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Touro Synagogue
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Reform Judaism and Views on Suffering

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Of all of the stories in the Torah, the book of Job is one of the most intriguing. Many people, Jews and Christians alike, know the story, and many more people are interested in the story's central question: why do just individuals suffer in a universe controlled by a just God? In Job's case, he was a wealthy individual who passionately followed God's laws. God, not for a punishment but rather for proof to Satan that Job will remain faithful, allowed Satan to strip Job of his wealth, kill his children, and smite Job with painful sores. Job was a righteous man, who vigorously denied that he had committed any sin. Many people at that time believed that God sent misfortune as a punishment for sin. The story concludes after a long conversation between Job, three of his friends, and a younger man when God appears in a whirlwind to Job to justify His actions and explain His role as the creator, implying that it is not the role of humans to ask for explanations of the divine. After Job repents of his questioning and anger at God for his undeserved suffering, God restores Job's health, prosperity, and gives him more children. The message of the book of Job is that anything and everything that arises outside of humanity's free will occurs by the will of God, whose justice is unquestionable by humanity.

The way people react to suffering in the present world is very different from the explanations often given in Job's day, that God sends misfortune as punishment for sin. The book of Job was written in the pre-modern world for a pre-modern audience. Its purpose is didactic, explaining that God's actions do not have to be justified to humans; just people can suffer as easily as bad people. Job replies to his wife: "we accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil" (Job 2:10)?

While the pre-modern Israelites viewed natural disasters as punishments from God, Reform Jews at Touro Synagogue in New Orleans view the destruction of Hurricane Katrina more as an opportunity for betterment rather than as a punishment for wrongdoings. The attitude toward this storm, which is essentially Job's story of suffering applied to many more people, is different from the older view of suffering as being God's punishment expressed in portions of the Hebrew Bible. It is necessary to look at the histories of Reform Judaism and Touro Synagogue to be aware of the context shaping the synagogue members' responses to the hurricane and its impacts.

BRIEF HISTORY OF REFORM JUDAISM

During the Enlightenment movement of the late eighteenth century, Jewish Europeans were receiving, for the first time, recognition as rational human beings, deserving of rights equal with those of their neighbors. Consequently, the tight-knit ghetto communities that had originated from necessity were no longer needed, and Jews across the continent began assimilating into secular society. Jews in what is now Germany recognized that this assimilation could result in the fading of Judaism. To curb that, the Reform movement began. After years of dealing with pressure from traditional rabbis and the government, the first Reform temple was erected and dedicated in 1818 in Hamburg, Germany. Some of the reforms that led to the creation of this temple were the synthesis of science and faith, the use of the vernacular in services, the arrangement for men and women to sit with each other when worshipping, and the more concise prayer book. Of all of these changes, the recognition that knowledge can be gained from science as well as religion had the greatest impact. The adaptation of this belief allowed Reform Jews to begin to understand their faith not only from a speculative point of view but also from a viewpoint that responded to an understanding of the natural world. On December 23, 1824, a congregation in Charleston, South Carolina adapted these reforms into their services. From this point on, Reform Judaism spread throughout the United States (Silverman 1970).

HISTORY OF TOURO SYNAGOGUE

The history of this synagogue is an interesting one in that it is the oldest synagogue outside of the thirteen original colonies to still be in use. Also, the person for whom this synagogue is named, Judah Touro, was the son of Isaac Touro, for whom the oldest synagogue in America in Newport, Rhode Island is named. But, this synagogue traces its beginning to a time before this family's philanthropy. In 1828 Gates of Mercy was formed by a group of Jews from what is now Germany. Eighteen years later, a new congregation, calling themselves Dispersed of Judah, was formed by Spanish-Portuguese Jews who split off from Gates of Mercy. Gates of Mercy and Dispersed of Judah merged in 1881. While the two were separated, both synagogues received very kind donations, including a new synagogue and a Holy Ark, from Judah Touro; as a result, the newly merged congregation took on the name Touro Synagogue in his honor. In 1891 Touro Synagogue joined the Reform Movement after slowly progressing to it. The size of the congregation continued to grow, and in 1909 the synagogue dedicated a new building and moved to its current home at the corner of St. Charles Avenue and General Pershing ("Summary History of Touro Synagogue" [2006]).

KATRINA'S IMPACT ON THE CONGREGATION

The majority of Touro's congregants are middle-class citizens working in mostly professional fields. Some are poorer and some are wealthier, but most are economically comfortable. The congregants live in New Orleans neighborhoods from the Faubourg Marigny to Uptown to Mid-City and even to the West Bank. Therefore, the impacts of Hurricane Katrina are numerous, and details must be examined so that one understands that many people's homes suffered from flooding along the lakeshore, but that some people's homes only suffered from mild wind damage in other areas.

