

**What Hurricane Katrina Laid Bare**  
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Today is the first day of 5766, and we welcome the New Year with high hopes and heartfelt promises. During the year just past, many of us experienced a good deal of joy and success and we pause to reflect on our blessings. But for too many of us, it's "good riddance" to 5765! It was also a year when many of us experienced undeserved pain and suffering. Our world lived through a monstrously destructive tsunami, continued hunger, hatred and violence. And as a country we faced a rising death toll in a war with no apparent way out and hurricanes that took the lives of too many and ruined the lives of so many more.

We would understand if those who suffered in the hurricanes and tsunami cried out with the Psalmist (excerpts from Psalm 69): "Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even unto my soul. I am sunk in deep mire where there is no standing. I am come into deep waters and the flood overwhelms me. I am weary from my crying, my throat is dry. Deliver me out of the mud; let me not sink. Do not let the floodwaters overwhelm me, nor the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth over me."

Where, indeed was God, is God? Sometimes it is oh-so hard to know, oh-so difficult to understand. I can tell you where God was not this past year. God was not in the blasphemous words of religious leaders who once again blamed the victims.

God was not with the director of a Philadelphia Christian group called Repent America who said, "We must not forget that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in their city for so long."

God was not with Palestinian Authority religious leader Yousef Abu Sneina, Imam of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, who preached on Palestinian radio that the death and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina was Allah's punishment to the U.S. for fighting Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, and for threatening Iran and Syria.

And God was surely not with Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, leader of Israel's Shas party, who linked Hurricane Katrina to President Bush's support for the Gaza disengagement. He said, "This is God's retribution...this is the punishment for what he (Bush) did to Gush Katif. And everyone else who did as he told them, their time will come too." This so-called spiritual leader went on, "There was a tsunami and there are terrible natural disasters because there isn't enough *Torah* study. Black people live there (in New Orleans). Blacks will study the *Torah*? (God said) let's bring a tsunami and drown them." As Jerusalem Reports magazine writer Stuart Shoffman wrote, "This bigot shames all Jews."

And sadly, God was also not with many of the leaders responsible for doing God's rescue work in our own country. It is a national disgrace that we failed to respond quickly and definitively and that our government officials "stood idly by the blood of their neighbors" (Leviticus 19:16), leading to unnecessary additional suffering and avoidable deaths. Yes, it is tragic for an entire region of our Gulf Coast to overnight become like a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country. Yes, it is humbling for the richest and self-proclaimed most advanced nation on earth to accept aid from foreign countries. America got a big black eye in plain view of the rest of the world. And yes, it is shameful that it took a hurricane to lay bare to all the world what we knew in the deep recesses of our

conscience: that the underbelly of New Orleans and so many other areas of America is filled with poverty and haunted by racism.

We dare not evade the implications of this moment in our nation's history. Most of the victims who were left behind were poor and black. Most of the white people got out. Of course no one was immune. With 80% of the city under water, no group was spared. Tragedy swallowed the privileged and the poor; suffering and death crossed all lines. But divides were also evident in things as fundamental as access to a car and cash to pay for gas. During those first few horrible days after Katrina struck, pictures of human suffering vied with pictures of looting and marauding, of gunshots and armed bands taking advantage of the situation. They were pictures of those who get left behind in American society...this time, sadly, in a literal way.

Even before Katrina, New Orleans was one of the poorest cities in the U.S., with a population that is almost 70% African-American. In the parish of Orleans, 34 percent of the households lived below the federal poverty line. Not just in New Orleans, but all over our country, there has been economic stagnation and deterioration at the lower levels. After a decade of improvement during the 1990s, poverty in America is actually getting worse. The poverty rate, defined as an income of less than \$15,000 for a family of three (!), rose to 12.7% in 2004. This represents some 37 million Americans, a number as great as the entire country of Canada. At this moment, 8% of whites live below the poverty line along with 22% of Hispanics, 24% of blacks and even more Native Americans. On average African-Americans earned 62 percent of what whites earned in 2003.

The U.S. is ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the world on infant mortality. There are 11.5 deaths per thousand live births in Washington, DC compared to 4.6 in Beijing, China! A baby born in Washington has less chance of surviving its first year than a baby born in urban parts of the state of Kerala in India! And 29% of America's children still had no health insurance last year.

