



DEVARIM

Ki Teitzei / Elul

Hurricane Harvey in the Month of Elul:

What is Its Message for Us?

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HURRICANE HARVEY IN THE MONTH OF ELUL WHAT IS ITS MESSAGE FOR US?

ABSTRACT

Houston, we have a problem.

In the wake of a historic storm which devastated Southern Texas this week, wreaking havoc for millions of people, with the extent of the casualties and damage still unknown – how does the Torah teach us to respond to such a disaster?

Considering that this happened in the early days of Elul, the month of compassion, which prepares us for the New Year – what compassion do we find in such catastrophe?

Can we say, as some religious fundamentalists argue, that natural disasters are a punishment for our sins? (Interestingly, these natural disasters are called “acts of G-d” by insurance companies. Apparently, when it comes to saving money G-d 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 Harvey and its powerful winds and flooding waters?

We can find the answer in the winds and storms referred to in the Torah – in the story of creation, after Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge and in the narrative of Jonah trying to escape from his divine destiny. These winds teach us a number of lessons about the winds blowing today.

1. Our Hearts and Prayers

In the wake of the historic storm which devastated Southern Texas this week, wreaking havoc for millions of people, with the extent of the casualties and damage still unknown, I want to dedicate my words today to this event.

Our hearts and prayers go out to all those that lost family or endured damage due to Hurricane Harvey. May they find the strength to recover and rebuild stronger than ever.

We cannot help but be touched by how Texans of all types mobilized to help neighbors and strangers alike, and by the outpouring of support from all over the country.

Even if many of us were not affected by the worst storm on record to ever strike that region and perhaps even the USA, 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.

Beyond the obvious offering of support and prayers to the victims, how does the Torah teach us to respond to such a disaster? What lessons do we learn from Harvey's winds and floods?

Especially as this happened in the early days of Elul, the month of compassion, which prepares us for the New Year – what compassion do we find in such catastrophe?

2. Was Harvey a Punishment?

I want to begin by first and foremost answering a question I have been asked now and in the past: whether one can say, as some religious fundamentalists argue citing Biblical statements, that natural disasters are a divine penalty for our iniquities?

Can we blame disasters on human behavior? When we suffer is G-d punishing us for our misdeeds? Or, in context of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Harvey – can we attribute it to human transgression?

So for the record, allow me to debunk this perception from the outset, stating bluntly and unequivocally: No, we have no right to declare anyone as cruel and to suggest that they have been hurt due to their transgressions.

You may then ask: How about the Torah speaking about the Great Flood brought on by G-d destroying the entire population of the world for their sins? Or G-d's destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah?

The answer is threefold: 1) In those instances all the people were utterly corrupt ("the land was filled with crime"¹), with no redeeming element, and they basically self-destructed. And those worthy were indeed spared (Noach and his family; Lot and his family). 2) G-d Himself explicitly decreed their destruction due to their crimes, as told to us in the Torah. 3) And that too was only after fair warnings that they repent and correct their ways.

In all other instances, we have no right to declare anyone as cruel and to suggest that they have been hurt due to their transgressions.

¹ Genesis 6:11.

1) We are not G-d. 2) We are not in any position to determine any community's level of corruption and what it warrants. We were not appointed as judges to make such judgments. We have enough of our issues to deal with before passing judgment on others. 3) How can anyone say that a community has no innocent and righteous people? Indeed, the fact is that there is no place on Earth devoid of good people! One can argue, that even in crime-ridden areas, the majority are fine men and women. 4) Even if someone has transgressed (and who has not?), the door of teshuva (repentance) is always open to every single person.

Bottom line: Our approach to a disaster like Hurricane Harvey is not to point fingers and blame anyone for their sins. Quite the contrary: Our response is one of love and compassion to do whatever we can to rescue and help the survivors and victims to rebuild their lives.

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 innocent people.

None of us know G-d'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 G-d 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 Harvey an Act of G-d?

But wasn't Hurricane Harvey – and any disaster – an act of G-d?

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 G-d”!

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

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 Maimonides²: *"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 Harvey 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 Harvey 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 Russians and the Chinese...

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 Harvey 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

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

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.

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.”³ A person is responsible to say that the entire world was created for me; when you save a life you save the universe.”⁴

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 G-d'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 G-d 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 (G-d forbid), we don't look to blame someone (or G-d); 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 G-d), and if you want it to stop say Amen.

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

⁴ Mishne, Sanhedrin 37a.

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 Harvey

Now let us apply this attitude to Hurricane Harvey.

Whether Hurricane Harvey affected you directly or not, it is clearly a major event that deserves our attention. In the early days of the storm The National Weather Service tweeted:

>>This event is unprecedented & all impacts are unknown & beyond anything experienced.<<

Just some statistics: The hurricane, which then turned into a tropical storm, lasted over a week, dropping over 50 inches of rain in many areas – more than the average annual rainfall for the entire Texas, breaking all US rainfall records.

