

When Life Is Unfair

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
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Laughter, joy and happiness are an essential and integral part of what it means to be Jewish. In fact, in the famous Pew Survey of the American Jewish community, a sense of humor ranked just below caring about Israel as essential to being Jewish. It even rated higher than being a part of the Jewish community, and of observing halacha, Jewish religious law.

Many have tried to analyze and explain why so many comedians are Jewish and why it is a fundamental element of our essence and identity. But when you stop and think about it, considering our history, it actually is somewhat ironic that we should so excel in this field. With all the tragedy and hardships we have experienced, the persecution, expulsions and anti-Semitism that has befallen our people throughout the ages, it could easily have been different. We could have turned inward and become a bitter people. Instead, humor and laughter is one of the many contributions we have made to the world.

Accustomed as we are as a people to adversity and heartbreak, it is not hardship on the grand scale, I want to address today, but rather those hardships that strike our personal lives, those who are close to us and those we love and care about.

The quintessential eternal test for a person of faith is how to deal with tragedy, with loss, or with pain and suffering, all of which may be on the minds of many, during the *Yamim HaNoraim*, the Days of Awe, when our prayers draw our thoughts to our wish to be inscribed in the Book of Life.

As has been observed, for the atheist there are no answers, and for the believer, there are no questions. But we have both, answers and questions.

A story is told about Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev who asked an illiterate tailor what he did on Yom Kippur since he did not know how to read the Hebrew prayers.

I want to push the “freeze frame” button for a moment and pause the story to note that the fact that the tailor was illiterate and could not read the Hebrew of the prayer book did not deter him from praying. It was not an impediment to his striving to speak to God, nor did it discourage him in his effort to communicate with the Almighty. He still was an observant, devout practicing Jew who prayed regularly. There is a powerful message here for those among us who may not be familiar with the language of prayer or who are uncomfortable with traditional liturgy. The message is to seek to find ways to reach God, regardless of our agility and fluency in Hebrew.

Now back to our story.

The simple tailor replied to the rabbi’s question by telling him, “Since I couldn’t read the prayers, I prayed and spoke to God directly from my heart. I confessed the sins I committed this past year. I admitted that I may have occasionally kept some leftover cloth and not been as honest in some of my business dealings as I should have been. I also did not pray as regularly as I know I should have. “And then I continued, ‘But in the grand scheme of things my sins are relatively insignificant and inconsequential. They pale in comparison to the sins You Almighty God have committed. I reminded Him

of some of what happened just in our shtetl alone this past year. 'You have taken mothers from their children, and children from their mothers. You have turned good people into orphans and widows. So let's make a deal. If You agree to pardon me for my sins, then I, in turn will forgive You for what you have done.'"

What a remarkable story. The chutzpah to think he could pray like this, that he could stand before God and make such a demand of the Creator of the universe and be so assertive is startlingly bold and unconventional.

How did the Berditchever rebbe respond?

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak scolded him, but not because of the reason you may assume he would condemn him for.

Rather than be upset with the man for putting God on the spot, Rabbi Levi admonished him because he asked for so little. The rabbi said, "Fool, you should not have asked to be forgiven only for your sins. You should have and could have insisted that God forgive the entire Jewish people. At that moment you could have brought redemption to all of Israel."

The premise of the story is that we are in a covenantal relationship with God, and that if we are to be held accountable for our sins and required to take responsibility for our acts and the condition of the world, then God needs to be held accountable as well.

There are times when I identify with the tailor in Rabbi Levi's story. Like him I feel as if I want to shout out at God and compel Him to explain how he justifies injustice in our world. It is reassuring to know that when I feel this way I am in good company and am consistent with our tradition.

I have heard too many instances of loss and suffering recently --- around our country, among our people, around the world, in our community and even in our own congregation. Some of us come here today with pangs of pain, as well as questions and doubts about God.

I am sure many of you heard about the tragedy this summer when a Jewish man from Columbia, MD who dressed up as Batman and outfitted his black Lamborghini to look like the Batmobile so he could visit and cheer up kids in hospitals was killed in a fatal traffic accident as he was on his way to perform the mitzvah of *bikur holim*, visiting the sick.

