

As the Northeastern seaboard was preparing for the ferocity of Hurricane Sandy, these jokes were going around the internet to help people get through the storm:

- They should rename Sandy to A-Rod, then it wouldn't hit anything.
- They should rename Sandy to the Jets [or fill in any team that fits the bill], then it would never touchdown.
- Nothing like Hurricane Sandy to make me realize what's really important in life, internet access.
- Romney has a binder full of hurricane names.
- Obama claims Hurricane Sandy is the result of a spontaneous butterfly.
- If Sandy were hitting Europe, we'd be starting to plan a summit to set the legislative basis to design a framework for buying a lifeboat.
- Hurricane Sandy, because God is tired of political ads too.
- I'm sorry for my terrible Hurricane Sandy jokes, I know they blow.

2. Was Sandy a Punishment?

In the wake of this historic storm which pummeled the Northeastern Seaboard this week, wreaking havoc for millions of people, I have heard people attempting to draw parallels of this disaster to the destruction by fire of Sodom and Gomorrah which, eerily, we read about in this week's Torah portion. Some are trying to derive lessons from this confluence as they did when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005.

Back then, I recall some people suggesting a link between the then recent Israeli evacuation from Gaza with the catastrophic devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast. Citing Biblical statements they were claiming that throughout history nations of the world have been punished for hurting the Jewish people. Since the United States pressured Israel to disengage from Gaza, which is against the will of God according to this theory, this country was punished, tit for tat, with the worst natural disaster in the USA that forced the evacuation of millions of people from Southern United States, and continued to be plagued by inept rescue efforts, rendering this mighty nation as helpless as a third world country.

Some are suggesting similar connections between the devastation brought on by Hurricane Sandy with what they perceive as human transgressions in our own time, especially drawing upon the reading about Sodom this week.

But can we even compare the two? Can we say, as some religious fundamentalists argue, that natural disasters are a punishment for our sins?

So let me begin by directly addressing this controversial issue, which some of you have asked of me now and in the past: Can we blame disasters on human behavior? When we suffer is God punishing us for our misdeeds? Or, in context of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Sandy - can we attribute it to human transgression, likening it to this week's story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah?

For the record allow me to state bluntly and unequivocally: We cannot compare the two events. Sodom and Gomorrah were cruel cities, whose demise was decreed by God Himself, as told to us in the Torah. We, on the other hand, have no right to declare anyone as cruel and to suggest that they have been hurt due to their transgressions.

3. What We Know and What We Don't

While it's true that the Torah way of thinking sees the entire universe as one integral whole and that our actions in one place of the world affects events in another, great care must be taken before drawing any direct parallels between events, particularly catastrophes that have taken the lives of many innocent people.

None of us know God's mysterious ways and it is therefore quite presumptuous, if not outright arrogant, to definitively state that any particular catastrophe, either on or off location, is a result of any given act.

If we were to take such license, just where does one stop? What about the six million who perished in the Holocaust – is that too a direct result or punishment of some human action?

What would prevent us from “finger pointing” every time a disaster happens, looking to lay blame on sinning scapegoats?

Whether it be a “natural” disaster or one perpetrated by men, the Torah advocates that we cry out to God when innocent people die. The entire basis of prayer is essentially stating that we pray for the healing of the sick and the dying, and do not attempt to “justify” their suffering by attributing it to their or someone else's sins. If we were to correlate every illness to a direct punishment, we should then not have the right to pray for anyone and try to change the course Divinely destined upon the ill.

4. Was Hurricane Sandy an Act of God?

But wasn't Hurricane Sandy – and any disaster – an act of God?

I always found it ironic and kind of humorous that our insurance policies – even if they may be otherwise atheistic – call “natural disasters” “acts of God”!

Apparently, when it comes to saving money God suddenly becomes a most convenient scapegoat... When our lives are healthy and running smoothly, we don't necessarily credit God; but when it comes to blame someone for our problems, suddenly our natural disasters become “acts of God”...

So back to our question: Isn't every event in the world controlled by Divine Providence, even a leaf blowing in the wind, definitely a major hurricane that misplaced so many people? And isn't it true that the concept of Divine reward and punishment is a form of cause and effect (totally unlike the superficial and circumstantial nature of human reward and punishment)? Just as a hand gets burned when placed in fire, so too do our actions bring upon us various consequences.

And what about the words of Maimonides:¹ *“When a calamity strikes the public we must see it as a result of our evil actions. We must cry out, examine our lives and correct our ways. To say that the calamity is merely a natural phenomenon and a chance occurrence is insensitive and cruel?”*

Doesn't it then make sense to conclude that a tragedy like Hurricane Sandy is an effect of our own actions?

The answer, my friends, lies in the very words of Maimonides. Maimonides does not say that a calamity should elicit a “witch hunt” to find the wicked culprits that brought the tragedy upon us. He says the exact opposite: Every individual that witnessed, experienced or heard about a calamity must not ignore it, but see it as a personal wake up call for introspection, to “examine our lives and correct our ways.”