On the whole, the storm impacted these people much less severely than the worst parts of the city. The largest problem that the synagogue is facing is from members who are not coming

back. Some are waiting until their children finish the school year, but others doubt if they will return any time soon. Their reasons for not returning are the same as the many other New Orleanians who are not returning—the city is in poor condition.

In addition, the congregation as a whole suffered in many ways. First, the basement under the main sanctuary, the structure built in 1909, flooded with water and gasoline, rendering the building unusable for religious services. Second, as with all Jewish congregations after the storm, the High Holy Days were attended poorly as many of the worshippers were located outside of the state. Third, the synagogue's Torah scrolls were not taken out of the city before the storm. These handwritten scrolls were recovered on September 10, 2005 from synagogues and Jewish schools around the city when a rescue team was organized to gather the holy objects. While the scrolls in Touro were in no danger of being damaged, leaving these sacred objects in an empty synagogue for an unknown amount of time would be unthinkable (Schleifstein 2005; Nolan 2005).

The storm impacted these people in a variety of ways. For some, it was only a mild tragedy, meaning that they were forced to find an alternate residence for a month. For others, it completely changed their lives, convincing them to relocate permanently. For those who have decided to return and remain members of the congregation, other obstacles lay in their path back to normalcy.

TOURO SYNAGOGUE'S RESPONSE TO KATRINA

Because the storm caused no irreversible damage to Touro's organization and structure, the congregants are able to reach out into the community and help those who are not as fortunate. While philanthropic actions are indicative of many religious communities, the fact that Touro Synagogue escaped severe damage allows for a stronger focus to be put on social service rather than rebuilding.

Since most people did not begin to return to the city until their children's fall semester was over, the months following the hurricane allowed time for the synagogue to take care of many of the problems that confronted it. That way, when congregants began to return, they came back to a functional religious center and many opportunities to help the city rebuild. To do this, Touro Synagogue organized events with charities that were created to deal with the destruction left by the storm. Such events were organized with the New Orleans Revolution, Helping Hands, and Katrina Krewe. In addition to the older generation of congregants working, their children also helped by making items, such as fleece blankets, to donate to hospitals. Also, Touro has been offering the use of its building to the Carrollton-University Neighborhood Association, which has put together meetings to discuss plans for rebuilding that particular area of the city (Hamilton 2006).

One of the most interesting forms of philanthropy that Touro has undertaken is the way in which it has been able to donate items. After Katrina, many groups, businesses, and unions collected goods to donate to places in New Orleans that might need them. Because of Touro's position of not having received much damage, it has been able to act as a mediator of those goods. When some group donates books, Touro, having no need for them, donates the books to schools in the city that do need them. The same is done for many more items, which the synagogue does not need, that are donated.

These acts of generosity and goodwill reveal an interesting point about Reform Judaism and its response to suffering. While the synagogue did not suffer much, some of its members did. What is interesting is that Touro Synagogue's service expands beyond those in the congregation

who suffered. The members are helping and donating, indiscriminately, to those who need it. This suggests that they are most apt to respond to instances of suffering from an argument such as this: if suffering is something common to humanity, then it is something that ought to be worked through with the help of humanity. Such an argument can only result in actions of benevolence that extend to all who need it.

CONGREGANTS' RESPONSES TO KATRINA

What will clarify this argument is not historical analysis of the movement or generalizations about the storm's impact on the congregation, but rather examples from individual members of the congregation who have shown that suffering is not something that should be carried alone. Suffering is something that should be eased with the help of others. In order to explain this, three members of the congregation were interviewed.

Rabbi Busch

On July 1, 2005, Rabbi Busch officially took his new position as Touro Synagogue's rabbi. Originally from the Northeast, he and his family moved to New Orleans only two months before the storm. These first few months in the city allowed him to witness the strong commitment and cooperation that binds not just Touro's congregants but also the congregants of all of the Reform temples around the city. During the summer months, the three Reform congregations in New Orleans pool their services in response to the low attendance rates that arise when many people leave the city during the summer (Busch 2006).

This strong cooperation also appeared when the storm was nearing. In Utica, Mississippi, there is a Jewish summer camp, which was transformed into an evacuee camp, where most of Touro's congregants went. From here, a decision was made for the synagogue's staff to relocate to Houston, where an overwhelmingly generous Jewish community met them and donated computers, office space, and space in their day schools (Busch 2006).

During his time away from New Orleans, Rabbi Busch spent many hours talking on the telephone and in person to his congregants offering them any help that he could. The dedication he had for contacting his congregants was to such an extent that he described the biggest change in his life caused by the storm was from being a person who only had a few people who knew his cell phone number to being one whose phone never stopped ringing (Busch 2006).

