

I love checking the weather. I know I am tipping my hand and showing nerd here, but I love the whole gestalt of weather forecasting. I check the Doppler radar, the visible satellite, the local radar, the regional radar, the NEXRAD radar, the dew point, the barometric pressure. Someone was thinking of freaks like me and said, "I bet there are enough weather nerds just like there were enough news nerds to make 24/7 news a success. Let's make a weather channel." I admit it. I watch the Weather Channel. I have a weather radio.

So when Hurricane Katrina came to life in the Atlantic Ocean, I took note, as we hurricane trackers do. In the old days we'd get gridded paper and plot the course of the hurricane, getting the coordinates everyday from the newspaper and from the weather reports on tv. Now of course, the internet makes tracking storms on paper utterly passé. One can watch the storm's movement minute by minute and then examine the various alternative paths the storm might take. The

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's website is a remarkable resource.

As I watched the storm heading into the Gulf region I saw and heard and read the reports. And all of them said the same thing: Hurricane Katrina was a very serious life threatening storm with the potential to wreak real havoc wherever she landed. This message was reinforced by every tv station that exhaustively covered the storm story. The folks in the studio, the wind blown reporters in their slickers standing near the pounding surf, the anchors themselves – everyone agreed that this would be a bad one.

I just want to be sure that this was a shared reality experience for all of us. It's not like I was a lone individual a la Dennis Quaid or Billy Ray Thornton in front of my computer discovering some horrible last minute – oh, fill in the blank: asteroid, tornado, alien spaceship, hurricane... Hurricane Katrina's approach was on every channel.

So, I ask you: what was New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin watching on tv? And Governor Katherine Blanco? What about Major General Bennett C. Landreneau the adjutant General of the Louisiana National Guard? And dare I ask, what station was Michael Brown, then head of FEMA, watching? And what was tuned in at the ranch in Crawford?

I'll tell you one thing: they couldn't have been watching what I was watching. Because had they checked in on a regular basis with the Weather Channel they would have been compelled to do their jobs: preparing for a catastrophic hurricane and the devastating storm surge that would surely follow. Declaring a disaster area is one thing. Picking up the pieces in the aftermath is something entirely different.

There is so much, too much guilt to go around. I feel slightly better knowing that Michael Brown was fired and also that President Bush acknowledged some complicity in the mishandling of this disaster. Republicans and Democrats will argue into the night about various components of this debacle. But I am not really interested in playing the blame game right now.

As suspenseful and nerve-wracking as it was to watch the hurricane hit, nothing could prepare us for watching the man-made disaster that followed in the hurricane's wake. It seemed beyond belief that the images we watched on television were from this country. I understand why the first word that came to mind in labeling those people who were unable to flee the city was refugees. Poor, homeless, hungry, desperate men, women and children, begging for help, for some kind of basic fundamentally sound, humane treatment. As the editors of the New Republic wrote in the September 19th copy, "When was the last time that the noun

"refugee" was modified by the adjective "American"? ...Americanist innocence...was drowned in Katrina's waters. Our invulnerability is not perfect. The storm beat us."

What I do want to focus on for this evening of Yom Kippur are some lessons learned in the wake of Katrina. Because we must learn from our sins and from our weaknesses. We must be brave about confronting that which is good within us – and there is much good here in this country – as well as that which must change.

So many of us said, while watching tv or listening to the radio, over and over again, But this is America. The words were not a protest only against the flood. They were a protest also against the aftermath of the flood ...Americanism [includes] the conviction that the wretchedness of large numbers of Americans is unacceptable, an offense to the American idea, a spur to American action. We take care of our own, and our efficiency is a measure of our decency. But when

our efficiency fails us, we must conclude that our decency failed us, too. "No insignificant person was ever born," President Bush unforgettably declared in his first inaugural address. How significant, exactly, were the persons who waited for days for relief and rescue from the Superdome and the Convention Center and the other makeshift purgatories, while the rest of the country watched their dehumanization on television? We did not take care of our own, not swiftly, not fiercely, not as if nothing in the world was more important to us. The natural fury that caused this misery should have been met with a human fury to alleviate it. It was not. (TNR)

