

**God in the Pandemic**  
**Rabbi Rona Shapiro**  
**Congregation B'nai Jacob**  
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What a year it has been! Shortly after Tropical Storm Isaias (ee-sa'-ee-as), while power was still out, and six months into this unimaginable pandemic, with 194,000 Americans dead, and counting, someone said to me, "Maybe, given reality, it is time for you to stop believing in your God!"

Fortunately, we are not the first people to confront difficult circumstances or to wonder about the alignment between events in the world and just desserts. In fact, 2500 years ago, the Book of Job asked the same question: Why do the righteous suffer? If you recall, Job was a wholly righteous man — tam v'yashar. One day Satan — whoever he might be — challenges God to a wager. Satan posits that Job is only righteous because he enjoys a perfect life, but if his life circumstances changed, Satan argues, Job would no longer be faithful to God. God makes the bet — this is a parable, remember — and in due course Job's livestock are carried off, his home collapses in a storm killing his entire family, and he himself is afflicted with boils. Job's friends arrive to "comfort" Job and each one suggests that despite appearances, Job must have sinned. He cannot be blameless. It is, they insist, the only explanation for all the calamities that have befallen him, they insist. Job, in turn, rejects his friends' counsel — stubbornly, he insists that he is innocent and, contrary to Satan's prediction, he refuses to reject God.

Finally, in the climactic moment of the narrative, God speaks to Job from the whirlwind. God says, "Who is this who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge?...Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understanding...Who closed the sea behind doors...Have you ever commanded the day to break...Do you know the season when the mountain goats give birth?" God goes on like this for four chapters. His essential message to Job is, "You know nothing. You are small and I am great and you have no understanding of the workings of the universe and how your little troubles might fit in to or be irrelevant to my master plan."

It seems like cold comfort. And yet, Job accepts God's answer. Or does he? Before I answer that question, I want to spend a little more time with this God of the whirlwind.

You have all met Him. During Isaias, once I got home — not to my home, but to a home — I watched the storm as I am sure many of you did from a safe perch. Trees danced. The wind howled. Every few minutes, you heard an enormous crack, as another tree split and fell. Everything that is usually still and solid swirled in the air for an hour or so, and then all fell silent. As the psalmist writes, "the voice of the Lord is power, the voice of the Lord breaks cedars, The voice of the Lord kindles flames of fire and convulses the wilderness.. and then, ה' למבול ישב — God sits, enthroned upon the Flood. God stills it all.

For me, God's might is abundantly evident in the storm, in the *mysterium tremendum*, in the sheer power and magnificence of nature. We see that power in the beauty of the sunset, in birth and death, in the roar of the ocean, in the vastness of the Grand Canyon. Even the pandemic, I think, bears witness to God's awesome power — imagine a tiny virus, invisible to the naked eye, new to the world, that, literally in a matter of days transforms the course of human events, shuttering cities across the world, bringing life to a standstill, sickening over 29 million people, killing almost a million. Storm, fire, flood, pandemic — all of them wreak great havoc in our world — but all evince God's tremendous power, a power which, as God himself argues to Job, knows nothing of human suffering or concern. It is a world of accidents in which God is removed. Sobering? Yes, but also real.

What use, though, is such a God? Or, to put it differently, who needs Him? And why does Job appear to accept God's answer from amidst the storm? Or does he? I want to invite us into a closer reading of these lines from chapter 42 of Job. After four long chapters of God's incessant hammering away at His own might and Job's comparative smallness, Job finally responds, "I had heard you with my ears but now I see You with my eyes; Therefore, I despise myself and recant, Being but dust and ashes." It sounds as if Job utterly capitulates, as if he is bowed before God's great power. But a closer reading might make us think again. The words, "I despise myself" are in Hebrew, *emas* — or I despise, I am disgusted, but with no definite object. With what is Job disgusted? Similarly, the word "*nehanti*" translated as I recant also means I pity, again with no object. So what does Job despise? What might he pity? Perhaps not himself. A better reading suggests that Job despises not himself but God and pities not himself but all human beings, who are but dust and ashes, in the face of such mighty, albeit amoral power.<sup>1</sup> Like Job's friends, God attempts to offer Job another, although different, theological rationale — I am great but you are small and you don't understand the workings of the universe. Job rejects God's answer. God may be great, but that knowledge is of little use to Job in the face of suffering. But does Job reject God?

In the final verses of the book of Job, Job forgives his friends and shares a feast with his remaining family and friends. He prays on their behalf and gives each one money and a gold ring. He is blessed by God with abundant livestock and a new family and dies, old and contented.

Abraham, by the way, in tomorrow's Torah reading, seems to make a similar choice. Confronted with a God who demands the life of his child, there is no understanding, no explanation, no bedtime story that will make it all right and whole again. Abraham, after the *akedah*, Abraham who was God's constant companion in conversation for ten chapters of the Bible, stops talking to God just as Job does. But Abraham continues to live a life of *hesed*, lovingkindness— he buries his wife, he marries off his son, he himself remarries and fathers more children.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Miles, **God: A Biography**, Knopf, 1995.

