

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
**JANUARY 30, 2010**  
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*God and Man ... in Haiti!*

No matter how much we have come to experience and see loss and disaster, one cannot help but be overwhelmed by the pictures that have come into our homes from the devastation in Haiti. A *Fox News* correspondent, who had witnessed some of the world's worst calamities, when arriving in Haiti and looking at its capital, broke down and cried. Crying seems to be the most natural thing to do ... for what is there to say? Perhaps the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, spoke for all of us when he said he had "nothing to say to make sense of this horror." Pat Robertson would have been wise to have taken the Archbishop's words to heart. Pat Robertson, the television minister who never passes up a chance to put his foot in his mouth, immediately declared that God caused the devastation of Haiti because many years ago Haiti had made a deal with the devil in order to achieve independence. It is easy to dismiss Rev. Robertson's words as most have done, but the fact is, whenever a tragedy of this magnitude takes place most thinking people wonder: did God cause this? How are we to understand this from a religious perspective? And the truth of the matter is, from a religious perspective many religious thinkers can't help but believe that, yes, the all-powerful God IS responsible for such devastation! It's all "God's will" and every calamity that occurs on earth is the result of an expressed Divine decision and that God decides who shall survive the tragedy and who will not. And yes, when tragedy strikes, it is because of sin. Robertson is not the only one who feels this way. Many rabbis do as well! The spokesman for a major ultra-Orthodox organization infers that the Haitian disaster came about because of "*lashon hara* – evil speech." Whose evil speech? The evil speech directed against the ultra-Orthodox, of course, not the evil speech that comes from the ultra-Orthodox. And either way, because of our evil speech, hundreds of thousands of Haitians had to die? This kind of thinking is nothing new. I could quote to you a whole list of rabbis, some of the giants, who have attributed everything from New Orleans to the World Trade Center to AIDS to bus crashes to being the hand of God punishing people for their sins. If one accepts, as many do accept, that the hand of God is involved in everything that takes place in this world then one has to accept that the devastation in Haiti is part of the Divine plan.

Having told you that, I don't accept it! I did when I was a kid, but I don't anymore. And I don't for several reasons:

- On a simple level, if the earthquake in Haiti is God's Divine punishment, then why are so many working so hard and giving so much money to rebuild Haiti? If this is what God wanted, why are we to go against God and help ease the pain of the Haitians? I guess this might explain why, in the 1940's, when the Belzer Rebbe was asked to pray to God to stop the Holocaust, he refused saying it was God's decree and "nothing can be done by us."

- Second, I would point out: If the Haitian earthquake was because the people there had turned against God, as Pat Robertson maintains, or the hurricane in New Orleans took place because of

the sinfulness of that city, as Rabbi Ovadia Yosef – a leading Sephardic rabbi – maintained ... then how would they explain the Lisbon earthquake? You may remember on Yom Kippur two years ago, I spoke about that earthquake. The period of the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was, in a sense, spurred on by this question when in 1755 a massive earthquake hit Lisbon, Portugal destroying many of the churches while Lisbon's priests attempted to salvage the crucifixes and religious icons with which to ward off the catastrophe. But it didn't help. Nearly 100,000 people were killed, many in and fleeing from churches. And to top it all off, it occurred on All Saints Day. And to add insult to injury, while most every major church was destroyed, at the brothels in Lisbon's Red Light district, it was business as usual! How could God allow that to happen? You should know that according to many, the great thinker Voltaire became an atheist after witnessing this.

- Which leads me to the third reason I reject this way of thinking ... I reject it because who wants to believe in a God that does such things? We Jews speak of God as being "compassionate and merciful" ... were the Haitian people so bad, so sinful that even unborn babies had to be killed? What had they done that was so bad? Israel is condemned for its response in Gaza as having been "disproportionate" ... what should we say about God's vengeance in Haiti? You call that "proportionate?" Some years ago, there was a powerful Broadway show, "Agnes of God," where a court appointed psychiatrist reveals to the Mother Superior why she abandoned her faith. As a young girl, her best friend had just died in a horrible car accident. The nun at her Catholic school explained why it happened, "She didn't say her morning prayers that day, so God punished her." Instead of inculcating the desired fear that would produce a life long devotee of prayer, the "explanation" created revulsion as well as abhorrence for a God who could be so cruel in response to a little child's forgetfulness. The playwright had the good sense to make the Mother Superior respond, "What a stupid woman!"

- And one thing more ... one more reason why I reject the thinking that these disasters are God's punishment. I reject that way of thinking because Maimonides rejects that way of thinking! Maimonides makes this very clear in his famous Shemonah Perakim where he writes, "The rabbis say, for example, 'The world follows its natural course.' You will find that the sages always avoided attributing a time-related event to the Divine Will. When they said that a person gets up and sits down in accordance with the will of Hashem, they meant that man's nature was such that he would always have the free choice of getting up and sitting down. They did not mean that Hashem wills the moment when a person gets up or remains seated, any more than He determines at any given moment that a stone should fall to the ground."