We cannot help but hear this and cry out in anguish, "why?"

Or perhaps you heard about the young mother of three who worked as a Jewish professional at Camp Pearlstone in Baltimore, whose father works tirelessly as a professional in the Jewish community, and whose husband is a rabbi, who was killed a few months ago when a truck plowed into her car as she was attempting to make a turn.

Regardless of whether you knew her or not, when you hear her story, you cannot help but feel for her family and cry out and ask, "why?"

There are other stories and instances of tragedy, too many, too personal and too close to home for me to specify, that shake our very belief in the goodness of God and the world and challenge our faith.

So how do we respond? What answers and wisdom does our tradition offer? We can identify with the prophet Isaiah who when overcome with a sense of emptiness, said, "*kol omer krah, v'omar, mah ikra*: A voice says cry out, and I say, 'what shall I cry?'"

The Book of Psalms contains many poems where the author clearly experienced anguish, pain, loneliness, despair and abandonment. One lamentation says, "O Lord, do not punish me in anger. Do not chastise me in fury. Have mercy on me, for I languish." (Ps 6) Elsewhere we read, "I cry aloud to God, that He may hear me in my time of distress...will the Lord forever reject and never again show favor? Has His faithfulness disappeared forever? Will His promise be unfulfilled for all time?" (Ps 77) and, the famous plea, "Why have You forgotten me? Why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 42)

Hearing these passages from the Bible reassures and comforts me. Knowing that we are not the first generation to encounter adversity and to wonder where is God helps me confront hardship and suffering, especially when it may appear to be inexplicable and unwarranted.

Like those who came before us, prayer is a resource to access during times of trouble. Prayer is not magic, which is why we are not allowed to pray in vain for something that defies the laws of nature. Once an embryo has been formed, we cannot pray that it be male or female. To do so would be to recite what is called a *bracha levetala*, a prayer in vain. But it can help us get through tough times and reassure us that we are not alone. It taps into the transcendent source of strength in each of us. We can pray, as I did when I was undergoing chemo treatments for my cancer for healing, for my family, and for strength to deal with life. I believe that God hears and answers those prayers.

In a story which teaches both the purpose of prayer, while recognizing its limitations, and counseling us not to dwell in our sorrow, King David fasted and prayed that his son who was dying would be healed. But once the child died, he rose up, ended his fast, consoled his wife, and resumed his responsibilities as king, explaining to his servants that once he could do no more, he accepted God's decree.

Though a parent never becomes reconciled to the pain caused by the loss of a child, one can be so overwhelmed that quiet acceptance and silence may be one way to face the abyss. After learning of the death of his two sons, the Torah tells us "*vayidom Aharon*: Aaron was silent." What could he possibly say? Job's friends who came to console him after his family was taken from him sat with him in silence for seven days, which is why we are to be quiet at a shiva house until the mourner initiates the conversation.

Turning to the Talmud, we read the story of Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir who waited for her husband to return home from synagogue on Shabbat. After Havdalah she told her husband that before Shabbat someone had asked her to watch over a valuable treasure for him, and now he has come to take it back. She asks her husband if she should return the object lent to her. Rabbi Meir told her that of course she is obligated to return it, whereupon she informed him that their two sons had died on Shabbat. Rabbi Meir composed himself and declared, "*Adonai natan, Adonai lakah*, The Lord has given. The Lord has taken. Blessed is the name of the Lord." It is hard to imagine how he could utter these words of affirmation and acceptance, but he did, just as the mourner is required to praise God with the kaddish prayer in the presence of a community.

In contrast to acquiescence, we find a remarkable story in the Talmud of a man who told his young son to climb a tree and shoo the mother bird away and take the bird's eggs. The son falls off the limb and dies. To truly appreciate the power of the story you have to know that there are two, and only two

instances in the entire Torah when a person is promised long life. The two times are for the mitzvah of *shiluah haken*, of not taking a bird's eggs in the presence of the mother bird, and the second is *kibud horim*, for honoring one's parents. And so here in this brief story, both of those assurances of long life are present, and although the child is fulfilling both of those two mitzvot simultaneously, he is not granted a long life. It is as if the rabbis present this as their means of questioning if God has the ability to deliver on His own promises.

