

A Theology for Living in a World of Suffering

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Dearest friends, this has been an incredibly challenging week here in our little village of Potomac, MD. Our kids have come face to face with mortality, loss, the fragility of life. Parents have been asked the most baffling questions about why such egregious things happen in the world. And beyond the confines of our community here, America has been reeling over the devastation caused by tornadoes that ferociously destroyed whole communities, including schools with children huddled inside. And across the sea in London, a nation is still trying to make sense of a brutal day light terrorist attack. Weeks like the one we've just experienced add up to a monumental test of faith. Why in the world do events like this take place? Why does there have to be so much suffering and pain in the world? Why does everything from sickness to meteorological events strike good people, people who don't deserve that tragedy, people who are positive, contributing members of society? Is it even possible to speak of God or faith or religion in a world that is so capricious and amoral?

I want to speak with you honestly today, because you are not the only ones to ask these questions. Although I'm in the religion business, I want you to know that I am not immune from doubt or struggle or skepticism. I am in the trenches with mourners. I am at the hospital bed side, and I am at the grave side. I walk with people regularly through 'the valley of the shadow of death.' And there are times when I wonder about the meaning of it all; Times when I just don't have any answers or neat and tidy explanations. And that hurts...it hurts because I consider myself a 'defender of the faith.' I love the gifts of religious life; I love the comfort and focus that prayer brings to my life; I love the rituals and ceremonies of our tradition; I love our sacred texts, their wisdom, and their vast libraries of interpretation. It would be so much easier to be a religious Jew if everything was spelled out for us; If God made divine intentions clear and obvious for all of us to comprehend; If we somehow could be privy to the eternal script that might provide a larger context a sense of meaning for this particular moment in time. But as Job discovered in his search for explanations, part of being human is that we cannot have all those

answers; our minds cannot fathom contain every intricacy of the world and how it works. We are finite, limited beings...and we do not, and cannot have all the answers.

Now that conclusion has spawned several offshoots. Some religious folks believe that there are black and white answers—whether we know them or not— and absolute meaning to every event under the sun. Like our biblical ancestors, they believe that everything is predetermined and purposeful. If we suffer, there must be a reason. Did we sin? Did we fail to repent sufficiently? Did we inadequately serve God somehow? Everything from individual illnesses to large scale catastrophes are evaluated through that prism. And there are still many people, even within the Jewish community, who view the world precisely on those terms. On the other end of the spectrum, there is only science. And science does not have a moral component. What happens in the world can be explained through physics and biology, chemistry and astronomy. The attempt to inject *meaning* into that system is artificial...it doesn't belong there...it's a relic of old time religion that has no place in a post-modern, scientific world.

But I am not personally comfortable with either extreme. I'm guessing that at least at least some of you aren't either, or else you wouldn't be found in this synagogue on Shabbat. So let me level with you today...I think you deserve to know where your rabbi stands on these questions, and perhaps I can provide you with something to think about after such a traumatic week. *I do not believe that there is a reason for everything.* Now before you walk out, let me explain. I happen to think the word *bashert* is very romantic. *Bashert* is a lovely Yiddish word that means that something was 'meant to be.' We use that word to talk about two lovers who find their way into one another's lives and live happily ever after. We say that something is *bashert* when it really works out well, and we feel incredibly fortunate or blessed in one way or another. I love that word, and I use it frequently. But I don't believe it **in a literal sense**. I do not believe in a God who is constantly manipulating the universe, or moving us like pieces across the game board of life without our knowledge. To admit that is to admit that the decisions we make and their consequences are really not our own. To admit that some things have a purpose means you have to admit that *everything* has a purpose. And I have spent too much time in pediatric hospitals and studying the Holocaust to believe that there is any purpose or meaning in the universe for innocent children to suffer. Sometimes the cause of our suffering is brought about by decisions we make...by not taking care of ourselves, or by taking excessive risks, or by being careless.

