



Jewish Responses to Disaster

Introduction

On the evening of Tuesday, January 12th 2010, Haiti was hit by a devastating earthquake, measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, making it the worst in the region in more than 200 years. It struck about ten miles southwest of the capital of Port-au-Prince and has left thousands dead and approximately three million people in need of relief. In addition, hundreds of thousands of people have migrated out of the immediate disaster areas and are now putting a strain on what were already scarce housing, health, food and sanitation systems in other areas of the country.

In response to this massive earthquake, AJWS has created the Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund to support its network of grantees as they address the urgent needs of the affected population. For more information, visit www.ajws.org/haitiearthquake.

As concerned global citizens and as Jews, it is our moral obligation to respond to humanitarian crises. The following texts explore these obligations.



The Jewish Obligation to Help

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 73a How do we know that if a person sees another person drowning, mauled by beasts, or attacked by robbers, s/he is bound to save him? From the verse, "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor!" (Leviticus 19:16).	תלמוד בבלי, סנהדרין עג. מניין לרואה את חבירו שהוא טובע בנהר, או חיה גוררתו, או לסטין באין עליו, שהוא חייב להצילו - תלמוד לומר לא תעמד על דם רעך (ויקרא י"ט).
Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:2 And any who sees a poor person begging and hides his eyes and does not give him charity transgresses a negative commandment, as it says (Deuteronomy 15:7), "Do not harden your heart or close your hand from your poor brother."	רמבם, משנה תורה, הלכות מתנות עניים ז:ב וכל הרואה עני מבקש והעלים עיניו ממנו ולא נתן לו צדקה עבר בלא תעשה שנאמר (דברים טו: ז) לא תאמץ את לבבך ולא תקפוץ את ירך מאחיך האביון.
Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.	תלמוד בבלי, גיטין סא. ת"ר: מפרנסים עניי נכרים עם עניי ישראל, ומבקרים חולי נכרים עם חולי ישראל, וקוברין מתי נכרים עם מתי ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום.

- These texts refer to direct encounters with people in need. Given our ability to access images and testimonies of people affected by disasters, how might we expand this obligation to those farther away?
- What can we learn from these texts about our obligation to respond to the needs of non-Jews?



Making a Difference

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, as quoted in *Smiling Each Day*, Rabbi Avraham Twerski (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993)

The seismograph has taught us that a tremor in any part of the world can be felt by a sufficiently sensitive instrument everywhere in the world. The same is true of a person's deeds. One should not think that his actions do not affect others. Everything one does in some way affects everyone else in the world.

- It can feel overwhelming to try to respond to disasters of this magnitude. How can we help ourselves and each other stay committed to addressing the immediate needs of the victims as well as supporting the ongoing rebuilding and community development efforts?



Understanding Contemporary Natural Disasters

"An Increasing Vulnerability to Natural Disasters," Kofi A. Annan, *International Herald Tribune*, September 10, 1999

We know that human communities will always have to face natural hazards, whether floods, droughts, storms or earthquakes. But today's disasters owe as much to human activities as to the forces of nature. Indeed the term 'natural' is increasingly misleading.

A wide variation in the number and intensity of natural hazards is normal and to be expected. What we have witnessed over the past decades, however, is not nature's variation but a clear upward trend caused by human activities. There were three times as many great natural disasters in the 1990s as in the 1960s, while disaster costs increased more than nine-fold in the same period.

We know why the trend is upward. Ninety per cent of disaster victims worldwide live in developing countries, where poverty and population pressures force growing numbers of poor people to live in harm's way -- on flood plains, in earthquake-prone zones and on unstable hillsides. Unsafe buildings compound the risks. The vulnerability of those living in risk-prone areas is perhaps the single most important cause of disaster casualties and damage.

Second, we know that unsound development and environmental practices exacerbate the problem. Massive logging operations and the destruction of wetlands reduce the soil's ability to absorb heavy rainfall, making erosion and flooding more likely....

Above all we must never forget that it is poverty, not choice, that drives people to live in risk-prone areas. Equitable and sustainable economic development is not only a good in its own right, but also one of the best forms of disaster insurance.

- According to Annan, why are poor people more prone to being affected by natural disasters?
- How can this understanding inform our approach, not only to disaster relief but also to international development?

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.

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