In fact, just to be sure the point is driven home, the pericope tells us that Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya saw this and he also saw someone else climb a tree on Shabbat, and take the eggs without shooing away the mother bird. There were no consequences, punishment or repercussions for this person who violated two commandments. Seeing both of these incidents, he lost all faith, became an apostate, and left the Jewish community as a result of what he witnessed.

I find it absolutely amazing that our Talmud, the work which defines what it means to be Jewish and how to live a Jewish life includes this story. Most other religious traditions would leave it out of its sacred texts for it is so potentially heretical.

Or consider the story of Rabbi Akiba, perhaps the greatest teacher of all the luminaries in the Talmud. When Moses is given the Torah, he asks God why some of the letters have crowns on them. God tells Moses that one day a great teacher will come along who will have the capacity to understand and explain their meaning. Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher asks to meet this man and is instantly transported to the yeshiva of Rabbi Akiba where he hears Akiba give a brilliant exposition on an obscure point of law that not even he, Moses himself could comprehend.

Moses is impressed, and asks to be shown what reward this great teacher receives. Moses learns, as we read in the martyrology section of our Yom Kippur service that Akiba is eventually captured and tortured by the Romans, and his flesh is sold in the marketplace. Moses angrily confronts God and asks, "This is Torah and this is the reward?" In other words, what kind of God are you and what good is this Torah of yours if this is the reward for those who are so devoted to teaching and spreading your word? It is as if Moses is the spokesman for all who have ever questioned the injustice of a seemingly unjust world.

And what is God's response? God has no response. It is almost as if God is embarrassed. He says to Moses, "*Shtok*, Be Silent for such is My decree."

Again, I am in awe of our tradition and proud that our rabbis had the courage to include such an unorthodox story in our Talmud.

Moses questions how Akiva's brilliance as well as his devotion to Torah and to God can be reconciled with the cruel manner of his death. Traditional Jewish theology leads us to believe that since we have free will, and our fate is determined by how we act, then if we do the right thing, God will protect us from the intrusion of unanticipated tragedy. But here the Talmud flips that assumption on its head, showing that things do not always neatly follow this pattern.

Our rabbis were not oblivious to reality. The story shows that suffering and evil presented as much of a challenge to belief in God for the rabbis of 2,000 years ago as they do for us in the modern age, and that they had many of the same questions that perplex us today. As the story shows, they recognized that observance of mitzvot and belief in God do not ensure that bad things won't happen. Our sacred literature is unique and deserving of admiration for presenting a challenge to its own theology.

These stories challenging an unfair world are included in our sacred texts because our religion deals with real life issues, because we believe in a covenantal relationship and because it is in our nature to struggle with God. It is precisely because I believe in God that I feel comfortable with this aspect of our tradition and am pleased that Judaism offers a number of responses. Our very name *Yisrael*, Israel, means to struggle with God.

So what are we to do when life is cruel and as in the story, God's ways and decrees are beyond our finite human capacity to comprehend? Is the answer to abandon our heritage? Absolutely not. Elisha ben Abuya is included in the Talmud, but he is not our role model.

Rabbi David Hartman comments that the message of the story is that it is impossible for Moses, or any of us to know God's plan in history because God's ways are incomprehensible to humans. A young child cannot fully comprehend the workings of a cell, or of DNA, or other sophisticated concepts. Nor for that matter can adults figure out how to program the remote control of their DVR. There are things which are beyond the capacity of our finite minds to comprehend. Some find comfort in the notion that in the long run, things ultimately turn out for the best. This is what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he wrote, "the years teach what the days never know."

Our tradition is neither monolithic nor systematic. It can best be described as contradictory, or having a split personality -- vacillating between saying that God determines what happens in our world, and that He does not, that there is such a thing as reward and punishment, and there is not, that there is a Divine plan, and that there is not, that we can make sense of what happens, and that we cannot.

