

RESILIENT RESPONSES TO NATURAL DISASTER

by Rabbi Dr, Dovid Fox

In popular thought, a crisis triggered by a cataclysmic event involving a change in the natural order of life is referred to as a “natural disaster.” We have come to assume that the climate and the topography in which we reside is a stable and reliable reality. It sometimes rains, it sometimes is dry; the wind blows or it doesn’t. When our surroundings change in a sudden and alarming way, we view these as “unnatural events”, or disasters playing out in our natural surroundings.

We are, by definition, seldom prepared for the unexpected. We do not expect nature to change its course or its patterns. Yet, throughout our lives, we or those whom we love will be faced by hurricane winds; torrential storms; flooding waterways; avalanches; earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones. When nature acts up and the power of the elements is unleashed in our midst, we are seldom prepared for the effects and their aftermath.

This article offers some guidelines for understanding the range of personal reactions which occur when adults and children have survived, witnessed and been affected by such events. It then provides some tools for addressing your child’s, and your own, struggles during these times of challenge. Finally, the article expresses a Torah perspective in grappling with the impact of having our environment, our world, undergo such upheaval.

Please take note of these general guidelines in gaining a perspective of the responses which the human mind encounters in the face of trauma and crisis during and following environmental upheaval.

- **SOMATIC RESPONSES**

Some of us “feel” our distress in our bodies. This can involve changes in sleep patterns, whether the inability to fall asleep or the need to tune out through excessive sleep. It can involve gastrointestinal distress, whether in the form of nausea or loss of appetite. People can experience headache, muscle tension, weakness or even become highly charged and agitated. The body can react to trauma in ways familiar to us from other past times of distress, or in ways which seem out of place and unusual, “unnatural”, to our normal coping style

- COGNITIVE RESPONSES

Some of us “think” our distress. This can involve obsessive intrusive images which we cannot shake. It may involve rapid wide ranges “flight of ideas” where we cannot focus, concentrate or retain information. We can find ourselves occupied with excessive worry, unable to feel secure or reassured by others. Some people actually experience a lapse of memory as to what has taken place, or what was happening prior to the tragedy. The mind can react to trauma by shutting down, by opening up in a vulnerable susceptibility to fright and apprehension, or the mind can cease to feel dependable and reliable as we adjust to the immediate wake of trauma

- AFFECTIVE RESPONSES

Some of us get emotional when we have been confronted by disaster. We may feel moody, may find our feelings unsteady and inconsistent, or we may feel numb and unable to experience our typical range of interests, passions and preferences. The heart may feel wounded, broken, aching or lonesome following a trauma and tragic loss to our familiar reality

- BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

Some of get very focused on avoiding risk, others act out as if unconcerned about personal safety, some become clingy and dependent upon others whereas others shun their loved ones and friends, and withdraw following loss and tragedy. Our tempers can flare or, alternatively, our conduct can become passive and overly subdued. Interpersonal connections can suffer when people face trauma, and they can become isolated or can alienate others

- SPIRITUAL RESPONSES

Whereas the common wisdom is that “there is no atheist on the battlefield” and some people can become very invested in increasing their observance and carefulness following a tragic event, others can grow out of touch with their faith, or can become defiant and angry regarding their sense of distance from Divine grace. Others are troubled at a spiritual level and may need support yet may be embarrassed to discuss and share their sudden crisis of faith. Some may leap to major changes in their level or manner of observance, even when doing so may be

unrealistic for them. The spirit is in strife following tremendous challenges to one's "presumptive reality" about their place in the Divine scheme

The five dimensions of experience cited above are important reminders about the types of reactions people can have to trauma and crisis. It is also important to know that most of us have multidimensional reactions, which means one can have concurrent distress in their feelings, their thinking, their actions and so on. It is also important to recognize that children can react in each of these dimensions yet will do so at a level appropriate to their stage of development. An example of this is fear. Fear in adults can involve somewhat rational apprehensions – we may be afraid (simply) that the catastrophe will strike again. A child, in contrast, may have fears which are not as clearly rational – a child may voice fears that everyone will die, or that evil creatures will appear, or ("simply") that no one will be around to give them their lunch.

In speaking to your children, there are key points of emphasis:

- Listen to them. Allow them to voice their fears without being criticized or reprimanded
- Validate their feelings. Abnormal situations lead to abnormal reactions yet, an abnormal reaction to an abnormal event is actually "normal." Normalize and validate
- Reassure. Verbalize your commitment to doing all that you can to keep your child safe
- Restore routines. Make an effort to help your family recreate a sense of stability or at least familiarize them with the "new normal" circumstances and tasks which await you
- Check in with children. A single reassuring discussion may last a very short while. Go over and over with your children their thoughts, their feelings and their welfare. Checking in with them regularly reminds them that you are still there and that your love for them has not been impaired.
- Promote health. See to it that your children's physical health is not threatened, keeping them nourished, hydrated, rested and sheltered
- Talk with them about HaShem. Maintaining your own religious frame of reference includes helping your children look at the challenges they may be facing, and the benefits of prayer, exercise of faith and trust, and emphasizing that HaShem is in fact continuing to watch over His people
- Answer their questions at a level that they can integrate. Too much detail, too much logic, too little attunement to what they need to hear from you, can lead to feeling

misunderstood or overwhelmed. Ask them what information they have heard from others and correct erroneous conclusions. At all times, your answers should be reassuring, and should not involve fabrications or magical thinking that distorts reality

