

America Is Not Who We Thought She Was:

The Disaster After The Disaster

Erev Rosh Hashanah

October 3, 2005

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The Rabbi was horrified to see a member of his congregation, a learned and pious man, walk into the Chinese restaurant. Standing at the door, the Rabbi watched as his congregant was brought shrimp in lobster sauce, crab rangoon, a platter of spare ribs, and other treif that the rabbi could not bear to think about.

As the congregant picked up his chopsticks, the Rabbi could stand it no longer. He burst into the restaurant. “Morris, what are you doing? How can you be eating this treif in violation of every dietary law and, mind you, with an apparent enjoyment incompatible with your reputation for observance?”

Morris replied, “Rabbi, did you see me enter this restaurant?” The Rabbi nods yes.

“Did you see me order this meal?” Again, the Rabbi nods yes.

“Did you see the waiter bring me this food?” Again the Rabbi nods yes

“And did you see me eat it?” The Rabbi nods yes.

“Then, my dear Rabbi, I don’t understand the problem. Everything I’ve done has been under strict rabbinical supervision!”

The story is told of a certain pious Jew who would come to synagogue day-in and day-out, always hoping for the spiritual experience he had heard so much about.

“What would it be like,” he wondered, “to hear the voice of god?” And then finally one Yom Kippur it happened. All at once he felt the divine presence enfold him. The room was bathed in radiant light. He felt an overwhelming sense of peace and joy; he felt complete.

And then a voice came to him and said: “What is it you desire, my friend? If you could have anything in the world, any wish satisfied what would it be? Without even pausing to think, the pious Jew answered: “It’s this that I want! This feeling of spiritual bliss. If this could last forever, I’d never ask for anything else again.”

And the powerful voice boomed back: “Have you never seen a hungry child?”

Hurricane Katrina – perhaps the worst natural disaster in American history – lit up the hidden, dark side of America.

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No one came to rescue some of the children, the elderly, and the infirm. They were left behind to die. This national shame is going to be with us for a long time. Hurricane Katrina exposed how white racism lives on, just below the surface. Etched into my mind is the ugly image of armed whites preventing their fellow black citizens from crossing a bridge into their neighborhood – and safety.

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Hurricane Katrina brought into the light what awful deprivation is the daily fare of millions of our fellow Americans. The horrifying media images bring home what poverty really is. Not just lacking sufficient funds to provide for ones basic needs. Poverty is hunger; lack of shelter; being sick and not being able to pay for a doctor. Poverty is not having a job, not knowing how to read. Poverty is powerlessness. Poverty is desperation.

But we don’t need to travel to New Orleans to see the cruel face of poverty. You can drive ten minutes from here and see it. Three weeks ago, TnT, our post b’nei mitzvah youth

organization, took 56 teens to distribute food, clothing, toiletries, and smiles to one of Irvington's poorest sections. Our teens were shocked by how little these folks had, how even a free pair of socks was a big deal to them.

But we don't need to travel to Irvington either. There is poverty right here in Summit. Some of our fair city's 21,000 residents are struggling economically. There is bigotry too. Some people will talk about Summit's minority citizens as "those people." How painful it is to hear some Jews speak this way. For in the eyes of some in Summit, *we* are among "*those people*" too.

Hurricane Katrina brought home to me not only the insensitive classism of disaster planners -- but my own. I just didn't get it. I didn't understand what poverty really means: absolutely no wherewithal to evacuate. No car. No cash for gas. No credit card for a hotel. No relatives with room to spare. No safety-net whatsoever to break the free-fall.

But now I do understand what poverty means after natural disaster: you don't get evacuated. You don't make it to high ground.

Four years after 9/11, the President and the Congress assured us our country was prepared to handle a cataclysmic disaster. Hurricane Katrina reveals the unpreparedness, incompetence, and complacency existing at all levels of our government. The truth may be we are even less prepared and more vulnerable than we were on September 11, 2001.

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By now, all of us know that the devastation to life and property in New Orleans did not have to happen to the extent that it did. This tragedy was decades in the making, precipitated by a series of choices made by all levels of government. Widely reported by the media, I need not review them here.

My point is this: if other choices had been made, many lives and much property would have been saved. But our society did not make those choices, based mostly on economic considerations.

Let me single out one glaring example: Hurricane Katrina puts into sharp relief our nation's peculiar aversion to pay for preparedness.

Other countries do prepare, you know. Think of the Netherlands, where both Amsterdam and Rotterdam lie below sea level. In 1953, a violent storm caused old dykes and seawalls to give way killing nearly 2,000 people and forcing the evacuation of 70,000 others. At a cost of \$8 billion, the Dutch built a futuristic system of coastal defenses that is admired around the world.

