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“Katrina, or Change”

So there's this joke I used to love...and not so much lately - too close to home. You remember the one about the guy who wouldn't leave his house when a flood was predicted? They came by for him in a car and he said, no thanks, I'll stay here - God will provide. Then the rains began in earnest, and they came by for him in a boat and still he declined, saying God would provide. The flooding waters drove him to the roof and they dropped a ladder for him from a helicopter. NO thank you, he shouted, God will provide. Then he drowned, and arrived at the gates of heaven where he angrily said to God - what happened? I believed in you; I prayed to you; I thought you would provide for me. “Look, buddy,” said God, “I sent a car, a boat, and a helicopter - what more could I have done?”

It's not always easy to hear the voice of God.

The political satirist, Bill Maher, got a lot of play for his recent remarks about President Bush, saying:

Mr. President, on your watch, we've lost almost all of our allies, the surplus, four airliners, two trade centers, a piece of the Pentagon, and the city of New Orleans. Maybe you're just not lucky. I'm not saying you don't love this country, I'm just wondering how much worse it could be if you were on the other side. So yes, God does speak to you, and what he's saying is, "Take a hint."

[Bill Maher HBO's "Real Time With Bill Maher," Sept. 9, 2005]

So many of you e-mailed me those remarks, that I thought I should take a hint.

And here's my hint back to you:

If you're looking for the Hand of God in the hurricanes, tsunamis, fires, and earthquakes, you can find plenty of them - attached to the wrists of the rescue workers, family members, neighbors, and strangers reaching out to those in need. When disaster strikes - be it terrorism, tsunami, hurricane, fire - there is no shortage of people who see it as brimstone. And a revolting number of religious leaders - not playing it for laughs -- have done just that, proclaiming Katrina to be as wide-ranging as God's wrath against the city's tolerance of its

gay community to God's punishment of George Bush for supporting Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, to name only two examples. And yes, I'm sorry to say one of those comes from a rabbi. [Michael Marcavage, founder of www.repentamerica.com, State Sen. Hank Erwin, R-Montevallo, Alabama & radio commentator, and that last one from the spiritual leader of Israel's Shas party (Rabbi Ovadia Yosef)].

But in a way, who can blame them for looking for explanations, answers, something to say in the face of chaos and disaster? The stories, the pictures, the personal experiences coming from the Gulf Coast - especially in the immediate aftermath of Katrina -- are their own kind of flood, and many of us may still feel endangered ourselves of being drowned in the reports, awash in our own distress over how to help, our anger over the blatant racism and incompetence that led to more suffering and many more deaths, our own survivor guilt as we showered in our nice homes, and slept in our comfortable beds having fallen asleep to the TV news coverage of the nightmare stadium shelters and the cesspool streets.

We can see why prescriptions for anti-anxiety medication and the search for explanations come easily to hand. But medication and wrong-headed theology are not, finally, very satisfying. They won't help rebuild New Orleans. They won't end the unnecessary suffering of so many people, victims of ineptitude and blatant racism and classism. They won't fix our incompetent government bureaucracies - federal, state and local - nor stop the infuriating and embarrassing attempts to shift blame and responsibility to others. And this is far from an exhaustive list - exhausting maybe - but far from complete, of all that needs to be done.

My hint about the presence of God in all of this? Not CAUSE, but EFFECT:

I think God wants us to make some changes.
I think God would agree with the writer Bernard Malamud, who famously said, "I'm against suffering, but if it happens, why waste the experience?"

So this is me saying: let's allow these events to change us - for good.

This is me challenging us to be among the change makers.

Many of us, I know, will be willing, but asking "how?" is easier than answering, and answering easier still than doing. Don't worry, we can ask and answer and do together, that's part of what it means to be part of a community: none of us has to do it all alone, although of course there are parts that will be ours alone, and none of us has to do it all.

Sometimes change, whether of the global variety or the personal comes upon us - we're just in its path - and sometimes change is our intention.

