

“Making Meaning”
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I like to watch the evening news. When I finish my work, I love to turn on Anderson Cooper 360 and get his perspective on the issues of our world. But this week, I could not. I was on overload from the overwhelming news of Haiti. I felt helpless. I felt heartbroken.

When I did catch a glimpse of the news, I asked myself, “What can I do?” As I heard about orphaned children not able to last much longer without formula or diapers or parents, enduring the harshness of nature and of our world, I struggled with what I could do.

“Maybe I could convince Chip to adopt just one of these children?” I pondered.

“Surely the congregation would help us raise a little Haitian daughter,” I imagined.

When I asked my boys, one thought it was a good idea and the other didn’t. Chip hasn’t been won over yet, but I keep trying -- not that adoption has been made a widespread opportunity or even a limited option.

The unbearable noise of our news is so difficult to endure because so there is painfully so little we can do.

The cries from the book of Exodus are mute in comparison. For the story captured in today’s parashah happened so long ago, it hard to sense its reality. If the plagues unfolded as they are said to have in our Torah, then life was as much a nightmare in Egypt back then, as it is in Haiti today.

Our Torah text teaches that there were swarms upon swarms of locusts that darkened the land and hid it from view. The locusts ate up all the grass of the fields and all the fruits of the trees. Nothing green was left. Then came the darkness of the ninth plague – a darkness so thick that no man could see another. For three days no one could get up from where he was.

Then in the middle of the Exodus telling something strange happens. We are told to celebrate Passover. In the midst of the utter darkness, before the Egyptians reach the depths of utmost despair, there is an unusual change in the narrative. Before the final plague of the killing of every Egyptian first born, God oddly instructs us to celebrate the Passover ritual. The text from Exodus tells us that each year in the future, we must remove leaven from our home for seven days, we must offer a special paschal sacrifice, and most importantly, we must tell our children about the suffering we endured, about the horrors we witnessed, and about the lessons that we learned.

“And when your children ask you,” our portioned repeatedly states, “You shall tell them.” In the middle of the unfolding of the greatest drama of our people we are told to find meaning, to make meaning, to remember the meaning, and to transmit it to our children.

You see, our children see the world as it is and tell it like it is. Our children hold us accountable... “And when your son asks you about Haiti’s earthquake, here’s what you can say.”

First, you can say it is clear that the Israelis were there to quickly and competently to help.

Within 24 hours of the earthquake, the Israeli Foreign Ministry prepared a rescue team for departure: elite army units, medical units, engineers ready to set up field hospitals. By the first Shabbat, they were up and working. Last Saturday morning, the Israeli Defense Forces set up a field hospital with a 121-member team including 40 doctors, 20 nurses, 20 paramedics and medics, and 20 lab and x-ray technicians and administrators. As of yesterday, 383 people have been treated there, among them dozens of children. There were 140 life saving operations and seven babies delivered.

Now you should know that Haiti is not known for its thriving Jewish communities. As one blogger wrote, “Port-Au-Prince doesn’t even have a Chabad house.. how odd. I thought they were everywhere.” Haiti’s Jewish population is estimated at 25 – even though a Jewish presence in Haiti does date back to 1492 as one of the interpreters on Christopher Columbus’ ship was a Jew.

Yet still, “When your son asks you, we were there.”

When your son asks you about this earthquake you can say we sent financial support. In the first week of fundraising, our Reform movement raised half a million dollars, and I am certain that’s only the start. We raised \$1,000 in small change as a congregation last Shabbat and I am certain this weekend of raising funds in Religious School will be far greater.

“When your son asks you” about this earthquake you can say we cared. We talked about it. We felt sorrow. We shared our prayers.

When your son asks you, I hope we can say that we even helped to rebuild.

As Jews, no matter where we are... whether in Egypt, in Nazi, Germany, in America today, we make meaning. That is the essence of the statement “And when your son asks you, you shall tell him.” History doesn’t belong to the past, it is meant to teach us and transform us today.

The ultimate meaning maker in the midst of tragedy was Victor Frankel, the Holocaust survivor, author and professor of psychiatry. In his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning* he chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate and describes his own psychotherapeutic process of finding a reason to live and that of others.

Frankel reflects on the philosopher Nietzsche's words, "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*." And Frankel add his own wisdom to carry us through the wildness of our world: "When we are no longer able to change a situation – just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer – we are challenged to change ourselves."

Crisis calls us to care. Crisis calls us to act with compassion. For if we do not, our hearts will become hardened like Pharaoh's leaving us too paralyzed to respond to the plight that we see.

Reflecting on the despairing ordeal of the camps, Frankel writes: "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

Our answer to the "Why" of tragedy is "What can we do?"

May we reach out to those in Haiti who are suffering and may we reach out to those in our congregational home who are struggling not with questions but with answers, not with helplessness but with healing, not with despondency but with hope and with faith in what tomorrow will bring.