

Katrina and the Days of Awe
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For the second time in four years we are going into our annual high holiday period on the heels of the occurrence of a serious national disaster. While there are many differences between the devastation wrought by the terrorist attacks of September, 11 2001 and that of hurricane Katrina, they are both events that have brought into bold relief, dimensions of our lives which are also resonant with themes evoked at this time of year in the Jewish calendar.

The first is that of our basic vulnerability, and the related sense of clarity about how uncertain our lives are each morning when we wake up and head out into the world to pursue our daily routines. While we often go to great lengths (for good reason) to protect our children from this awareness, we are also pretty good at keeping this awareness on the back burner for ourselves as well. Many of the images from the high holiday liturgy, in particular those of Yom Kippur, are geared to put us in touch with our mortality. In fact, cultivating this sense of life's fragility is quite fundamental to many religious perspectives, including, or perhaps even especially, that of Judaism.

One reason our tradition places such value on remaining conscious of this reality is that without that to goad us, we have a tendency to let things slide too much in our lives. This is not about paying bills on time or finally getting around to cleaning out the basement or other such matters. It is about making the effort to connect with a loved one when an argument has put distance between you. It is about taking in the joy of a moment of playful family togetherness without allowing concerns about an upcoming project to intrude and turn your attention elsewhere. It is about being fully present to the pain of a friend as he or she struggles with what feels like an untenable situation in his or her life.

Another dimension of our lives which disastrous events bring to the fore is our deep desire to help others who are in need. Even though we are aware that we cannot really resolve these difficult situations for anyone, we feel called to do something, anything, to make even the smallest dent in the swell of distress. This urge to act on behalf of those in trouble is another human trait that our tradition in general and the high holiday period in particular attempts to strengthen within us. And it is certainly a trait that has been broadly manifested in our society and around the world in the aftermath of these horrific catastrophes. So, as we approach the entrance to a new sacred year within just a few days, may we acknowledge the true impact that grappling with Katrina's destructive effects has had on us, even indirectly and from a great distance. And as painful as it may be, may we allow ourselves to maintain that stance of openness and raw vulnerability as we are enveloped by the spiritual and affective embrace of the month of Tishri. If we can do this, I am convinced that we will be better human beings as a result.

Shannah tovah umetukah to our entire Kol HaLev community.

Rabbi Steve