

<https://reformjudaism.org/practice/spirituality/responding-spiritual-questions-and-emotional-needs-after-tragedies>

### **Responding to Spiritual Questions and Emotional Needs after Tragedies**

Following tragedies, especially those that are manmade, people of all ages have questions about how a good God could let terrible tragedies happen.

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Following a terrible event or loss, they may even cry out this question, tempting others to offer their own religious understanding or to engage in philosophical discussion. These are valid questions... to be engaged at other times.

In times of deep crisis and pain, such questions – when posed by adults – might be heard as:

- “How could this have happened?”
- “Does anyone care about and protect me and those whom I love?”
- “What did I do to deserve this?”
- “How can this terrible and unfair thing have happened?”
- “Is there any order and security or is the world just chaos and mayhem?”

When posed by children, depending upon their ages, they may be heard as:

- “Why didn’t my parents/teachers/caretakers protect me?”
- “Is it safe to be away from my parents?”
- “Is it safe to go to sleep?”
- “Are there bad guys everywhere?”
- “Is the world a scarier place than I thought?”
- “Is anyone in charge?”

### **The Role of Religion in Comforting Those Affected by Tragedy**

For most of us, in the immediate moment of tragedy, the question is only partly theological. Rather, the care we desperately need is that which human beings – perhaps Divinely inspired – can offer to one another.

This is not to suggest that pastoral counseling and religious questions aren’t important or should not be addressed in the days to come. Some people may change their own beliefs because of what has the trauma they’ve experienced – but however tenuous or tentative a

person's belief in God may be, the moment of serious loss and fear is not the right time to toss aside all possibility of belief in a loving compassionate Presence.

### **How We Can Help**

We needn't try to convince these individuals of anything or to challenge their doubts and disappointments, nor is it helpful to add our own negative conviction to theirs. If we hear them saying (directly or others) that life and the world seem devoid of love, order, and meaning, then agreeing or disagreeing isn't the issue. Rather, the issue is how the world feels to them *right now* – and thus, anything we can do on the side of life, calm, and meaning will be most valuable.

The kindest response we can offer is one of listening, conveying acceptance that the questions are being asked, and doing and saying things that help restore a sense of love, justice, protection, and order in our world – even though what has happened is shocking, unfair, hateful, or a result of temporary chaos.

We don't necessarily have to convey all that in words. Instead, it can be in hugs offered, compassionate care provided, and accompaniment through agonizing tasks such as funeral preparations and the gentle and timely restoration of routine. We try to provide living proof for one another that we live in a world in which there is great goodness, even though it is also a world in which terrible tragedies sometimes occur.

This great goodness is expressed in such activities as caretaking, rescuing, and rebuilding, and it can be understood, by some, as a sign of God in the world.

### **When Children Have Questions**

Children sometimes raise religious questions in the midst of tragedy too, although less often than their parents. It is important to ask them what they think and to try to support what they wish to and are able to believe, particularly if it is strengthening and reassuring.

As adults, we needn't profess beliefs we don't have, but we can be respectful of our kids' hopes – even when our own beliefs and faith are shaken.

We can remind children about the ways religion and God can inspire us to take care of one another and to do the good and wonderful things that are also part of our world. Religious rituals like lighting candles, expressing hopes through prayer, and participating in celebrations that support optimism can be very helpful.

Children need their sense of security restored and anything that helps with that (and is consistent with their family's practice and belief) is what counts – including explaining that those who have died are with God. Young children may not be able to conceive that someone who was once here is now *not* somewhere (this is difficult enough for adults); most older children can conceive of people living on within our hearts, or of souls returning to God.

It's essential that we listen to children's questions before we compose our answers, as very young children age may not be clear about the permanence of death and the difference between being alive and no longer alive. They still may be most concerned about being separated from parents themselves and are reassured that the child or adult who has died is not "somewhere" suffering and crying out in loneliness.

At moments of traumatic crisis, children's faith and trust in the people they have counted on to protect them may be more significantly shaken than their religious faith. Anything adults can do to restore their sense that the people around them are working to restore safety will matter most. They need to be allowed to remain close to caring adults and to have a sense of calm – and, eventually, joy – returned to their lives.

Perhaps in this way, children and adults are more alike than different: All of us need to feel we are not alone and that there are trustworthy sources of hope, security, and joy within our world.

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**Rabbi Edythe Held Mencher, LCSW**, serves as Union for Reform Judaism faculty for Sacred Caring Community and is director of the URJ Presidential Initiative for Disabilities Inclusion. In her role as director of the URJ Ruderman Disabilities Inclusion Initiative, she helped to create the online learning site [disabilitiesinclusion.org](http://disabilitiesinclusion.org). She has been an adjunct faculty member of [Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion](http://Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion)'s Interfaith Doctor of Ministry Program in Pastoral Counseling. She writes and consults on disability, mental health, and helping children and adults to navigate the

feelings associated with difficult personal and communal events, drawing about Jewish and secular sources. She is the co-author of [\*Resilience of the Soul: Developing Emotional and Spiritual Resilience in Adolescents and Their Families\*](#). Ordained in 1999, Rabbi Mencher is also a graduate of the Westchester Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy and of the Hunter College School of Social Work.

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