

Hesed and Din: Tsunami

- I'd like to offer some thoughts as to how one might address God's role in a natural disaster with terrible human consequences like the Tsunami.
- First, I want to rule out any possibility of attempting to justify God by blaming the victim. I don't believe that natural disasters as such occur to punish sinners. In the Tsunami, innocent people suffered and died, and God did not stop it.
- How can we understand this?
- Our tradition teaches that one important model for understanding and addressing God, in so far as that is possible, is the human being. We are created in God's image, and the prophets often relate to God as in human form.
- This idea also makes some kind of philosophic sense. I think of the universe as an interconnected whole, in which each piece reflects the structure and logic of the that whole. If so, then the human really is as the tradition teaches an עולם קטן, that is, a microcosm of the universe as a whole. By reflecting on the nature of a human being, we reflect on the nature of everything. And since everything is included within God, as we say אין עוד מלבדו¹, there is nothing other than Him, it follows that by reflecting on the nature of a human being we reflect, in so far as we're capable, on the nature of God Himself.
- Now, whether or not that made any sense, the tradition does in fact teach that a human being is a good model for addressing God, and that's the model I'll try to use.
- It seems to me that there are two distinct aspects to people: body and mind. The body is material, mechanistic and impersonal like the material world that it's a part of. The body is about necessary causes and effects. The mind is spiritual, willful and personal. Its not at all like the material world. The mind is about feelings like love and hate, and about purpose and freedom.
- I don't understand how mind and body form a coherent whole. But somehow they do.
- I think that this dichotomy also describes the way God is revealed to us. Actually, this follows by definition given what I said before. So there's a side of God which is mechanistic and impersonal, like the body. This is the side of God revealed in the laws of nature. The name of this aspect of God is Elokim, and Elokim is characterized by דין, or strict and fixed lawfulness.

¹ פרשת ואתחנן ד (לה) אתה הראת לדעת כי יקנך הוא האלהים אין עוד מלבדו:

- There's another aspect of God as revealed to us which is spiritual, personal and willful like the mind. This aspect of God is called E-I or YKVK, and He is revealed in life and thought, and in the Torah.
- These are two aspects of one God. I don't understand how they form a coherent whole, but somehow they do.
- How can I know when to relate to God as Elokim and when to relate to God as YKVK? The mishnah at the end of brachot teaches that we bless God for the bad just as we bless the for the good. We say about good and happy things, ברוך הטוב והמטיב, that is, we bless God for being Good and Beneficent. The goodness of beneficence reflects that freely given love of Hashem, the personal aspect or YKVK.
- But we say about death ברוך דיין האמת – blessed is the True Judge. Dayan or Judge is language associated with Elokim – the fixed lawful aspect of God. Its taught there also that we say, in fact, about earthquakes ברוך שכוחו וגבורתו מלא עולם, blessed is He that His power and greatness fill the world. The Kabbalah teaches that gevurah or greatness also relates to the aspect of God called Elokim.
- And thus the harsh mechanics of nature which produced the Tsunami can be understood as the fixed and lawful aspect of God, the aspect of Elokim and Dayan and Gevurah, which follows its necessary course. The Tsunami reflects the necessity of the laws of nature like the functioning of the organs of a body. I don't ask why God **wanted** this to happen, for I see here the necessity of the fixed lawfulness of din.
- But God is one, and thus Elokim and YKVK are one. It must be possible to hear the personal voice of YKVK even amidst the necessity of Elokim. What could He say? A long time ago, God Himself spoke out to Yirmiyahu about how Rachel wept over the horror and terror in which the ten Northern tribes of Israel were murdered and the survivors exiled. The Zohar explains that Rachel is in fact the Shechinah, the personal presence of Hashem which is closest to us. Yermihayu quotes:
 - כֹּה אָמַר יְקִיָּקוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע, נְהִי, בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים, רַחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל בְּנֵיהָ, מֵאַנְהָ לְהַנְחִים עַל בְּנֵיהָ, כִּי אֵינָנוּ: (ירמיהו לא יד)

Thus saith the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuseth to be comforted for her children, because they are not.
- The Shechinah, the immanent presence of Hashem, YKVK, wept for the suffering of Her People Israel. And I believe that today Hashem weeps with those who suffer, and mourns for those who are dead, as a result of the Tsunami.

Shaiya Rothberg

The Conservative Yeshiva 5765