

***From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center***

***Rabbi Manes Kogan***

***D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah***

**5772**

-Did you feel it?

-No, I didn't. What are you talking about?

-The earthquake. You didn't feel it?

-No, I didn't. Which earthquake?

-An earthquake in Virginia. It's all over the news! Check Facebook or turn on the TV and you will see.

-I am in the car. Let me ask Silvia to check.

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Everybody is talking about it. It's all over Facebook. Apparently it happened a few minutes ago outside Washington DC. They evacuated buildings in New York City. I didn't feel a thing.

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Yes mom, I am telling you I am OK. No mom, Virginia is in the middle of the East Coast and we are in the Northeast. We are fine, mom, the children are fine, nothing to worry. No, I don't know how many deaths. I just found out myself. It is all over the news in Israel? I believe you mom. I'll call you later; daddy is calling, probably to check if we are OK.

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-You are welcome to come to us!

-What are you talking about?

-Irene, what else?

-Who is Irene?

-The hurricane, it is going to go straight through the middle of Queens. You should leave your home.

-And go where?

-To our home, safety is primary. If you want to stay, that's your prerogative, but send Silvia and the children to our place in New Jersey.

-And who told you that New Jersey won't be hit?

-New Jersey? No. They show the lines going through the middle of Queens.

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Yes mom, I am telling you we are OK. No mom, just lots of rain. Yes mom, we lost power. No, mom, no flooding, thank God. Yes mom, we have drinkable water. No mom, I didn't have time to think about the food in the refrigerator. Yes mom, I will. No, mom. Yes, mom. No, mom. I don't have too much battery. Daddy is calling, let me speak to him. Love you. Yes, I will be careful.

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At the end of the summer New Yorkers experienced two unusual nature-related phenomena. First, an earthquake whose epicenter was in Virginia, 300 miles away, but was felt all over the Tri-Borough area (with the exception of Silvia and me). Second, Irene, a powerful hurricane, later on degraded to a tropical storm, which hit the northeast, leaving 44 dead, many more homeless, and hundreds of thousands without power.

By the way, I find it amusing and quite unfair that hurricanes are being named with human names. I am sure a few among us are named Irene, and we have at least one Katrina. Then poor you, you need to hear people say: "Irene was terrible!" Or: "I hope Irene doesn't pass near us!" Or: "Katrina was devastating, the worse in years!" And maybe other things which I am not allowed to repeat in the synagogue.

Silvia assures me that I don't have to worry. That nobody is going to name a hurricane "Manes" even if they run eventually out of names. But still, you get the point.

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Earthquakes and hurricanes are not the same. However, they have a lot in common. One of their common characteristics is that they are arbitrary and, therefore, you are near the epicenter or you are not; you are in the path of the hurricane or you miss it. Paraphrasing the words of "Unetane Tokef": *How many will be hit and how many will be spared? Who will tremble and who won't? Who will lose power for four days and who only for one day? Who will feel it at home and who at work? Whose basement will be flooded and whose will remain dry? Whose nearby tree will be uprooted, and whose house will be hit by it?*

Personal suffering is very much like the path of a hurricane although the simile of an earthquake might be more accurate. When one human being suffers, others might be affected to different degrees, depending how far they are from the epicenter.

-I heard he has cancer.

-Yes, I heard it, too. It is terrible, poor wife and children. What are we doing Saturday night?

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-They fired 150 people in my company"

-What about you?"

-Thank God, I was spared."

...

-I heard her daughter is being bullied in school, but my child has a nice group of friends!"

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I am so sorry to hear about your loss. Please, call me if you need anything! I've got to go now."

*How many will be hit and how many will be spared? Who will tremble and who won't? Who will lose his job and who won't? Who will be sick and who will be healthy? Who will be able to save for retirement and who will need to depend on his children? Who will be touched by the lucky star and who by the bad one?*

The haftarah reading this morning introduces us to four characters: Hannah, the childless woman, Peninnah, the rival, Elkanah, the husband, and Eli, the Priest.

