Jewish Theology of Disaster and Recovery

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A Jewish theology of disaster response and recovery is grounded in 5,770 years of Jewish communal practice and thought. The texts, practices, and values of Jewish life inform both how we frame and meet needs of individuals after disaster.

The Jewish religious conscience is in a constant state of what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel[1] called "radical amazement." Radical amazement is the fullness of presence in the moment. The observant Jew has only one response to that sense of fullness: to recite a blessing, a *bracha*, acknowledging the privilege of being in the moment as one of God's creations. There are blessings to be uttered for every moment, every activity of the day. Each *bracha* gives voice to the individual's awareness that he or she is a mere speck in the universe and yet has the privilege to be alive, to be part of God's handiwork – indeed, to be a brushstroke on the canvas of Creation. Each of us has it in our power to determine the size and color and fineness of that brushstroke by our actions and the relationships we build. For the Jew, life is lived in relationship to God and others.

Jewish theology begins with Creation.[2] In the beginning God created the universe and everything that is in it. According to our tradition the beginning was just that – only a beginning, as Creation was not yet complete. We human beings are intended to be God's partners and are responsible for serving as stewards of the earth's resources to harness its energies. We do not live for ourselves but with a profound sense of responsibility, obligation, and gratitude for the gift of life. We strive to praise the Creator of the universe by acting in ways that bring benefit to fellow beings, to the land, air, and waterways – all of God's creation.

At the same time, we are aware that every action is fraught with consequences, whether intended or not. We take responsibility for our actions and inactions, realizing that passing the buck or blaming others is counterproductive. Each of us is constantly called to make choices; indeed, redemption is found in the choices we make. In his book *Have a Little Faith*, Mitch Albom quotes Rabbi Albert Lewis who said, "Faith is about doing, not believing." In the pivotal moment of revelation at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people asserted, "*Naase v'nishma*; we will do and we will listen!"[3]

As a distinct people, those who stood at Mount Sinai chose to accept in perpetuity the rule of law established by the Divine. Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy,"[4] is followed by 36 verses that explain in concrete terms what it means to be holy. Holiness in the marketplace means to use honest weights and measures. Holiness in social relationships is not putting a stumbling block before the blind or cursing the deaf. Honoring one's parents is an act of holiness, as is keeping the Sabbath.

The Hebrew word *Avodah* means both "work" and "worship." We serve God by nurturing the earth, caring for humanity, and leaving the world in a better condition than the way we found it. For the Jew, that work is in the here and now.

There is a beautiful prayer that is recited every day of the year: "*Elokai neshama natata bi tehorah hee* – Oh, Holy One, you gave me my soul and it is pure."[5] How astonishing to wake up each morning knowing everyday that there is an opportunity for a new beginning, and that the soul is pure! How can that be? Each day we have an opportunity to sweep away the metaphoric debris of our wrongdoings from the day before. How? Through our actions. We can apologize for the wrong done to another;

we can complete an unfinished task; we can speak out for justice for the marginalized among us; we can feed the hungry; we can look inward to find what still needs attention so that we can begin each day anew.

Jewish prayer calls us to action. It shows us the ideal and then makes us ask this question: "If this is the ideal, but our reality is far different, then why?" We see the bounty supplied by God, yet there is so much want in the world. Hebrew prayer compels us to ask, "What are we doing about this?" In the rabbinic tractate, *Ethics of the Sages*, we are told, *"Al tifrosh min ha-tzibor* –Do not separate yourself from the community."[6] This community is not defined narrowly; Jewish law commands that we respond wherever there is need, and all the better if we can do so in the company of others. Rabbi Marshall Meyer said, "Silence is deadly!" in the face of need. He continues, "If you accept the Bible, then human rights is an obligation. You cannot take the thrust of the biblical literature and keep quiet." [7]

And so Jewish text and practice challenge us – how can we remain silent in the aftermath of disaster?

Yet, when we respond to a disaster our first reactions to the sight of so much devastation and need are speechlessness and helplessness. We Americans have come to expect quick fixes; we find it difficult to fathom what it will take for people to rebuild their lives and the complex ways the disaster will affect their lives for many years, if not a lifetime.

Jews who witness the aftermath of disaster come to understand the concept of radical amazement. What blessing is said at this time? "*Baruch dayan ha emet* – God is the true judge."[8] This does not mean that we accuse God of causing the disaster to punish

the wicked. It means that good and bad happen in life. Death and destruction are not signs of life's failure; they are invitations for us to rise to our highest levels of compassion and concern. They provide an opportunity to reach out to each other to provide support, realizing that we cannot take away the devastation, but we can ameliorate it somewhat. We thank God for giving us the opportunity to experience the fullness of life. Gratitude compels us to respond by being of help to those in need. (Whenever I recite this blessing I become aware of how vulnerable I am and how unpredictable life can be.)

