Tora Reflections on Tsunamis, New Years and the Human Condition

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We all have a tendency to view the world as well as whatever we may be thinking about and/or studying through the lens of situations and quandaries that are preoccupying us over the past several weeks and days. Ever since last Sunday, when walls of ocean water devastated the inhabitants of numerous islands and coastlines throughout Southeast Asia, it is difficult to remove from our minds the images and first-hand accounts that scream out at us from various news media. Particularly with regard to disasters that affect our fellow human beings, such a response and perspective are natural and entirely appropriate in order that we properly empathize with the sufferings of others and try to make every effort to offer them assistance in their time of dire need. The metaphor in this week's Haftora read in Ashkenazic congregations, (Yeshayahu 28:2) comparing God's Wrath to "a flood of mighty waters overflowing" takes on a new sense of immediacy and visceral reality in the wake of the mighty havoc-wreaking tsunami of this past week.

In a Reuter's article appearing in the New York Times on December 31st, entitled "White Roses, Candles Bring in Solemn New Year" (http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/international/international-quake-newyear.html) the sobering effects of the recent disaster upon usually boisterous celebrations marking the secular New Year are described. Particularly those countries whose citizens have been directly affected by the calamities either as native inhabitants or tourists and visitors, realize that it would be inappropriate to proceed with merrymaking as if nothing has happened, despite elaborate planning, significant expenditures and long-standing traditions. Ironically, this year's secular New Year's observances in the many communities and nations touched by the recent monumental tragedy appear to be much closer in spirit to traditional Jewish themes that mark our commemoration of Rosh HaShana. While Rosh HaShana is approached as a joyous holiday in certain respects—e.g., the occasion is marked by elaborate meals and the wearing of newly-purchased clothing—there is at the same time an air of restraint and even dread regarding our individual fates that are hanging in the balance on "Yom HaDin" (the day of judgment). R. Yosef Karo, in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 597:1, 2 immediately after stating that it is inappropriate to fast on Rosh HaShana, mentions that one should avoid satiating him/herself, and that, in fact, in certain communities, it is customary to fast, reflecting the need to acknowledge that there is a difference between Rosh

HaShana on the one hand, and the three harvest festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot on the other. Furthermore, S.A., O.C. 584:1 notes that Hallel, the prayer associated with giving thanks for having been miraculously saved from some calamity, is not recited on Rosh HaShana, given that our lives have not been guaranteed for the following year. This is also the reason for saying the supplication "Avinu Malkeinu" (our Father, our King), liturgically indicating that we must plead for our personal survival and salvation.

Learning about the practices and customs that are associated with New Year's in various societies and cultures—see e.g., "New Years Celebrations Around the World" (http://www.hallmark.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/ProductDisplay?catalogId=10001&productId=542857&CatIDsList=3%3B11476%3B37552)—suggest that many of these folk rituals are designed to try to "magically" insure that the coming year will be happy and successful. In Spain, the custom is to try to eat 12 grapes simultaneously as the clock strikes midnight, in order to guarantee good luck during the upcoming year, while in Scotland if the first visitor to one's home in the New Year is a tall dark stranger bearing a lump of coal, this is considered a particularly good omen for the future. The widespread practice of drinking alcoholic beverages to the point of inebriation also may indicate a desire to obliterate past, present and future difficult realities, rather than confronting them and trying to initiate constructive change. Judaism's approach to the advent of the Jewish New Year appears to be that the only significant and substantive means by which to try to improve one's prospects for next year is by responding constructively and introspectively to any personal shortcomings that we recognize as having beset us during the year that has just been completed. At the conclusion of the most unsettling liturgical poem "U'Netaneh Tokef", wherein we recite on Rosh HaShana and Yom HaKippurim an inventory of potential disasters and problems that could affect any and all of us, including "who will pass away by water", we proclaim, "By means of prayer, repentance and charity can we divert the evil decree." Next year will hopefully be a better year only if we proactively look to make ourselves better. The secular practice to undertake New Year's Resolutions would appear to parallel the stage of repentance designated as "Kabbala Al HaAtid" (resolve regarding the future). But in all likelihood, a Resolution that is not proceeded by "HaKarat HaChet" (recognizing the error of one's ways), "Vidui" (a verbalization of such a recognition), and "Charata" (emotional regret for not having acted properly) will ultimately be ineffectual since the individual making the resolution has not grappled with the deep reasons for why the resolution has become necessary in the first place.