The poorest children in our country get the worst education. The vast majority of those enrolled in large city public schools are children of color. These schools are de facto segregated. While we proudly proclaim that we will leave no child behind, poor children are being held back. Our public school system robs low-income families of a good education, the one thing that could liberate their children from this cycle. It's an especially cruel reality.

For the last five years our federal government has shown precious little interest in attacking these issues. The poor are trapped and not just in poverty. They are trapped in our debate about poverty. They are pawns in political chess games, props for media moments, victims of the ideological war between liberals and conservatives.

Instead of attacking poverty we have attacked the social safety net and refused to address the decline in the value of the federal minimum wage, which has remained at a paltry \$5.15 since 1997. For five years we have engaged in a redistribution of wealth enriching the top of the economic order with little or no discernable impact on those at the bottom. For five years the richest country on earth has seen an increase in poverty at the same time that we have witnessed a surge in the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Tax cuts and pork barrel spending should end in the face of poverty and mounting deficits.

Liberals say the problem is an economic system favoring the rich. Conservatives blame a corrosive culture of poverty. Of course it's a bit of both. Liberals say the solution is for the government to sponsor programs to help people break down institutional

barriers. This is true of course, but will never succeed without the hard work, determination and effort of those who truly want to live the American dream. Conservatives say personal responsibility is the key. No doubt that it is necessary, but it will never be sufficient when the deck is stacked so heavily against you. And the so-called 'Faith-based 'Initiatives', independent of the Church-State issues involved, are a totally inadequate substitute for a broadly-based, government-led nationwide effort to erase this stain on our country's conscience once and for all.

The other issue laid bare by hurricane Katrina is the continuing reality of racism in American life. Telling the truth about race, America's so-called 'original sin', has always been difficult. Racism has played various purposes in our history. Initially it was a way to economic gain through slavery. Racism has also been a distraction, a chance to blame the 'other' when our lives are not going well. And recently racism has become a political strategy in elections that are won by divisive and shameful rhetoric such as 'racial quotas', 'welfare queens' and 'affirmative action'. In truth, our American spirit has too often been fractured by race. And as Abraham Lincoln reminded us, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

Some of the racism following Katrina was overt. For example, it has been widely reported that one white suburban New Orleans police force closed at least one bridge to keep a group of blacks from fleeing into a white area. There was also a fair amount of public speculation over whether the response would have been different if Katrina had hit a white enclave like Hilton Head instead of New Orleans. In 2004 the federal government very quickly moved huge resources into Florida after the hurricanes there. The difference, however, was probably not race, but politics. The Florida hurricanes came just before an election. Yet if even this is true, then lives were lost because of political considerations. Either way, Katrina's victims were too quickly transformed from a natural disaster and human tragedy into a political problem to be handled and spun.

The media, clearly heroic in the way they reported so much of the story and helped to prod our government officials into action, also contributed to the problem. Some reporters used the word 'refugee' in speaking about US citizens. A Freudian slip? There were two similar photos published, one showing a white couple up to their chests in murky water. The woman was holding some bags of food. The caption by the French press said that they are shown 'after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.' The other was a picture of a young black man wading through water that had risen to his chest. He was clutching a case of soda and pulling a plastic bag. The caption provided by the Associated Press said he has just been 'looting a grocery store.'

It's clear that, just as there was a division of perspectives concerning the O. J. Simpson trial 11 years ago, blacks and whites view the effects of Katrina very differently. A recent USA Today poll taken after Katrina reported that, when asked whether the President "cares about black people," 67 percent of whites said 'yes,' but 79 percent of blacks said 'no.' A broader question was put in a poll by the Washington Post, which reported that nearly two-thirds of black respondents said that race played a part in the government's slow response to Katrina, while just over two-thirds of whites said it wasn't the case.

This controversial issue of racism ignited a frenzy of feelings when rapper Kanye West said that the President doesn't care about black people. Whether we believe it or not or like it or not, his comments reflect a broad consensus of anger expressed by many

African-Americans about the government's relief efforts. When 67 percent of black Americans believe that the answer is A, not B, and 67 percent of white Americans believe that the answer is B, not A, then at minimum we have a breakdown in communication between two cultures.

