Earthquakes, Tsunamis, Vulnerability

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In his magnum opus, Ha'amek Davar, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin, (also called Netziv, 1817-93), the last leader of the illustrious yeshiva of Volozhin, Russia, asks why the first book of the Torah, Bereshith is also called: Sefer Hayashar, "the book of those who are upright". In his own unusual way, Netziv responds that this is due to the fact that the three patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaacov, the main figures in this book, were men of uncompromising straightforwardness, justice and mercy.

While there are many people who are perhaps righteous and even pious, the "Avoth" were even greater: Their concern for their fellow men, even those who were immoral idolaters, was almost unlimited. Avraham challenged and even bargained with God not to destroy the people of Sodom who had fallen to the lowest possible level of moral behavior. Although by the law of God they were liable to lose their lives, still Avraham did not let up and kept pleading with God to save them. (Bereshith, chapters 18-19). Yitzhak showed tremendous patience with his depraved opponents who did everything to make his life miserable but in the end he did even more to appease them than what they had even asked for (Ibid. chapter 26). Yaacov went out of his way not to hurt and even to please his father in law Laban, who had broken all the rules of decent behavior toward his son in law and had exploited him in ways which not even the

pious would be able to bear (Ibid. chapters 29-31).

This, says the Netziv, is the great trademark of the patriarchs, and as a result the book of Bereshith is also called Sefer Hayashar. True Judaism is not the kind of tradition which asks its followers to turn the other cheek, but it does demand concern for even the most foul among men as long as this does not lead to disastrous consequences. This, says Netziv, is because we have to realize that without such compassion mankind will not survive.

When contemplating the terrible disaster which struck China, and some years ago South East Asia, and the number of people killed and wounded as well as the millions of people left homeless, one is reminded of the words of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin: The obligation of Jews to shower infinite mercy on the world. This is also borne out by the fact that God commands Avraham to be "a father to all the nations" (Ibid. 17:4) which means nothing less than being a man who shows great compassion for God's creations and to be the one to whom the nations can always turn for spiritual if not for physical help. And just like Avraham is asked to be a "father to the nations" so are all Jews.

The State of Israel has gone out of its way to help victims of the tsumani and earthquake catastrophes. Besides sending rescue workers, doctors and nurses, money and food, it has asked its citizens to help financially and to do anything in their power to help out. Israelis have responded in unprecedented ways. In fact Israel's aid to tsunami victims is the highest per capita donation of any country in the world. This is even more remarkable taking into account what Israeli Jews have been through in the last years. Whatever our own tragedies, we will not forget the world at large, although a good part of the world seems to forget us--including those who now are in need of our help.

What is missing, however, is a massive and nationwide ***religious*** response. As a nation which is committed to the commandment to sanctify God's name, the religious establishment, including the Chief Rabbinate, heads of Yeshivoth and other religious Institutions are obligated to call on their people to pray for all those who are

still missing, who have lost their homes and material possessions as well as for the sick and the poor.

Synagogues should add special prayers to the daily service. Yeshivoth should organize special study sessions dedicated to all those who are suffering, and their leaders should invoke feelings of deep compassion through their sermons and mussar (ethics) sessions. A public fast day should be seriously considered, and calls for an increase in our moral and religious obligations should be heard around the country and in Jewish communities around the world. When Rabbi Israel Meir Hacohen learned of the devastating earthquake that rocked Japan in September 1923, killing many thousands of people, he took upon himself a private fast day and called on others likewise to engage in prayer and repentance.

Statements of sympathy should be published, and above all large prayer gatherings should be organized throughout the land and in communities worldwide. This is the minimum obligation of the religious community.

After all, what happened was not just a local event but a global disaster which will live on for many more years. In many ways it has already transformed our basic notions concerning our lives. For one, our conviction that we are secure in our homes and that nature is a reliable companion has been utterly shattered. There is no way we can be assured that we will still be alive in the next five minutes. A veil has been ripped away and we stand bare in front of ourselves. Ultimately our emunah, faith, has been challenged but also enhanced. From now on, we are aware that we live by Divine mercy only. As such, we are able to re-discover why many of us have decided to opt for a religious life. Religion, after all, is the art of living in wonder. It is a call to protest against taking things for granted.

The fact that parts of the world community have shown unprecedented concern for the well being of the victims is even more reason that world Jewry and even more so religious Jewry, should stand up. That this has not yet (fully) happened is disappointing and we call on all those in power to turn the tide.

Religious Jewry cannot permit itself to make the slightest impression of indifference even when it concerns those who have little in common with us and are no lovers of Israel. Religious Jews should be at the forefront of humanitarian concern notwithstanding the attitudes of the people who are in need of our help. Just as Avraham could have turned his back on the upcoming disaster in Sodom but did not do so, so religious Jewry should demonstrate its religious duty to help and show compassion in every way possible. To do anything else is contrary to Jewish authentic teachings.

Jewish religious leaders should send a message to all of the people of Israel and not less to all of mankind, that the time has come to realize that the world is a different place than we imagine it to be. While there are moral and religious values which are worth fighting for, we often focus on our physical pleasures, our need for honor and often extreme comfort, our hates and loves, that are not worth the time and energy that we spend on them. In our vulnerability, we mature and become aware of what is important and what is not. To make ourselves and others aware of this is also our task as “a father to the nations”.

Instead of trying to discover textual hints for these disasters in biblical or kabbalistic texts, (which mostly is fanciful speculation and wishful thinking), religious Jewry should act with great responsibility and show that we have not forgotten their duty toward all of mankind. This would increase respect for the Jewish Tradition throughout the world, and no greater sanctification of God’s name could be achieved.

We have not yet fully understood our responsibility in this matter. We are still too much stuck in the sandbank in which we have maneuvered ourselves. This is not only true about hareidi Orthodoxy but also about modern Orthodoxy. It is time that in an unprecedented move, our religious leadership should lead the ship of the Torah and its moral teachings into the center of the world community. What is needed is a moral religious uproar which will shake mankind’s and our own indifference. It is the task of the Jewish people and its religious leadership together to join with others to make this happen. Only then can we properly call ourselves the children of Avraham Avinu. May the Holy One blessed be He have mercy on all victims and may He bring healing to all human suffering.