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How to Avoid Meteors



By Marty Kaplan

NASA scientists say that meteor explosions like the one last week injuring 1,200 people in Chelyabinsk, Siberia, are 100-year events. The last time a big meteor crashed into our planet, incinerating 80 million trees in the Tunguska region of Siberia, was in 1908. So if you're feeling a bit panicky after Chelyabinsk, relax. Odds are it'll be a century before something like that happens again — though it's understandable if you decide to cross the Trans-Siberian railroad off your bucket list.

On the other hand, the same cosmos that visits us with 10,000-ton space rocks also sends earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes and lightning our way. Every second, the division of trillions of cells in our bodies risks minuscule, morbid mistakes in our DNA. Every time we get in a car, we take our lives in our hands.

It's the randomness that's galling, the notion that we're not in charge. Even within the city of Chelyabinsk, flying glass in one building sliced through tendons, while next door the windows were unshattered. The damage was "without a discernible pattern," said a spokesman for the governor of the region. That's how shock waves work, said an MIT planetary scientist. No wonder they're called shock waves. It's shocking how little control we have, how contingent these catastrophes can be.

God's plan, God's strange and mysterious ways, God's promise of a less capricious afterlife: these get some people through the arbitrary night. Through the millennia, theodicy — the attempt to square divine justice with the bad things that happen to good people — has come up with explanations: the free will that God gave to man; the evil of Satan; the inevitability of suffering; the *tsimtsum*, the Kabbalistic concept of a God who contracted from the world in order to create it; the distinction between a benevolent God of morality named Adonai and a tragic God of nature named Elohim.

The Enlightenment advantaged scientific explanations of the universe, and historic events from the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to the 20th-century Shoah have tipped the scales toward the secular for many a former believer. Each 9/11, each Newtown, reopens the wound of God's perverse omnipotence. The governor of Chelyabinsk told reporters why there had been no fatalities: "God directed danger away." How grateful would he have been to that God if Chelyabinsk had looked more like Tunguska?

But secularism sucks. It is hard to tell children that the universe is indifferent to them. It is unacceptable that chance changes everything all the time. It is difficult to tell ourselves the running story of our lives — to find meaning in our personal narratives — when the plot points come not from character or merit, but from rolls of the dice, bolts from the blue, madmen, freaks of nature, lousy luck.

There are of course rational ways to deal with this dilemma. We buckle up and drive defensively. We buy insurance and earthquake kits. We exercise, wear sunscreen and eat kale.

There are spiritual ways, too — ones that don't require twisting ourselves into theological pretzels. Knowing we may die tomorrow, we seize today, smell the roses, hug our children close. We count our blessings without positing a Blesser, thank our lucky stars without believing in fortune, fate or destiny.

Living well is the best revenge. I have friends whose toddler died suddenly of an undetected heart defect. “What do you do with that?” I asked the boy’s grieving father as, horrified, I fought thinking the unthinkable. “How do you go on? What do you learn? What do you do?” “Drink better wine,” he said.

There’s a poem by Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi mystic:

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.*

We are sleepwalkers, amnesiacs, oblivious of everyday miracles, comically reliant on benign biopsies and Siberian meteors to remind us to be mindful.

We’re about to learn whether Hurricane Sandy decisively awakened us to our planet’s manmade mortality. “Climate Change a Bigger Extinction Threat than Asteroids” was the headline in a newsletter last week. Sixty-five million years ago, when an asteroid hit the sea off the Yucatan Peninsula, 70 percent of all living species disappeared in the climate change that followed. Today, as Michael D. Lemonick’s Climate Central piece explained, “many scientists believe another mass extinction is under way — this one entirely of our own making.”

No one can avoid living where a chunk of space rock explodes with the force of 20 Hiroshima bombs. But the causes of climate change, unlike the contingencies of the interstellar cosmos, are within our control. There remains to us a small window of time when we can still bend the curve of global warming. It will be a manmade miracle if we don’t go back to sleep.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you’d like.

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