[Optional, but very interesting. You can choose select lines to share with your audience]

The atmospheric physics behind Harvey's prodigious rainmaking ability were described like this by Eric Berger, a local Houstonite: A big low pressure system moves into the Texas coast, dragging a bunch of moisture with it. Usually, when big tropical systems achieve hurricane status, they have some capacity to forge their own steering currents. But when Hurricane Harvey made landfall, it ran into a ridge of high pressure over the southwestern United States. This blocked further movement.

Once inland Friday night, Harvey was essentially a marble on a flat table, wobbling around. This is a particularly bad thing for people nearby such a storm, since it essentially becomes a conveyor belt for moisture from the Gulf to coastal areas. You've got this counter-clockwise circulation hoovering up moisture from the Gulf at lower levels of the atmosphere, creating a funnel of rising air. And when warm, moist air rises, it rains. And when a storm doesn't move far from the coast, it just keeps raining—and never really stops.

Harvey came inland about 200 miles south of Houston, and the outer rain bands pushed into Houston on Saturday, setting the stage for the first of several exceptionally wet nights. Houston lies a few dozen feet above sea level, and during normal rainfall residential yards drain into streets, streets drain into bayous, and bayous carry water into Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

But this was not normal rainfall; it was extreme tropical rainfall. Meteorologists measure rainfall rates in inches per hour at a given location. A rainfall rate of 0.5 inches per hour is heavy, while anything above 2.0 inches per hour is intense (you'd probably stop your car on a highway, pull over, and wait out the passing storm). Over Clear Creek, near where I live, from 11pm to 1am that night, 10.6 inches of rain fell, about as much rainfall as New York City gets from October through December. That happened in two hours.

The next night, the heaviest band of rainfall set up over western Houston, where affluent suburbs are generally protected by two large reservoirs. The Addicks and Barker facilities were built before World War II following devastating floods in Houston. Combined they have a capacity to store about 400,000 acre-feet of water, or about the same amount of water that goes over Niagara Falls in 10 days.

The reservoirs filled up for the first time ever during Harvey, forcing the US Army Corps of engineers to release water into bayous that were already flooded, worsening conditions downstream in central Houston. Dramatically, this occurred near the very height of the storm. It seems insane, but this was the best of several bad options. Had the Corps not done this, the dam walls might have failed, leading to a catastrophic release of a wall of water as much as 100 feet high.

[End of optional section]

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

A major event like Hurricane Harvey – 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 Harvey?

The first and most obvious lesson is that this disaster brought out the best in us. Just witness how the torrential floods elicited an equally powerful torrent of good and compassion: people of all types, regardless of creed, color or beliefs, mobilizing to help neighbors, strangers, anyone. Witness the rescue efforts of so many sacrificing their own lives to save others. Witness the supplies and funds pouring in from around the country.

In stark contrast to the polarizing politics consuming the nation just a few days ago, we suddenly were united by our better angels.

When our human vulnerability and fragility was exposed by the raw elements of nature, when we looked up to heaven for the sun to reappear after days of relentless rains – when we were stripped of our comfort zones and the illusion of superficial material success – we showed, for all to see, the beautiful and compassionate people we all really are.

We may not understand why it took a devastating storm to reveal this in us, but we cannot ignore that the winds of Hurricane Harvey will always be remembered (long after rebuild) for the surge of goodness and kindness we all saw and heard.

For one week, in this compassionate month of Elul, Hurricane (or Tropical Storm) Harvey brought on winds of change – shifting the focus from our torn and divisive politics to the forces of compassion that unite us.

Hopefully, only the positive and compassionate winds of change will stay with us.

8. More Lessons from the Winds of Change

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 Caribbean seas, which will soon whimper away into oblivion somewhere in the Northeast -- which unleashed their fury over the Gulf Coast, 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:⁵ “*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.”⁶

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...

9. More 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 G-d’s voice moving about in the garden with the *wind* of the day. The man and his wife hid themselves from G-d among the trees of the garden. G-d 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)?

⁵ Genesis 1:2.

⁶ Bereishit Rabba 2:4. 8:1.

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 G-d... 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 G-d, perhaps G-d will think about us, and we will not perish’”⁷

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.⁸

10. Nothing Can 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 Houston, who spend day and night helping anyone in need. When asked why he is risking his life for others, he nonchalantly replied by text:

“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 Harvey won’t stop us! Shabbos is on!”

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 Harvey. Were it not for her raging winds, my friend, and all those working tirelessly to rescue and help others, would not have discovered and appreciated the depth of their inner winds (spirits) and commitment.

What lessons will we learn from Harvey?

⁷ Jonah 1:4-6.

⁸ Jonah 1:9-12.

11. What Will We Learn from Harvey?

As we think about Hurricane Harvey pummeling its way across the Gulf Coast and then making landfall – 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 in middle of breaking stock exchange records and breathtaking technological breakthroughs– 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?⁹

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⁹ Isaiah 11:9.