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God is not to blame; we are

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It was inevitable. When there is a natural disaster, God often is cited as the cause. It is a way of deflecting blame from the real culprit—which, all too often, as in the coronavirus pandemic, rests heavily on human shoulders. God, we are told, manages events. He is the Grand Puppeteer and everything He does has a reason. Rather than move people closer to God, saying such things pushes them farther away.

That is far more evident in our Jewish world, surveys show, than in the greater world in which we live. About two-thirds of all Jews in the United States reportedly are uncertain God even exists, and a little over a quarter of American Jews are certain He does not. In the general population, supposedly nearly two-thirds of respondents to surveys by the Pew research and Gallup organizations say they are certain God does exist, yet their sincerity is in question given that the last half-century has seen a remarkable drop in church attendance (something synagogues can attest to, as well).

COVID-19 is no different. In its case, we are being told God is punishing us for all manner of sins, inclkuding homosexuality, abortion rights, postmodernism, and, in one case, globalization and the sins of the Catholic church.

The last two charges come from an extreme right-wing Roman Catholic historian and church critic, Roberto de Mattei. The pandemic, he said in a recent video lecture, was a “scourge from God” and the “killer of globalization.” Much of the blame, he said, also rested with “the men of the church in their collective whole, with few exceptions.”

The legalization of homosexuality brought on the pandemic, according to Pastor Steven Andrew, who heads something called the American Christian Denomination. “God destroys LGBT societies,” he said, whereas, “Obeying God protects the USA from diseases, such as the coronavirus.”

One minister, Pastor E.W. Jackson, renamed the scourge the “homovirus” on his radio show, The Awakening.

A Tennessee preacher, Perry Stone, said COVID-19 was God’s “reckoning because the courts of the land passed a law to take an infant’s life…and for [the acceptance of gay] marriage…, something we’ve never known.”

One unnamed Muslim cleric, appearing on the official Palestinian Authority television channel, called the coronavirus “one of Almighty Allah’s soldiers” that God unleashed “on those who attack His believers.” True, he said, believers will also succumb, but if they “have stood firm and place their trust in Allah, then they will receive an enormous reward…, the reward of Martyrdom.”

Then there are the Jewish voices. To Rabbi Meir Mazuz, a prominent ultra-Orthodox leader in Israel, the blame for COVID-19 is on Israel for allowing Gay Pride parades, which are “against nature, and anyone who does something against nature, the one who created nature takes revenge on him.”

Another rabbi on the right (on the right, not in it), Shlomo Aviner, said that God sent the pandemic because “man thinks he is God, that he is the master and can decide what is good and bad, something which is called moral relativism or postmodernism.”

As I said, such declarations are inevitable. Almost immediately after Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas in 2017, for example, there came the voices, mainly from the Christian religious right, blaming the storm on gay rights, abortion rights, and even transgender bathroom privileges. We heard the same following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in 2005. For example, the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of the late Rev. Billy Graham, had this to say: “This is one wicked city, okay? It’s known for Mardi Gras, for Satan worship. It’s known for sex perversion. It’s known for every type of drugs and alcohol and the orgies and all of these things that go on down there in New Orleans.”

The left is not immune from such absurdities, either. The post-Hurricane Harvey issue of the satirical Paris magazine Charlie Hebdo, for example, ran a cartoon on its cover showing hands of drowning victims reaching above water in salutes to Nazi flags that also were disappearing beneath the flood. The headline read: “God exists. He drowned all the neo-Nazis of Texas.”

Let us be clear about this. Blaming God for disasters of any kind are blasphemous. They malign God. God does not work that way. In the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Avodah Zarah 54b, we are told that Roman “philosophers” asked visiting sages why God, if He detests idol worship, does not simply destroy the venerated objects. God, replied the sages, would only destroy “objects for which the world has no need,” but the venerated objects—“sun, moon, stars [and the] constellations”—are vital to the world. “Should He destroy the world because of the fools? Rather, the world follows its own course (olam k’minhago noheg).” Natural disasters—whether hurricanes or pandemics—destroy people and property, both of which we need in the world.

The gemara then elaborates. A person steals some wheat seedlings and plants them. Since God abhors theft, the seedlings should not grow into stalks of wheat, yet they do—because “the world follows its own course.”

God did not send Hurricane Harvey, or Katrina, or “Superstorm” Sandy that wreaked havoc in parts of the Northeastern United States in 2012 (including here in the Greater New York Metropolitan area), or the rains that flooded Mumbai in 2017, or the 2018 tsunami in Java and Sumatra that killed over 400 people and injured 14,000 others, or Hurricane Dorian in 2019 that destroyed large chunks of the Bahamas and caused much devastation in parts of the United States, or the tornadoes in Tennessee in March that caused 26 deaths and hundreds of injuries. And He did not rain down the coronavirus on our heads. “The world follows its course.” Nature did its thing.

Worse, the devastation wrought by nature is on us, not God. The devastation caused by Katrina, for example, never had to happen. Scientists had been predicting it for many years. Years before Katrina, in fact, a coalition of scientists, business leaders, and environmentalists joined with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in proposing a $14 billion plan to stave off a Katrina-like disaster in New Orleans, but it found no support in Washington.

COVID-19 began in Wuhan, China, in mid-December 2019. China failed to report on the outbreak until December 31, when it notified the World Health Organization. Part of the blame for COVID-19 rests on the shoulders of China’s leadership. Much of the blame for how the pandemic is unfolding here rests on our leadership, however. Almost from the moment WHO was notified by China, U.S. intelligence agencies began issuing “ominous, classified warnings” about the looming danger, but rather than being acted upon, the warnings were being basically ignored. As reported on March 20 in the Washington Post, the intelligence warnings painted a picture of “a globe-encircling pandemic that could require governments to take swift actions to contain it.” Yet the administration and members of Congress “continued publicly and privately to play down the threat the virus posed to Americans.” Washington, the Post reported, “did not grapple with the virus in earnest until this month.”

Ordinary people share the blame, as well, and specifically those people who ignore the dangers and go on as if nothing is wrong—thereby helping to infect others. In Lakewood, as of this writing on March 30, police had to break up five chasidic gatherings, including two on Sunday and Monday of this week. On Monday, Ocean County had 874 cases of COVID-19, according to state figures; Lakewood accounted for 371 of those cases, or over 42 percent. In New York City, health officials report a surge of coronavirus cases in Brooklyn chasidic Jewish communities, blamed on gatherings of various sorts, including weddings, which continue to take place despite warnings.

Another sector that seems less inclined to take precautions are people 45 and under, teenagers especially. One of every five people being hospitalized for the virus are between 20 and 44 years old. According to CDC figures, roughly a third of new cases are in this age group.

People who do not take this pandemic seriously are endangering themselves—and they are endangering everyone else.

We look at the reality we see in our world. While some of us shake our fists in anger at God, too many of us see it as proof that there is no God. The blame is misplaced. “The world follows its own course.” We understood hurricanes and tsunamis. Even if we do not immediately understand a “novel” disease, we do understand how disease spreads. We have a very good idea what the world’s “course” is, but unless we do what is needed to avert disasters we know could happen, they will happen.

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