

Talking to Our Children About Tragedy and Suffering: Jewish Reflections on 9/11

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SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE

There is nothing more precious than human life. The single quote below is included to remind people that nothing matters more, and it is essential that we protect every human life.

1. Therefore, only one person was created to teach you
That whosoever kills a single soul,
The Bible considers to have killed a complete world.
And, whosoever sustains and saves a single soul,
It is as if that person sustained the whole world.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

PARTNERS WITH GOD

The concept of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, puts humans in partnership with God. Our actions reflect the sacredness of our task - reaching out and helping others, in good times and bad.

1. What is the meaning of the verse,
"Follow none but *Adonai* your God?" (Deuteronomy 13:15)
Is it possible for a human being actually to follow the ways of God?
What it means is that we should imitate the qualities of God.

As God clothed the naked,
As it is written,
"And *Adonai* God made for Adam and his wife

Garments of skin, and God clothed them."
SO you should clothe the naked.

As God visited the sick,
As it is written,
"Adonai appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre"
[after Abraham's circumcising].
So you should visit the sick.

As God comforted the mourners,
As it is written,
"After the death of Abraham,
God blessed his son Isaac,"
So you should comfort mourners.

As God buried the dead,
As it is written,
"God buried Moses in the valley,"
So you should bury the dead.

Talmud Bavli Sotah 14a

2. Whatever was created in the first six days require further preparation:
Mustard needs sweetening
The bean plant needs sweetening
Wheat needs grinding
and humans, too, are in need of repair.

Genesis Rabbah 11:6

3. Wherever you go, God will go with you.

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:10

4. God is praised in heaven
When they (the Jews) are one band (group) on earth.

Leviticus Rabbah 30:12

5. Only when Jews are united on earth
Is there a firm foundation for God's chambers on high.

Sifra 346

6. In my distress I called upon my God;
To my God I cried for help.

Psalms 18:7

7. Cause us, Adonai our God to lie down in peace, raise us up, our Ruler, to life.
Spread over us your *sukkah* of peace.
Direct us with your good advice.
Save us for your Name's sake.
Be a shield around us.

Remove from us every enemy, disease, sword, famine, and sorrow.
Remove also the adversary from before us and from behind us.
Shelter us beneath the shadow of your wings.
For you, God, are a gracious and merciful Ruler.
Guard our going and our coming to life and to peace from this time and forevermore.
Blessed are you , Adonai, who guards Your people Israel forever.

Hashkiveinu prayer, evening service

8. If you remove from your midst those things that enslave others,
The denigration of others,
The saying of evil things about others,
And share what you have with those who have not,
And respond to the needs of those who call out to you,
Then shall your light be a beacon in the darkness,
And your darkness will be washed in the full day's light.

And God will walk beside you as a guide,
And shall richly fill and nourish your life;
And God will renew your strength,
And you will be like a garden wealthy with water,
A spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Isaiah 58:9-11

FAITH AND BELIEF

In the face of tragedy - natural disaster or human-made - there are those who turn to God for support, just as there are others who turn away. Jewish Tradition has much to say about faith in God (and each other).

1. A faithful person will be abundant in blessings.

Proverbs 28:20

2. A person should believe in God through faith, not because of miracles.

Nahman of Bratslav

3. God is with me, I shall not fear.

Adon Olam

4. We affirm the reality and oneness of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the Divine presence.

We affirm that the Jewish people is bound to God by an eternal [covenant], as reflected in our varied understanding of Creation, Revelation and Redemption.

We encounter God's presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of

everyday life.

We strive for a faith that fortifies [strengthens] us through the vicissitudes [unexpected changes] of our lives - illness and healing, transgression and repentance, bereavement and consolations, despair and hope.

We continue to have faith that, in spite of the unspeakable evils committed against our people and the sufferings endured by others, the partnership of God and humanity will ultimately prevail.

We trust in our tradition's promise that, although God created us as finite beings, the spirit within us is eternal.

In all these ways and more, God gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

"A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism,"
Adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention, CCAR, May 1999

BEHAVIOR CHOICES

While we have no control over natural disasters, we do have control over our own actions. While others may make poor choices, even tragic ones, and while devastation may follow natural disaster, we have the power to step up and effect change.