Aside from the natural tendency to temper joyous celebrations in the face of severe and widespread tragedy, the more fundamental existential issue of the effects that such a calamity may have on people's overall belief in God, is addressed to some extent by Peter Steinfels in his Beliefs column in the January 1st edition of the New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/01national/01beliefs.html?oref=loginn&n=Top%2fNews%2fWashington%2fCampaign%202004%2fCandidates) By way of introduction to the question of theological doubt precipitated by natural disasters, Steinfels references a paper by Darren E. Sherkat, a sociologist at Southern Illinois University, who, based upon a number of social surveys, concludes that wholehearted and unmitigated belief in God is less prevalent among Americans than is usually assumed. As opposed to the generally held supposition that 9 out of 10 American adults possess an untroubled faith in a personal God, Sherkat argues that the figure is closer to only 2 out of 3. Specifically with respect to Jews, the percentages indicate even more extensive doubt and denial. Sherkat reported that "only 27 percent had no doubts about their belief in God, 21 percent believed despite doubts, 16 percent believed in an impersonal 'higher power', and an additional 22 percent of Jews declared themselves agnostic". Assuming that the conclusions have been properly drawn from data accurately collected, such statistics in their own right should be of concern to the Jewish community as a whole, and have implications with respect to how each of us thinks about HaShem, and the degree to which we should take an active role in strengthening such belief on our own parts as well as with respect to members of our families, communities and people.

Steinfels then points out that with respect to the recent disaster in South East Asia religious individuals and institutions are currently preferring to deal with the challenges of providing aid and comfort to the survivors as well as those who have suffered grievous losses, rather than directly grappling with the theological difficulties raised by these circumstances. He nevertheless notes, "Questioning cannot be avoided, however, and eventually religious thinkers and doubters will be heard alongside the experts on earthquakes, warning systems and emergency assistance."

One individual for whom such questioning appears to have already led to the conclusion that the universe is devoid of a Supreme, Caring Deity is David Brooks, Op-Ed columnist for the New York Times in an article entitled, "A Time to Mourn" (http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/01/opinion/01brooks.html?oref=login&pagewanted=print&position). He writes, "If you listen to the discussion of the tsunami this past week, you receive the clear impression that the meaning of this event is that there is no meaning. Humans are not the universe's main

concern. We're just gnats on the crust of the earth. The earth shrugs and 140,000 gnats die, victims of forces far larger and more permanent than themselves."

By virtue of the strong emphasis found in traditional Jewish belief upon personal human free choice as a pillar of Judaism, (see RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Teshuva, Chapts. 5-6), we most assuredly should not look upon ourselves or our fellow human beings as gnats. In fact, Brooks' identification of people with gnats calls to mind a Midrash towards the beginning of Beraishit Rabba (8:1) that advances a different perspective:

> R. Shimon ben Lakish said: …If a person is deserving/fulfills his/her responsibilities, we say to him, "You are greater than even the Serving Angels." And if s/he is not deserving, we say to him, "The fly is superior to you, the GNAT is superior to you...."

Jewish tradition therefore posits that even the lowly fly and gnat have a purpose within the overall creation, as does mankind. The difference between us and other life forms, however, is that whereas the insects and angels fulfill their responsibilities without the possibility of opting to diverge from HaShem's Master Plan, human beings can decide for themselves the extent to which they comply or don't comply with God's Will. If man in general and Jews in particular are able to freely choose to do great things, then they truly deserve the credit, much more so than even the most powerful creature who unthinkingly and automatically is preprogrammed to carry out a single task, however redeeming and important that mission or activity may be. On the other hand, should man fail to live up to his/her promise, then s/he is deemed inferior compared to even the most insignificant parts of creation which when all is said and done is precisely fulfilling the purpose for which it was created. Consequently gnats we definitely are not, but rather either heroically much more, or regrettably much less.

