

**Against a Sea of Troubles:  
When Bad Things Happen to Good Planets  
(and What We Can Do In Response)**

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*Ashreinu! Mah tov chelkeinu! U'mah na'im goraleinu. U'mah yafa yerushateinu!* How greatly are we blessed! How good our portion, how pleasant our lot. How beautiful our heritage of life, our world and all that is in it. The challenges before us are immense. But there is energy in the air! You can feel it. Look around and know: where there is will enough, where there is love enough, we can meet any challenge, reach any goal. We face the future with heads held high. And in the peeling away of layers, in peering into complexity below the surface, connectivity in the midst of diffusion, meaning in the midst of chaos we will know anew that we are all a part of each other. In oneness we will uncover in the end... the ultimate power at the heart of the universe.

Words of thanks, on this special occasion. To Sharon Bloome, for the wonderful introduction. To Debra Shapiro Katz, for working with me, and for you, on this amazing program. To two of my colleagues and friends in this Washington Jewish community, Rabbis Fred Scherlinder Dobb and Warren Stone – you are rabbis to me in the true sense of the word, teachers in the way you lead your lives. And to my colleague at Temple Shalom, our family educator, author of the very first article in the “Learn” section of the COEJL web site, who also led Kabbalat Shabbat services this past Friday night for those who arrived early enough for the Shomrei Adamah Shabbaton, Rabbi Daniel Swartz, whose ongoing dedication to the health of our planet and the healing of our world I deeply admire. It is an honor for me to be here with you today.

As I stand here with you at the opening session of the 2005 Mark & Sharon Bloome Jewish Environmental Leadership Institute, there is one more person I would like to acknowledge. That is my father, Murray Feshbach. An economist who has spent his career in close scrutiny of the now former Soviet Union, his scholarly investigation moved from demography and population trends to factors affecting people’s lives – the health care system and, ultimately, the environment. His groundbreaking book, published in 1992, had the distinction of adding a word to the English language. The title of the book, his diagnosis for what eventually brought down the old Soviet regime, was “Ecocide.” A chilling concept. Sadly, it is much on our minds to this day. Not confined to any one part of the planet, but for our entire world.

As to why I am here. [Well, let me rephrase that. Sounded like Admiral Stockdale in the 1992 Vice Presidential debate: “Who am I? Why am I here?” And we didn’t know if the question was rhetorical or not.] Sometimes, you just have to be in the right place, at the right time. I am here, today, because of one of those moments in life. A journalist at National Public Radio sent a memo to her co-workers seeking religious leaders to comment on the tragic events at the end of December. Where was God in the tsunamis? How can we reconcile religious faith and natural disasters? A member of my congregation saw the memo, and gave my name. Now, I’m not a major scholar. I’m not an expert on questions of life and death, nor even an overly confident spokesperson for God’s ultimate plan for the universe. I’m just a Jew and a rabbi who had a chance to answer a question, about why something happened. All I said, in a way, was that I don’t know the answer. Or, rather, that I think there was no inherent answer. And that... theological restraint, that stubborn refusal to ascribe a natural act to a supernatural source, was so against most religious traditions, put me in such a minority of spiritual company... that it seemed to those who called me to speak with you... to be worthy of further elaboration.

*“V’haya im shamo’ah tish’m’u el mitzvotai asher anochi mitzaveh etchem hayom... And behold, if you hearken unto the commandments I enjoin upon you this day...”* then the rain will come, soft and sufficient, in its due season. You will have bumper crops, a bountiful harvest. But if you do not hearken unto the Eternal, your God, and do not follow God’s ways... then the heavens will be stopped up, plagues will come upon the land. The earth will not respond to your touch...and you will disappear from the good land which the Eternal God is giving you.

These words are from the second paragraph of the *Shema*, recited morning and night as the central premise of every traditional Jewish service. It is the soaring rhetoric of Deuteronomy, the promise of the Torah: do good -- good things will happen. Turn away from God -- tragedy will follow. Graphically, obviously, visibly. A causal connection. In our time. And in this world.