Why not? *Al chet she' chatanu lefanecha*: for the sin we have sinned against you by ignoring the scourges of poverty and racism in America. I fear that because the overwhelming number of victims of Hurricane Katrina were desperately poor and black, their needs were not immediately recognized and responded to. I doubt one of those men or women had a friend in high places who knew someone who

could get a helicopter to drop bottles of water at the Superdome or the Convention Center. No one amongst the folks trapped in New Orleans was a commissioner or on a political action committee. Not one of the evacuees had donated money to a candidate or alderman, or knew a judge or a chief of staff. These impoverished African Americans were and are powerless people with no political clout.

I am not averring that the White House or the Louisiana statehouse purposefully turned their backs on those left behind because they are poor and black. I am not accusing George Bush or anyone else of being a bigot. I am suggesting that powerless people generally do not show up on the radar screens of politicians. And you know what? They don't show up on ours much either.

We absolutely must encourage our legislators to pay attention to the dispossessed, to acknowledge that racism is not a thing of the past but a stubborn legacy we have not yet managed to extinguish. We

must stand for the notion of equality by the way we vote and the programs that are created to address racism and homelessness and poverty.

The notion that we could somehow end poverty in America and eradicate racism is surely a dream. But can we agree that the 17% rise in poverty in America over the last 6 years is unacceptable? 10.5 percent of all U.S. households, representing 20 million adults and 13 million children, are "food insecure" because of lack of resources (U.S. Census Bureau survey -2000); is that your vision of America?

The food we collect every year for the Grow Clinic and The Boston Food Bank is not for an abstract population. It is for hungry destitute people in our own greater Boston locale.

Lesson one after Katrina is: poverty and racism are real phenomena in America. Until we tame or diminish these twin scourges, our

nation will not be great. Our work to heal the world will not be accomplished. We need to say that this is all unconscionable. The God of Genesis created human beings, and created all of them be-tzelem Elohim. Every person in the image of God. No exceptions; no second tier creations. This is the central claim of the tradition called Torah; it is the pumping heart of Jewish ethics. If all of Torah disappeared tomorrow, except for that single line in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 9, verse 6, we could rebuild the structures of Jewish life. Judaism really stands for something. In this case it stands for human sanctity, divorced from other considerations. The retired janitor on a meager pension, with nothing on his table except beans and rice is worth exactly the same as a prince of industry, exactly the same as a U.S. Congressman. If we can't say this, we can't say anything.

Lesson #2

By now everyone must have seen the LA Times article about ruined Torah scrolls in New Orleans. Rabbi Yisroel Shiff of Congregation Beth Israel in New Orleans hoped that his Orthodox synagogue's holy scrolls would come through Hurricane Katrina undamaged. But if not, he wanted them buried in the appropriate manner.

"We bury them with honor, as we would someone we care about -- the Torah is the life's blood of our community," Shiff said.

If you didn't read the article you've surely seen the pictures: Isaac Leider a rabbi from ZAKA, the Orthodox organization that searches for dead bodies and pieces of dead bodies at terrorist sites in Israel, arrives at the synagogue in a rubber raft. The synagogue was still swamped by 4 feet of water. Wearing waist-high rubber waders and a yarmulke, [he] followed the rescue squad into the synagogue and made his way to the sanctuary. The wooden door swung open, slowed by the water.

The rabbi waded to the front of the hall and opened the ark that held six Torah scrolls.

Rabbi Schiff of Beth Israel, who evacuated to Tennessee before Katrina hit, knew that the temple near the shores of Lake Pontchartrain had been flooded. But, he said, "we believe in miracles. Maybe the water didn't reach the scrolls."

The photos that were emailed to me a number of times are indeed moving and filled with pathos. What Jew can feel anything other than sadness and despair upon seeing Torahs that are ruined beyond repair.