For the chaplain in the field, this response is the theology of Presence. Words do not have to be said – giving a bottle of water to a thirsty person speaks volumes about not being forgotten. Maintaining a calm presence at the bedside does not remove fear; it lessens isolation. To be with a person at a time of need is to honor the survivor's humanity, the inherent dignity endowed by the Creator. Teaching others how to be present and how to listen to those in distress is a divine-like intervention that spreads the safety net of care and concern.

Why do we train responders in all parts of the country, even in areas seemingly immune from natural disasters? We do so because the ones who respond to the call today might be in need at another time. Our patriarch Joseph teaches us a lesson in Genesis[9]. In the years of abundance, Joseph stored grain in anticipation of famine yet to happen. The population did not starve during the famine because of his diligent preparations. The biblical text does not say that only certain people were fed; rather, all were provided for. However, in disaster response no single organization can possibly provide for all, as Joseph did. Collaboration is essential in disaster response[10].

The first task of disaster response is to provide for the essentials of safety, food, medical care, and shelter. We first save lives and eliminate imminent dangers such as exposed electrical wires. Then long-term recovery, the next phase of disaster response, begins, when we must attend to the soul's aches by being a companion and listening to its psychological and spiritual cries. This is the time when people begin to realize the magnitude of what has happened. Euphoria at having survived wears off and terror sets in, colored by the uncertainty of what lays ahead. Ambiguity looms like a fog.

At this time, survivors are dependent on others to provide them serious and sensitive attention, for individuals cannot heal their soul wounds by themselves, especially if they feel forgotten, alone, or abandoned. Such feelings may arise when the media turn their attention elsewhere. Isolation can impede the capacity to recover.

In this context, Jewish mourning and bereavement ritual inform a pattern of response. Three thousand years ago[11], rabbinic sages recognized that there were distinct phases in the grief and bereavement process and they shaped Jewish practice accordingly. They gave community an important role in this process.[12] After someone dies, the community is called into action: some will prepare the body for Jewish burial, others will prepare food for the mourners, and they and others will visit the mourner.

The first phase of mourning occurs during the time between death and burial. Attention is fully focused on honoring the deceased, as burial arrangements are made. The mourner is in shock, so that even obligatory prayer is suspended. Community members accompany the mourner to the cemetery and participate in the burial by placing earth into the grave.

The second phase of bereavement begins when the mourner returns home for a week of *shiva*[13] in which the community provides for all the mourner's needs. The rabbis recognized that it is human nature to pull away from contact with death. They knew that people would be reluctant to spend time with the mourner; might be at a loss about how to comfort; might even experience an awakening to their own mortality. The rabbis provided structured activities for community members so that they could be true companions to the mourners. Through those activities mourners would not be left alone. The community comforts the mourner so that the hard work of grieving can begin.

The third phase begins when the mourner opens the front door at the completion of *shiva*, crosses the threshold, and takes the first hesitant steps into what for them is a radically changed world. A friend accompanies the mourner for a walk around the block; the walk is symbolic of reentry into society. This phase ends with the completion of a year in which the absence of the loved one is marked liturgically through recitation of the Kaddish prayer[14].[15] The fourth phase of mourning stretches across a lifetime as the mourner adjusts to life with a new paradigm. It will unfold as the mourner's world evolves.

The underlying theme of all four phases of mourning is that they are all done within community. Though grief is singular and individual, mourning is communal.

The disaster response and recovery model practiced in the United States today is based on the same principles that underlie Jewish mourning practices. For responders to function effectively, they need to have clearly defined roles and expectations. Preparation is the key to being able to provide calm, focused support.

Because no two disasters are the same (and people have very different responses to disaster), the responder must focus on being present in such a way that the recipient feels heard, attended to, and cared about. He/she is not alone, not forgotten. We are walking them around the block and back into society, into their new world. By doing so, we will be partners with God, leaving them in a better condition.

Another important Jewish value informs disaster response. On the seventh day of Creation, God rested from the previous six days of work.[16] In Hebrew, *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) means rest. Jews observe *Shabbat* once a week, every week of the year. We purposely abstain from labor and carve time out from the week to pray, study, and be with family and friends. The religious mandate is to observe the Sabbath from Friday night at sunset through Saturday night after sunset. But it has become accepted practice to extend the joy of Shabbat to a period prior to sunset on Friday and beyond sunset on Saturday evening. It is a time for restoration and renewal – for a *shavat vayinafash*,[17] a rest so complete that it satisfies on spiritual, physical, emotional, and soulful levels. Indeed, Shabbat is a vacation once a week.

However, saving a life is even more sacred than observing the restrictions of Shabbat.[18] In the aftermath of an earthquake, for example we must clear away the debris from collapsed buildings to save the people trapped underneath.

Just as saving another's life is sacred, so too, is preserving one's own. Taking a Sabbath from the work of response and recovery enables responders to take a break, to observe an oasis in time. Resting is an important form of self-care.[19] It can mean physically moving away from the site, turning off the phone, reading for pleasure, taking walks, or just relaxing. Having a buddy system enables colleagues to check in on each

other and to make it possible for them to take a break. Without self-care, burnout is highly likely.

