

And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights. (7:12)

When something happens in Thailand, does it have anything to do with us? We hear about an earthquake across the globe, does it impact us? Can we learn something from this tragedy? A Jewish businessman who lived in China took a business trip to Poland. One could not be in Poland and not take a day off to visit with the saintly **Chafetz Chaim**. The man rearranged his schedule so that he could detour to Radin. Perhaps he would be fortunate to receive a blessing from this saintly leader of world Jewry.

The man arrived in Radin and immediately proceeded to the home of the *Rebbe* of the Jewish People. He presented himself before the *Chafetz Chaim*, who, upon inquiring his place of origin, asked, "What is new in China?" The man replied, describing life in China, "There are a few Jews and even less opportunity for them to earn a living. There is no *rav* or *shochet*, ritual slaughter." The *Chafetz Chaim* agreed with his visitor, "It is the same all over the world. I have had vignettes from all corners of the globe – each with the same sad story. This is why I wrote a short *sefer*, book, entitled *Netzach Yisrael*, the eternity of *Yisrael*. It will strengthen the hearts and minds of Jews all over."

"Tell me more about China," the *Chafetz Chaim* asked. The man related that a large dam had burst, flooding a large valley and destroying everything in its wake. Thousands of people had perished, thousands of homes had been destroyed. It was a cataclysmic disaster.

Hearing this, the *Chafetz Chaim* began to tremble. He wanted to hear more about it. He asked the man to tell him every detail about the disaster that had befallen China. After a few moments of relating the events in China, the guest became perturbed and gathered up his courage (or *chutzpah*) and asked, "*Rebbe*, what does this have to do with us? How is world Jewry affected by what takes place in China?"

The *Chafetz Chaim* calmly responded, "If a man were to build a stage in the town square of Warsaw and proceed to make a proclamation in *Yiddish*, who would you say was his intended audience?" "Clearly, he was speaking to Warsaw's Jews," the man replied. "Why do you say that?" asked the *Chafetz Chaim*. "The majority of the city's residents are gentiles. Do we not always follow the majority?"

"True," countered the traveler, "but only the Jews understand the man's language."

"It is exactly as you say!" the *Chafetz Chaim* replied with a slightly raised voice. "All of these disasters are signs from Heaven. They are Heavenly messages sent to the world – for whom? For those who understand the language! What do the Chinese comprehend about *middas HaDin*, the attribute of Heavenly Justice? The messages are directed towards those who learn, who study the

Torah and are able to understand that Hashem wants us to repent. He is talking to us: See what happened in China – it could be you next! How do Jews in Poland become aware of these messages? Hashem catalyzes a Jew from China to travel to Poland. While he is there, he relates the catastrophe that took place in China. Now the Jews in Poland have a Heavenly imperative to repent.” Heavenly messages are dispatched all of the time; unfortunately, we are not always tuned in to listen.

The believing Jew is acutely aware that there are no coincidences in life and that things do not just happen. There is a rhyme and reason for everything. Nothing can affect us unless it is so decreed from Heaven, and, likewise, we cannot escape Heavenly retribution. Last, we must remember that punishment is not an end in its own, but only a medium from which we are to derive a lesson, a window into Hashem’s demands of us.

In his *Hahe’erah Sheb’nistar*, *Horav Eliav Aderi, Shlita*, focuses on the forty-day punishment of the *Mabul*, Flood. Veritably, that generation had sinned so egregiously that the Heavenly decree against them had been total annihilation. That entire generation, except for Noach and his family, were to be wiped out from the face of the earth. Nothing would be left of them. Could this punishment not have been executed through the medium of a giant tsunami? Why did Hashem send a torrential rain that lasted specifically forty days?

