

Rabbi Lewis' message for February 2005

How do we explain when bad things happen to good people? When the tsunami first hit, I thought of Rabbi Harold Kushner. When he wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, he carefully titled the book “When” and not “Why.” We know that bad things happen. Good people get sick, they suffer, they die, just like bad people. The “when” is clear to us. It’s the “why” that is not apparent (unless, as one of my astute Religious School students pointed out, there is a clear cause and effect like smoking and lung cancer – although even then, how do you explain why some people who smoke get lung cancer and others don’t?).

After the tsunami, people asked, “Why does God cause these things to happen? Why does God allow these things to happen?” You may have read the position of some religious thinkers who claim that we bring these things upon ourselves due to our inherently sinful natures, but that is not a Jewish belief. The Talmud tells us, “Nature pursues its own course.” Rabbi Harold Schulweis explains what this means when he tells us to distinguish between two aspects of God, the side we call Elohim and the side we call Adonai. Elohim is the name we use for the source of nature, the God of Creation; Adonai is the name we use for that aspect of God that is involved in human affairs, the God of Morality. Both are aspects of the one God. At the same time that Elohim teaches us that nature is not within our control, Adonai teaches us that our human response to nature is within our control.

And so the Jewish response to tragedy is not to dwell on “why” but more to focus on “What can we do?” The answer is always the same: Give tzedakah and perform deeds of loving kindness. This is the answer whether it is how to respond to tsunamis or how to react to someone who has cancer, how to respond to earthquakes or mudslides or hurricanes or how to relate to someone who is suffering. Repentance, prayer and tzedakah do not prevent bad things from happening to good people; they merely give us, as mere mortals, a way of trying to make things better. Sometimes that is all we can do; and sometimes, that is enough.

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