In working to keep everyone together, Rabbi Busch feels that he is fulfilling a duty that is common to anyone in his position, not a duty designed for him alone. "I think one of the more theologically skewed things that people have said to me is that I am here for a reason." This ultimately relates back to his view of tragedy and his opinion of how one should respond to it. "There's clearly evil, chaos, and disaster in the world and my faith has always been that we find God in the people that help us through it and that God in no way causes it" (Busch 2006). This view that tragedy helps people find God is essentially optimistic because God is distanced from the tragedy. It shows, contrary to the former interpretation, that disasters naturally occur without the command of God and that the way people respond to disasters—through generosity and caring—ultimately reflects back to the people and the Creator. Suffering is not something that signifies God's anger or punishment; it is something that solidifies faith in God's goodness and the goodness of people (Busch 2006).

John Lovett

In addition to being a professor in Loyola University's Law School, John Lovett also serves as the treasurer for Touro Synagogue. Although he has been a resident of New Orleans for most of his life, he only began his involvement with Touro Synagogue after he graduated from law school at Tulane University. What led to his current position at Touro was his volunteering in some of the synagogue's social action programs. One of his proudest accomplishments was planning a weekend of peace and understanding with a local African American mosque that took place last year during the weekend before Martin Luther King Jr. Day. This weekend involved both congregations going to each other's weekend services and then sharing meals. Unfortunately, it was not possible to repeat the event this year because many of the congregants of the mosque have not yet returned to the city (Lovett 2006).

Like most of his fellow congregants, John Lovett evacuated to Houston, where he kept his same job as a professor in Loyola's Law School, which set up a temporary campus at the University of Houston. Also similar to many of his fellow congregants, he noticed the tremendous generosity that everyone extended to the evacuees from New Orleans, specifically the accommodations that Beth Israel offered to Touro Synagogue (Lovett 2006).

Now that he is back in New Orleans, John Lovett wants to use his experience and knowledge in property law to benefit the rest of the community. One of his biggest goals is to create or help to create legislation that will deal with the problem of blighted and vacant housing. Another avenue to fixing this problem that he wants to try is to "create agencies and institutions that will confront this problem of blighted and vacant...property and turn it into more productive use." Also, he will continue to work with Touro Synagogue to better the community through their pre-established service programs. John Lovett's viewpoint is similar to Rabbi Busch's in that he sees his role after the storm to help others improve their situations and help rebuild the city (Lovett 2006).

Eileen Hamilton

Eileen Hamilton is employed by Touro Synagogue as the Director of Education, a job that brought her to the city twelve years ago. She lives on the West Bank in Algiers. Like Rabbi Busch, she and her family evacuated to the Jewish camp in Mississippi; however, instead of going to Houston, she decided to visit some of her family in Florida and, by spending a few days at Disney World, managed to turn the trip into a vacation. After that, they ended up in Park City, Utah where other family members offered her a place to stay.

A few weeks after the storm, her husband traveled back to Algiers to check on their house and to gather up some clothes for the stay in Utah, which lasted until the end of their children's fall semester. Fortunately, their house was in an area that did not receive much harm and was only left with a damaged roof (Hamilton 2006).

One of her greatest experiences after Katrina was the way that people, unexpectedly, tried to help her and her family. While support may be common among family and friends, she was delighted at how many individuals—and even a few organizations—called her to make sure that she was well and to offer their assistance. "Every time someone called and asked if they could help, I just said, 'we're doing fine, but just the fact that you called is more than enough'" (Hamilton 2006).

Now that she has returned to New Orleans, Eileen Hamilton is actively involved in service projects through the synagogue. In February she was cleaning the city's streets of trash with the New Orleans Revolution, and in March she was out again with Katrina Krewe to perform a similar task. Her primary goal, however, does not involve participating in service projects. She still has Touro's religious school to run and works on making sure that the children are educated as well as trying to enroll new students to fill the spots of those who are not returning to the city. Her primary reaction, therefore, is one focused on Touro Synagogue. She works to make sure that the institution is secure, both in membership and finances, so that it may, in turn, help others in the future (Hamilton 2006).

CONCLUSION

While the book of Job represents the struggle with the question of the suffering of just people, practitioners of Reform Judaism seem to have found a satisfactory preference in the logical battle between God's omnipotence and the free will of humans. As the reactions from Touro Synagogue's members have shown, primary concern is based on what people can do. Bad things happen regardless of who suffers from them. "If there is evil in the world, innocent people will suffer from the consequences. Man's [and woman's] freedom of will and choice is primary" (Silverman 1970). If this is true, then the men and women of Touro Synagogue have freely chosen to exercise their wills, and in doing so, have chosen to act for the betterment not only of themselves or of Touro Synagogue but of everyone they are able to assist.

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