Reactions to Rabbi Cardozo's Article on Praying for the Syrian Victims

Submitted by mdangell on Fri, 01/06/2017 - 11:45

We posted an article by Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, in which he faults Orthodox synagogues for their tepid response to the tragedies going on in Syria. You can find the article on the homepage of jewishideas.org. The link is https://www.jewishideas.org/article/syria-and-scandal-our-orthodox-synagogues

We received many responses. Rabbi Shaul Robinson of New York's Lincoln Square Synagogue challenged Rabbi Cardozo's premise: "With the greatest respect, I think it would have been correct to note that the RCA sent out Rav Cherlow's email prayer to its entire membership, the OU placed it at the top of their website and many many shuls sent out the tefilah and recited it on shabbat as well."

A number of respondents expressed discomfort at the notion of praying for Syrians, when Syria has been an implacable enemy of Israel, and when Syrians are inculcated with deep and dangerous anti-Semitism.

Below is a sample of the responses we've received thus far.

Thanks for sending this, an important voice of human compassion.

I'm so perplexed by this overstated case... orthodox prayers have numerous avenues for recognizing just the travesties he references in daily prayer - in amidah alone there is the bracha asking H' to uproot various forms of evil; the "shema kolenu," which allows for interjection of a personal prayer; etc. This is a well-worn critique of the orthodox for not innovating with each new crisis or modern event but utilizing the existing format of traditional prayers to incorporate changing concerns. As an aside, it would not have mattered to me whether the churches on West End Avenue prayed for my family members in Auschwitz in the 1940s, or not, and even less whether they did so via a "special prayer," a personal one or a traditional one expanded for the purpose. It would have mattered to me if those congregants acted and spoke on behalf of my family.

Much insight shared by Rabbi Cardozo and his article.
While in orthodox public circles there is little to no mention of this crisis, there are a few orthodox Jewish individuals that are doing something very concrete about this. See below link and article about Montreal resident Mrs. Cymbalist (an orthodox Jew) and her efforts.


In 1948 there were 40000 Jews in Aleppo. The parents and grandparents of today's Alleppan refugees formed mobs to drive them out... I believe that God is punishing the Arabs for their crimes towards us to the third generation. It is hard for a Mizrachi to find sympathy for them.

I get it! However, I feel that R. Cardozo's tone is too condemning. Also, while it's appreciated that he gives a link for the tefilla to be said for the people of Aleppo; it does not appear in a format that's print ready.

In all fairness to the Orthodox Community, before the Syrian war got started, the Syrian people supported their government's effort to destroy Israel. Also several of the Syrian refugees have been involved in unrest in Europe. While Israel has offered treatment to Syrian refugees, it has not allowed them to stay in Israel and for obvious reasons. I think that most Orthodox organizations have condemned the atrocities in Syria. Beyond that and contributing to relief organizations, there is not much we can do. To pray for a people who in the past have wished to destroy the Jewish people may be asking for too much.

Today we are asked to assist refugees from Syria, are these the same men, 43 years later, who rejoiced at the mutilation of Jewish bodies? Ignorant and hateful, was it more than following orders, finding enjoyment in disrespecting the dead? Or are these Syrian refugees only victims of a hateful government like so many today? Thankful that we are not like them, that our traditions teach us to respect all humans, to respect the dead, to help those in need, and welcome the stranger as we were once strangers in Egypt. So, how much do we assist? I imagine there are some Syrian veterans from that war among the refugees, hopefully remorseful and now decent human beings. So how do we respond? Perhaps the line from Fiddler on the Roof is appropriate. May the good lord bless and keep the Syrian refugees (Czar) far away from us.

My real concern is that prayers are simply not enough!!! Even if all of us prayed 10 times a day, I don't think the realities on the ground would change. With all due respect to the Ribono shel Olam, He has let many millions of lives perish in spite of prayers. What is needed is action! Israel is doing important work providing some health care for victims, and is seeking other ways of being helpful. Various groups are also trying. But I think prayers need to be directed not only to Ribono shel Olam....but to people! Don't sit back and expect Hashem to do miracles. If we are really troubled by the terrible violence in this world, we have to follow the actions of Rabbi Heschel and others like him.
I did send my thoughts to the CKJ rabbis and got a range of replies but most in the direction of total agreement.

After that, I found this wonderful statement which I pass on to you. It is poignant for the present discussion.

"Sometimes I would like to ask God why He allows poverty, suffering and injustice when He could do something about it".

"Well, why don't you ask Him?"

"Because I'm afraid He would ask me the same question."

(author unknown)

When the Allies were bombing Germany in WW11, should we have been praying for the innocent German women and children? I don't have an answer on these issues, so I will not be praying for 'innocent' Syrians, because we don't know who they are, or if there are any.

I think that God will have to decide, without my intervention, as only He can "bochen klayot valev".

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