



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Tisha b'Av: Coming to Terms with Disaster

How to Use this Publication

From the Sources is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. We invite you to learn and ask, teach and engage, act and facilitate.

- **Invite others to learn with you.** Read through this text study together with a friend or a group of friends and discuss the issues it raises. This can be an excellent opportunity to learn with your family, a group of friends or one-on-one.
- **Use *From the Sources* for your own learning.** Either for the sake of learning or in own preparation for a Dvar Torah or sermon, this resource aims to invite new thinking.
- **Use *From the Sources* to teach.** Invite students or participants to share in this learning. By reviewing the material ahead of time you and photocopying *From the Sources* for your students, you will be able to work through the texts, opening the questions up for discussion. You can also invite students to take action steps after the learning session in support of advocacy or *tzedakah* initiatives in your school, synagogue or Hillel.

Introduction

Tisha B'Av commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples. These disasters raised deep philosophical and theological questions for the Jewish community: Why do such things—death, exile, violent conflict—happen? Why do innocent people suffer? Where is God during tragedy?

These questions continue to challenge us in our time; below, you'll find three texts to help you explore them. The texts in this study guide reflect on the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, a natural disaster that caused the deaths of over 230,000 people across South and Southeast Asia, and East Africa. In the days and weeks following the tsunami, people around the world wrestled with these challenging questions, questions that confront many of the communities in which AJWS works.

The first text is an article from *Newsweek* that summarizes the perspectives of four different faith communities (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian) that were directly affected by the tsunami. The second and third texts are prayers composed by rabbis in response to the tsunami. To prepare for this text study, you may want to

review Eicha, and it will help to have a copy of Eicha at hand. As you read these texts, please consider the following questions:

- Using the *Newsweek* article as a model, and thinking back to Eicha, how would you characterize the Jewish response to the destruction of the Temple? What characteristics does it share with the various religious traditions described in the *Newsweek* article? Does this theological posture “work” for you? Why or why not?
- Eicha represents a response to a human-caused disaster while the texts below represent responses to a natural disaster. Is this distinction important and, if so, how?
- Eicha and the *Newsweek* article represent responses to disaster by the people who experienced them, while Rabbi Sacks’ and Rabbi Held’s prayers represent responses by witnesses to another people’s disaster. Is this distinction important and, if so, how?
- If you were crafting your own theological response to natural or human-caused disaster, what do you think would be the most important elements to include?



Kenneth L. Woodward, “Countless Souls Cry Out To God: After A Cataclysm Of Biblical Proportions, People Of All Faiths Ask, Why Us? Why Here? Why Now?” *Newsweek*, 10 January 2005¹

The waters that rose up from the deep last week, drowning tens of thousands of people across a wide arc of South and Southeast Asia, were a cataclysm of Biblical proportions. But most of those who survived to weep and mourn—like most of those who died—had never heard of Noah or the Biblical God of Wrath, figures so familiar to Christians and Jews; they were, instead, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. Caught up in the disaster, they had no time for religious ceremonies of any kind. In Sri Lanka, as in coastal southern India and along the beaches of Indonesia, there was only time to dig huge holes in the ground and shovel in the dead. “In this kind of tragedy, there is no religion,” said Syed Abdullah, a local imam in the ancient south Indian port of Nagapattinam, where Muslims, Hindus and Christians have lived together peacefully for centuries. “Let the dead be buried together. They died together in the sea. Let their souls get peace together.”

But no survivor of a disaster of this magnitude can long avoid asking the Job-like questions, “Why us? Why here? Why now?”

HINDUS: Those hardest hit by last week’s tsunami were poor fishing communities whose inhabitants—mostly Hindus—are untutored in refined theological speculation on life and death. For them, all of life is controlled by the play of capricious deities. Yet their religious world views and practices provide a measure of spiritual relief from the toil of their labor. Along the coast of south India, Hindus tend to worship local deities, most of them female and far down the Hindu hierarchy of divinities. But like Shiva and other classic gods and goddesses, these local deities are ambivalent: they have the power to destroy as well as to create. The ocean itself is a terrible god who eats people and boats, but also provides fish as food. “Hindus use the deities to think about and explain happenings like the tsunami as destructive acts of god,” says Richard Davis, a specialist in South Asian Hinduism at Bard College in New York. “Relating to the local deity and cooling her anger through propitiation is more important than thinking about personal or collective guilt for what has happened.”