I personally do not really believe that our President is a racist. Insensitive? Perhaps. Shielded from the reality of how so much of America lives? Absolutely, and, sadly, like most of us sitting here as well, including myself. But we must understand that the effects of administration policies have had important and unnerving consequences for the poor and for people of color. Hiring a few extremely visible high-ranking African-Americans is not a racial policy. It is true that often the issue is not race but socio-economic class. Yet the distinctions are often so intertwined with each other that it is virtually impossible to separate them. And while racism may be totally nonexistent in George Bush's heart and soul, we can't ignore the fact that the consequences of his approach to economic and social issues have a disproportionately negative impact on people of color. Indifference to the poor becomes, willy-nilly, indifference to the racial divisions in our society.

Those on the conservative side of our country's political spectrum have tried to narrowly restrict the discussion of public morality to a short list of hot-button social issues. The religious right has kept the focus on gay marriage, right-to-life and abortion, prayer in the public schools, and a set of granite 10 Commandments. Our national leadership was willing to run back to Washington to try to inappropriately intervene to save the life of one Terry Schaivo but dallied when it came to saving hundreds of lives after Katrina.

This incredibly limited view of the role of morality in the public square must be challenged. Regrettably it ignores too many other compelling ethical issues. Where is our national leadership on concerns like the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the genocide in Darfur, and international human rights violations aided by our own foreign policy of deliberately sending suspected enemies to foreign countries that still practice torture? These are also moral issues. We cannot allow these, along with the challenges of poverty and racism, to be buried or disregarded.

Katrina is an American tragedy but also, potentially, an opportunity to get serious about poverty and racism. The generosity and concern of our country has been evident as people have opened their pocketbooks and their hearts and given of their time and resources to help rebuild shattered lives and cities. Our national leadership needs to take advantage of this moment. It's not just about rebuilding New Orleans, as drastic and important and immediate a concern as that must be. It is about an entire class of people spread all over the United States, in every region, every state, and every city. As Jonathan Alter said in his Newsweek article entitled "The Other America" a few weeks ago, "Katrina gives (President) Bush an only-Nixon-could-go-to-China opportunity, if he wants it."

As Jews we bear a special responsibility in this effort. Our history is replete with enough poverty and discrimination to specially sensitize us to the need of the underclass in America, including the at least 250,000 Jews who live in poverty right here in New York City. I especially urge those of us who have political contacts to use them to push this agenda. And I suggest that those of us who have influence in the Republican Party could be especially helpful in this effort.

Our Shaaray Tefila Social Action Committee provides all of us a number of ways to make a difference. Our members have contributed over \$13,000 to the Katrina efforts of the Union for Reform Judaism just through us. There are many ways for all of us to join in the fight against poverty right here, right now. On *Yom Kippur*, look for the bags that the Social Action Committee will distribute for our continuing support of the Yorkville Common Pantry. Make this the year that you come once each month to make lunches for the underprivileged at our Sandwich Saturday program. Make this the year that you deliver a package of dry foodstuffs to elderly shut-ins in our neighborhood through our *Kesher* program. Make this the year that you volunteer to serve the hungry and homeless of our own Upper East Side at our weekly Wednesday Soup Kitchen. And there is an opportunity for some generous members sitting here tonight to help us make up the deficit in our Soup Kitchen budget for this year.

But what of our still-unanswered question: where, indeed is God in the midst of our struggles? The Psalmist begs for rescue when he feels his soul drowning in the deepening depths of his dark despair. 'Where are you, God? Save me. Hurry. The waters, the floods....'

Dear friends, God is precisely where God always is when nature's fury, disease, suffering and death overwhelm us and push us down into the pit of hopelessness: God is in our redeeming acts of selflessness and sacrifice for our family, our friends, our fellow human beings who reach out their hands to us for help. We do God's work in our Divine acts of comfort and salvation, support and deliverance.

Let us remember the words of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav who taught us to 'pray as if everything depends on God and to act as if everything depends on us.' This year let's not just mouth the words of our prayers but put them into action. May God give us the strength and courage we will need, for the tasks are great, but so is our human spirit of caring and compassion. *Amen.*