By way of contrast, Coast 2050, the large-scale engineering plan to save New Orleans, at a cost of \$14 billion, was cut by the federal government. What is it about our culture that we won't pay for preparedness until it's too late? Some argue that such preparedness is too expensive. Too expensive for whom? Because eventually we always pay – in billions of dollars more than we would have otherwise paid -- and in the priceless value of lives lost.

Tomorrow morning, we shall hear the sound of the shofar. But the shofar has already sounded. Hurricane Katrina and the disaster after the disaster were a solemn wake-up call to us all.

We must rethink our national priorities. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman put it, "Katrina ripped away the argument that we can cut taxes, properly educate our kids, compete with India and China, succeed in Iraq, keep improving the u.s. infrastructure, and take care of a catastrophic emergency – without putting ourselves totally into the debt of Beijing."

Our Jewish moral tradition can shed some light on these matters. As Jewish ethics understands it, poverty is a violation of human dignity. The well-known term "tzedakah" does not mean "charity." Tzedakah comes from "tzedek," the Hebrew root for justice. Tzedakah constitutes economic justice. Our Rabbis saw clearly that poverty is an unjust condition. Our spiritual tradition unequivocally insists any society that calls itself just must take care of its most vulnerable. Over and over, the Torah insists we take care of those most at risk within biblical society: the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.

Through such famous institutions as the sabbatical year, the jubilee, and the system of tithing, biblical society addressed the chronic difficulties that befell the poor in antiquity: Inability to pay off debts, to obtain loans, to escape indentured servitude. In short, the Torah is teaching us that being charitable isn't sufficient. The Torah insists that society must actively institutionalize an economic safety net for the poor.

Our heritage categorically forbids insulting the poor, accusing them of being undeserving, or blaming the poverty-stricken for their own poverty, thereby adding insult to injury.

Our Rabbis teach: "if one were to put poverty on one side of a scale and all of the other sufferings of the world on the other side, poverty would outweigh them all" (Midrash Raba on Exodus 31).

Our heritage rejects any form of Social Darwinism that leaves the poor to fend for themselves. The Book of Deuteronomy instructs: "If however there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart and shut your hand...rather you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).

The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that 1.1 million more Americans are living in poverty since 2004. Now 37 million of our fellow citizens struggle every day for those things we take for granted: adequate food, shelter, clothing, health care.

37 million human beings. This isn't right. But we can start to make things right by embarking upon a truly serious effort to bring an end to poverty in our country.

Is it really possible to "make poverty history"? Probably not. But we can certainly *improve* the lives of our neediest fellow Americans. We can certainly *interrupt* the cycle of poverty that enchains so many. *And the way to begin is by never, ever again leaving anyone behind.*

The Congress is contemplating extending the federal tax cuts but not raising the minimum wage. In a post-Katrina world, we have been sensitized to ask: but who will that leave behind?

The Congress is thinking about repealing the estate tax even as it considers \$35 billion in budget cuts in Medicaid, food stamps, and child nutrition. But who will that leave behind?

This Temple Sinai is a beacon of conscience in the city of summit. We are actively involved with ship, the hospitality for the homeless program, and other projects. But in a post-Katrina world, we must do something more bold.

For example, at the consultation on conscience I attended last spring in Washington, DC, I learned that Congregation Schaarai Zedek in Tampa, Florida, has involved its entire membership in an ongoing obligation to provide relief and support to Wimauma, a nearby migrant farm worker community. Every month, they target a different need for this community: collecting school supplies, distributing baby formula and diapers, serving as “reading buddies” for elementary school students.

I call upon our Board of Trustees to explore seriously, in lieu of a single mitzvah day, what anti-poverty project can we undertake as an entire congregation on an ongoing basis? Could it be affordable housing? Tutoring disadvantaged children? Opening a free health clinic for the uninsured?

We need to rethink some of our Temple Sinai customs. The bimah flowers behind me are beautiful. But what about adorning our bimah every week with two baskets of packaged food to be donated after shabbat? Wouldn't that also be beautiful?

“Reform Jews are committed to social justice,” writes Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the President of the Union Of Reform Judaism. “Even as reform Jews embrace ritual, prayer, and ceremony more than ever, we continue to see social justice as the Jewel in the reform Jewish crown. Like the prophets, we never forget that god is concerned about the everyday and that the blights of society

take precedence over the mysteries of heaven. A reform synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms.”

We are a Reform synagogue.

Let's roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Let's begin to alleviate the anguish of the suffering.

Let's do our part to make things right.

“The world may smile at our dreams.

No matter – we still believe.

We believe in tomorrow.

We believe that we have the power to make tomorrow different from today.

We believe that poverty need not be permanent,

That alienation need not be forever,

That people need not be perpetually at war.

We believe in humanity, despite all that

We know about ourselves.

We believe that there can yet be a time of justice,

And a time of virtue,

And a time of fellowship,

And a time of sharing,

And a time of tranquility for all who live on earth.

We believe in tomorrow,

For god has guided us in how to live today.”

(Rabbi Rick Sherwin).