

My friends, I dedicate my talk tonight to Leiby Kletzky and his family. Tonight is undoubtedly the worst Shabbat of their lives as they grapple with the aftermath of this week's tragic events. Tonight, let us be extra grateful to God that we have the blessing of celebrating the birth of new life by giving Ori her Hebrew name. As we prayed earlier tonight, my God send strength and comfort to all who mourn the death of Leiby Kletzky.

I want to talk tonight about the source of most of the pain we experience in life. Nothing that I say tonight will apply to every single individual. I will be talking in generalities, and there are always exceptions to generalities. The question I want to address is the following: if you think back over the pain you have experienced in life, has most of it been caused by natural causes such as tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, or even disease, or has most of the pain in your life been caused by other people?

For years, insurance companies have done God a disservice when they enumerate the kinds of events that their policies do not cover. Whatever the specifics, be it a lightning strike or a flood or an earthquake, insurance companies put them under the heading of “acts of God.” I do not believe they are acts of God at all. They are acts, if we must use that word, of nature. Nature has no consciousness and no moral compass. Expecting to be spared from natural disasters because you are a good person is like going into a bull’s pen and expecting the bull not to charge at you because you are a vegetarian.

Natural causes can indeed cause us pain. For some of us, perhaps most of the pain in our lives has been the result of natural causes, especially diseases that take away our loved ones. But over the twenty-plus years I have been on a bima on Shabbat, most of the pain I see in the lives of people is caused by other people. That is even true of God.

You would think, would you not, that if anyone has a perfect, pain-free life, it would be God? I mean after all, if you're God, how bad can your day be? Anything that is a problem just gets zapped away—doesn't it? But unfortunately for God, the answer is no. In fact, when I study Genesis, I often feel very sorry for God.

God started out with such high hopes, and at first, things were working out beautifully. God made light, and saw it was good. God made the sky, and saw that it, too, was good. He separated the land and the seas, and that was good, and on the same "day," made vegetation, and that was good, too. Then came the sun, moon and stars, all of which were good, and then animal life, and finally human life, and it was all good. In fact, when God stopped to look over His creation, He said it was very good. Next came Shabbat, and one can only imagine what a wonderful and special Shabbat that was for God.

But only a short time later, God becomes a tragic figure in Genesis. At the end of the first weekly portion in the Torah, we read: *The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened.*¹

Is that not touching and saddening? God's heart was saddened. God was broken-hearted—how can your heart not go out to God at that moment? And why was God, Who had been so pleased with Creation, now so sad about it? Because of us. We are the source of pain in God's existence. And it is my firm belief that most of the pain, and literally all of the evil in the world, come from we humans.

¹ Genesis 6:5-6

As Cain did so long ago and as we so tragically saw this very week, we murder one another. We rape one another. We abuse and molest one another. We beat and torture one another. Our capacity to be cruel to other people seems to be without limit.

Most of us are not murderers, rapist, child molesters or torturers. But if we as humans are in any sense at all the children of God, then just think about how you feel as a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or what have you, when the children we love are unkind to one another. It feels awful, does it not? What is more important to a parent than that one's children are close and loving and will care for one another after we're gone? What means more to us than that? But God must watch His children be harsh, short-tempered, unkind, ungenerous, and fall short of expectations in countless other ways.

That's the bad news. We are the primary source of pain and evil in the world. The good news is that if we are the source, there is something we can do about it. We can love what is good and hate evil. We can fight evil with every weapon at our disposal. And even the majority of us who are not evil can reduce the amount of pain we add to the lives of others. We can replace a harsh word of criticism with gentle guidance and teaching. Instead of being too busy to realize all that others do for us, we can take the time to say thank you and express our appreciation. We can be just a bit more careful about how we choose our words. We can spend just a little more time considering how our actions affect others. We can take the time to recognize that we have the power to make our own presence a great gift to others simply by treating them with kindness. In short, when we follow the simple rule of not doing things to others that we do not want done to us, we can make a little difference in the world. Multiply that little difference by the millions and millions of us that can each

make a little difference, and you have enough power to change the world and make it better, less painful, with less evil.

As a pious Jewish family struggles through their first Shabbat since the murder of their son, it seems to me that all we can do is use the events of this past week to motivate us to put more goodness into the world. How much better can we make the world? My friends, I believe we will not know until we try, and I believe that we are obliged to keep trying, no matter what. And the next time we are tempted, after hearing of a tragic event, to ask God “How could You let this happen?”, let us remember that it is the question we really should be asking of ourselves.