WHERE WAS GOD, WHERE IS MAN?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

People come to temple for lots of reasons, in fact there is an old joke about two men, Goldberg and Cohen. Goldberg and Cohen come to temple every week with out fail, finally one night at the oneg, the rabbi approaches them and says to Cohen, "I never knew you were such a pious man, your friend Goldberg here, he is the son of a rabbi, a scholar in our community, but you Cohen, I always though of you as a bit of a *schleper*, when did you become such a devout Jew? To which Cohen replies to the Rabbi, "Rabbi, Goldberg comes to temple to talk to God, I come to talk to Goldberg."

Tonight I think even Cohen would come to temple to talk to God. For Goldberg, Cohen and the rest of us there are two questions pressing on our thoughts this evening, as we struggle to comprehend the tragedy and disaster that has befallen the people of the Gulf Coast and our nation, as we watched winds scatter houses, and cars and people and possession to the corners of the earth, those who believe in God or would like to believe in God, we have turned our eyes toward heaven and strain to ask, "Where was God? In the midst of this natural disaster, where was the source of all nature, Where was God?"

The second question I think many of us are asking as we read of the violence and suffering, not only that the victims have endured but that has been brought upon them by other human beings, of the rapes, the murders, the stealing, the shootings, the mob rule and the raw inhumanity, we incomprehensibly ask our television sets, "Where is man? In the midst of all this chaos, where is the humanity, Where is man?"

These two questions, they occupy my every waking and many sleeping moments, what kind of God is it that we pray to that would allow such a thing to happen and what

kind of human beings are we if in the midst of our suffering and loss, we take advantage of the weakest and the most vulnerable?

The answers to each question are not simple, nor is the indictment of God or Man entirely complete. To be sure there is tremendous compassion and care being provided by countless volunteers, emergency workers and fellow victims to those who are in need. For every report of violence and inhumanity I hear on the news I hear a multitude more of acts of true *tzedek* and *hesed*, of charity and compassion. Individuals have opened their homes and their checkbooks across the nation to reach out to the victims and to begin the process of repair and recovery. So to ask the question, that we are all asking, "Where is the humanity?" We do have answers, it is there in the streets of New Orleans and the beaches of Biloxi, you can find it if you look, but likewise there is also the stark contrast of man's utter inhumanity, and that is there too, it is not a mirage or a media invention, people are still being brutalized, now not only by the waters and the winds but by each other. I read in the LA Times this morning of national guardsmen just returning from Iraq and flying over the destroyed neighborhoods, not of the Middle East but of the Southern Coast of the United States and they had to take cover from sniper fire coming from their very own citizens, the people they were trying to help. Yes even in the midst of stories of compassion, their are stories of man acting at his most base and inhumane and we are permitted to ask, indeed we must ask the question tonight, "Where is the humanity?"

As we struggle to comprehend how that could be, we struggle to comprehend a God that would allow such a disaster to unfold. To be of the people of Israel literally means, to struggle with God, the word *Yisrael*, means just that the one who struggles with

God. Jacob was given the name when he doubted God and struggled with the concept of God's power and we earn that name this evening, as we struggle with the nature of a God who would create a world where such destruction by nature and such harm and hurt by man's inhumanity is possible. What use is prayer, what purpose is their to belief in God if this is the world that God created?!

And so I put the questions to you tonight, where was God in the midst of this natural disaster and where is man's humanity toward man in its aftermath? To help you and all of us find the answers to these most pressing questions of the nature of God and the nature of man? I want to harness the truly most powerful force in the Universe the power of the human intellect, to reason comprehend and to question. I have prepared 4 texts to guide you in this quest for answers

DISCUSSION

Instructions: break congregation into ¼ groups assign text to group by number study with each other in your area and we share at the end.

TEXT STUDY
"Where was God in Hurricane Katrina?"

1 "*There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Adonai; but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound*." (1 Kings 19:11-12)

Commentary: Rabbi Jan Katzew
Where was God then? Where is God now? When an insurance company attributes a loss of property or life to an "act of God," it is not making a theological statement. It is only claiming that some occurrences are out of human control. A hurricane or two or three or four are such occurrences. They are not divine actions.

The text above refers to one of the most dramatic moments in the *Tanakh*, a meeting between God and the prophet Elijah, who in desperation asks God to take his life. Instead, God tries to teach Elijah a lesson, and through Elijah to teach us a lesson. God is not manifest in extraordinary acts of nature, at least not any more than in the most discreet, private, intimate moments. God was in the stillness, not the noise. God is in the personal acts of kindness, in the silent smile flashed to a son, daughter, sister, brother, spouse, friend, neighbor, stranger until the storm comes and we realize we are all one family.