- It is always acceptable to say to a child who raises a difficult question –whether one involving practical or theoretical matters – to say that you do not know the answer yet, but will try to find out more for them
- It is not useful to children when you make promises to them that you cannot keep
- You can show your emotions to your children as a means of normalizing their own reactions but it may not be helpful to them to see you fall apart or act in an extreme manner
- When possible, arrange for your children to confer with a favorite teacher or rabbi who might give them further support and encouragement
- Most people react to crisis events over the short term, and respond fairly soon to the warmth, support, encouragement and reassurance described above. If you feel that you or your child are showing indications of more enduring, severe turmoil, consult with a trained mental health professional in considering further assessment
- Remember and also clarify to your children that the way they feel or think now will likely change with time. This can be reassuring to them as they begin to accept that most crisis is temporary and that most major issues have resolutions

Each person copes differently. There is no “correct” way to react or to feel when confronted with turmoil, chaos, upheaval and confusion. It is often helpful to arrange a “safe spot” for victims and survivors to meet, where they can have access to a variety of intervention tools. Some may utilize artistic expression, some may do well in journaling their experience, some need to speak with their peers whereas others need to talk with a trained professional or sensitive volunteer crisis worker. Some younger children may do well through the unstructured opportunity to play quietly with familiar toys, thereby regaining a sense of their former routine and security. Some may be drawn to prayer, recitation of psalms, or words of spiritual direction. We find that some even turn to musical expression, engaging deeper parts of themselves when verbal communication is not easy. Adults as well as children at times do well when having the ability to channel their energy into exercise, long walks and similar diversionary activities which draw on physical animation while allowing the mind to recover some internal calm.

At all times, keep your own reactions in check. You are probably undergoing a number of simultaneous reactions, and you too must preserve your strength and health. You must catch up on normal breathing, for example, and allow yourself to acknowledge and to express your fears, your worries, the practical challenges and tasks you are facing, and find yourself some support system to share the process with. No one is immune to stress, particularly when our sense of order and stability has been threatened.

Draw on the coping tools which you know well, and turn to others for additional support and optimism. Resilience comes to us when we recognize the scope of concerns, when we do not try to be entirely self-reliant, when we make use of resources available to us, when we give and receive the love of those who matter to us, and when we access our faith, trust and praying.

As religious Jews, think back to the days of creation, Genesis. Imagine the immense energy, if you can, that was enacted in order to bring about planets, oceans, mountain peaks and deep canyons. The forces of creation were beyond the scope of our comprehension, and would have been frightening and unfathomable had any human beings been there to witness them. We can only picture such forces in our minds because the same terms are used in our own jargon to refer to microcosmic replicas of those events - we can relate to thunder, to lightening, to windstorms and to rainstorms, and those natural events give us a fragment and a glimpse of what went on in the days of creation. It is for this reason – that we more fully appreciate and recognize the power and the might of Shomayim - that our sages instructed us to react to these weather changes by reciting a blessing – a bracha - in order that we capture a trace of that awe and humility that gives perspective to our place in this universe as it and its activities are controlled by Divine Ratzon. Upon experiencing a significant change in the world around us, we are instructed to praise HaShem with “Oseh maaseh Bereishis” – You crafted the events of the creation. At times we say “Sh’kocho u’gevuraso malae olam” – Your power and energy contain the universe.

Hundreds of years ago, the great Chacham Tzvi in Amsterdam received an inquiry from the Jews of London. They questioned whether belief in “Mother Nature” is consistent with a Torah outlook, or whether the concept that there are in fact “natural” forces at work in the universe is antithetical to our beliefs. The Chacham Tzvi (responsum #93) declared that no G-d fearing Jew should make the error of viewing winds, storms, sunshine or mundane events as reflecting any fixed global process or force. Everything – everything from the casual breeze to the dewdrop, from the fiery eruption to the paralyzing cold – is a direct expression of Ratzon HaShem. There is no “mother” nature. There is no nature. Nothing is truly natural. We tend to lapse into a state of accepting the familiar and not recognizing that moment - to - moment events are all a facet of Divine hashgacha – the constant attentive oversight of a focused G-d in a world of implicit meaningfulness. Nothing comes from “nature”. Everything is Heaven-sent. We just fail to see this, and attribute conditions to “nature.”

When, however, our world is shaken, when our routine is jolted, and when floodwaters, or destructive gales, or chilling mounting snows or stifling droughts disrupt our lives, our safety, our communities and our security, there is nothing natural about this. It is entirely accurate to say that our world is in an abnormal state. When health is endangered and when lives are lost, whether from crushing rockslides, cracking fault lines, collapsing buildings or rushing waters, our world is no longer in a normal, secure or predictable state. The world is strikingly not “natural” anymore.

Whereas those brachos – yes, those brachos are also recited when disastrous events befall us – help us recapture our sense of dependence on the One Above and can be reassuring as we access faith and trust, there are nonetheless other reactions which are a part of the normal response to fear, to loss, to suffering and to crisis. It is important to understand your reactions, and the reactions of your loved ones of all ages.

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