

tradition where humans are partners who bring their moral sensibilities to God's word. It is much harder to be fundamentalist and to call for the death of innocents when humans are enjoined to bring their moral sensibilities into the conversation.

Jeff Helmreich: *Can you offer an example from your own life where you find yourself feeling some tension about having to do something, but you do it anyway because that is what Jewish tradition seems to dictate?*


Josh Kornbluth: I'm new to all this. I haven't, for the most part, been faced with that tension. I've largely inhabited the secular world; I was raised by atheists. But one of the biggest things that I'm grappling with, as I prepare to go with my family to Israel for my bar mitzvah, is that I do not want to be separated from my wife — who is not Jewish — or my son, who technically isn't Jewish either. I do not feel nor do I want to convey in any way that because I'm studying Judaism, I am pulling myself away from them or suggesting that there are qualities, a certain humanness, that I have and they don't have. As I study and become more Jewishly attuned, I don't want to sacrifice the relationships with the people dearest to me. God shouldn't even think about asking me to bind my son. I'm clinging to my humanity, and generally it supersedes my Jewishness.

Dov Linzer: As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has said, "You know, I don't have any problems with the tradition. I'm a white male Kohen rabbi, heterosexual." Of course, he meant that ironically, and he went on to address the challenges that everybody who does not have those benefits faces. I find myself, personally, in a position of privilege. As it is, while I grapple with issues philosophically, religiously, and ethically, these challenges remain less immediate for me than they do for others.

Jeff Helmreich: *If we're not talking about the word of God challenging us personally, what about the work of God? This has been a year of terrible natural disasters, and whether it's a tsunami or a tornado, it's hard for a believing person not to attribute those natural disasters to God. Is it, then, a personal challenge to continue revering and worshiping a God whose hand is in all of that?*

Dov Linzer: I know people who are very challenged theologically by natural events. Personally, I'm not. God created a world; He has set the laws of nature. Are natural disasters

an expression of God intervening with and micromanaging these laws? I don't know. But what I do know is that the Jewish response is not "How did God let this happen?" but rather, "How am I to respond? Where does my responsibility lie?" When I first met Rabbi Avi Weiss, I was in his office and saw a little sign. One person says, "I want to ask God how He allows poverty and injustice and suffering and so much tragedy in the world." The other person says, "So why don't you?" And the first person answers, "Because I'm afraid that God will ask me the same question." So while we have natural disasters, we don't know all that we've done to contribute to them. For example, in New Orleans, we had disastrous weather as well as a tremendous amount of human negligence. God has created a world and now it is up to us to figure out how to take the forces of nature and to be the most powerful moral and religious agents that we can be in that world.

Sharon Brous: Of course there is a political analysis in which we must assess our behavior to see how human beings are contributing to freak weather conditions, why we aren't doing more to protect the most vulnerable. But there is also the theological or spiritual response. The question is not, "How did God let this happen?" but, "How are we called to respond to tragedy?" Tragedy calls us to a radical reassessment of the way that we live, knowing that the world could change dramatically in an instant and everything that we love could be gone. How does that knowledge impact how we live in the world now? In the language of Yom Kippur, it's *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* — repairing relationships, recognizing that there is something greater than us at work in the cosmos, and doing acts of justice in the world. Rather than asking, "How could God do this to people?" I prefer to ask, "What must we learn from these tragedies?" It seems to me that the answer is very clear. For Jews, it's about love, humility, and working toward a more just and peaceful world. 

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides *Sh'ma* readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Why did Abraham argue with God

at Sodom but not argue when told to sacrifice his son?

2. Why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? Was the binding of Isaac a test of Abraham?
3. How do you reconcile morally challenging religious texts with continued reverence for tradition and Torah?
4. What does it mean to you to say, "*Hineini*, Here I am"?