

“Is Life Fair?”
Parashat Vayetze
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As we are sitting here in comfortable chairs, in a comfortable room that shields us from the elements, rescue workers are sifting through debris in California, looking for victims of the terrible Camp Fire that ate up 141,000 acres and is still uncontained.

At last count, 63 were killed and over 600 people are unaccounted for.

It’s a terrible thing when something like this happens. It seems so, well, **“unfair.”**

Sometimes, when there’s a disaster like this, there’s an effort to find fault with someone -- so as to put to the side the uncomfortable feelings and difficult questions this might elicit. We might say, well, it’s the fault of that smoker who threw his cigarette butt onto the ground, which later on caused the grass to catch fire, and spread; or maybe it was the camper who inadvertently left a glowing coal in his fire pit. Or maybe it was the forest management people, who were negligent.

We’re always looking for a *reason* when these things happen, aren’t we? That’s our nature, as thinking people, or as “meaning makers.” Sometimes, there is a human actor involved in the chain of causation; and sometimes there isn’t. Of course, if there’s a human actor, that needs to be explored; if he or she is culpable, he or she should be punished. But either way, it’s disturbing.

After all, we want to believe that if we behave properly, even if other people behave improperly, we’re going to be OK. We want to believe that even if people are bent on mischief, our good deeds will magically protect us from their impact.

So when something like this happens, it raises questions for all of us. What kind of a world do we live in? Is it a world in which terrible things like this can happen to us, even if we are decent, well-behaving people?

The short answer is “Yes.”



Though it's not easy to acknowledge, the reason is simple, and it's been known for thousands of years:

There are two parts to the explanation. **First**, the world operates according to universal laws of matter and energy. These laws are oblivious to their impact on human life. **Second**, people have free will, and even though it would seem fairer to deny bad, or even careless, people their right to make decisions, and to deny them the fruits of their bad behavior, that's not the way the world works.

This is discussed in the Talmud in a classic passage (Avodah Zarah 54b) that we should all know: If someone steals a bushel of wheat and then plants it in their field, it really shouldn't grow, because it's stolen. Right? That thief shouldn't benefit from that theft. So how do we explain it when the grain actually grows? The answer is that "the world follows its natural course." (*Olam kminhago noheg*.)

Scientists spend their lifetimes helping us all understand that the laws of nature are, well, the laws of nature. They are inviolate. They don't bend at our will -- even if we're good people. And even though it would *seem* to be fairer if that thief with the bushel of grain would be punished rather than rewarded, that's not how the world operates.

But it's hard for us to accept that. That, after all, doesn't seem **fair**. The temptation is to believe that if a person is good enough, pious enough, then the laws of nature shouldn't apply to them. And the same should be true if they're bad, or evil enough.

On that same page of Talmud that I quoted, there's a story about a Roman philosopher who approaches a rabbi, Rabban Gamliel, and says to him: Idol worshippers have more power than you think. A fire once broke out in our city, and the entire city was burned down except for one building, a temple for idol worship. See?

By the way, we've seen some of that thinking in California. Rescue workers came upon a street on which just about every home was burned to the ground. Except one. One house was mysteriously left intact. Now, it's tempting to say that it must be that the owners of that house deserved to be spared. But if we say that, if we say that their fate implies that they deserved it, then we have to be willing to say that all their neighbors, the owners of all the other houses on that street, were sinners, who deserved what was coming to them.

But that just doesn't make sense. In the book of Job, we read that when the rains come -- and rains, as we know, are necessary for the crops to grow -- they fall where they may. You may be a no-goodnik, but you're as likely to have rain fall on your fields as the saintly person next door. And the same is true of the fire raising down the mountain. The winds, the terrain, ... they aren't influenced by how nice or nasty you are.

But then what do we do with our feeling—our *deep* feeling—that somehow **life isn't fair**? What do we do with that?

Well, some people nourish the idea that goodness is **ultimately** rewarded, and evil is **ultimately** punished – if not in this world, then in the next. There must be a place where our fates are adjusted. That's is the belief of that Talmudic passage. After telling us that the world operates according to its laws, it says that “the fools who sin will **ultimately** be held to account.”

And that is a very Jewish idea. Far be it from me to dispute that.

But I prefer to focus my energy on *this* world. What is the impact—on me, on my beliefs, and on my behavior—of the realization that the world operates according to its rules, and that some people will be harmed by natural disasters, even though they're decent people; and others, who we might think *deserve* what's coming to them, will get off scot free.

To me, this realization gives us a mission. It says the following:

We should use the resources at our disposal to help those who happen to be -- that is, who seemingly *unfairly* are -- impacted by the weather, or by fire or by rain or by earthquakes. When these disasters occur, we should say to ourselves, “What can we do?” For the fact is, we could as easily be the victims of such disasters as they.

Life is a gift. Life is a blessing. None of us did anything to deserve it. We may live lives of comfort and prosperity. But that's no reason to assume that we *deserve* them any more than anyone else.

What then should we do with this incredibly wonderful gift? The answer, of course, is: the best we can. No matter what. No matter what happens. We should

try always to be our best—*without any hope of a reward*—for, in fact, we may never experience that.

Now, that doesn't mean that we don't have *any* influence over the world in which we live. We often do. For example, we can and should work together with others to help those who *happen* to be -- that is, who seemingly “unfairly” are -- impacted by the weather, or by fires, or by rain or by earthquakes. We should institute laws and procedures in our communities to forbid bad behavior, and we should take steps to help those who are impacted by crime.

There's a lot we can certainly do to influence our fates and the fates of others for the better.

The only thing we *shouldn't* do is to expect God to somehow step in and magically make things right - for others, or for ourselves.

This was Jacob's mistake. It's described in the beginning of this week's *parashah*. Jacob, you may recall, is fleeing for his life. He cheated his brother and his brother is bent on killing him. If there's anyone who you would expect, based on that set of facts, not to make it out of town alive, it's Jacob. And yet he does. Finally, at the end of the day, he falls asleep and has that wonderful dream of angels going up and down the ladder. And then he wakes up. He realizes that “God is in this place.” That's a very humbling recognition.

So far, so good.

But then, the next day, when the sun is up and things look a bit clearer, Jacob makes a vow:

“*If* God is with me,” he says, “*if* God protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and *if* I return safe to my father's house—*then* the LORD shall be my God.”

That's a no-no. That's bargaining with God. That's imagining that our behavior can and should have an impact on God. That's making our own behavior contingent on how God treats us.

I'm reminded of the story of the guy who was looking in vain for a parking space downtown. Again and again, he drives around and around. Finally he says, “God,

if you provide me with a parking space, I promise I'll start going to shul (or church, depending on how you tell the story) every week."

All of a sudden, as he's turning a corner about to pass for the umpteenth time his destination, someone pulls out of a space right in front of it! As he pulls into the space, he cries out, "Never mind, God! Thanks anyway -- but I found it myself!"

Let's not worry about whether what *happens* to us is or isn't fair. Let's instead be grateful that we're alive, and do whatever we can to make the world around us as meaningful -- and as fair -- as possible.

That is up to us.

Shabbat shalom.