

Shoftim
Homeland Security vs Spiritual Security
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Most of us are still recovering from Hurricane Irene, one of the worst storms to batter the East Coast in a long time. Many of us spent much of this past week without power, cleaning up downed trees and branches and damage caused by leaks and flooded basements. And with all the mess and damage, most of us have come here today to offer a quiet prayer of thanks because we realize that it could have been much worse!

But of all the reactions to the storm that may be represented in this sanctuary today, I would be surprised if there is anyone here who has come to do *teshuvah*, to repent for their bad behavior that may have aroused God's anger and possibly contributed to the Lord's decision to send a Hurricane our way.

Yet, according to presidential candidate Michele Bachman, that is precisely what she thinks we should be doing here this morning. Michele Bachmann says that the earthquake and hurricane that have recently hit the East Coast of the United States were sent as some sort of divine warning message to politicians in Washington to curb government spending. Lest you think I am being unfair here are her exact words: "I don't know how much God has to do to get the attention of the politicians. We've had an earthquake; we've had a hurricane. He said, 'Are you going to start listening to me here?'"

It appears that Ms. Bachman has joined a former Republican candidate for president, the Rev. Pat Robertson, in interpreting the true meaning of what many of us foolishly thought were natural events. In case you missed Mr. Robertson's words and were thus deprived of the real cause of the recent magnitude-5.8 earthquake, the good reverend informed us that the damage to the Washington Monument came from divine displeasure with the path America is on. Unfortunately, he did not let us know the reason behind the damage to the National Cathedral.

Now, some of you may doubt the accuracy of Mr. Robertson's claims. But ye of little faith should not ignore the reverend's past record. After all, it was he who exposed the possible connection between legalized abortion and Hurricane Katrina. (I must admit, this confused me a bit. After all, the Rev. John Hagee has shared with us that Katrina was divine punishment for New Orleans' decision to hold a gay pride parade.)

And lest we forget, as we approach the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, we owe thanks as well for the insight of the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, who saw behind the terrorism of Osama bin Laden the helping hands of pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians as also being responsible for that disaster.

And this kind of thinking I am afraid is not limited to our Christian friends. Rabbi Sholom DovBer Wolpo, who is arguably the most popular rabbi in the Chabad street in Israel, says God sent punishment to the US in the form of Hurricane Irene to punish America for its Mideast policies, and Rabbi Yehudah Levin in Brooklyn has taken to YouTube to explain why no one in New York was hurt by the earthquake – he says that God promised he would have

spared Sodom and Gemorrah if God could have found 10 *tzadikim* – 10 righteous people there – but could not – well, according to Rabbi Yehudah Levin – since there are many more than 10 *tzadikim* in Brooklyn alone – New York was spared destruction by the recent earthquake. Unfortunately he went on to say we were not so lucky to avoid harm from the recent hurricane and that may be – he offers due to our recent support for homosexuality and the decision to legalize gay marriage.

We like to believe that ours is an era of rationalism and reason but I would insist that the crucial questions of our day are about faith and belief, and the role God plays in our day to day lives and everyday challenges.

And all of this makes this weeks Torah portion, *Shoftim*, one of the most relevant in the cycle of our reading as one of its central themes is how to reconcile a belief in an all powerful God and a world where bad things seem to occur. In this weeks Torah portion, Moshe informs the Jewish people that no matter how daunting the realities of their day, *ki adonai eloheychem haholeyach imachem l'hilachem lachem im oyvaychem l'hoshia etchem!* Israel need not be afraid, “For it is the Lord your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.”

Now this is a remarkable passage - but one we need to spend a little time trying to understand - because not only is it crucial for understanding how to understand God's role in our world- but it is very easy to read these words and get them wrong - something I, as your rabbi, would never want *you* to do - so let us spend a little time and see if we can get it right and see if in fact it can help us navigate the waters of a confusing world.

Now on the simplest level, these words could be read and taken to mean that Jews do not need an army - God is the defender of Israel and any other mortal attempt is superfluous. Now, in a second I will attempt to prove that such a reading cannot be sustained even by the torah itself - but it is important for us to understand that there are many in our contemporary world – from Michelle Bachman to the Rev Robertson, to the Habad Rabbi in Israel and Rabbi Levin in Brooklyn who read it just that way. The *Haredim*, for example, believe that the very notion of an Israel Defense Force is heretical. They refuse to serve in the army because they believe that Jewish defense is achieved not by guns and weapons but by prayer and righteous living.

Now, I have a problem with this theology on many levels. And it is not that I am opposed to using tragedy – any tragedy as a time for soul searching. I find this many times to be a healthy and appropriate reaction. When times are tough – there is a natural desire to turn inwards, to look inwards and ask – did I do anything to contribute to this disaster? Was there anything I could have done to have made it better? Was I ill prepared – maybe had I purchased a backup generator, more D batteries, cleaned out my gutters – the storm would not have been so difficult to endure. No, I have no problem using tragedy as an opportunity for some serious *mea culpa* but what I find interesting about the comments from the various religious and right wing politicians I quoted before – is that what they all share in common is that they are not engaged in a process of *mea culpa* - but rather *tua culpa*. In these storms and earthquakes God is never coming to correct them. God, it seems, only uses natural disasters to instruct their enemies. How convenient. In fact they usually see themselves as the antidote for whatever shortcoming God has chosen to instruct us.