Dare we consider though, that in addition to saying that we cannot understand the bigger picture of God's purpose, there may be a radical notion that you don't hear too many rabbis mention in their sermons? We Jews believe in a soul that is eternal and we believe there is an afterlife, what we call *olam haba*.

Our sages were reluctant to be very specific about something so clearly speculative. They place a far greater an emphasis on and are much more concerned with how to live in this world. As a result, they do not clearly define or offer many details about what happens after we die, even saying in one citation, it is not as if someone has been there and come back to tell us about it. Nevertheless, Judaism does believe in an afterlife, and in a soul which lives on beyond us. The rabbis assert that it is in *olam haba*, the next world where reward and punishment is meted out, helping to explain the mystery of why good deeds and good people may appear not to get what they deserve and sinfulness may appear to go unpunished.

I must confess that when I was first ordained as a rabbi, I was uncomfortable and shunned the concept. But with the passage of time, I have seen many instances when this traditional notion can be reassuring and offer tremendous comfort. The more I know the less certain I become about the unknown.

Prayer, rituals and immersion in our tradition is a path that can also help us heal and recover from tragedy and find our way back.

The Vilna Gaon once said that the most difficult mitzvah in the Torah to fulfill is "you shall rejoice in your festival." Elie Wiesel wrestled with this concept until he saw Jews dance on Simhat Torah during the Holocaust, study Talmud while carrying heavy stones, and whisper Sabbath songs while performing hard

labor. He realized then why rejoicing even in the face of sorrow is both so difficult and so important a commandment to fulfill.

When I visited Budapest in the 1980's the chief rabbi poignantly told us what it was like after the holocaust to still be alive. "It was as if we had awoken from a nightmare. We all looked around and wondered why we had been spared, for what purpose." They resolved to keep on living and to keep Judaism alive in the remnant that was still left.

Oliver Sacks, professor of neurology at the New York University School of Medicine and author of a memoir entitled "On the Move" wrote a moving piece in the New York Times this past August. Knowing that he is facing imminent death he finds himself longing to return to the beauty of the Sabbath peace he had known as a child, but which he had rejected long ago. Now that he is in, what he refers to as "the Sabbath of his life" he writes how he felt when visiting family members in Israel he had not seen in decades. "The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness."

When bad things happen to us, we search for answers. We ask why, why me, because there is a natural desire to want to make sense of suffering.

But do we really want to know the answer? When we ask why me – we are looking to put something into a framework and to contextualize it so we can understand what is happening to us. When we are blessed with good fortune, do we pause and ask God what have we done that we deserve to be the beneficiaries? Do we stop and express gratitude, give tzedekah and acknowledge God when we prosper or have good things happen to us?

You may recall the joke I told you several years ago about the woman who sat in the back of a church day in and day out lamenting her plight and expressing her woes. Every day she cries out, "why me?" One day the roof of the church and the heavens open up and she is startled as she hears a Divine voice answer her prayers. The heavenly voice proclaims, "All day long you pester me and ask 'why me'? You really want to know why you? Ok. I'll tell you why you. It's because you tick me off!"

She never asked again.

The same Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev of our opening story prayed, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, I am not asking You to show me the secret of Your ways. I only ask that You show me one thing: What is the meaning of the suffering I endure? I do not mind that I suffer. I only ask that You let me know that it is for Your sake."

Rabbi Harold Schulweiss writes that the question, "'why me?'" is much more a cry to be understood, a cry for recognition than a call for cognition. He contends people don't really want an answer, but a compassionate response. That is why people who bring comfort are God's messengers, or as we say in Hebrew, *malachim*, angels. Never underestimate how much a helping hand can help lift someone up in a time of need. When facing tragedy many discover the power of community, friendship and support in getting through the crisis they are facing.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written, "That's what you do with tragedy; you don't explain it, you don't try to justify it. You survive it." He says, when we call out and ask God how can You let this happen, "God answers you by sending you people, people to work day and night to try to make you whole, people to

sit with you and cry with you and assure you that you are not alone and not rejected, people to bear witness that they once stood where you are standing. It was hard, but they survived and you'll survive too."

