

## “G-d and the Haiti Devastation”

Last week saw the terrible earthquake that destroyed much of Haiti, killed tens of thousands of people, and left hundreds of thousands in such horrible inhuman conditions that one cannot even comprehend the gravity of the situation.

How does a believer of G-d explain an event of such magnitude? How does a religious person theologically come to understand the pain and suffering that has occurred and not ask: “where is G-d?” What I want to offer tonight is not a reaction to the Pat Robertsons of the world. To suggest as he did that, somehow, the earthquake was punishment for some pact made by Haiti with the Devil centuries ago is so absurd, it is beyond the pale.

It reminds me of when former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Mordechai Eliyahu, declared that the Holocaust was punishment from G-d for the birth of Reform Judaism that started in Germany. To argue that G-d committed millions of Jews, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, adults and children, to the most horrific of deaths as punishment for the start of a movement, to believe that G-d sent an earthquake that would destroy hospitals, schools, and churches, and leave thousands of innocent children dead as punishment for a "pact" made centuries ago is not serious religious thought. It is what makes people revile G-d and religion, and rightfully so.

No, this is for those who saw the earthquake, felt the pain of those who have suffered, and who still want to believe in a loving G-d. This sermon is for those who cannot understand how a good G-d could allow this. This is for those who want to see G-d as a force of kindness in the Universe, who cares for us and is not a malevolent despot looking to inflict such horrific destruction on His creatures. For those who believe in a gentle and loving G-d, how do you understand what happened in Haiti?

Well, the answer usually given by those who believe is: "There must be a reason for it. We may not understand the ways of G-d, but we must believe that everything happens for a reason. G-d made this world, has complete control over it and while we do not fully understand His ways, this must be part of His overall plan."

I saw a book by a Pastor Dave Earley entitled "*21 Reasons Why Bad Things Happens to You.*" And his 'reasons' include: suffering expands our perspective of Him; suffering is G-d's way of teaching us lessons about life; bad things are sent our way to strengthen us, to bring people together and to enhance our ability to pray. In other words, everything that happens to us or happens in this world is G-d sending it to us for a reason and always a good one.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of "*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*", spoke in Charleston years ago. Rabbi Kushner wrote his book as a result of his caring and eventually losing his son, Aaron, to progeria, the premature aging disease. Kushner told us that a

person came up to him once and said: “Rabbi, maybe there was a good reason for G-d giving your son that disease. Because of what you have experienced and lived through, you were able to write an eloquent book that has comforted millions.” Rabbi Kushner understood that, though insensitive, the person meant no harm and said: “With all due respect to you and to G-d, I would have given anything to have had a healthy child who didn’t have to live with progeria and as a result, never written a best seller that comforted millions.”

I understand what that person and what Pastor Earley are doing. It is what so many want to do and that is find meaning for the heartbreaking aspects of life. We desperately need to find a reason for all the bad things that happen to us. And for religious people, we doubly feel the need to find an explanation because why would a loving G-d allow these things to happen? And other than: “Well, I guess it is because there is no G-d”, the only other explanation is: “Well, there has to be a good reason and while we don’t know it, G-d does.”

Here is why I cannot accept that premise any longer.

Because you and I know there is no "good" reason for a child to suffer progeria – not for the child and not for the parent. There is no good reason for the Holocaust. There is no good reason for the hundreds of thousands lying dead on the barely paved streets of Haiti.

Not if there is a G-d that has the power to stop such pain.

The minute one declares that G-d has the power to act and does not, He is no longer good. A good G-d, in complete control over the universe, can no more allow the innocent to suffer than a human being with the ability to help someone but turns his back be called good. It doesn't work that way. Yet, we so desperately want to believe in a good, loving, and all powerful G-d that we try to create an untenable answer.

So let me suggest this instead.

The great psychiatrist Victor Frankel, who wrote the fabulous book "*Man's Search for Meaning*", based his life on the following thought: We have no control over what happens to us, but we do have control over how we react to what happens to us. In other words, we can't change our genetics, our upbringing, accidents and tragedies that occur to us, but we can control how we live despite them.

If you are with me so far, let me offer this that, while I admit is radical, is an idea for you to consider about G-d. Maybe G-d has no control over what happens in this world. None. He is as helpless as we are. I understand that is not how we traditionally understand the nature of G-d, but just as our tradition believes that we have free will and **we** can react outside of G-d's command, maybe the same can be said about our universe. Nature operates as freely as we do and G-d has no more control over what happens in Nature as He does over us. That is the nature of this world.

Yet to build on Frankel's idea, while G-d has no control over what happens, G-d does have control in how we, His children, react to what happens in Nature.

Let me explain.

To witness the devastation and somehow believe that G-d has a reason for allowing it to happen is, for me, blasphemous. Why would I want to pray to, let alone love, a G-d that for whatever reason allowed such pain to happen?

However, I can accept and find strength in a G-d that may not control the universe, but created human beings with an incredible capacity to want to reach out to those in need. When we act in this world, G-d has control in this world.

I see G-d, not in nature but, in how humanity comes together to help each other; I see the control G-d has when human beings react very much against their nature, which is usually predatory and selfish, when people risk their lives to save others. That is G-d at work in this world.

I am not suggesting that people who reach out to help are all saying, "G-d wants me to help." I am merely stating that the Divine is not present when nature destroys, when disease paralyzes, or accidents cripples. However, I do feel the Divine Presence when people unite in the service of others. That is when I see the loving hand of G-d. When a hurricane creates the homeless, when a virus unleashes chaos, when atrocities threaten to overwhelm and

humanity finds the capacity to extend their arms, to bring hope, and to find a new beginning, I see the hand of G-d in this world. That is the power of G-d at work.

The catastrophe in Haiti ought to cause every serious religious person pause. What we witnessed is so difficult, I cannot simply accept the idea that G-d has some plan or reason that we cannot fathom. I find that to be indefensible. What possible reason is there for so many innocent people to suffer? I cannot love or be with a G-d that has the power to alleviate pain and simply doesn't.

But I can love, be at peace with, and draw strength from a G-d who is in control in that He is the spark, the catalyst, that gave us the capacity to reach out, who gave us the ability to be there, and the guiding hand that offers us the way to bring goodness even in tragedy.

That is a G-d that I can love.

AMEN