What cannot be contested, however, is the awesome power of the "earth's shrug" that gave rise to so much death and destruction last week. Aldous Huxley, in his essay "Wordsworth in the Tropics" (Collected Essays, Bantam Books, New York, 1966, pp. 1-10) notes that for good Wordsworthians, "a walk in the country is the equivalent of going to church, a tour through Westmoreland is as good as a pilgrimage to Jerusalem." The ethereal beauty of nature that is immortalized by William Wordsworth throughout his poems, is epitomized by his paean to Daffodils, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww260.html).

I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze…

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Huxley posits that the reason for Wordsworth's love of nature is due to his living in England with its numerous manicured gardens, and carefully tended flower beds. Had the poet resided for instance in the Amazon rain forest, the essayist speculates, the aspects of nature depicted in his poems would probably have been of a different, more ominous, terrifying type. Such an idea does not deny the existence of natural beauty; yet it is important to acknowledge that nature's beautiful dimensions coexist side by side with abundant terrors and brutal ugliness. Perhaps this darker side of nature is precisely what RaMBaM intends by his comment in Hilchot Yesodei HaTora 2:2 concerning how one can develop a sense of the fear/awe of God. After asserting that at first glance, one is attracted to love God as a result of the wondrous, aesthetic qualities of the Creation, RaMBaM writes,

> And when one reflects upon these things (the vast array of objects and life forms that comprise nature and the universe), immediately s/he stumbles backwards and is fearful and realizes that s/he is a tiny, lowly, imperfect creature, endowed with extremely miniscule intelligence standing before the Perfect Mind.

RaMBaM may not only be referring to how small one may feel when gazing out at the Grand Canyon or looking at a starry sky on a clear evening; reflecting upon the power and devastation caused by phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis similarly fill us with trepidation and concern and a realization of how ultimately not in control of our fates we truly are. And according to one Talmudic perspective, that is exactly the point. The Talmud in Berachot 59a states:

> Said R. Alexandrei in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi:
> Thunder was created for no other reason than to straighten out the

crookedness of the heart, as it is said, (Kohelet 3:14) "And HaShem has so Made it so that men should fear from before Him."

If a powerful thunderstorm can strike "the fear of God" in one's heart, how much more so is this true about the disaster that struck South East Asia last Sunday. It is events like these that people often say "give them perspective". When someone has a narrow brush with death, when they fortunately recover from an illness or an accident, when someone returns from a dangerous mission, when a terror threat turns out to be a false alarm, let alone when confronted with a catastrophe that actually takes place, some suddenly gain a sense of what is truly important in their lives, and what is less so. Issues that we may just recently have thought to be so absolutely vital to our continued happiness suddenly seem absurd when considered along with what some individuals are currently being forced to cope with—the loss of loved ones, the loss of a home, the loss of all of one's possessions, the inability to obtain even a small amount of uncontaminated drinking water for one's child, for oneself.

Living in a world that is fraught with physical and spiritual challenges should not come as a surprise to those conversant with the Bible. God Tells Adam that the world to which humanity is being banished after their idyllic respite in the Garden of Eden would be harsh and difficult. (Beraishit 3:17-19) "…cursed is the earth for your sake. In sorrow shall you eat of it all of the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you…By the sweat of your face shall you eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you will return."Consequently we learn of the difficulties of the human condition from the time we study the opening verses of Beraishit. And not only do we recognize that life will be hard in terms of coping with nature; in the very next chapter (Beraishit 4) we read about the first murder, and by extension the dangers that we ourselves pose to the continued and long-lasting existences of one another. However threatening and destructive a natural disaster can be, there has been nothing in the history of the world to compare to the persistent, organized and ideologically driven extermination of 6,000,000 Jews @60 years ago. R. Chanina Segan HaKohanim was not exaggerating when he stated (Avot 3:2) that human beings are capable of swallowing one another alive, reflecting a level of cruelty and viciousness unique to our species.

We must respond to intimations and insinuations of our fragility and mortality, driven home to us by the latest pictures and reports emanating from the awesome and terrifying tsunami, by actualizing each of our potentials for heroism, greatness, Godliness, and demonstrating our concern for those in need, helping as much as we can, and thereby making the most of this opportunity to once again express our indomitable human spirit in the face of

disaster, death and destruction, as mankind has done for as long as we have walked the earth.