But whether global, like the hurricanes or the withdrawal from Gaza or the endless war in Iraq, or more personal - a break up, a death, a dramatic shift in one's health or the health of a loved one, a new job, a lost job, a new synagogue community, an entry into grief or an emergence from it, to name a few, change comes to all our lives at various times - that's a given. But what we do with change when it comes - not a given - and that makes all the difference.

One of my colleagues offered me a phrase that's been my mantra for over a year:

“Change is inevitable, growth is optional.”

Change will come in the near future on all kinds of fronts, and we, as individuals and as a community get to decide if we want to be a part of it, or just open ours to be witness to it, or even, I hope not, just close our eyes and turn our backs.

Kurt Tucholsky was a German-Jewish writer who died in exile in 1935 after being denounced by the Nazis. A quote from him is on exhibit at Yad va Shem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. It reads: “A society is judged not only by what it does, but by what it tolerates.”

I'm thinking we've tolerated a bit too much lately, do you agree?

Change -whether invited or not - can feel like there is no ground under you. We who live in earthquake land know that feeling too. How do we get a solid footing when we don't know what will come next?

A contemplation of change is one of the ironic themes of the Days of Awe. Ironic because when we think about the holy days, we often think about the rituals that we want to stay the same. You know what I mean, all the rituals that the humorous e-mails make fun of: going to the same synagogue year after year, sitting in your usual seat, next to the same people - maybe friends, maybe just people you see once a year, same rabbi, same cantor, same melody (“please, Cantor, don't change that melody - it's not high holy days without it”), same prayers - “didn't believe it when I was a kid, still don't believe it, but don't change a word!” “Services are too long, but don't cut anything out! It wouldn't be high holy days if it didn't feel too long.” Even Jews with few customs, or Jews who didn't grow up with Jewish customs, or non-Jews who live with Jews, can get hooked on the rhythms and the repetitions of the High Holy Days: the music, the prayers, the ritual, the dinners, the greeting cards, apples and honey, the sound of the shofar, the late afternoon Yom Kippur lightheadedness. You know what I mean...traditions make us want things to be the same every year (even though sameness can make us only want to come once a year, but that's a different conversation). Even the root of the Hebrew word shana (shin nun hey) as in Rosh Ha SHANA means not only “year” but also, “repeat, do again.”

And yet buried in that sameness, that familiarity, precisely in that repetition is an altogether different theme. For the irony is that SHANA also means - you guessed it - "change."

And it makes sense if you think about it - a year turns into another and another, repeating seasons; but look at how many cultures have a new year ritual around resolutions and change.

And Judaism is no exception. For the traditional assignment of this season comes from the Jewish belief that people can change, that we can, by setting aside time every year, seriously reflect on the lives we are living, and in so doing, take serious steps toward ...yep, toward change, toward becoming more the person you want to be, the person you know yourself to be. Interestingly, the Hebrew term we use for this process - teshuvah -- sounds like it might mean the opposite of change. For it comes from the root 'to return.' Contemporary scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz gives an explanation of tshuvah as "return" that has helped me a lot:

"The urge to take a look back," he writes, "is prompted by a spiritual disquiet rather than a guilty feeling.

Indeed, we feel as if we are no longer the right person in the right place, we feel that we are becoming outsiders in a world whose scheme of things has escaped us. "This is why we decide to turn around and go back. . . ." He continues: "To feel the need to repent means to realize that a change is imperative. Teshuvah does not mean that we moan about our past wrongdoing . . . "We should not rethink and relive our past as it happened, with its faults and mistakes. What we should ponder is our past as it ought to have been. "The main thrust of teshuvah is indeed to show the definite intention of changing the scheme of things." [reprinted in URJ Reaching for Holiness, 2001, p.31, from his book, The Strife of Spirit, 1998, Jason Aronson Books]

All of which offers very much more help to me than people's concerns about whether God is speaking through hurricanes and breaking levees, and if so what is God trying to tell us? I'd rather ask each other questions, questions we might be able to answer. I'd rather each of us look inside ourselves while doing the work of Tshuva, and find there what God wants from us - something different from each one of us, I suspect.