It is the heart of the plain meaning of the first part of the Bible. And yet one branch of Judaism, at least, has taken these words – and tossed them away. Cut from the *Shema*. Eliminated from the *siddur*. Gone from the daily proclamation of our faith.

Why was it that the Reform movement took this paragraph out? Why did liberal Judaism eliminate the link between obeying commandments, and abundant crops? Not just because they were divorced from the land, were no longer farmers. But also because we knew – or we thought we knew – that rain and crops come when they will, unaffected by human behavior. The clear or cloudy skies of heaven are not caused by clear or cloudy morals on earth. Whole villages washed away. Entire areas flattened. Lone survivors stunned and stunted. What later triumph of the spirit will make that worthwhile? How dare we say these are “acts of God?” A good life on the land is promised as a reward for piety... and we have questioned the connection.

And this, too. Also cut by the early Reformers. That line in the traditional *siddur* which seeks to explain why the ancient Temple was destroyed. “*Mip’nai chata’einu galinu m’artzeinu; because of our sins we were exiled from our land.*”

Because of our sins? These words stuck in our throats – we couldn’t get them out. We may once have so desperately needed an explanation about why things happened that we were even willing to blame ourselves. But with heightened ethical sensitivity, it seemed callous to blame the targets of Roman persecution for their own misfortunes. Of course we should look inside, we should always be open to how we might contribute to what happens to us. But it’s not our fault! Was it where she walked, or how she dressed? A victim is victimized again... by the pointing finger of blame. *Hashgacha pratit*, reward and punishment? Forget it! A primitive notion, opium for the masses, grist for the mill of small minds who can’t cotton to chaos, who cannot fathom the randomness of life.

So let me speak plainly, about what I said to that NPR reporter – a two hour interview, boiled down to a twenty-second sound bite – and what I believe, about the tragedy of the tsunamis, the hand of God – and the role of human beings in response to nature and the world around us.

God does not cause earthquakes. Our tradition may posit a God who controls the path of every quark and every creature, the motion of the molecules inside and the paths of the planets above. But I simply don’t believe that God micromanages the universe. It wasn’t *b’shert*. And it didn’t “happen for a reason.”

I believe that God does not cause bad or good things to happen to us, a small child to contract a horrible disease, or an upstanding citizen to win the lottery, neither the smokestacks of Europe nor the new dawn on the distant shores of a Mediterranean Sea. I don’t believe that God had anything to do with planes crashing into the Towers... or waves crashing ashore from a once calm sea. Nothing to do with it... nothing... except, except... in the way we respond afterwards.

But we are human beings. Our souls cry out in pain, our limited minds grasp at cosmic strings of infinity. We yearn for answers.

So here is one. About why there are earthquakes in the world.

There is a strange reading in the High Holy Day *machzor*. “If some messenger were to come to us,” the reading begins, “with the offer that death should be overthrown, but with the one inseparable condition that birth should also cease; if the existing generation were given the chance to live forever, but on the clear understanding that never again would there be a child, or a youth, or first love, never again new persons with new hopes, new ideas, new achievements; ourselves for always and never any others -- could the answer be in doubt?”

[I believe, by the way, that the author of those words was named Herbert Samuel. The bombing in Tel Aviv two days ago took place on a street called Rechov Herbert

Samuel, named, presumably, after the first British High Commissioner in Palestine. I don't know if that was the same Herbert Samuel.]

“... That birth should also cease.” I used to rebel against these words. Why can't we have it all? Why can't there be birth with no death, immortality and renewal, eternal life and growth, all at the same time. But I finally realized the wisdom in the words – and it is not just about finite resources and a problem of space, running out of room in an overcrowded world. It is that death and birth are linked together – not in a one-to-one correspondence, but as necessary components of an evolutionary process.

I believe that bad things happen in the natural world because death is part of the universe, that in order to have growth we must inevitably have decay, that to have new things come to be you must also have old things transform, change form, make room, take root, to return anew as something else. There needs to be decay, disorder, instability – a shaking of even the ground beneath our feet. Over time we cannot have the growth of the new without the moving aside of the old.

Indeed, any time we change, any time we grow, there is that instant, that paradoxical transformative moment: before we can be what we are to become, we must surrender what we have been. The yet-to-be cannot overlap the once-was.