Maimonides here is teaching us an important lesson in life ... God created this world with natural laws; laws that have nothing to do with man's behavior. And the world follows these laws of nature. And so, earthquakes and volcanoes and tsunamis are part of nature ... they are checks and balances of the universe to maintain its balance. If there were not earthquakes to release the energy beneath the surface of the earth, the plates would ultimately destroy each other causing far greater damage to the entire planet. Hundreds of small earthquakes occur daily around the world! If humans were not living in the regions of these events, these natural "corrections" would silently keep the world intact, with no trace of human casualty. However, the fact is that humans have populated the universe and live in areas where they are vulnerable to the powerful forces of nature. The country of Haiti is located where such a fault line exists in the

earth. The reason why Haitians died was not because they sinned, but because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The reason why the brothels of Lisbon survived and the churches didn't was because the brothels were built on strong stones and the churches weren't. And the people in the churches happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You know who was in the right place at the right time? We read about them in today's Torah portion: the children of Israel as they were preparing to cross the Red Sea! There are scientists and archeologists and religious thinkers who claim that there was no miracle at the splitting of the sea ... that such an event is a natural occurrence and takes place from time to time. They just might be right about that! It was a natural occurrence but what made it miraculous was that it happened just at that moment when the Jews needed to escape from the Egyptians! My teacher, the great Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, understood the Egyptian experience in this way. In his words: "As we read the story of the exodus from Egypt, we are impressed by the distinct tendency of the Bible to relate the events in natural terms. The frogs came out of the river when the Nile rose, the wind brought the locusts and split the sea. All archaeologists agree that the plagues as depicted by the Bible are very closely related to the geographical and climatic conditions that prevail in Egypt. Behind the passages in the Bible we may discern a distinct intention to describe the plagues as naturally as possible. The Bible never emphasizes the unnaturalness of the events; only its intensity and force are emphasized."

Yes, God created this world and decreed that it would follow the laws of nature, and it is our challenge to use and harness nature for our own good. And perhaps on no day of the year are we more cognizant of this than today. Today is a special day in the Jewish calendar. It is Tu B'Shevat – the 15<sup>th</sup> day in the month of Shevat. Tu B'shavet is never mentioned in the Bible; it is only mentioned in the Mishnah as being the yearly date for reckoning the age of trees. A significant number of mitzvot Jews performed in Israel depended on the agricultural cycle. For example, the Jew was obligated to tithe 10% of his produce from that year. What did "that year" mean? It meant from one Tu B'shavet to the next. Obviously, with the destruction of the Temple and the exile from Israel, the meaning of Tu B'shavet lost most of its relevance, but during the Middle Ages the mystics seized upon this holiday from a new perspective, even writing a special Seder for this day. For them, the concept of trees was not looked upon as being something of an agricultural nature but was looked upon more from the perspective "cosmic tree of life" – the Etz Chaim – which is so important in Kabbalistic thinking. In modern times, Tu B'Shevat took on renewed meaning with the re-establishment of the state of Israel and the return to the land. This became a natural day to commit ourselves to the planting of trees of Israel.

It is in regard to planting that our sages taught a most fundamental lesson in regard to our world. The Talmud tells us of a person who robbed some wheat and then planted it. In the words of the Talmud: "*Din hu shelo tismach* – according to the law it should not grow." The wheat is stolen ... it shouldn't work in the ground. But *olam k'minhago holech* – nature follows its own course. Does that mean that we shouldn't plant? Does that mean that it is all hopeless? No! That's what the Jews thought as they approached the Red Sea. With the sea swirling before them and the Egyptians behind them, they cried out to God. And what did God say? "*Mah titzak elai* – why do you cry out to me? *Daber el b'nai Yisroel v'yisahu* – tell the Jewish people to get moving." There is much that man can do to overcome nature. Voltaire, in describing the course man must pursue, put these words into the mouth of his Candide, "We must cultivate our

gardens.” And we as Jews can take great pride in what the people and state of Israel have done – they took it a step further, where nature made a desert, they made it bloom. And now, where nature made an earthquake that devastated Haiti, Israel was at the forefront of relief. Israel was the first to set up a working hospital there, including a neo-natal intensive care unit. Every news organization pointed this out ... little tiny Israel sent relief workers who have been trained to remove bodies from collapsed buildings. While some Jews are content to take the attitude of “*Goht vet helfen* – God will help” ... these Jews – many of them religious and some of them Charedim – heard God’s mandate, “Why do you cry out to me? Get a move on!” And you know what? It is much easier to sit back and not get involved. When you get involved there is always a price to pay! There was a picture that appeared in Israeli newspapers of some of these ultra-Orthodox volunteers who had come to save lives having a minyan to daven on Shabbos. That picture evoked protests from the right and from the left. From the right there were those who claimed that Jews should not be violating the Sabbath to save – you should excuse me for saying it – “goyim.” From the left there were protests of why did these Jews stop to pray when they could have been clearing out a building? But there is one person I know of who had no complaints about what the Jews of Israel had done in Haiti. Her name is Gubiland Jean Michel. She lives in Haiti and one month early her son was born in the Israeli hospital there. And in the very Catholic country of Haiti she named her baby “Israel.”

“Speak to the children of Israel and let them go forward.” We are those children of Israel. We believe in a compassionate, loving God. We also believe He created a world that follows its natural course. And most important, we believe He created a world in which it is our mandate: “*L’takein olam b’malchut Shaddai* – to repair the world for God’s kingdom.” There was a fascinating article in the *Wall Street Journal* where the writer pointed out that throughout history natural disasters – from Lisbon to San Francisco – have led to growth, development and renewal. That’s because we didn’t leave it all to God. Man did his share. Let us do our share, and we know that God will do His. And we will see the fulfillment of the prophetic dream of a world “in which none shall hurt and none shall destroy, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Amen.

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