Therefore Choose Life

The Jewish Perspective on Coping with Catastrophe

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Buttressed by their faith in the face of both natural and man-made disasters, Jewish communities throughout history have continued on and chosen life. Community resilience, the ability of a community to stick together and to help itself as a group as well as the families in its midst, and religious faith are important coping mechanisms, lessening the development of stress-related problems.

There is an old joke that purports to describe the traditional rites surrounding Jewish holidays (at least Passover, Hanukkah, and Purim): “They tried to kill us, G-d saved us, let’s eat.”

It is likely that the author of that flippant line deliberately ignored the reality. Throughout Jewish history disasters struck communities repeatedly, forcing Jews to cope with catastrophe. Rabbis confronted the realities of disaster, giving comfort while offering theological responses based on the covenantal ideal of sin-retribution-and-restoration. Simply put, if the Jews obeyed the commandments they would be protected. If a catastrophe befell them, their sins were to blame.

The literature often reflects anger at the seemingly disproportionate focus of G-d’s wrath on Jews (Roskies, 1998). The 15th-century Spanish Jewish chronicler, Solomon Ibn Verga, wrote about the Inquisition: “One is stunned, pondering these awesome tribulations, and asks, ‘Why is this great wrath? He has not done the like to any nation’—be they ever so more sin-laden than the Jews. All these and like questions are answered by a single verse: You alone have I known (from all the nations), oh children of Israel; therefore I visit all your sins upon you (Amos 3:2).” Buttressed by their faith, Jewish communities continued and chose life.

CATASTROPHE—NATURAL AND HUMAN-SOURCED

The spiritual reaction was not limited to human war. Sitting on the Syrian-African rift, Israel was frequently struck by earthquakes (Amiran & Arieh, 1994), and the rabbinical responses continued to echo the same formula for natural disasters. In 16th-century Italy, Azariyah ben Moses Dei Rossi described the earthquake of 1570 in Ferrara, Italy as the “voice of G-d” even as he noted other religious and classical explanations of the significance of earthquakes (Rossi & Weinberg, 2001).

Most often, however, the Jewish group psyche reflected the human-sourced traumas starting in the Assyrian, Greek, and...
Roman eras, proceeding through the Middle Ages and the Crusades, and leading to the pogroms of Eastern Europe and the Holocaust.

**ISRAEL AS A RESPONSE TO CATASTROPHE**

An ideological and theological tectonic shift emerged paralleling the Enlightenment and the growth of nationalism that emerged in Europe in the 19th century. Instead of merely accepting disaster as a consequence of sin, some Jews embraced the developing model of nationalism and acted to transform continuous Jewish religious aspirations into political ones. Their efforts to establish a Jewish homeland became known as political Zionism. The movement intensified in response to the pogroms of the 1880s and ultimately led to Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948.

The Arab Legion immediately invaded the newly established state, and the pattern of ongoing conflict began. The psychological impact and shared grief of major wars in 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982; the SCUDS launched from Iraq in 1991; two Intifadas; and numerous terrorist attacks continue to be significant for a country so small. The death of each soldier or victim of terror is deeply felt because it seems that everyone in the country knows them or knows someone who knows them.

Mental health professionals note a unique element in the Israeli communal psyche. It is surprisingly resilient. In psychological terms, resilience is defined as encountering a stress or trauma and emerging strong or stronger from the experience. Community resilience, the ability of a community to stick together and to help itself as a group as well as the families in its midst, is an important coping mechanism (Ganor & Ben-Lavy, 2003). The Israel Trauma Coalition coordinates the work of 43 psychotrauma service providers.

Most observers credit both personal and community resilience to the commonly held Israeli value that, “nothing will succeed in breaking our spirit” (Sugarman, 2006). On a recent visit to Sderot, I met with its Mayor, Eli Moyal. Sderot, an Israeli city bordering the Gaza Strip, has been hit by more than 6,000 Qassam rockets over the past five years. Mayor Moyal angrily reacted to a rumor that the Israeli Defense Ministry was developing plans to evacuate the city, saying, “If they evacuate Sderot it will mean the end of the Zionist dream.”

Israel has developed other techniques and institutions to deal with the most recent wave of terrorism. Its emergency responders including the Mogen David Adom (the Israeli affiliate of the International Red Cross) and trauma teams developed state-of-the-art responses to suicide/homicide bombers (Aschkenasy-Steuer, 2005). Volunteers from ZAKA painstakingly comb through post-incident wreckage, locating dismembered body parts and taking responsibility for their proper treatment. They provide religious supervision during forensic analysis and arrange for proper burial. They and most of Israeli society view such work as a sacred duty and act of piety (Stadler, 2006).

Interestingly, religious individuals experiencing trauma may have an advantage over their secular neighbors; researchers find that deeply held belief systems may impart significant psychological resilience and lessen the development of stress-related problems (Kaplan, Matar, Kamin, Sadan, & Cohen, 2005).

However, Israel’s coping systems are not perfect. A recent study notes that one-third of the residents in areas affected by the second Lebanon War exhibit posttraumatic stress symptoms (Ashkenazi, 2007). The rate among Jewish residents was 26% and, among their Israeli Arab neighbors, 41%. One of the possible explanatory factors for the differing reactions of the two groups is the higher level of community cohesiveness in the Jewish neighborhoods. The Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs plans to initiate and coordinate activities to improve community resilience and sustainable commu-
Community development in Jewish and Arab neighborhoods throughout Israel.

**JEWS WORLDWIDE**

When a disaster strikes in which there are Jewish victims, Jewish families of victims, and Jewish recovery workers, their religious and spiritual needs must be addressed. Doctors and government officials should turn to their local rabbis and synagogue(s) for specific guidance on treatment of the dead and the provision of kosher food for the survivors. Directories of local Jewish community contacts are available on the United Jewish Communities Web site (www.ujc.org) and from Chabad/Lubavitch (www.chabad.org/centers/).

The adage describing the absence of atheists in foxholes applies in the aftermath of disaster. As people turn to religion there are those who would take advantage of the opportunity for evangelization and proselytizing. Recognizing the great benefits of appropriate nonsectarian and interdisciplinary spiritual care, a diverse group of religious leaders have developed guidelines and training (www.disasterchaplaincy.org) so that all can receive appropriate intervention and referral.

The rabbinic imperative of tikkun olam (repairing the world) shapes the Jewish communal humanitarian responses to natural and man-made disasters, providing victims short-term emergency aid and long-term recovery and rebuilding support. International and national Jewish agencies, including United Jewish Communities, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the American Jewish World Service, are important components of the voluntary aid network providing a wide range of relief services to victims of all faiths in the United States and around the world.

Disasters and catastrophes can bring individuals to the depths of despair. Jewish history and theology repeatedly teach us that during times of darkness it is difficult to see the blessings—our situation seems an overwhelming curse. However, the Bible teaches us (Deuteronomy 30:19) to choose life, so that we and our children may live.

**REFERENCES**