But my real disagreement is even deeper. It is not just that these leaders show bad form in their theology – in believing in a God who strikes others but never themselves – it is the theology itself I wish to take issue with. Insurance companies call them “acts of God,” but most religious leaders would never think of doing so. But if God does not act through these natural disasters – how do I explain the verse from today’s torah portion where Moses seems to promise that God will do just that? *Ki adonai eloheychem haholeyach imachem l’hilachem lachem im oyvaychem l’hoshia etchem!* Israel, be not afraid, “For it is the Lord your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.”

Fundamentalists love to quote phrases out of context. And what is interesting here is the context in which this statement, that God will defend us, falls. Moses is informing the people that when the time comes for them to enter the Promised Land there will be inevitable conflicts with the people who are already living there. They are strong and well organized - but Moses tells the Israelites - do not be afraid. And this is where that sentence I quoted above comes in, “For it is the Lord your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.”

But the very next *pasuk* is most interesting and makes clear that the fundamentalist reading of this verse is unsustainable: “then the official shall address the troops as follows: “Is there anyone who has built a new house but not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home.... Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but never harvested it? Let him go back home...Is there anyone who has paid the bride-price for his wife, but has not yet married her? Let him go home....is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades flag like his.” And then Moses concludes, “When the officials have finished addressing the troops, the army commanders shall assume command of their troops and prepare for battle.”

In cherry picking the first verse – the fundamentalist would have us believe that God will fight our battles – and our job is merely to pray and do mitzvot. In fact they argue based on this verse that a human army is an expression of a lack of faith in God. But this interpretation is unsustainable because the very next verse deals with the words that the officers should use in charging their troops on the eve of battle.

What I believe the Torah is teaching us here is that God may be our Commander in Chief but we are going to still have to do the heavy lifting here on earth. A full reading of the bible makes it crystal clear that y was formed, the battles were fought and good men died in securing the land and making it safe for their people to live. Well then if we still have to fight the fights and win the battles ourselves, what do we need God for? What *Moshe Rabeinu* is teaching us in this critical passage in the Torah is that God is indeed our secret weapon but not as some of our more right wing brothers and sisters would have us believe.

We do not pray to God so that God will act properly on our behalf. We pray to God so that we will act properly on God’s behalf.

The Psalmist says: “God is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I fear?” When God is the stronghold of my life - I have no need for fear. Not because of what God will do to *them* - but what God does for *me*. God is the source of my strength.

The decisive factor in almost every battle that has ever been fought - is the fear factor. History

is filled with countless examples of lesser armies defeating greater armies. Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, observed a long time ago that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong... but rather those who most passionately and most fervently believe in the rightness of their cause have an edge, a decisive edge over their enemies. Doubt and fear are enormous liabilities on the battlefield. That is why in today's torah portion Moses has the commanders address their troops on the eve of battle and ask: "Is there anyone afraid or disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades flag like his."

I am angry with those who would tell us that "hurricanes and earthquakes are messages from God," criticizing our morality or our politics, not only because it is theologically absurd but also because it is dangerous to our welfare. In dangerous times we do not need our religious and political leaders preaching fear, rather like Moses – we need them to give us strength.

Fear will defeat us. Fear causes us to become paranoid, to increase our army and place police on every corner. But the answer to our current world dilemma will not be solved by the creation of a Department of Homeland Security alone. Our enemies will not be defeated no matter how many police stand at the entrances to our tunnels or how sophisticated the airplanes that guard our coastline. A world that depends upon such armaments and security devices alone is a world that will forever be insecure.

"Trust in the Lord *and* let your heart be strong." Moses understood that God would *not* fight our battles – but he also understood the need for courage and to be fearless in the pursuit of our goals. When our enemies see that our faith is as strong as theirs, our passion as intense, our will as determined - then the cause of evil will be defeated and not a moment sooner. Today, we are like the commander who surveys his troops and he sees the fear on our faces - he knows that he must send us home - for we are no good to his cause and will undermine the will of the rest.

What we need now more than ever is not a Department of Homeland Security but a Department of Spiritual Security. That is why, during the course of this month of Elul, in preparation for the coming of the High Holy Days, during each morning and evening service we add an additional recitation - Psalm 27, *L'David Ori* which concludes each service with the affirmation: *Adonai ori vishi, mimi ira? Adonai maoz hayai, mimi efchad? Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear? Adonai is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?*

Hurricanes and Earthquakes are not examples of God fighting our battles for us. Sorry Ms. Bachman, God will not fight this battle for us. God has never fought our battles for us. But God can give us the strength today as God has given us the strength in the past - to fight the fight that needs to be fought.