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2 *"Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me…" (Psalm 23:4)*

Commentary: Rabbi Jan Katzew
This is arguably the most famous verse in the most famous Psalm and its fame is justified. It contains the essence of a sacred, compelling response to tragedy. The operative verb in this verse is "walk." Rather than try to run through the valley or to run around the valley or to dwell in the valley, the Psalmist's teaching asks us to walk, to make slow, steady progress, to defy the tragedy, not to deny the tragedy. Taking small steps physically and emotionally is a healthy, holy response to tragedy. There is no way to pretend that what happened did not happen. Destruction is real. Pain and loss are real. Comfort is also real, as is healing. Fix something. Help someone else find something. What took an incredibly short time to destroy will take a significant amount of time to repair. It is not fair. But, by walking through the valley, over time there will be cause for celebration, and with time comes perspective that enables a person to see blessings over the horizon. Even very young children will realize that there is no simple, fast remedy to make everything right. Normal will be a different normal. Resilience is a phenomenal antidote to tragedy. Allow yourself the freedom to walk through the valley, and perhaps discover that you are not alone, that other humane beings are walking with you, and perhaps you will feel God's presence as well.

TEXT STUDY
"Where is Man in its aftermath?"

3 *Rabbi Yehudah said: You are called God's children only if your behavior makes you worthy of the ascription. Rabbi Meir said: You are called God's children even if you are unworthy" (Talmud Kiddushin 36a).*

Commentary: Rabbi Mark Diamond
How would Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Meir react to the stories and images of the human response to the death and destruction wrought by Katrina?

I imagine Rabbi Yehudah would join Gulf Coast residents and some officials who are cursing the slow emergency response to the crisis. "You are not doing enough fast enough," he might say. "If you truly aspire to be children of God, act immediately and decisively to alleviate the pain and anguish of human suffering in the region."

I also picture Rabbi Yehudah deeply troubled by images of gunfire, looting, and other senseless acts of violence and destruction in New Orleans and neighboring communities. "How can you debase your essential humanity and dignity?" he might cry out. "How dare you compound the suffering by impeding rescue and relief efforts and terrorizing the innocent victims of this tragedy?"

As for Rabbi Meir, I imagine him speaking as follows: "I weep for the men, women and children whose lives have been shattered by this unprecedented disaster. I celebrate the acts of heroism of emergency services personnel and ordinary citizens who put their own lives at risk to save others. I am awed by people thousands of miles away who are making generous donations to relief efforts. All of you sanctify God's name through your care and compassion." Then he sighs and adds softly with tears in his eyes: "As for those whose words and deeds hurt others, those who are guilty of sins of omission and sins of commission--they too remain God's children."

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4 *"What is the most important verse in the Torah?Rabbi Akiva said: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' This is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai disagreed: The verse 'This is the book of the descendants of Adam… the human whom God made in God's likeness' (Genesis 5:1) utters a principle even greater" (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4, 41c).*

Commentary: Rabbi Michael Strassfeld
Why does Ben Azzai find such an obvious choice as "love your neighbor as yourself" inadequate? Perhaps, quite simply, because some people don't know how to love themselves. Perhaps because it demands too much of us--to love everybody?

Or perhaps Ben Azzai thinks that the simple statement of human existence is enough: "This is the record of Adam's descendants." For as we look in the face of another human being, we see the image of God, the image of all God's creatures who have ever existed. Ultimately, we are looking in a mirror and seeing our own face. Through the realization that we are all equal, both in our humanity and in our having been created in the image of God, we learn to treat the other with respect and with kindness.

Concluding Thought

In the old blue gates of prayer siddur that many of us grew up reading in our reform congregations, there was a powerful and favorite reading of mine. The passage read, "Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city,; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will." God has not abandoned us in the midst of this disaster, God is down in the mud and muck with us, we can turn to God and find strength, and courage and meaning and compassion and comfort. But in the midst of it, some have abandoned God, thrown the values and teaching of our sages and our tradition away just like the scattered remains of so many homes and possessions. To those the only response I truly believe is to hold a mirror up to their actions, perhaps they will see in the reflection the evil that they have done and if they look closely they may see the image of God staring back at them and then maybe they will get reacquainted.