

My friends, I learned an important lesson recently: do not underestimate the power of the pulpit. Here, in little Shaarey Tefilla in Carmel, Indiana, I gave a sermon about something I heard on the Dennis Prager Show. It was a book on the Ten Commandments by David Hazony. Imagine my surprise when David Hazony himself contacted me through Facebook. He told me he had been given a copy of my sermon to read, and he was writing to thank me for my remarks. I have no idea how my sermon reached him. I doubt it was through Dennis; although we are sometimes in touch I do not send him my sermons and I'm certain he has no time to read them on our web site. But somehow, to my surprise and I admit, to my delight, somehow it did reach David Hazony.

With that in mind, I want to begin tonight by saying that although my talk tonight analyzes a remark made by Andy Klotz,¹ it does not reflect on Mr. Klotz whatsoever. He made a remark under the pressure of speaking in front of

¹ Promotions Director and spokesman for the Indiana State Fair

a television camera that expressed more emotion than rational thought. I've been in his situation and you simply do not have time to think carefully through everything you say. Mr. Klotz, given time to reflect, may well agree with everything I have to say tonight. He was speaking live under pressure; I have had days to think about how I want to respond to his words. The playing field is inherently uneven, so please do not take my words as critical of Mr. Klotz in any way. If that is so, why am I doing this? Because I think what Mr. Klotz said is the way a great many people view the tragedy, and for that reason it is worthy of being addressed from the pulpit.

Mr. Klotz called the State Fair tragedy a "freakish act of God." I'll unpack this statement in two pieces: was the tragedy freakish, and far more important to me as a rabbi, was it an act of God?

I hope it goes without saying that my heart goes out to all who have been harmed by this tragedy, especially to the families of the six who died, to the injured and their families who suffer with their loved ones, and to those who were traumatized by their proximity to the event. It was a horrible tragedy indeed, but far from unique. Only yesterday, a storm swept through an outdoor music festival in Belgium, killing at least three people and injuring more than seventy. Although tragedies like these are uncommon, I have to argue against calling them freakish.

I learned a little about storms during my eighteen years in hurricane country. One of the characteristics of hurricanes and tropical storms and other powerful storms is that before the storm arrives at a given location, it is preceded by powerful winds called squalls. The tragedy at the Fair was caused by a squall that was close to hurricane strength. Winds that strong cause destruction. If you want to call the timing freakish, I can understand that. But a

near-hurricane force wind blowing down a non-permanent structure is not out of the ordinary.

Obviously, as a non-meteorologist rabbi, I am more interested in the other part of the statement. Was this tragedy an act of God? Rather than simply give you my answer, I want to give you some food for thought.

Allow me to place three premises before you:

1. God is good. The Torah tells us that God is not only good but just, merciful, and loving. In addition, in one of the best-known paragraphs in the entire Torah, it tells us that God is lovable. When the Torah says “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might,” we lose important information in translation. The English cannot tell us that the Hebrew original is not stated in the imperative, but in the imperfect—in other words, the Torah is not commanding us to love

God. It is telling us what will happen as a result of our covenant with God: we're going to love Him. So the Torah teaches us that God is not only good, but lovable.

2. God is omnipotent (all-powerful). Many believe that God is in complete control of everything that happens in our world. That is certainly the Biblical view. If something happens, it is because God wanted it to happen. Unless we believe that God has accidents, calling this tragedy or any other a act of God necessarily leads to the conclusion that the tragedy was something God decided should happen.

3. The six who died and the many others injured were average people who no more deserved to be killed or injured than anyone here tonight deserves to be killed or injured. This is the monkey wrench in our theological complacency. The falling scaffolding did not seek out and kill six child molesters or rapists or murderers. The injured

were not a collection of bad or evil people. No one would could defend a claim that of all the people who had attended the fair, the ones who were killed or injured were the ones who most deserved to be killed or injured. I cannot imagine any thinking person seeing anything but randomness in who escaped unscathed and who did not.

Those are my three premises. Here is the problem I leave you to struggle with. These three premises cannot all be true. Any two of them can be true, but only by denying the third. So which of the two do you accept, and which one do you deny?

I believe premise #3 is beyond question. No one will ever convince me that the dead and injured deserved their fate and everyone else deserved to escape unharmed. If premise #3 is the one you chose to deny, I beg you to explain your thinking to me privately. I won't criticize or argue with you—I just want to understand the thinking that

could lead to denying the third premise. For now, I'm proceeding on the assumption that premise #3 is true.

If that's so, then we are left with two alternatives. One is to say that God is in complete control of all that happens in the world, and this omnipotent God capriciously caused the deaths of six people and the injuries of many more. Obviously, if that is what God did, God is not good, let alone lovable. Perhaps you will respond that God can still be good, that God had reasons for doing this that we cannot understand. I reject that for the following reason: although biologically we are animals, religiously we are not. One difference between humans and animals in the religious view is that humans have a moral compass. I cannot accept that God gave us this moral compass, does things like kill people who do not deserve it, and expect us to ignore that moral compass telling us that there was nothing right or fair about what happened to the victims. If this was indeed an act of God, it makes God no less real

to me, but it does render God unlovable, immoral, and unworthy of worship. It undermines all religious morality by destroying God's moral authority. I believe in God's goodness and in God's moral authority. Therefore, I have no choice but to reject the idea of God's omnipotence.

This leaves me free to embrace the first premise, that God is good, fair, kind, merciful, and yes, lovable. I can live with the idea of a God Who is not omnipotent. I cannot live with the idea of a God Who is omnipotent but not good.

To what do I ascribe the State Fair tragedy? Leaving aside all secular questions about foreseeability and inspections and so forth, I ascribe this tragedy to nature. As I have said many times, nature is neither moral nor immoral. We cannot expect morality from an amoral force like nature. To do that is, to repeat myself again, like going into a bull's pen and expected the bull not to charge at you because you are a vegetarian.

Was the State Fair tragedy a “freakish act of God”? No. It was a tragic, random act of nature. In other words, it was a terrible accident. Where was God when the accident occurred? God was with the victims under the scaffolding, even while God was in the souls and hands of those who struggled to help the victims. And as tears were shed for the dead and injured, I believe in God’s own way, God wept with us.

Despite the astonishing experience with David Hazony, my friends, I have no expectation that my words will reach Andy Klotz. If by some chance they do, I would not be surprised if he agreed with what I have said tonight. In that spirit, I conclude by acknowledging that his job was much harder than mine. I sat in the comfort of my rabbinic study, carefully thinking through what I wanted to say. He put himself in front of live television cameras and tried his best to express the pain that Hoosiers shared in the face of this

horrific accident, and he did so beautifully, even if some Monday-morning quarterback rabbi decided to use his words as grist for the sermon mill. Let's end by saying that Mr. Klotz expressed the pain of countless people, and happened do so in words that give religious people some food for thought. I extend to him a Yasher Koach, and I wish you a *gut Shabbos*.