The Hasidic rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch noticed that the Hebrew letters in the word “*ani*”, meaning “I,” “myself,” are the very same letters as in the word “*ain*,” meaning “nothingness.” It is only when we pass through the nothingness that the once was can become the yet-to-be. Death, then, is the ultimate nothingness through which we pass. It is thus a part of life, a requirement for life.

But once it is here, no one and no thing, not you, not me, not the best doctors in the world, not the Doctor of the World can fully control it. We try. We strive. We make progress. But we cannot control it all, not fully. Even God cannot. Death and disease, earthquakes and entropy need to be part of the picture of life. The problem is that once in the frame, they function, at least in part -- at random.

And yet... I believe we are not yet ready, not fully willing to sever the cord between what is inside us and what is outside, between the kind of lives we lead and the welfare of the world around us. There is, yet, something to be said of the bond between faith and fate.

In my opening words, I mentioned my friend Rabbi Daniel Swartz. He works for an organization called Interfaith Power and Light. Power and Light. Those are great words. Let's take them in the metaphorical sense. Of understanding. And impact.

For the more we learn of our world, the more we come to know how delicate it is. And we have, I believe, more of an effect on what is around us than ever we realized before. If we but open our eyes, to the work of our hands.

I remember Tova. It was years ago, during my junior year in Jerusalem, and Tova was the Israeli girlfriend of one of my flat-mates. She was also, as I recall, the daughter of an Israeli diplomat. Her father had been stationed in Ethiopia, in the years before 1967, before all African nations broke off ties with the Jewish state. Ethiopia! I know what you are thinking. Famine and draught, suffering and depravation. But Tova's father had pictures from his posting. It was a green and verdant land, lush and ripe, rich and productive.

What happened? First came the wars, which cut down the trees. Then came the rain, which washed away the soil, which had nothing left to hold it in place. And then, as the land changed, the weather... changed with it. That drought was not a random event. Nor was it an "act of God." Let us look in the mirror. It was the consequence of human actions.

*V'haya im shamo'ah tish'm'u el mitzvotai asher anochi mitzaveh etchem hayom...* And behold, if you hearken unto the commandments I enjoin upon you this day..." then the rain will come, in its due season. Might we, perhaps, have been too hasty? Might we actually have been wrong, to toss out the wisdom of our ancestors, in our rush to a rationality we only thought we understood? We have more power than we thought – to till and to tend, to harm and to heal.

And even when our power is not of a causal kind, if earthquakes do not come as an act of will in punitive response to mortal provocation, if God, as Elijah discovered, was not in the wind, and was not in the fire, yet there is, in the stillness that echoes after the thunder, something that remains. There is such a thing... as a sound of silence. A pregnant pause. An emptiness that is full. A "*kol d'mama dakah*," a "soft, murmuring sound," a "still, small voice." For God is there with us, in the power of response.

We look back at the events of our lives, and our experience of the world around us, and like God in Genesis, in acts of creation, we work to bring order out of chaos, meaning to the madness, patterns to the raw stuff and substance of life. I do not believe that things happen for a reason. But in the way we work, in our human task, things happened for a reason. We are, at our core – and this is not my original phrase but I don't know who said it first -- we are "retroactive meaning makers."

What is the meaning of the South Asia tragedy? The religious answer that makes sense to me has far less to do with "why?" than "what now?" – less with the arrogance of explanation than with the humility, the humanity, of restoration. We make meaning of events. What they mean, in the long run, has to do with how we respond.

Was there evil in the tsunamis? Yes, I think, there was evil there. The evil was not in the water, but the waste – the hoarding of resources, the disparity between rich and poor, the absence of protection so carefully cultivated an ocean to the east. The lives lost that could have been saved. All those people who did not need to die.

And are there lessons here? Yes, and one of them, I think, is not yet heard loudly enough. Try this. Set aside a set time, and keep a running tab. Make a comparison, and keep a count, of the references you here, in any media; see what you find, in a given week.

