

## Sin and Human Responsibility

In a year that has been so painful and difficult for so many of us, it would be easy to ask the following question: “What did I do to deserve this?”

I will admit to you that I have asked this myself. Yes, even though I am blessed with work that I love; even with a family that is not only intact—but one in which we still enjoy being together in spite of the increased family time the pandemic has provided; even with many friends that I am grateful for; and although my life is filled with blessings too numerous to count; I have recently found myself asking: “Really God? Really?!?”

Our family has had to weather Deborah’s parents suffering from the virus in mid-March—they both thankfully pulled through; Deborah having had two hospital stays in the past six months; and the pandemic impacting the lives of our young adult children: an upcoming wedding for our daughter and future son-in-law Eliana and Ben for which there is still no wedding date; our daughter Klielle being summoned back from Israel prematurely; our son Noam’s senior year in college happening only online. And yet, I know all-too-well that we are the lucky ones.

Many of you watching have had it much more difficult. You may have parents who died alone because in the early stages of the pandemic you were not allowed in hospitals as they died; you may have children who are suffering from anxiety and depression without the in-person interactions associated with school and camp; you may be dealing with job losses and deep financial insecurity because of how the pandemic has impacted the economy. You, too, may have asked yourselves: “Really God? Really?!? What did we do to deserve this?”

If you opened your High Holiday prayer book looking for answers, you would **not** be faulted for thinking that God is punishing you for your sins. This might make you uncomfortable, but it is a foundational concept deeply embedded in our Jewish tradition. How many times on this Yom Kippur day do we beat our breast and confess: *Al cheit shechatanu lefanecha*, for the sin we have committed against you by doing various offenses. The *Machzor* tells us that we were exiled from the Land of Israel because we were sinful--*Mipnei chataeinu galinu m’artzeinu*. This connection between sin and punishment is not only a primary focus of our High Holiday liturgy, it is embedded in our daily prayers as well. The second paragraph of the *Shema* says that if we follow God’s laws, we get good weather and abundant produce; if we sin, we get bad weather and famine.

In fact, the notion that God punishes us for our sins is affirmed over and over again in the Torah. The Book of Deuteronomy can be boiled down to a single point: If the Israelites follow the laws of the Torah, they will be rewarded by being able to stay in the land. But if they sin by violating the laws of the Torah, they will be kicked out. Reward and punishment, along with blessing and curse, are the inevitable consequences of both God’s anger for our sins and God’s blessing for our good acts.

I'm pretty sure the pandemic's impact on my family has nothing to do with **sin**—mine or anyone else's. The idea that these things have happened because God is punishing us for our sins is not only demonstrably **false**; it is worse than false—it adds unnecessary suffering in a world in which there is already too much pain. My teacher, Dr. Neil Gillman z"l, used the phrase **broken myth** to describe a concept in our Bible that does violence to our deepest intimations of religious truth. For Gillman, a God who punishes us for our sins does not—and cannot—explain the world around us. In fact, it is theologically offensive. Why?

Because it would force us to say that the more than 200,000 people who have died from Covid-19 in this country lost their lives because they were all sinners. That would be deeply offensive. Therefore, it is a **broken myth**. And it would force all of us to look at our many losses—and our suffering over these last many months—and conclude that we **deserve it**. To affirm such a concept is to affirm the existence of a God that none of us would want to worship.

While Dr. Gillman used the language of a **broken myth** to describe a concept that does violence to the core values of a religious tradition, he was by no means the first person to describe this phenomenon. In fact, our ancient rabbinic Sages beat him to it by 2,000 years. In the tractate *Avodah Zarah*, the Talmud teaches that God does not come down to earth and whack you if you commit a sin. If you don't keep kosher, or if you don't observe Shabbat, God does not single you out for some punishment because of your ritual infractions. If you cheat on your taxes, or if you have an extramarital affair, God is not going to make sure that you will be found out.

The Rabbinic language for this truth is called *olam k'minhago noheig*, the world goes according to its natural course. The Talmud offers the example of somebody who steals wheat and plants it in the ground. Since it is stolen wheat, we might wish that it would not grow so that the person who commits an immoral act would not benefit from it. But the concept of *olam k'minhago noheig*—the world goes according to its natural course—says exactly the opposite—the wheat **will**, in fact, continue to grow. God will **not** interrupt either the laws of nature—**nor** the manifestations of human free will—to respond to either moral—or immoral—human actions. That wheat will grow, and the person who stole it may actually benefit in the short term. But that is not the end of the story. Why?

Because the world that God has created is a world in which **actions have consequences**. When you make choices, those choices have ramifications: You have to live with the choices that you make. Because when you cheat on your taxes, or when you take what is not rightfully yours, or when you cheat on your spouse, you have to live with the consequences of your own dishonesty: the fact that you live in fear of being discovered; the fact that when you look at yourself in the mirror you see a person who lacks integrity; the fact that you have broken trust with the people who matter in your life. *Olam k'minhago noheig*—the fact that the world goes according to its own course—means that your rectitude—or lack of it—is completely the result of your own decisions.