So, yes, Hurricane Sandy should not be seen merely as “*a natural phenomenon and a chance occurrence*;” that would be “insensitive and cruel.” It should serve as a wake up call – to wake ourselves up, not for us to wake up others and clamor for a scapegoat to blame. That would defeat the entire purpose: Instead of focusing on our personal behavior we deflect the entire experience as someone’s else’s problem and caused by another’s sins. That’s the easy way out: Hey, it’s not my problem; it was caused by sinners, or by the Israelis and the American government.

Maimonides is telling us, no! It is *your* problem. When a calamity strikes, you have to look into your own heart, examine your own behavior and repair your own ways. Is there a more sensitive thing we can do in regard to the suffering? The greatest honor we can bestow on those that have tragically died or been misplaced is to become better people because of them...

In conclusion: The destruction inflicted by Hurricane Sandy should cause us to privately and discreetly look at our own lives and improve our ways. But it should not become a mud slinging contest looking for whom to blame.

There are things we know and there are things we don’t know. There are events that the Torah specifically tells us happened because of human sins, like the great flood in the times of Noah, or great fire that destroyed the city of Sodom. The Torah has the authority to tell us that. But in all other situations, where we do not have a Divine authority informing us otherwise, we simply do not have enough information or insight to determine the exact cause for any given catastrophe.

And that lack of knowledge should not be seen as a liability. Our sages teach that we are not given a challenge that we cannot face. What we know – and what we don’t know – is exactly what we *need* in order to fulfill our mission in life. The fact that we do not know the correlation of different events in life means that we don’t *need* to know that information to achieve our calling.

¹ *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Fasting 1:2-3.

What we do need to know is that we must always feel responsible and see that our actions affect the world around us. "A person must see himself and the world as equally balanced on two ends of the scale; by doing one good deed, he tips the scale and brings for himself and the entire world redemption and salvation."² A person is responsible to say that the entire world was created for me; when you save a life you save the universe."³

When a calamity strikes, especially one that affects large numbers of people, we need to know that we must look into our selves and become better people.

Beyond that is God's domain.

5. A Life Changing Attitude

This approach to life is absolutely life altering! Think about it. Every event that you and I witness is not an "accident;" it was meant for us to experience so that we derive lessons in being more sensitive and responsible human beings.

Everything that happens is driven by Divine Providence. But God created us to be His partners in creation. So we are never bystanders and surely not victims. Therefore, when we are faced with a challenge or when a calamity strikes (God forbid), we don't look to blame someone (or God); we may not know why it happened, but we certainly know that we can and must do something. We look into ourselves and find ways to improve our behavior.

A man was hiking through a forest and was becoming very tired. Then he stumbled upon a farm that had plenty of horses. He asked the farmer if he could borrow one. "Well son," the farmer said, "I can only lend you one because all the others are working. But it is a special horse. If you want to make it go say Boruch Hashem (praise God), and if you want it to stop say Amen.

³ *Mishne, Sanhedrin 37a.*

³ *Maimonides Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4.*

Now the man climbed on and shouted Boruch Hashem, the horse ambled along, it picked up speed after a time and didn't stop. By this time the man could not remember what to say to make it stop. He saw a cliff right in front of him. Frantically, he started to pray and then, of course at the end of his prayer he said Amen. The horse stopped right at the edge of the cliff. The man breathed a sigh of relief and in gratitude shouted... Boruch Hashem.

Well, while we don't say Boruch Hashem for the hurricane, we do derive lessons from it in our own lives.

6. Lessons from Sandy

Now let us apply this attitude to Hurricane Sandy.

Whether Hurricane Sandy affected you directly or not, it is clearly a major event that deserves our attention. Just some statistics: It was the worst storm on record to ever strike the Northeast. It left over 8 million people without power. Disrupted the lives of over 60 million people. Disturbed global markets based in New York. Caused over 20 billion dollars in damages (that is only an estimate). Knocked out the most extensive public transportation system in the world for days on end.

Here was a statement released by the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) right after the storm: "The New York City subway system is 108 years old, but it has never faced a disaster as devastating as what we experienced last night. Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc on our entire transportation system, in every borough and county of the region. It has brought down trees, ripped out power and inundated tunnels, rail yards and bus depots."

Also consider the hard-to-ignore coincidence of the hurricane striking the most heavily populated part of the country, including Washington DC, just a week before the Presidential election - winds from above disturbing the final whirlwind campaign efforts of both candidates.

All the more compounded by the fact that the magnitude of this storm is being considered a once-in-a-lifetime event, given that it was a rare combination of several factors: (1) the most extensive storm system in years, (2) made a beeline for the most densely populated part of the eastern seaboard, (3) made landfall at exactly high tide, (4) on a full moon when tides were at their maximum (5) and when a cold weather system converged with it.