1. Circumstances are beyond the control of human beings,
But their behavior is in their hands.

Disraeli, Contarini Fleming (1832)

2. Who is mighty?

One who conquers his evil impulse.

As it is written,

Those who are slow to anger are better than the mighty,

And those who rule over their spirit than those who conquer a city.

Pirke Avot 4:1

3. You are not to hate your fellow in your heart;
You must rebuke (reprimand, scold) your fellow,
That you are not bear sin because of him!

Leviticus 19:17

4. A person must bless God for evil,
Just as one blesses God for the good.

Mishnah B'rahot 9:5

WHY WE SHOULD STEP FORWARD TO TAKE ACTION

While we may feel powerless in the face of tragedy, Judaism tells us it is important to take action. These quotes represent the idea that we must take a stand in order to make the world a better place.

1. Justice, justice, you shall pursue.

Deuteronomy 16:20

2. Seek good and not evil that you may live.

And that Adonai, the God of Hosts, may truly be with you, as you think.

Hate evil and love good,

And establish justice with the gate...

Amos 5:14-15

3. Love your neighbor (or "fellow human being") as yourself.

Leviticus 19:18

4. He (Hillel) used to say,

In a place where there are no people (leaders),

strive to be a person (leader).

Pirke Avot 2:5

5. There may be a time when we are powerless to prevent injustice,
but there must never be a time when we fail to protest

Elie Wiesel,

quoted in Noah Ben Shea's *The Word*, page 191

BEING GOOD TO OTHERS

How we treat others reflects on us and on our understanding of the world. We treat others well because that's how we expect others to treat us, and because it's just the "right thing" to do.

1. On three things the world exists:

on Torah

on worship and

on acts of loving kindness.

Pirke Avot 1:2

2. It has been told to you, O human,

What is good, and what God seeks of you:

Only to practice justice,

To love compassion,
And to walk humbly before your God

Micah 6:8

3. Do not do to your friend what is hateful to yourself.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

4. Other people's dignity should be as precious to you as your own. (PirkeAvot 2:15)

How is this to be understood?

This teaches that a person should treat others with the same dignity as he treats himself.

And, just as no one wants to have his or her own dignity trampled upon,

So too a person should not want the dignity of others to be trampled upon.

Avot d'RabbiNatan 14

5. When a human being performs acts of loving kindness

and shows goodness toward other creatures,

God will do the same and show that person mercy.

Judah Loew of Prague (Maharal)

6. To be pious to God is to be caring to people.

Philo

7. Without a love of humankind

There is not love of God.

Sholem Asch

HAVING EMPATHY FOR OTHERS

In the face of tragedy, a common human response is a desire for revenge. The texts, below, offer alternative ways of viewing difficult situations. We are all human and only together can we fix the world's problems.

1. When your enemy falls, do not rejoice.

Proverbs 24:17

2. This is what the 'Holy One said to Israel: My children, what do I seek from you?

I seek no more than that you love one another

And honor one another;

And that you have awe and reverence for one another.

Tanna de BeiEliyahu Rabbah 26:6

3. You shall love the stranger;
For you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

4. Do not despise any person
and think that nothing is useless.
For there is no one who does not have his/her hour,
And there is no object that does not have its place.

Pirke Avot 4:3

5. People hate what they do not understand

Moshe ben Ezra, *Shirat Yisrael*

6. We have been held together and upheld by common remembering.
Martin Buber, *Kampf um Israel* (1933), page 133

POWER OF COMMUNITY

We live in a global society - when crisis strikes, it's our responsibility together to find solutions. There's power when we join together as a community to help!

1. Hillel said, "Do not separate yourself from the community."

Pirke Avot 2:5

2. And if I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?

Pirke Avot 1:14

3. Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor, I am Adonai.

Leviticus 19:16

4. How do we know that if a person sees another person drowning,
mauled by beasts, or attacked by robbers, s/he is bound to save him?
From the verse, "You shall not stand by the blood of your neighbor!"