And what applies to us as individuals applies to us collectively as well. Think about how the number of American deaths due to the pandemic compares to the number of deaths of other countries with comparable economic resources. Here are some statistics:

- If the US had the same death rate as the European Union overall, nearly 87,000 Americans wouldn't have died from Covid-19 (out of the more than 200,000 who have died so far).
- If the US had the same death rate as Canada, nearly 113,000 Americans wouldn't have died from Covid-19.
- If the US had the same death rate as Germany, more than 158,000 Americans wouldn't have died from Covid-19.

These sobering statistics affirm the truth of *Olam k'minhago noheig*—the fact that the world goes according to its own course—in two distinct ways. The first is that there **is** a natural order of events in which a new virus—like Covid-19—can appear and cause disease to human beings. Second, the natural order is reflected in the truth that **how** human beings respond will have a huge impact on the course that a disease takes. When we use the best science available and follow guidelines which tell us to wear masks in public; to maintain social distance; and to wash our hands frequently, the impact of the virus can be mitigated. The inability of this country to act uniformly to follow the best scientific thinking on how to slow the virus is not simply an example of failed leadership; it's also an example of the world following its natural course.

The same truth about the natural order is manifest when it comes to climate change. Science has demonstrated unequivocally that the increase in wildfires, hurricanes, and the number of places in this country where temperatures in the summer rise above 100 degrees has never been greater. If carbon emissions stay constant—and do not increase—here are some predictions for what the world will look like 50 years from now:

- One in twelve Americans will move out of the South towards California, the Mountain West or the Northwest because of climate influences alone.
- At least 28 million Americans are likely to face megafires like the ones that we are now seeing in California; they will be happening in places like Texas, Florida and Georgia.
- 100 million Americans — largely in the Mississippi River Basin from Louisiana to Wisconsin — will increasingly face humidity so extreme that working outside or playing school sports could cause heatstroke.

The natural order is again reflected in these statistics. Continued carbon emissions will cause our planet to experience crucial changes in its ecosystem—thus the extreme weather events we are witnessing will only increase. And yet, the corollary is equally true: Changes in human behavior to reduce the use of fossil fuels will diminish these changes to our climate and reduce the human suffering and dislocation associated with them.

*Olam k'minhago noheig*—the world, does indeed, go according to its own course. Just as we don't want to pray to a God who is going to punish us for our sins, we also cannot count on God to bail us out of the problems that are a result of our collective **action**—or **inaction**.

That is where *Teshuvah* comes in and that is why today is so important. Our *Teshuvah*, our repentance, is capable of disrupting an important part of the natural order that the rabbis describe. When we recite *Unetaneh Tokef*, when we acknowledge the power of this day, we say “*u-Teshuvah, u'tifillah, u'tzedakah ma-avirin et ro-a ha-gezerah. Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah* have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny. The *Teshuvah* of the **wheat thief won't** cause the wheat **to go bad**, but it **will** allow him to make **restitution** and look at himself in the mirror each day. *Teshuvah* won't bring back even one of the 200,000 dead; but it will allow us to fix what is broken and look *ourselves* in the mirror each day. *Olam k'minhago noheig*. The world follows its natural course until we **seize** the day, **take responsibility** for our actions, and **change** because of it.

That is what we come together on Yom Kippur to remember. Our actions—both individually and collectively—will change the course of the world. On Yom Kippur, we remind ourselves of our capacity to work not only for the betterment of our individual souls, but for the deepening of our responsibilities to one another as well.

We don't have to change the order of things in big and flashy ways. We can do it through the small, meaningful actions we each take. Indeed, **we** disrupted the natural order of things here in our own congregational community. When the virus hit, we did not simply throw up our hands and say: “Isn't this awful?” and let it run its course. Instead we responded by joining together to see how we could help each other out: shopping for food for those who were housebound; keeping the Mitzvah pantry going because more people needed food; teaching our elderly congregants how to use Zoom so they could stay connected to the congregation. We changed the natural course of events by finding ways of taking care of each other.

Yes, a God who punishes us for our sins is a broken myth. But a God who waits for us to be partners with God to repair a world that is so desperately in need of repair is how we redeem that broken myth.

On this Yom Kippur day, we come to remember that the fate—not only of our own lives—but the fate of the world—rests in our own hands. We cannot claim that it was someone else's responsibility. Sin is **not** about the punishments that await us for our failure to observe the *Mitzvot*. Sin is an opportunity for *Teshuvah*. It is a reminder that **we** are responsible for the world that we are creating.

At a time in which we are scared, at a time in which there is so much uncertainty, at a time of a global pandemic, let's re-energize our understanding of sin as a vehicle for reminding us that the future **is in our hands**. On this, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, let us remember that God creates a world that goes according to its natural course. But *God also gives us the tools to disrupt that order for the good*. The choices that we make, both for the

good and for the bad, will create the future that will be ours—and that will be our children's—to inherit.

The Book of Life is still open. Let the New Year reflect our *Teshuvah* and our capacity to shift the natural order towards the good. *Kein yi'he ratzon*—So may it be—Amen.

*G'mar Hatima Tova*