The Jewish theology of disaster response and recovery is shaped by Jewish practice and Jewish values. The work is integrated into a worldview consistent with a relationship with God through our relationships with our fellow humans on earth.

Endnotes

[1] *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001.

[2] Genesis 1:1-2:4, *Etz Hayim: Torah Commentary*, the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Jewish Publication Society, 2001, pp, 3–12.

[3] Exodus 19:8, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, p. 438

[4] Leviticus 19:2 *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, p.693.

[5] *Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for the Sabbath, Festivals and Weekdays*, Rabbi Jules Harlow, Editor; The Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of America, 1985, p. 8.

[6] "Teachings of the Sages, Chapter 2:5," *Siddur Sim Shalom*, pp. 612–613.

[7] Rabbi Marshall Meyer was the leader of the Argentine Jewish community from 1959 to 1985, and his leadership was particularly effective during the Reign of Terror, 1976-1983. "A protégé of [the American spiritual and moral leader Rabbi] Abraham Joshua Heschel, Meyer founded the first Conservative rabbinical seminary (*Seminario Rabbinico*) in Latin America (later renamed in his honor) and the unprecedented Bet El, a synagogue rooted in the Prophetic Tradition and Liberation Theology." *A Different Light: the Big Book of Hanukkah*, editors Noam Zion & Barbara Spectre, p 272.

[8] "Berakhot [blessings] for Various Occasions," *Siddur Sim Shalom*, pp. 712–713.

[9] Genesis 41ff, *Etz Hayim*, pp. 250ff.

[10] "The four C's: Cooperation, Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration," *Light Our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster for Disaster Response Volunteers, First Responders, and Disaster Planners.* Rev. Kevin Massey, BCC, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), 2006, www.nvoad.org p. 2.

[11] *The Tractate Mourning Semahoṯ: Regulations Relating to Death, Burial, and Mourning*, Rabbi Dov Zlotnick, Yale Judaica Series, Vol. XVII, Yale University Press, 1966.

[12] Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *Consolation: A Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*, Jewish Publication Society, 2004;
Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning: Death is a Night That Lies Between Two Days*, Jonathan David Publishing, 1990;
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, MeOtzar HoRav, KTAV, 2003:
Rabbi Chaim Binyamin Goldberg, *Mourning in Halachah: The Laws and Customs of the Year of Mourning*, Artscroll, 1991;
Hyman E. Goldin, *HaMadrickh: The Rabbi's Guide A Manual of Jewish Religious Rituals, Ceremonials and Customs,* 1939.

[13] Mourners observe seven days following burial in which community comforts them. The Hebrew word *Shiva* comes from the Hebrew word for "seven".

[14] The *Kaddish* prayer is an Aramaic doxology in which hope is expressed that God's great name will be sanctified in the whole world. Originally it was recited at the completion of a scholarly teaching, in memory of beloved rabbis, and eventually became the closing signature to sections of prayer and in one form is the prayer mourners recite at each memorial occasion. *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, Rabbi Louis Jacobs, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp 297-298.

[15] *Siddur Sim Shalom*, (some not all) pp. 20, 94, 158, 162
[16] Genesis 2:1-4, *Etz Hayim*, pp 11–12.
[17] Exodus 31:16-17, *Etz Hayim*, p. 529.
[18] Based on biblical text: "Neither shall you stand by the blood of your neighbor" Lev. 19:16, *Etz Hayim*, p. 696. Halachic discussion (Jewish religious law, Talmud): *Yoma* 82a, *Ketubot* 19a, *Kiddushin* 8b, *Shabbat* 132a
[19] *Compassion Fatigue: Coping With Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder In Those Who Treat The Traumatized* (Routledge Psychosocial Stress Series), Charles Figley.

Biography

Rabbi Myrna Matsa is the Rabbinic Pastoral/Trauma Counselor Hurricane Katrina Relief in the New Orleans, Baton Rouge and the Biloxi/Gulfport Region. She works closely with Jewish and non-Jewish religious leaders and also laypeople along the Gulf Coast and provides direct pastoral services during reconstruction and recovery. She also serves as a Jewish referral resource while interacting with various mental health associations, disaster response organizations, and other organizations. She was sent by the New York Board of Rabbis in partnership with the Jewish Federations of North America.

Rabbi Matsa has served as a congregational rabbi, both as senior rabbi in a small southern congregation and as an assistant in a large Midwestern synagogue. She has earned a Doctor of Ministry degree, which brings together psychology and theology. Her thesis was: "The Impact of Bereavement on the Emotional and Spiritual Life of Jews by Choice." Having Clinical Pastoral Education credentials, she has worked in a variety of medical settings: hospice, psychiatric hospital, cancer hospital, and nursing homes.

She has dedicated her life to helping people who have been at the margins of society: protecting children's rights, affordable housing issues, advocacy for homeless individuals and families, and working with people struggling with substance abuse and domestic violence. She has served on the Ethics Committee of such prestigious hospital systems as Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, NY and Mission-St. Joseph in Asheville, NC and nursing homes.

Rabbi Matsa brings her knowledge of loss and bereavement to the work of recovery on the Gulf Coast.