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TSUNAMI & REED SEA THEOLOGY

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We found ourselves in the past few weeks considering a number of theological questions related to recent and ancient events that involve walls of water.

The recent event, of course, was the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004. What makes this event a particularly incomprehensible tragedy is not the large number of deaths per se, but that so many apparently innocent people died needlessly and in such an unexpected, heartbreaking manner. Many commentators we've heard, including several who identify themselves religiously, have described the outcome as one of inexplicable suffering.

The main theological conclusions we've heard are either that, on the one hand, the tsunami was another instance of nature running amok, taking no notice of human life; or, on the other hand, God taking no notice of either nature or human life. In the first instance, the implicit perspective is that "God" is a figment of overactive religious imagination and nature simply a "physical force" that operates by its own, self-contained rules, entirely independent of human affairs. In the second instance, the implicit point of view is that God is active in the world, but is not masterminding the forces of nature or, if He is, it's not with any connection to the moral behavior of humankind. The nearly universal conviction seems to be that science compels us to reach one of these two conclusions.

Let's segue now to ancient events, which also convey images of great walls of water and drowning victims. The events at the Reed Sea present a different theological problem, however—not the indifference of God and nature, but a scriptural narrative that describes the active intervention of God to control nature and to ensure the survival of innocents and the death of evil-doers. The modern

mind, influenced by the scientific method and outlook, doesn't look kindly on this story either.

If we assume that the salvation of the mixed multitude at the Reed Sea is essentially historical fact, how do we explain it? Did God act through nature to save the innocent and punish the wicked? Or was nature operating simply as a blind but fortuitous force?

Is it anymore conceivable for us to believe in a God who controls nature at the Reed Sea in response to human morality than to believe in a God who seems indifferent to human morality by loosing a tsunami or at least relinquishing any influence over it?

So these two historically discontinuous events present a similar challenge, which is to understand God's role in the workings of nature, and the relationship of nature to human affairs.

Science tells us that neither God's control of nature nor nature as responsive to human behavior is *verifiable*—which, of course, is not the same as saying they're impossible. And since we don't treat science as religion, we have no expectation that science knows everything or that everything can be known by science.

Our wisdom tradition conveys a very different understanding. When we read in the Torah (Exodus 6:2) that God speaks to Moses and says, "I am Adonai," we understand this to mean that God is masterminding all of creation, regardless of any particular conditions or circumstances, irrespective of all momentary appearances. We reject the idea that the creation is operating haphazardly and at random, thus ironically aligning ourselves with the implicit assumptions of modern science and cosmology. We recognize the constant application of a "Divine Intelligence," a systematic management of the creation that is far beyond our powers of observation, insight, and understanding. In effect, our God

proclaims to us that He has free will and can change the course of natural and human history.

And from this understanding of God comes the parallel understanding that we—created in the image of God, wedded to the will of God, beginning with mattan Torah, the giving and receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai—have the capacity to free ourselves from the chains of materialism and from indifference to human pain and suffering.

But how can we affirm the existence of a compassionate and just God in the face of so much needless and undeserved suffering?

The problem is far more challenging than the Holocaust conundrum, because at first blush we have no evil-doers culpable for the tsunami, only the apparently “blind forces” of nature. And that point of view suggests that the Creator and Mastermind of all creation has abandoned His work, because His purposes and processes are either beyond our comprehension or too shocking for our sensibilities. Consider as an analogy, however, that the most loving parents understand that much of what they must do in creating the world in which their children live and learn is not only to provide rewarding experiences, but also painful educational lessons when their children fail to acquire critical knowledge and skills. Our relationship with God, on the face of it, entails similar educational contingencies for our behavior, natural consequences for our indifference to Torah’s demands for righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness.

The problem we have with this understanding is that we believe innocents should not suffer. But it’s precisely the innocence of the victims that points to the nature of the evil at work in the world. The tragic consequences of the tsunami are, for all practical purposes, no different than the death of a mother and child who are crushed when a building that doesn’t meet current earthquake standards collapses in an earthquake. In such instances there are public officials and private owners who at best are guilty of civil nonfeasance and at worst of criminal malfeasance.

How many of the deaths from tsunamis are actually avoidable?

What we know with certainty is that the massive loss of life on December 26 was largely preventable. A tsunami warning system is not a new or untested idea. Formal international arrangements establishing the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWS), geared to tsunamis that pose a Pacific-wide threat, were concluded in 1965—40 years ago! The PTWS is an alliance of 26 member-states. The system incorporates extensive means to communicate watch, warning, and information bulletins to emergency officials and the general public, thus ensuring timely evacuation.

Not surprisingly, several reputable scientists have noted that the absence of an equivalent tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean was the principal cause of the large loss of life. In fact, had such a system been in place, it’s likely that residents on the coasts of Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka would have had two to three hours warning. One expert from India stated: “There’s no reason for a single individual to get killed in a tsunami. The waves are totally predictable.”¹ Although in this instance, even with a warning system in place, northern Sumatra would have had only 15 minutes to evacuate.

