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ONE. God is all powerful. TWO. God is all knowing. THREE. God is all good, and FOUR. Unjustified suffering exists in the world.

You may choose three.

This is how Rabbi Elliott Dorff, the rector of my rabbinical school, opened his senior seminar called “The Problem of Evil”. On the first day of class, Rabbi Dorff wrote those four assertions on the board, asked us which we were willing to sacrifice in order to have a sustainable personal theology, and in doing so, welcomed us into a millennia-old theological wrestling match, one that Maimonides, Heschel, and the rabbis of the Talmud never could seem to resolve.

Again, the problem is this: there are four statements, but only three of them can theologically co-exist in harmony.

I'll say them again:

1. God is all powerful
2. God is all knowing
3. God is all good
4. There is unjustified suffering in the world.

Think about it. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, how do we explain the existence of unjustified suffering? Wouldn't an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God swoop in and save people who are hurting, especially kids?

Alternatively, if unjustified suffering didn't exist, that is to say, if any pain we felt was always a fair and just consequence for a sin or misdeed, then yes, we could reconcile the other three things. Whether we're talking about a skinned knee or a murder spree or a rare disease or a war or genocide, we could say: this is part of God's plan and is justified.

But you may be able to tell by my tone of voice that that argument does not cut it for me. At all. A god who in any way

uses the mass murder of children as a punishment is not a God I am comfortable praising.

That's why lots of Jews stopped believing, in the wake of the Holocaust. Many Jews stopped believing, stopped practicing, stopped identifying as Jewish, or simply seethed in anger at God for what had happened. Because there was no escaping the fact that unjustified suffering had happened, to us and to our children, and that God had not prevented it from happening.

So. All knowing God, all powerful God, all-good God. Which of these three things are we willing to compromise, in order to make sense of this world?

That was the basis of the class I took in my final year of rabbinical school, a class which I have never forgotten.

And I know, I know, last week I gave a sermon on baby elephants and baby penguins and the importance of play, and now I'm talking about unjustified suffering and evil.

And I know that unjustified suffering is a really, really uncomfortable topic. I'm not trying to give you spiritual whiplash.

But just as laughing together and reflecting together like we did last week is a worthwhile and important endeavor, so too it is important to acknowledge and process the more difficult parts of life. Especially now, with the High Holidays coming up, when we're about to embark on a journey of repentance and forgiveness, when we're about to make ourselves vulnerable before God, I think it's important to have a God we actually believe in.

So, yes, no baby animals today. But instead, perhaps I could interest you in an existential crisis?

The class I took with Rabbi Dorff has stuck with me– in part because it didn't offer us one resolution, and he didn't try to convince us of what to believe. Instead, we read through bunches of books and articles as famous rabbi after famous rabbi attempted to reconcile these four things.

And of course, they couldn't agree.

Some sages, like Rabbi Ishmael, choose to preserve God's power and mightiness at the expense of believing that God is all-good. This first option is backed by Scripture: In the Torah, God is sometimes wrathful, God wipes out civilizations, God turns people into pillars of salt, and God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God as portrayed in the Torah is not always patient, not always kind, not always forgiving. But God in the Torah created the entire world, and certainly has a plan, and sure is powerful and all-knowing. In order to think this way, we just have to be willing to sacrifice the idea of God being all-good.

Again, this view is nice, because it lines up with a simple reading of the Torah. But the downside is that it's hard, in times of pain, to turn for comfort to a God who is not all-good or all-merciful or all-loving.

Not everyone thinks this way, though. Other famous Jewish thinkers preferred instead to preserve God's goodness and mercy, at the expense of God's omnipotence. Meaning,

perhaps God doesn't have the ability to make an evil person kind, but God does have the ability to provide comfort, and beauty, and love to help us when people do evil things. Rabbi Akiva was a proponent of emphasizing God's mercy above all, and modern thinkers like philosopher Eugene Borowitz and Rabbis Harold Shulweis and Kushner similarly chose to embrace limitations on God's power in order to continue seeing God as all-good. By believing that there are limits to God's power, evil becomes a side effect of humans having free will– making evil something we do to ourselves, not something that God does to us.

This view is reassuring for those of us who turn to an all-loving God for support… but it takes away the ability to say "everything is part of God's plan."

See? It's quite a dilemma. What are we supposed to believe?

Well, I can wrap my head around the idea of God as having been the source of everything, but I can't wrap my head around the idea of God wanting or intending or supporting the Holocaust happening.

But when I'm having a really rough day, or my mental health is suffering, or when it's the buildup to Yom Kippur each year and I'm sitting with the sins I have committed and all of the ways I have failed… in those moments, I need a God of love. I need a God who will say, my child, yes, I have standards, AND, I also accept you, and I forgive you.

Do I really have to choose one or the other? Do I have to choose either a God who has a plan and is in charge, or a God who is the ultimate source of goodness and love?