Hannah, the childless woman, is at the epicenter of our story. She is the one suffering. The path of the hurricane passes right over her.

Elkanah, the husband, is one circle removed from the epicenter. He loves Hannah, no doubt, and he hears her moan and sees her tears. Her suffering, however, is not his. He has many children already, so he doesn't quite get it. Elkanah is successful, he is very busy, and when he gets overwhelmed by Hannah's suffering, there is always Peninnah, waiting for him.

Peninnah is the rival. She and Hannah share the love of Elkanah, although it is more 30% - 70%, than 50% - 50%. Although Peninnah has many children, when it comes to Elkanah's love, Hannah is the favorite one. Peninnah knows it and taunts Hannah, hitting her where it hurts the most.

Eli the Priest is the establishment. He is the rabbi, the leader, the one who represents society with its norms and rules. He knows how to read the holy books but he doesn't know how to read the human heart. Eli's menu of spiritual possibilities is extremely limited: sacrifices and words. No tears, no silences, no

shaking of the body and the soul. Eli the Priest is also the judge and therefore he is always ready to judge others. Eli the Priest volunteers his opinion whether it is wanted or not.

Elkanah lost power for a few hours. Peninnah lives in a different state and doesn't care. Eli the Priest believes that people should upgrade their insurance policies and, from the comfort of his office in the city, tells others what to do.

Hannah, however, is right at the epicenter, right in the path of the storm. She lost power, and her basement is flooded, and the food in the refrigerator is gone, and her insurance doesn't cover floods, and a huge tree fell right on her roof and she is bitter and lonely.

*"And her adversary also provoked her bitterly, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb" (I Samuel 1:6).*

Hannah suffers and Peninnah adds salt to the wound. She shows off her success in front of Hannah, and Hannah doesn't say anything. What could she say?

*"Then Elkanah her husband said to her, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (I Samuel 1:8).*

Elkanah doesn't get it. He is oblivious. Why do you weep, Hannah? I love you!

Hannah thinks: How can you say you love me if you cannot even feel my pain?

*"And Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she was drunk. And Eli said to her, how long will you be drunk? Put away your wine from you." (I Samuel 1:13-14)*

Eli the Priest doesn't understand pain. He is a man of the spirit, but the spirit eludes him. Eli cannot relate to Hannah's suffering, only to the letter of the law. When confronted with his misperception, he mutters a blessing, in lieu of an apology.

Peninnah is arrogant, Elkanah is oblivious, Eli is judgmental, and poor Hannah stands alone, at the epicenter of her suffering, at the mercy of the merciless storm.

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Did you feel it?

No, I didn't. What are you talking about?

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Elkanah the husband, Peninnah the rival, and Eli the priest are not only biblical characters, but prototypes of different ways not to relate to the pain and suffering of the others.

On the other hand, our society, our community, our congregation and our families, have many Hannahs, suffering in loneliness at the epicenter of their personal storms; Hannahs who are, more often than not, judged, misunderstood, and ignored.

Feeling an earthquake or being in the path of a hurricane is not a matter of choice (you feel it or you don't; you are there or you aren't).

The ability to feel the pain of the other, however, is a matter of a special sensitivity, one that can be trained, a sensitivity we all can work on it, we all should work on it.

The High Holy Days can be seen, should be seen, as a spiritual journey, one that has the potential to transform us, to make us more attuned, more sensitive, to the cry and suffering of our neighbors, our co-workers, our classmates, our fellow congregants, our spouses. We might never be able to feel the exact pain they feel at the epicenter of their storms, but we can certainly learn how to move one or two circles closer.

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So, did you feel it?

No, I didn't, but I am working on it.

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As we begin these new High Holy Days, as we embark together on this joint spiritual journey, may we have the honesty to see our deep spiritual need to become more attuned to the suffering and struggling of our fellow human beings; may we recognize our potential to become more sensitive human beings, and may we find the strength and the courage to change.

May Hashem bless all of us and our loved ones with a good, sweet, healthy, joyous and meaningful year! Amen!