The frequency of so-called “natural disasters” has increased from about 100 per year in the early 1960s to as many as 500 per year by the early 2000’s, according to Daniel Sarewitz, a profession of science and society at Arizona State University. But it’s not that earthquakes, tsunamis, and other calamities have become stronger or more regular. “What has changed is where people live and how they live there. As new technology allows, or as poverty demands, rich and poor alike have pushed into soggy flood plains or drought-ridden deserts, built on impossibly steep slopes, and created vast, fragile cities along fault lines that tremble with alarming frequency. In that sense, catastrophes are as much the result of human choices as they are of geology or hydrology.”²

According to Dr. Kerry Sieh, a seismologist at the California Institute of Technology, “The difference between rich and poor countries . . . was that the rich ones had improved their building techniques and their political systems to deal with inevitable disasters.”³

Needless to say, whatever the costs of organizing and installing a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean, they are miniscule next to the costs of salvaging lives and property after the fact. Consider that Mozambique, anticipating major flooding in 2002, sought \$2.7 million from international donor organizations to make emergency preparations. It received half that amount. After the flood those same organizations committed \$550 million in emergency assistance, rehabilitation, and reconstruction financing.

The primary barrier to implementing such a system has not been cost per se or technology, but poverty and government instability in the hardest hit nations. Such a warning system requires international cooperation, and these impoverished countries, given their continual struggle for existence and survival, often are distrustful of other nations.

It should also be noted that peoples of indigenous cultures have repeatedly demonstrated that they possess methods capable of forewarning them of imminent disasters from the sea. Although, unforgivably, such knowledge has often been suppressed by imperial and colonial governments.

Our tradition holds that the outcome of events at the Reed Sea, not unlike the recent tsunami, were the responsibility of both God and the people. Moses initially believed that God would save the people without any effort or initiative on their part. But the Torah and many of our commentators make it clear that while God was capable of opening the sea and making a path on dry land for the people to pass over and escape from the Egyptians, they would *first* have to bring themselves to the edge of the sea and then go forward into it.

As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches: “Indeed the salvation is still dependent on the people, the first step must be taken by them, they must first show themselves deserving of salvation by a courageous, fearless act, cheerfully showing their trust in God. Let them break camp and unconcernedly march into the sea; *then* God will start his salvation.” (Hirsch commentary on Exodus 14:14. Emphasis in original.)

The theological question is whether our God is bound by the forces of nature or, unlike the heathen gods, has not only created the forces of nature but manages the laws that govern them, with the power to suspend or transform those laws at will. It is the fact of this overarching power that we implicitly recognize when we describe chaos and the seeming disintegration of order in the natural world. Such an understanding of God compels us to accept that neither the tsunami nor the opening of the Reed Sea was the result of nature’s “blind force” but part and parcel of the Divine Masterminding of the creation.

If this God of nature and humankind seems too harsh and too kind by turns, given our modern sensibilities and scientific outlook, we have several choices:

- We can exculpate our loving God, thereby enfeebling Him. In effect, we can say that our God had nothing to do with these events, thus redefining God as One Who does not bind nature but is bound by it.

Of course, if God has no free will, then what’s to be said of the free will of humankind created in the image of God?

- We can indict God, thereby proclaiming Him unworthy of our love and devotion. That is, we can effectively say that God had the power to

prevent the tsunami but is indifferent to human pain and suffering.

Of course, if God is not compassionate and just, then what model shall provide the universal basis for our own commitment to compassion and justice?

- Or we can accept that God’s masterminding of the world, the Divine purposes and processes, are not for us to understand but to accept as moral challenges.

And, of course, such acceptance requires that we forego the arrogant self-delusion that we, not God, control the forces of nature and history that shape our destiny.

As we have learned from Rabbi Hirsch: “The Jewish conception of God . . . considers God as the completely free Master over His work, Whose creations do not outgrow His control. It was in the cessation of a plague at God’s command, and in the differentiation between Egypt and Goshen [Exodus 9:26] that, above all, God showed Himself. No other Power can gain control once the elements have been unchained. [Exodus 8:9, 8:27, 9:33, and 10:19] So the Jew celebrates the last day of creation, the Sabbath. . . . Why does creation not go on producing new creatures? The same creative forces of nature are still there. That is why God made the Sabbath, the שבת with which Creation ceased, to be the memorial of creation.” (Hirsch commentary on Exodus 9:29)

But if we are to accept this viewpoint, which is the traditional Jewish view of God, we have to ask ourselves once again, in what sense then is our God compassionate and just?

And the answer is that we take it as an act of the Creator’s loving-kindness and justice to have given us the wherewithal of free will and intellect to prevent needless suffering and death, both our own and that of our fellow human beings.

Salvation, whether at the Reed Sea or from a contemporary tsunami, makes the same demands upon us: to choose moral action, trusting in God, using all of our mental powers to ameliorate harm to humankind, holding one another accountable for the consequences of our acts and omissions according to the *derekh Adonai*—the path of God given to us through the gift of the Torah.

¹ Tad Murty, Electric New Paper, <http://newspaper.asia1.com.sg/top/story/0,4136,80172,00.html> (January 2, 2005).

² Andrew Revkin, “The Future of Calamity,” *New York Times* (January 2, 2005).

³ “Future Disasters Can Kill More,” *The Times of India* (January 2, 2005).

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