

Rabbi Lewis' Message for February, 2010

As I watched the earthquake disaster unfold in Haiti, I felt like I had been handed the answer to the question I posed here last month: What is the function of our new tzedakah box? Is there any way for us to hear of that devastation and not feel compelled to give what we can? The numbers of dead defy comprehension. The numbers of the orphaned, the injured, and the gravely ill are likely to grow. It is our religious obligation to give whatever we have.

It is hard not to feel helpless in the face of this and every tragedy, but helplessness can lead us to look for hasty answers. The news has reported them all. Haiti is so corrupt, this is why it happened; its leaders don't care about the people, this is why it happened. Evangelist Pat Robertson was quoted as saying that the country has been "cursed by one thing after another" since they "swore a pact to the devil." We feel tempted to lay blame as a way of comforting ourselves and rationalizing our own fears.

Jewish tradition, however, teaches that this isn't the moment to ask why. When lives are at stake, we act first and ask later. The JTA wire service reported:

The Israel Defense Forces was the first major Israeli team to arrive. Team members reached Haiti last Friday on a flight loaded with military and civilian medical personnel from all over Israel, rescue teams, search dogs and supplies. While Port-au-Prince's hospitals were rendered mostly useless by the quake, the IDF team set up a field hospital near a soccer stadium to treat survivors. It was one of the only places Haitians could receive advanced medical treatment in the city. "The Israeli field hospital is phenomenal," [reported] Dr. Richard Besser of ABC News "Good Morning America." "They were up and running on Saturday morning, way ahead of the United States hospital."

Another reporter said the Israeli field hospital is the "Rolls Royce of medical care." One grateful Haitian mother, whose baby was delivered at the field hospital, has decided to give her baby the name Israel. You may have read about ZAKA, an Israeli volunteer rescue team that immediately deployed to Haiti as they had to New Orleans after Katrina. ZAKA's workers consist of traditional Jews who would not customarily work on Shabbat. In this case, they kept working as Shabbat began: "There was not really a Shabbat, but on Friday night we said Kiddush with delegations from Mexico, England, and Scotland," commander of the ZAKA mission to Haiti, Mati Goldstein, told Ynet. "With all the hell going on outside, even when things get bad Judaism says we must take a deep breath and go on to save more people." Our tradition teaches that the saving of a life supersedes Shabbat.

Our traditional texts offer us guidance when we don't know what to do or say. The most important lesson is often what not to do. Pirke Avot 4:18 is specific with us: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: When your friend becomes angry, don't try to calm him. When he is recently bereaved, don't try to comfort him. It is not for us to utter platitudes or offer theological solutions. Resolving the problem of theodicy (attempting to reconcile God's positive attributes with the problem of evil in the world) can wait for another place and time.

Crises motivate us to give. That is a good thing. But we don't want to wait for crises in order to be inspired to give. Maimonides' ladder of charity says the highest degree of charity — above which there is no higher — is giving money, a loan, your time or whatever else it takes to enable someone to be self-reliant. The goal of our intervention in Haiti at the moment is to manage the crisis; the longer-term goal will be to help the people become self-sufficient. Again, the words of Pirke Avot (Chapter 2 Mishnah 16) give us direction when we feel helpless: "It is not up to you to finish the work, yet you are not free to avoid it."

We of all peoples know what it is like to be in need and to hope and pray for help. Our experience and our sacred texts tell us we have no choice but to open our hearts and our wallets to help the people of Haiti.

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