Rashi states that the number forty was by design. The *yimei yetziras ha’velad*, gestation period of a child, is forty days. Thus, Hashem punished them, for, through their immoral behavior and illicit relationships, they had caused Him to create many illegitimate children. Forty days of destruction for the forty days of their destroying the many potential *neshamos*, souls, which they compelled Hashem to bring into the world. Alternatively, **Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl**, writes that the number forty implies creation (forty-day gestation period). The *Mabul* lasted for forty-days, alluding to it setting the tone and foundation for the re-creation of the world. With the decimation of that society, the world as we had known it then, the world that was left was actually the beginning of the creation of a new world.

We find this idea in *Hilchos Shabbos*. Destroying an edifice is considered *kilkul*, destruction, and, thus, not under the *halachic* purview of *meleches machasheves*, calculated labor, the criterion for determining the validity of an act of labor. Accordingly, one who destroys on *Shabbos* is not *chayov*, liable. *Shabbos* labor must be constructive. If, however, the destruction is for the purpose of building – ie, knocking down a building in order to lay a new foundation to build another edifice – one is liable. Destruction for the purpose of construction is actually a constructive labor. Ridding the world of evil, so that good can be planted, is constructive. It is a good thing.

Hashem repays us *middah k’neged middah*, measure for measure, gives out retributive justice. This is a tremendous kindness, because, when we receive a punishment and we engage our minds, we are able to identify the area of our life in which we are deficient. This, says **Horav Yechezkel, zl, m’Radomsk**, is what David *Hamelech* alludes to in *Tehillim* 62:13, *U’lecha*

Hashem ha'chesed ki atah teshalem l'ish k'ma'aseihu, "And yours, my Lord, is kindness, for You reward each man in accordance with his deeds." *Teshalem* means to pay back – reward and punishment. What act of kindness is there in punishment? The *Radonsker* explains that, when Hashem punishes *k'ma'aseihu*, according to the individual's actions, measure for measure, he allows the offender the opportunity to introspect and peer into his deficiencies, to see where he went wrong – and correct the area in which he has strayed. The greatest blessing is to point out one's failings discreetly, so that he can repair them. Hashem does not punish; Hashem instructs.

The *Talmud Berachos* 5a states that a person who has *yissurim*, troubles, suffering, should introspect and investigate his actions. In other words, nothing "just happens." *Chazal* are teaching us that the correct response to suffering is to study one's actions, to delve into his motives and intentions: Are they pure? Are they worthy? Ostensibly, one will figure out what has catalyzed his present predicament, and he will do something about it, like correcting his lapse.

There is a story that occurred concerning **Horav Isser Zalmen Meltzer, zl**, that underscores this idea. A man came to visit *Rav Isser Zalmen*. While the two men were talking, they heard a noise from the kitchen. Quiet, followed by the *Rebbetzin's* crying out. *Rav Isser Zalmen* ran to the kitchen. Quiet, followed by hushed voices, as the *Rosh Yeshivah* and his *Rebbetzin* discussed something. Then, they both left the house, leaving the man waiting and wondering. When *Rav Isser Zalmen* returned, he went right back to his discussion with the man as if nothing had occurred. "Where were we?" he asked. The man, of course, was not prepared to return to the conversation until he became privy to what had just taken place. A noise in the kitchen; the *Rebbetzin* cried out; the hushed discussion; both leaving and returning a while later. The man felt that he deserved an explanation. Obviously, he must have been close to the *Rosh Yeshivah* to make such a request.

Rav Isser Zalmen began to explain what had happened. A pot of milk in the kitchen had boiled over and spilled. He and his wife had a discussion to figure out how such a thing could have happened. The *Rebbetzin* suddenly realized that she had forgotten to pay the milkman for the milk. They both left immediately to search for the milkman and pay him. When he received the money, the milkman remarked that he did not know how he would have purchased food for dinner that night.

If things do not go smoothly, one should stop and ask himself: What did I do, what am I doing wrong? Whether one calls it retributive justice, tit for tat, what goes around comes around, or *middah k'neged middah*, measure for measure, it is something very real in our lives, something that, if we were only to open our eyes, might change the course of our lives.