How many references are there to the attack on our nation three years ago? [Now, in the comparison I am about to make, I do not mean in any way to belittle September 11. God forbid! Even as it was a national tragedy I know its human face; we had relatives of friends, and friends of relatives, who were lost on that day. So I do not mean to play it down in any way. But still I want to ask, in comparison:] How many references would you hear in the same period to the devastation two months past that was, in human terms, a hundred times worse. It was in the headlines for a while. It might be back, briefly, as former Presidents Clinton and Bush fly in with their matching blue blazers to raise funds and bring aid and sustain awareness. But watch how fast it fades again, into a blur of foreign-looking faces and far away problems. Where, then, is our sense of proportion, our ability to sustain our attention and fully embrace the greater hurt of others, along with lesser albeit still real wounds that are closer to home?

There is so much pain in this world, so much suffering. Some comes from the choices we make; more from our struggle to scrape out an existence in the face of the elemental forces of the world. But either way the suffering comes, our moral challenge and our mortal purpose is to retain a sense of compassion and connection, perspective and proportion – and to live our lives in joy and celebration and appreciation as well. A bumper sticker proclaims: If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. I agree. But for anyone who has ever climbed a mountain, or walked through an ancient forest, or taken in the sunrise on a beautiful beach, I would also add this: If you're always outraged, you're not paying attention either.

For pride and pain, celebration and compassion, joy and anger, wonder and wounds all flow from the same place.

What is the central declaration of Judaism? What words are so familiar that one child referred to them as the “washword of our face?” They are the first words of the *Shema*. “*Shema, Yisrael*. Hear, O Israel. Listen. *Adonai, Eloheinu*. Our God. *Adonai Echad*. God is One. There is a single power as the source of all, a unity at the heart of life.”

If God is One and the world is whole, then all areas of life are filled with God's presence, with the promise and possibility of holiness. Indeed, our tradition teaches that there is a beracha, a blessing for everything: the first butterfly seen in spring, the first fruit of a season, the rainbows of summer, greeting a familiar face, learning something new. There's even a blessing for the Czar.

If God is One and the world is whole, then scientists may discover that all of their equations are identical, that the forces of the universe are the same. And, indeed, the most modern myth of cosmology now speaks of a Grand Unified Theory, the first fractions of a second of existence, during which electromagnetism and gravity, the strong and weak nuclear forces are all one, joined together for that tiniest instant into one singularity whose echoes reverberate still in the throbbing pulse of the universe. Some scientists... some scientists even call this theory... “the God Equation.”

If God is One and the world is whole, then we will come to see that everything is connected... that the words we use are mere symbols for that which are not separate things at all. Daniel Matt writes that as he looks out his window and sees a leaf on a tree, the name “leaf” may be “mentally satisfying.” But is there really, he asks, a separate object called a leaf, “as if the leaf were not part of a continuum: blade-veins-stem-stipule-twigg-branch-limb-bough-trunk-root?” As if the tree, too, were not part of a continuum of its own. As if, in Rabbi Lawrence Kushner’s words, all of it, and all of us, were not made of the very same substance, the same molecules arranged in slight variance, energy accidentally and temporarily congealed in superficially distinguishable ways: you and me, an antelope, a redwood, the moons of Jupiter, a distant star.

If God is One and the world is not yet the way it should be, then as partners with God it is up to us to make it better.

If God is One and the world is not yet the way it should be, then the lesson we have to teach is that someday differences will disappear, the fissures will heal and the fractures be fixed.

We live in a world in which everything is connected. There is a harmony at the heart of life. Even that which seems separate and distinct is bound up together. How much more we can care for the world once we explore and expose, realize and reveal the connections beneath the surface of our lives. In our oneness with the world, we discover power, and purpose, and love.

We can do it. We can stand up for each other, be there for each other, help each other, heal each other. We can stay firm and stand fast, we can frame our response and give meaning to our lives, we can be the authors of ourselves against slings and arrows and, indeed, even against... a sea of troubles.

*“Ki Adonai Elohecha M’viacha el Eretz Tova... For the Eternal Your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing forth from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing...”* (Deuteronomy 8) A Promised Land is held out before us, healthy and whole, and filled with possibility. We have the power. We can get there. Together.