But I must say this: the abandonment of those Torah scrolls to the elements with the hope that because "we believe in miracles" they would be safe, strains my good will to the limit. Abandoning those Torah scrolls in hope of a miracle is as negligent as leaving invalids

behind in a nursing home hoping that someone would find them and miraculously saver them.

Every other synagogue in New Orleans safeguarded their Torah scrolls. Every other rabbi who fled New Orleans in front of the storm made sure their sifrei Torah were safe. Jews may believe in miracles. But we don't wait for them.

I know you know this story, about the man who has remarkable faith in God. When he is told to leave his home because a flood is coming he says, "Look, I am a deep believer in God. If God wants me to leave He will surely intervene with a miracle and save me." A couple hours go by and a guy in a truck honks and says, "Hey, come on, get in, let's go!", but the man smiles and says, "God will miraculously save me." A couple more hours go by and the water is rushing down the streets and a boat comes by and the guy inside says, "Hey, come on, let's go. You're going to drown!" But the man smiles and says,

“No, God will miraculously deliver me from harm.” The next morning the man is on the roof of his house and a helicopter flies overhead. “Take the rope and let us get you out of there!” But the man smiles and waves and yells, “It’s ok. God will miraculously deliver me to safety.”

An hour goes by and the man is swept away and drowns. The next thing you know, he is standing before the Holy One’s throne.

“Excuse me, God,” he begins, “But I have been such a loyal believer. Faithful and pious.” “Yes you have,” agrees God. “Well, so, no offense, but what did I do to deserve this death? Why didn’t you miraculously deliver me from evil and save me?” “Schmendrik!” God exclaims, “Who do you think sent the truck, the boat and a helicopter”?!

It’s a great story, and it’s a little bit close to the bone regarding the aftermath of Katrina.

Lesson #2: It's not about miracles! Sure they're nice, but since when have we lived assuming a miracle would occur? One cannot live life waiting for someone else to come to the rescue: God or someone else. WE are the ones God counts on to take care of this world. As the famous song goes: "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition." Al chet she'chatanu lifanecha For the sin we have sinned against you by assuming You will do the work and not us.

Lesson #3

The million dollar question in moments of devastation and disaster is often, "why did this happen?" Hurricane Katrina was no exception. And there was no shortage of answers.

A group calling itself [Columbia Christians for Life](#) suggested that a satellite image of Hurricane Katrina as it hit the Gulf Coast Monday looked just like a six-week-old fetus.

"The image of the hurricane ... with its eye already ashore at 12:32 p.m. Monday, August 29, looks like a fetus (unborn human baby) facing to the left (west) in the womb, in the early weeks of gestation (approx. 6 weeks)," the e-mail message says. "Even the orange color of the image is reminiscent of a commonly used pro-life picture of early prenatal development." And in case you're not getting the point, the e-mail message spells it out in black and white: "Louisiana has 10 child-murder-by-abortion centers," the groups says, and "five are in New Orleans."

Yes it's that old tried and true brickbat: divine punishment. The Christian fundamentalists appreciate it: it's one size fits all sins. The Columbia Christians led with abortions as the primary sin. Alabama

State Sen. Hank Erwin, R-Montevallo prefers a more generalized approach.

"New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast have always been known for gambling, sin and wickedness," Erwin wrote in early September in a column he distributes to news outlets. "It is the kind of behavior that ultimately brings the judgment of God."

After touring Gulfport and Biloxi, Miss., and Bayou La Batre, Erwin said he was awed and humbled by the power of the storm. But he wasn't surprised.

"Warnings year after year by godly evangelists and preachers went unheeded. So why were we surprised when finally the hand of judgment fell?" Erwin wrote. "Sadly, innocents suffered along with the guilty. Sin always brings suffering to good people as well as the bad."

That smug certainty of fundamentalism always spikes my blood pressure. When someone or a group of someones they and they alone know the 'true' reason for the deaths of a thousand people and the destruction of billions of dollars' worth of property and machinery is utterly maddening.

But to be fair, it's not the Christian right alone indulging in this line of theology. A forum used by al-Qaeda sympathisers has dedicated a page to Hurricane Katrina in which it welcomes the natural disaster as a "divine sign against the corrupt crusading America". The page opens with a quotation from the Koran about "punishment from above" referring to the hurricane.