One of my Jewish heroes is a long time Jewish activist and seeker of social justice named Leonard Fein. Among other things, he helped found MAZON, the Jewish response to hunger that so many of you, and I, support. He wrote an article recently posing a few questions, and here are some of them:

"Does religion come to answer questions that might not otherwise be answered? Perhaps religion comes to insist on questions that will otherwise be neglected? Such as: Where are you? Where is your brother? For that matter, who is your

brother, your sister?" --Leonard Fein
<http://www.socialaction.com/stoppraying.html>

Fein's questions come from the Torah stories of the first human beings. And his questions helped me change the way I'm thinking about one of those stories: After Eve and Adam - on the advice of the serpent - eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they hear God coming and they hide. And, says Torah, God called out to the hiding human, saying "aye-ye-ka? Where are you?" [Genesis 3:9] You know the rest of the story, but let's stay here for a moment. What is God saying to them, to these, God's newest creations - the best and the brightest? This year, this night, I'm thinking that God is saying, "You've eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you've gotten yourself an education, and what you're doing with it is hiding? Not on My watch. Aye-ye-ka? Where are you? Show up! and bring your education with you. This world already needs repair. Along with the gifts of life, and this amazing world that I have given you, comes the responsibility to partner with Me and make it more amazing still."

And human beings - some anyway - including a lot of Jews -- have been doing that ever since: getting an education, and showing up to make use of it by helping repair and protect the world and one another.

When we come together for these Days of Awe, we do so in part with a communal and personal intent of deciding how to proceed with our lives. What a gift we give one another - a few days in a year to actually be introspective and reflective, to look inward. But one can't really do tshuvah, can't be self-reflective only by looking within - it also takes looking around.

For despite the independent nature of tshuvah -- of re-turning to the self we know and can love, the one we may have strayed from more than once through the vagaries of life, there are reasons why we are - by tradition - invited to be in community while doing that work. Why we are invited to see others do it too, and to take part in one another's tshuvah - in any ways we can be helpful to each other.

One more NOT coincidence about Yamim Noraim: the traditional Hebrew term for the High Holy Days, Yamim Noraim, means not just "Days of Awe," it can also be translated: "Days of Fear." The fact that Jews come together in large numbers for the scary times (and that we gather in smaller numbers for the joyful ones - Pesach, Sukkot) is significant, don't you think? We live in community no matter what, but especially when we have changes to make, work to do, especially when we deliberately acknowledge - as we do during the days of awe - that we live always in a state of uncertainty, of change, of unpredictability - that is when we need strengthening, that is when we need to be able to look around at numbers of people and say, oh yeah, together we can do this. Do you feel the energy in a room filled with likeminded, like hearted people? I do, and I thank you for it.

Of course I know not all of you will sign on to this interpretation of what we're all doing here. And that's okay - these Holy Days are a Jewish thing, and as such they have countless explanations as to their meaning. I don't mean to say coming together to change the world has to be the foremost idea in our minds when we notice on the calendar that the Days of Awe are coming soon, and then when we make the decisions that we all have to make (well, okay, maybe I don't have to) about whether we want to go to services at all, let alone where we want to go. True, that may be an easier decision for those of you who are members of BCC - I hope it is. But whether you are a BCC member, or not YET one, coming here to see friends and to meet new friends is a wonderful reason to come here, and to stay here. And I'm glad you have your favorite seat - your place among us.

And there is more...there is bigger: those of us blessed to be part of this group are positioned to make a difference - in our lives and in the lives of others. We are positioned to be a partner in the repair of our world. We are positioned to bring our education with us and show up, and armed with some important knowledge about good and evil:

We are positioned to change the world for the better.
We are positioned to change ourselves for the better.
We are positioned for growth.

May this be a year in which - independently and together - all of us opt in.

Shana tova - I wish us all change - for good