This really strikes me on days like today. Days where I can't in good conscience stand here and pretend that we didn't just read the Torah portion we read.

The Torah portion we just read outlines a world where men may make vows and those vows stand. Women, however, do not have the power, according to the Torah we just read, to make vows and have them stand on their own merit– women's vows only stand if whichever man is in charge of the woman's legal status declines to interfere. The man in

charge of a woman's legal status, be it her husband or her father, has the power to nullify her vows.

Quote:

"... if her father hinders her on the day he hears the vow, all her vows and her prohibitions that she has imposed upon herself shall not stand. The Lord will forgive her because her father hindered her."

That's what the Torah says. And then goes on to say that if her father doesn't hinder her, her husband can.

So, first reaction: Ew.

How could a God who is all-good allow for such inequality? How could a God who is all-powerful not step in and fix it? How could a God who is all-knowing not see the harm that would be done by enshrining sexism into the Torah?

I don't believe in a God who thinks anyone is lesser, or anyone's vows have less value or validity, because of gender or sexuality. I just don't.

And, I don't believe in rejecting the content of the Torah outright. I believe it is holy. I believe it is important. And I believe that it was divinely inspired.

I believe in our tradition, and I believe in God. Not only do I believe in God, I'm a rabbi! I'm like a professional cheerleader for God and for religion.

So, what's a caring, wrestling, dedicated, curious Jew to do with all of this?

I'd like to offer a possible alternative solution– an imperfect one, of course, but one that helped me this week. Similar to the view held by Rabbis Akiva, Shulweis, and Kushner, this solution zooms in and focuses on the idea of God being all-good. For the purpose of this solution, though, instead of talking about good and bad, I'm going to talk about peace and chaos.

What if, on a zoomed-out, Universe-wide scale, God really does have a plan. Not a goal-oriented plan, persay, not a micromanaging plan that governs every second of every day, but a deep-seated foundation for the Universe based on patterns, harmony, peace, and connection. We see patterns, harmony, and connection all over the place in nature— in the swirls of sea shells, the petals on a flower, the swirling of the galaxies, and in our own desire to connect with one another. What if these all speak to a deep, underlying plan of peace?

I like that idea– it feels good and comforting.

And what if that plan of peace is the default for the universe, but God has made the sacrifice of giving us self-awareness and free will, meaning, God has allowed us to choose to have both moments of chaos and moments of peace, individually, societally, historically, and spiritually?
So God is still the most powerful, yet my choices matter– I like that idea too.

What if, when we choose peace, and love, and justice, we are choosing to tap into the holiest portions of ourselves, the part that is closest to God's nature, and are helping heal the whole Universe? I like this too– it means my life and my decisions matter.

This would mean that while peace might be hard to find in a specific day of our lives or era of history, in the grand scheme of things, peace is always there, pulsing through life, as long as we are committed to working towards it and opening ourselves to it.

So what does this mean for our Torah? What does it mean for problematic verses like the ones we read today? What happens when we try and read those verses through a lens of a peace-loving God who is committed to human free will?

Remember, our quote was this:

"... if her father hinders her on the day he hears the vow, all her vows and her prohibitions that she has imposed upon

herself shall not stand. The Lord will forgive her because her father hindered her."

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin, senior rabbi at a synagogue in Oakland California, invites us to focus on the last phrase: "The Lord will forgive her because her father hindered her." This, Rabbi Mates-Muchin writes, is a gentle reminder that when that woman gave her vow in the first place, God took it just as seriously as when any man, or any other person, gave a vow. God accepts all vows equally. The failure– the inequity in the verses– comes from us humans, from a social system that we designed and developed in our own chaotic free will. It's up to God to then respond to our human iniquity with love and forgiveness.

That means the purpose of this Scripture is not to say "God wants some people controlling other people", but actually to say, "God sees that some people are controlling others, and that is human reality. But God wants to reassure the people being controlled that God is not going to hold them accountable for the injustice that is happening to them."

That's a lot more of a palatable way to think about the Scripture, don't you think?

With deep respect to the many great thinkers that have gone before me, I think that the 4 assertions from the beginning of this sermon, and the beginning of that senior seminar, are a start, but don't have enough nuance to offer a sustainable solution. An all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God? Nah. That's not held up by either the Torah, or by our lived experiences.

So. I'll offer you a different four statements:

1. Maybe God isn't all-good, because God created everything in the Universe, the good and the painful, but God *is* deeply peace-loving,and longs for us to choose peace, too.
2. Maybe God sees and knows everything, sees our messes, our wars, our arguments, our possessive and competitive societies, and God tries to guide us to find *resolutions*, and harmony, and hope.

3. Maybe God understands that if God were to micromanage us and control our thoughts and actions, we wouldn't be partners in healing the Universe, because we wouldn't have choice. And
4. Maybe God wants our love, but understands that love without choice, love without free will, isn't love at all.

Apparently, my God is all-maybe,

But that's alright with me.

Shabbat shalom!