BUDDHISTS: Among coastline Buddhists in Thailand and Sri Lanka, two of the hardest-hit areas, there are many weather gods to both blame and propitiate with assorted prayers and offerings. “But when the time comes to make sense of it all,” says Donald Lopez, professor of Buddhist studies at the University of Michigan, “Buddhists

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/id/48158>

will look to the idea of karma and ask what they did, individually and collectively, that a tragedy like this happened.” Their main concern will be to generate good merit that can be transferred to the deceased as a positive force in their next lifetime. To this end, families will go to a temple to pray or have a special ceremony performed by a monk acting as an intermediary in the transfer of merit.

MUSLIMS: Like the Bible, the Qur'an recognizes no natural laws independent of God's will. All that happens is Allah's doing, and nature itself—wind, rain, storms—constitutes signs of his mercy and compassion. Even the destructive tsunami, therefore, must have some hidden, positive purpose. “Ninety percent of Muslims will understand a tragedy like this in this way,” says Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University. “On the individual level, they also have this notion that God is testing them by taking away a child or a spouse. Will you lose your faith or will you continue to believe?” This idea of testing and the patience it requires, Ahmed argues, provides “an in-built psychological cushion which allows Muslims to absorb a tragedy of this scale.”

CHRISTIANS: Though a minority in places like Sri Lanka and south India, Christians also had to look to their faith to make some sense out of the sudden loss of lives and of whatever possessions they had accumulated. For them there is the example of Jesus on the cross—the God who takes on human flesh and, with it, a criminal's cruel torturing and death. But even though the acceptance of suffering is deeply embedded in the Christian world view, the death of so many innocent children alone was an excruciating test of the Christian belief that their God is a God of love.

Job, too, was tested, his patience tried to the extreme. But he was only one just man. Whole families, whole communities, countless pasts and futures have been obliterated by this tsunami's roiling force. Little wonder that from Sumatra to Madagascar, innumerable voices cry out to God. The miracle, if there is one, may be that so many still believe.



A Prayer in the Wake of the Asian Tsunami Disaster—December 2004 **Rabbi Shai Held**

Ruler of Creation, Master of the world:
Have mercy on all those who are suffering from the raging waters and the storming waves.
Have compassion on Your creatures—Look, O Lord, and see their distress;
Listen, God, and hear their cries.
Strengthen the hands of those who would bring relief, comfort the mourners,
Heal, please, the wounded.
Grant us wisdom and discernment to know our obligations,
and open our hearts so that we may extend our hands to the devastated.
Bless us so that we may walk in Your ways,
“compassionate ones, children of compassionate ones.”
Grant us the will and the wisdom to prevent further disaster and death;
Prevent plague from descending upon Your earth, and fulfill Your words,
“Never again shall there be another flood to destroy the earth.”
Amen. So may it be your will.



Prayer Following the Indian Ocean Disaster

Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth

Adon ha-olamim, Sovereign of the universe,

We join our prayers to the prayers of others throughout the world, for the victims of the tidal wave which this week has brought destruction and disaster to many lands and many lives.

Almighty God, we pray you, send healing to the injured, comfort to the bereaved, and news to those who sit and wait. May you be with those who even now are engaged in the work of rescue. May You send Your strength to those who are striving to heal the injured, give shelter to the homeless, and bring food and water to those in need. May You bless the work of their hands, and may they merit to save lives.

Almighty God, we recognise how small we are, and how powerless in the face of nature when its full power is unleashed. Therefore, open our hearts in prayer and our hands in generosity, so that our words may bring comfort and our gifts bring aid. Be with us now and with all humanity as we strive to mend what has been injured and rebuild what has been destroyed. *Ken Yehi Ratzon, ve-nomar Amen.*



Conclusion

In response to natural and human-made disasters, it is critical to take action to alleviate the suffering and, to the extent possible, forestall future harm. At the same time, it is also important to create space to reflect on what has happened and to mourn the losses. In the plaintive cries of Eicha, we hear a community struggling to understand its suffering. As you commemorate this ancient Jewish tragedy, while working to address current injustices, Tisha b'Av offers an opportunity to reflect on suffering and our responses—both in thought and in action.

For more information on this and other educational resources from the AJWS Education Department, please contact us at education@ajws.org. To subscribe to this resource, visit www.ajws.org/fts. AJWS is preparing a catalogue of holiday teaching guides for the Jewish calendar.

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