Babylonian *Talmud Sanhedrin 73b*

5. Separate reeds are weak and easily broken.
But bound together, they are strong and hard to tear apart.

Tanhuma Nitzavim

6. Observe the waters:
when they flow together,
they seep along stones, trees, earth and many other things;
but if the waters are divided into many streams,
the earth swallows them and they disappear.

So shall you also be if you allow yourself to be divided.

Apocrypha

7. If the community is in trouble, a person must not say,
"I will go home, and eat and drink, and all will be well with me..."

But rather, a person must share in the concerns of the community,
for so we find that Moses, our teacher, shared in the distress of the
community...

Those who share in the community's troubles are worthy to see its consolation.

Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 11a

8. Woe to the person who says, "Peace be upon my soul!" and does not join the
community in its hour of trouble.

Shevet Musar

9. When can someone truly be called a 'mighty person?'
When there's an individual who is about to fall into a pit,
and that someone seizes the individual's hand so that s/he does not fall in.

Or when that someone sees another fallen into a pit and lifts the other out of it.

Midrash Psalms 52:6

COMPASSION

We are created in God's image, so just as Jewish tradition teaches that God has
compassion for us, we need to act with compassion to others.

1. I curse the soil because of humankind,
For the inclinations of humankind's heart is evil from its youth;
I will never strike again down all life as I have just done.

Genesis 8:21

2. Be filled with compassion for one another
And the Holy One will be filled with compassion for you

Genesis Rabbah 33:3

3. God surrounds you with kindness and mercy...
God executes righteous acts and judgments for all who are wronged.

Psalms 103: 4,6

4. I, the Eternal, act with
Kindness,
Justice,
And equity
In the world.
For in these I delight, declares the Eternal.

Jeremiah 9:23

5. The merciful person does good for his or her own soul.

Proverbs 11:17

JEWS HAVE A SPECIAL OBLIGATION TO OTHER JEWS

Jewish people all across the world have a special connection. We all share a past, present and future -- we need to be able to count on each other.

1. All Jews are responsible for one another.

Talmud Bavli Sh'vuot 39

2. Hillel said, "Do not separate yourself from the community."

Pirke Avot 2:4

3. One God, one Law, one people, one land.

I.L. Peretz, Der Dichter

4. Separate reeds are weak and easily broken.

But bound together, they are strong and hard to tear apart.

Tanhuma Nitzavim 1

5. How good and pleasant is it for brothers and sisters to live together.

Psalms 133:1

PEACE

The word "shalom" is core to Jewish life. While we say that the word means "hello," "good-bye" and "peace," it takes on a deeper meaning when connected back to its root: "wholeness." In the face of tragedy, it's important to remember that peace is a Jewish (and worldly) ideal, and that the actions we take should lead the world to completeness, to peace.

1. The whole of the Torah is for promoting peace, as it is written,

“Her ways are pleasant, and all her paths peaceful.”

Talmud Bavli Gittin 59b

2. God makes *shalom* between all that exists.

If God did not make peace between the opposites (that exist) in the world,
The world could not stand...

Judah Loew of Prague

3. The work of righteousness shall be peace.

Isaiah 32:17

4. Peace, peace to the person that is far away and is near.

Isaiah 57:19

5. *Adonai* will bless God's people with peace.

Psalms 29:11

6. Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding.

Albert Einstein, *Cosmic Religion*

1931, page 67

7. The world is established only in peace.

8. Great is peace, for all blessings are contained in it, as it is written,
Seek peace and pursue it (Psalms 34:15).
Great is peace, for God's name is peace

Leviticus Rabbah, Tzav, 19:9

9. The law does not command you to run after
or pursue the other commandments,
but only to fulfill them upon the appropriate occasion.
But peace you must seek in your own place
and pursue it even to another place as well.

Numbers Rabbah, Hukkat

10. Grant true and lasting peace to Your people Israel
and to all who live on earth,
for You are the supreme Ruler of all peace.

May it be good in Your eyes to bless Your people Israel
In every season and at all times with Your peace.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who blesses Your people Israel with peace.

Siddur (prayerbook), Shalom Rav

11. The more *tz'dakah* the more peace.

Pirke Avot 2:7