So, do Job and Abraham reject God? No. God's might and majesty are real — our sense of awe at the miracle of the world — its raw power, its beauty, its mystery — evinces deep religious sensibility. Job and Abraham accept that. But they each do something else as well. In his generosity to friends and family, in his forgiveness, Job instantiates hesed, as does Abraham in the final chapters of his life. If God will not enact hesed in the world, Job and Abraham will. God, they realize, is a wholly other force. God's hesed comes through our hands and our hearts.

I want to expand a little bit on this second notion of God, as hesed. Because I believe that as much as life is difficult, as much as pandemics and hurricanes are part and parcel of our existence, as much as suffering is real, God's hesed is also real. It is an unqualified gift to be alive. Every day, throughout this hard time, I have sat in my backyard and marveled at the trees swaying in the breeze, their glorious canopy, each leaf and branch straining toward the light. I have watched the hummingbird suck happily from the nectar of the flowers on my deck; I have watched monarch butterflies feast on our flowers. I have watched fireflies at night and gone to sleep to the hum of crickets and cicadas. I have listened for the owl's faithful call and rejoiced at my sightings of red-tailed hawks, great blue herons, and, in Vermont, eagles and falcons. God's hesed — God's love and goodness — fills the world. It would not exist, I believe, for a minute, without it. Life is often unfair but it is also profoundly good.

The natural world goes along on its course without consideration of human life and livelihood. But, I believe, that that well of hesed that we experience as God's overflowing abundance, also fills us and enables us to instantiate it in the world — to be God's hesed, God's arms, God's hands. This is the conclusion I think Job reaches when he forgives his friends and bestows gifts on them. God may be in the whirlwind. God may be amoral. But we are not. We can make God's hesed real on earth.

A startling text in the Talmud, begins with the verse from Deuteronomy in which we are commanded to walk in God's ways. Is it really possible to walk in God's ways, the Talmud asks. God is consuming fire. God — the God of the whirlwind, the God of the storm, the God of fire and flood and pandemic — is raw power, nuclear fusion. It is not a walk in the park. How are we to walk in his ways?

The Talmud answers: Just as God made clothes for Adam and Even in the garden, so too you must clothe the naked. Just as God visited Abraham after his circumcision, when he was in pain, so too, you must visit the sick. Just as God blessed Isaac following his father Abraham's death, so too you must console the mourner. And just as God buried Moses on the steppes of Moab, so too you must bury the dead.

To be created in God's image means to instantiate God's hesed in this world, to be God's hands, to be God's heart. Not because God is absent but because, as the gemara teaches, the world goes according to its way. God is overwhelming power. He doesn't save us from accidents and contingencies. But God's hesed is also planted

deeply within us and when we choose to act with hesed, we make God real in this world. We are His truest reflection.

Anne Lamont writes, in the face of the world's great suffering, "most of us have figured out that we have to do what's in front of us, and keep doing it. We clean up beaches after oil spills. We rebuild whole towns after hurricanes and tornadoes. We return calls and library books. We get people water. Some of us even pray. ...The equation is life, death, rebirth, hope. The horror is real, and so you make casseroles for your neighbor, organize an overseas clothing drive, and do your laundry. Sometimes you do other people's laundry too." When we lost power for a week during the storm, the Ginzberg family took us in and fed us and sheltered us and gave us a place where we were safe. That is God's presence in this word, God's hesed, every bit as much as the storm was also God. I believe that the ability to love, the ability to persevere in the face of pain, the ability to help others, to make justice real, to hold, to heal, to care — that all these are as much God in us as the hummingbird and the roaring storm are also God's reflection.

Is it possible for humans to reconcile the pain and suffering of the world and its magnificence? I don't know. How do we even hold them together? How do we keep walking, holding ourselves together? I guess, like Abraham on the mountain, we find a ram. We find a third way — a path between utter despair and perfect faith — a way to go on and live with the contradiction. And not only live with it, but live deeper and better because of it, walk forward, shine God's light, be a blessing.

Listen to the amazing words of Rabbi Shefa Gold:

Carrying the wood, the fire, the knife... only God will see the ram. There at the peak of Mount Moriah, the mountain of seeing, I offer everything. I finally surrender. I admit that I don't really know or see how all this will work out. But still, I say, *Hineni*.

And that's when it happens: The power of my complete presence calls forth God's Presence. Against all odds, a ram appears in the thicket. By some unimagined miracle, I survive the vicissitudes of being human, and even thrive, sparkling on as the stars of the sky. Like the sand of the shore, I am touched again and again by the infinite ocean.

And when it's time to come down that mountain, I must become a blessing. Even with my scars, doubts, and questions. I breathe in blessing and breathe it out. Even when that blessing is difficult or unfathomable. To be a blessing means to know in my bones the absolute truth of the goodness of Life, no matter what. To be a blessing is to shine that simple truth."

I affirm life's goodness and blessing in the face of my own vulnerability, in the face of pandemics and storms and fires, in the face of all our pain, with the full knowledge that my life, all of our lives, hang over the abyss, *tole eretz belima*, or to be more accurate to Job, God hangs the world over the abyss. But I also affirm the blessing of life's goodness, the hesed that courses through the veins of the earth. In the face of pain

and suffering, I hold the contradiction, I know that it is all true, that life is stronger than death, and blessing and love and goodness shine forth even in darkness.