The confluence of so many unlikely “coincidences” certainly captures our attention.

A major event like Hurricane Sandy – which exposed our human vulnerability and fragility in unprecedented ways, in stark contrast to our breathtaking technological advances – undoubtedly contains many important lessons for us.

7. Winds of Change

As sensitive human beings what lessons can we learn from Hurricane Sandy?

Winds in general and especially strong winds are powerful reminders of forces beyond our control. And like any formidable force, they can either wreak havoc or bring us greater opportunities.

The gale winds upon our waters -- born last week in the warm southern seas right around Aruba, now whimpering away into oblivion somewhere in the northern hemisphere -- which unleashed their fury over the Eastern Seaboard, bring to mind the question:

What is the first documented episode of a powerful wind, and its impact on water?

The second verse in the Bible:⁴ *“And the divine wind hovered over the face of the water.”* The Midrash says that “the divine wind (“ruach” in Hebrew, which also translates as spirit) refers to “the spirit of Moshiach.”⁵

As the winds howled over the waters, and the seas surged, perhaps they were also bringing us (beyond the devastation and the compassion to those suffering losses) refreshing winds of change...

8. Winds of Change

The second time the word wind is used in the Bible is equally fascinating: After Adam and Eve had transgressed and eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, and they realized what they had done, the verse tells us: “They heard God's voice moving about in the garden with the wind of the day. The man and his wife hid themselves from God among the trees of the garden. God called to the man, and He said, 'Where are you?’”

In the “wind of the day” the Divine voice called out to Adam: “Where are you?” Where is your soul – your windy spirit (ruach)?

This is eerily reminiscent of the story of Jonah, where we read:

“The Lord cast a mighty wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, and the ship threatened to be broken up. And the sailors were frightened, and each one cried out to his god... and Jonah went down to the ship's hold, lay down, and fell fast asleep.

“And the captain approached him and said to him, ‘Why do you sleep? Get up, call out to your God, perhaps God will think about us, and we will not perish’”⁶

⁴ Genesis 1:2.

⁵ Bereishit Rabba 2:4, 8:1.

⁶ Jonah 1:4-6.

The storm subsided only after Jonah declared that *“I am a Hebrew, and I fear the G-d of heaven, Who made the sea and the dry land”* and acknowledged that the tempest had come because he was fleeing his divine calling.⁷

9. Stalin Didn't Stop Us

Jonah's immortal words ring true today as they did then – and as they did for Adam and Eve who were trying to hide from their divine calling as well: *“For I know that, because of me, this mighty tempest is upon you.”*

Just to repeat, we don't blame natural disasters on anyone, as discussed earlier; yet we are sensitive to events around us – especially those disrupting millions of lives -- and make sure to derive their personal lessons in our own lives.

I just learned one such lesson – and a powerful one at that – from a colleague of mine in New York, who teaches a weekly Monday night Torah class. Last Monday night was, of course, during the height of the storm. So everyone assumed that the class would be cancelled. But just to make sure a few of its regular attendees texted my colleague to confirm that the class is in fact postponed.

My colleague texted them back: *“If Pharaoh [of Egypt], Nebuchadnezzar [of Babylon], Titus [of Rome], Stalin [of the Soviet Union], and Hitler didn't stop us from enduring as Jews, surely Sandy won't stop us! The class is on!”*

As you can imagine, after reading his message, everyone attended the class. (For the record, they all lived nearby and did not place themselves at risk to join the class). With the winds roaring outdoors, they learned Torah like they never learned before...

⁷Jonah 1:9-12.

With one short text my friend taught me an immortal lesson – which I believe is a priceless lesson for us all: When it comes to our eternal values as Jews nothing can stop us.

And the credit goes to Hurricane Sandy. Were it not for her raging winds, my friend and those who attended his class would not have discovered and appreciated the depth of their inner winds (spirits) and commitment.

What lessons will we learn from Sandy?

10. What Will We Learn from Sandy?

As we think about Hurricane Sandy pummeling its way across the Atlantic and then making landfall – on no less than a full moon – what messages did its furious winds bring us?

Are they howling out to us with the eternal question asked to Adam and to every human being: “Where are you?”

Or are they conveying Jonah’s enduring words: *“For I know that, because of me, this mighty tempest is upon you.”*

Are they waking us up, crying out to us, as the captain did to Jonah: *Why do you sleep?*

Or perhaps they may just be humbly reminding us – smack at the end of a billion dollar Presidential campaign – who is really in charge?

Are they a harbinger of the wind and spirit of a global revolution in spiritual consciousness (aka Moshiach)?

And will we absorb their lessons and create a spiritual storm of our own, which will bring fresh winds of spirit and growth in our own lives?

Will we then allow all our winds to join together and sweep across the universe with a new wind of divine awareness, which will finally usher in the “wind (spirit) of Moshiach” upon the water and land of our world – a world filled with divine wisdom as the waters cover the earth?⁸

⁸ Isaiah 11:9.