

REACTING TO TRAGEDY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

To a great extent, reaction to defeat and tragedy is the true defining moment of one's inner strength and faith. Aharon's silence in the face of the loss of his two older sons is reckoned in Jewish tradition as an act of nobility and sublime acceptance of the unfathomable judgment of Heaven.

Contrast Aharon's silence and humble acceptance of fate with the response of Iyov to his troubles and tragedies. Iyov has a great deal to say, to complain against, to bitterly question and to debate almost endlessly with his companions and visitors as to the unfairness of what has befallen him.

To the human eye, we are all aware that life and its events are often unfair. There is no one that I am aware of that has successfully "explained" the Holocaust. So it seems that we are faced with two diametrically opposed choices as to the proper response to mindless fate and tragedy. Are we to remain mute and silent or are we to rail against the arrogant fate that has brought misfortune to us?

The Torah does not seem to inform us about this and in fact, as shown above, apparently even contradicts itself regarding this continually recurring facet of human existence. Yet the Torah and all of the books that it contains is one seamless whole, and the seeming contradictions lie within us and not within its holy words and exalted ideas. Thus we are brought to study this matter with greater introspection and with less judgment and personal bias.

I think that the Torah means to teach us that there is no one correct, one-size-fits-all response to the failures and tragedies of life. Aharon is correct in his response to inexplicable tragedy and so is Iyov. King Solomon correctly noted that there is a time for silence and a time for speech. So too there are people for whom mute silence is the proper response to tragedy and there are people who must give expression to their feelings of grief and frustration by words, debate and even complaint.

In most instances the rabbis of the Talmud voted for silence over speech and acceptance of one's fate over complaint and public debate. Yet the rabbis did not exclude the book of Iyov from the biblical canon of holy books. In that act of inclusion they allowed for varying degrees of response to troubles and travail.

Iyov also has a place in the pantheon of heroic human views regarding tragic events. Within limits and with a faith-based attitude one can question and complain, express wonderment and even somehow demand answers. But, deep down, all humans understand that they cannot fathom Heaven's wisdom, decisions and the individual fate that is visited upon us all. So the death of Aharon's sons serves as a template for life, a lesson for all of us.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com