Sometimes we are the victims of other people's disastrous decisions...like terrorists or violent criminals. And sometimes...sometimes we suffer because we are a part of a natural world that does not discriminate between good and bad, the worthy and the unworthy, the moral and the immoral. Part of what it means to be human is to be vulnerable to those forces in the world we inhabit, even as we try our hardest to shore up our defenses and appropriately weigh our risks.

On the other hand, there are too many flashes of extraordinary goodness, kindness, altruism, and compassion to qualify every worldly phenomenon scientifically. Where I absolutely believe that God is present in our world is *in every moment of human concern and compassion for the other: In every act of generosity and selflessness; at every moment when one person reaches out to provide comfort, and solace, and hope to another.* Tell me, can loving kindness be scientifically measured? Is there always an evolutionary advantage to goodness, or righteousness, or decency? This is the divine in each one of us! This is the sacred power that all of us possess, and this is precisely what religion is meant to cultivate and promote in the human species. Now I am not a Reconstructionist Jew, and I do not believe that God is just the sum total of everything good in the world. I believe that God exists above and beyond nature. I believe that God is the creator and designer of this universe. And I believe that God loves the world and that God loves and knows each and every one of us. **The way that our loving God demonstrates such profound love for us is precisely by not controlling our every move!** And another way is by giving us the incredible capacity to spread goodness and love through our words and our deeds.

Earlier this morning we sang the words in the siddur that begin *Ahava rabbah ahavtanu Adonai Eloheinu*, You God have loved us with an extraordinary love...how do we know: *Torah u'mitzvot hukkim u'misphatim otanu limadeta*...Because you gave us a Torah. You gave us a holy manual for how to live life meaningfully and with sacred purpose. Notice that in this prayer, and you can read it in its entirety on page 111, it doesn't say that we know God loves us or cares about us because He keeps all the bad people and bad stuff away from us, or because He answers all of our prayers, or because He makes all of our doubts disappear. Rather, we claim that God loves us and cares about us because He didn't put us into this complex, unpredictable world left to our own devices to figure out how to make sense of it. In fact in one of my favorite Midrashim, God says if I have to choose between people believing in Me or people doing the mitzvot in the Torah I would prefer that they do the mitzvot! It's a radical, trailblazing midrash.

God says, I don't particularly need all the professions of faith. I am not a narcissistic God. I don't have an ego problem. What I need is for you to get up in the morning and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the mourners, and pursue justice in the world. That's what I need. If you do that and you believe in me, so much the better! But if it comes down to absolute, crystal clear, question free faith or doing real deeds of goodness in the world...do the deeds and don't worry about Me.

I remember when a dear friend's mother was in the hospital with a critical illness. She told me that all her non-Jewish friends said, 'We'll pray for you' and all her Jewish friends said 'We'll cook for you!' And let me tell you she had dinner in her freezer for the next 12 months because the Jews cooked so much! Now to be perfectly honest Jews pray and cook. We say *mishebeirachs* and we make brisket. Because we recognize the power of both—we may not know exactly how prayer works, but we know it is meaningful and transformative; and we certainly know that acts of loving kindness between human beings is what makes God's presence come alive in this world.

It's amazing, with all the tragedy of this past week, there were so many moments when I felt that I was in the presence of incontrovertible holiness. So many instances where I witnessed people providing such care and comfort, easing each other's sorrow and taking care of their needs. It is these moments that reassured me and buoyed my faith.

Rabbi David Wolpe concludes his beautiful book *Why Faith Matters* with the following words: "Why does faith matter? Love of this world, of one another, is the sole hope in an age when we can destroy the world many times over. There is no power that is only good, that cannot be twisted for evil. Religion is hardly an exception. But while there are many things that can doom us, only one thing can save us. Faith. Not blind or bigoted faith, but faith that pushes us to be better, to give more of ourselves, to see glimmers of transcendence scattered throughout our lives. Such faith is an achievement and a gift: it is an achievement of seeking, questioning, yearning, reasoning, hoping, and it is a gift of God, who fashioned this world, whose goodness sustains it and whose teachings could save it if only we—believers and deniers both—would listen, would love."

Amen.