My message to those of us who are may be feeling pain, experiencing loss or loneliness, or grappling with alienation, is that while recognizing that life can sometimes be unfair and incomprehensible, this is precisely when we most need to reach out to each other and to God.

One thing our rabbis did not do, no matter how bleak their situation was: they did not give up their faith. They did not abandon God or forsake Judaism or its teachings. They saw it as a source of meaning, purpose and strength. As the psalmist tells us, "the hand that wounds is the hand that heals," which I have always taken to mean that faith, ritual and Jewish teachings can be the path back to life.

Our quest to find meaning in suffering may lead some to look at life differently, to deal with their loss by appreciating what they have and what they had. Some are motivated to do good, to become better people, to be more sensitive, compassionate and understanding. Some try to help others facing trying circumstances since they know what it is like to be there. We also know that our loved ones continue to live on, in our hearts and minds. Remembering those dear to us, the way they lived their life, the deeds they performed and in perpetuating their ideals and what was important to them is yet another way to honor and to extend their impact, even after they are no longer here.

Some who lose a loved one perceive the presence of their departed in unusual and admittedly irrational ways. They may interpret the appearance of a bird, a butterfly or even more unusual occurrences, such as the random ringing of a doorbell as a sign of the abiding presence of their loved one. If it gives hope and comfort, who are we to judge or to understand that which may be beyond us?

Some passages in our literature ascribe the origin of suffering and bad fortune to God, others to our own failings and shortcomings. The ones that mean the most to me are those which portray God as weeping with us and sharing our sorrow. God accompanies us and is with us when we are in pain. He feels our sorrow when we are at a loss. God's promise is not that we will be spared pain. His promise is that He will be with us in our time of trouble. Empathy is one of the most powerful emotions and can give us hope.

Hope can keep us going, and optimism can help overcome misfortune. Sherry Mandel whose 14 year old son Koby was brutally and savagely murdered by Palestinians sought to find meaning and purpose after such a tragic and sudden loss of an innocent child. She writes in her book, The Blessing of A Broken Heart, after establishing a foundation to help families of victims of terror, "Your death has given us a new mission – to take your strength and bring it out into the world, your love of Israel, your love of being Jewish, your belief in God." Her faith was shattered, but ultimately it is what helped her overcome the morass that threatened to overcome her.

Faith is what keeps us hoping when hopelessness threatens to overtake us. It can ease our burden of worry and anxiety and give us strength to confront sorrow. The Psalmist said, "The Lord is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him in sincerity."

A story is told that one summer the great English actor Charles Laughton went to a church in a small town in Maine while on vacation. He recited the 23rd Psalm – "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...in a booming stentorian voice. People applauded when he concluded his reading. An elderly

cobbler followed him to the pulpit and recited the same Psalm saying it was the one he knew by heart. Despite his feeble voice when he finished, there was not a dry eye in the church. When asked to explain why he got applause but the other man moved everyone to tears, the actor said, "That's because I know the 23rd Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

I want to conclude with the story of a king who had a beautiful diamond that was ruined because it had a scratch in the middle of it. He sent out word throughout his kingdom that whoever could remove the scratch would receive a great reward. Although many came from near and far, none could do so. One day, someone passing through the kingdom heard of the king's problem and said he could take care of it. The king entrusted the diamond to him, and the next day he presented it to the king. Instead of removing the scratch though, he made it the stem of a beautiful rose that he etched into the diamond.

We all are fragile. We each have our own scratches and imperfections. The question is what do we do with our situation when life seems unfair and we have our share of troubles.

Let us turn to our tradition and to each other. We should reach out to those near us so we can feel their love, so they can feel ours, and so that we can offer strength to each other. Let us trust and find comfort, even in times of pain, for in the words of the Psalm we recite at this time of year, "Be strong. Take courage, and place your hope in Adonai."

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Bibliography

I thought it might be helpful and of interest for you to see the books I used in preparing this sermon.

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