And lest I give you the impression that the other monotheistic faith in Western civilization, namely us – is free of nahrishkeit: Rabbi Ovadia Yosef is amongst the most well known rabbis in Israel. He is the spiritual head of the religious Sephardic party, Shas. In his weekly

sermon, the rabbi said: "There was a tsunami and there are terrible natural disasters, because there isn't enough Torah study... black people reside there (in New Orleans). Blacks will study the Torah? (God said) let's bring a tsunami and drown them."

"Hundreds of thousands remained homeless. Tens of thousands have been killed. All of this because they have no God," said the rabbi, who already found himself in hot water in the past following controversial remarks of one kind or another.

Yet Rabbi Ovadia was not done there, and proceeded to explain in detail why Americans deserved the Hurricane.

"Bush was behind the (expulsion of) Gush Katif," he said. "He encouraged Sharon to expel Gush Katif...we had 15,000 people expelled here, and there 150,000 (were expelled). It was God's retribution ..God does not short-change anyone."

“He (Bush) perpetrated the expulsion. Now everyone is mad at him...this is his punishment for what he did to Gush Katif, and everyone else who did as he told them, their time will come, too,” the rabbi said. (Yediot Achronot Sept. 7, 2005)

Well, all this is evidence that narrow-mindedness and bigotry and fundamentalism use religion as a weapon to slash and deface humanity – and God. But we can’t let extremism obfuscate the question, which still stands after we’ve cleared away the fools. Why did Hurricane Katrina happen? Why do bad things happen to good people, to innocent people?

Without beginning another sermon, let me say that this is lesson #3: bad things will surely happen to good people. It has always been so and will continue to be so until the end of time. We live in a world with a loving God who feels about us the way we feel whenever our

children get behind the driver's seat, whenever they wave as they board a plane, every time they embark on their own path, from the first day of kindergarten to their ascendancy to the chairman of the board. We feel, as does God, "I've done all I can. And I am always here with unconditional love, advice, and succor. I might not approve of what you do, and I will tell you that. But I can no more control your destiny than I can guess the winning lottery number. I cannot protect you from heartbreak or heart arrhythmia. I cannot prevent hurricanes or tornadoes. I cannot stop drunk drivers, avian flu, or terrorist attacks. I can't even stop you from piercing your eye brow or tattooing your calf."

My image of God is less and less the figure on a cloud with a white beard shooting thunder and lightning and more and more the presence of the Shechina, the feminine presence of God, clutching her hands and shaking her head as her child runs outside without a sweater. Our God is about the infinite power of love and kindness

and grace. I almost feel sorry for the fundamentalists and their God, who seems perpetually in a bad mood, ready to strike randomly and savagely. My God may not be omnipotent, but then I'm not looking for a vengeful God. I don't want a God who wreaks havoc. I want a God who loves and forgives. Al chet shehatunu lefanecha, for the sin of making the Holy One into a hit man for political agendas, for blaming God for the random pain and folly we humans encounter.

Our obligation in the face of tragedy is not to blame man or God.

"Our obligation in the face of a catastrophe is to act: to comfort and aid those who have suffered, and to use human creativity to prevent future catastrophes. The only Jewish response to tragedy is to restore human dignity and rebuild the world." (Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz)

Three lessons from Katrina on erev Yom Kippur to remember for me, and I hope, for you: #1, racism and poverty are crushing realities in America and we must respond to it, as Americans, as Jews. #2, it

may take a miracle, but we're forbidden to wait for one, and #3, our God is a loving God whose job in this world is not controlling the weather or doling out punishments, but rather comforting us in our pain and challenging us to respond to the pain and travail of others.

The rain may fall for forty days and nights. Water may cover the entire earth, but when the ark is built it must be large enough. It must be large enough for all to enter. Rich and poor, sick and healthy, down to the youngest child of the youngest mother. Only then can we claim to be worthy of the covenant rainbow in the sky above us.