

ROSH HASHANAH 5770
YISSURIN AND CREATION
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Five thousand, seven hundred and seventy years ago today,
God created a perfect place, the Garden of Eden.

We had everything we needed handed to us on a silver platter:

Fruits, and vegetables to eat to our heart's content,
rivers and flowers and trees to surround us with natural beauty,
birds to make sweet music, and animals to keep us company.

We experienced no pain, only pleasure.

We felt no guilt and no shame, only innocent delight.

We had no responsibilities and could spend our days in frolic and play.

God gave us this exquisite place but there was a quid pro quo –
in exchange for this gift, we had to follow one rule:

We could eat of any tree in the entire garden –
and there were thousands of them –
but we were forbidden to eat from one tree --
the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This was the very first mitzvah – commandment – that God gave us.

The message of this story is that God will provide us with the security and comfort
we so crave, but only if we obey God.

Of course, we didn't obey, and the result was that
we were kicked out of the garden

to toil and sweat for those things that had come to us without any effort.

Our labor in working the land and our pain in childbirth became our punishment for this disobedience.

Now, whether or not we were REALLY being punished, and whether or not we really deserved to be, we seem to have a very deep need to feel that way.

We need to believe that when calamity befalls us, there is a reason, and most often, we attribute that reason to our own misbehavior.

Why is it that we blame ourselves under such circumstances?

I think it's because it gives us a way to explain why something has gone horribly wrong.

In addition, and perhaps even more importantly,

it also gives us a feeling that we can do something about our destiny.

We can tell ourselves that, if we could just be good, then we could avoid disaster.

Take the case of Elaine Pagels, a theologian at Princeton University.

She lost her 6 year-old son to a lung disease and

her husband to a hiking accident – all in the course of 15 months.

She says that she does not believe in a morally ordered universe

where everything happens as a result of divine justice --

where we are punished when we are bad and rewarded when we are good.

However, she does admit that,

“there is a basic assumption you make about the world

and about the way things happen ...

One can think, 'Well, I've been doing pretty well,
and things should turn out well.'

When we do that and things turn out horrendously, our impulse,
because of our tradition, is to blame ourselves."

Pagels says this is why, for example,
the doctrine of Original Sin has lasted in Christianity for so many centuries.
As you know, Original Sin teaches that human beings are born into sin,
guilty for Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden.
Pagels concludes that people would rather bear that awesome guilt
than accept the alternative -- that death and suffering
are random and meaningless.

Though, as Jews, we don't subscribe to the idea of Original Sin,
our own Torah emphasizes that troubles befall us
when we disobey God's commandments.

Many hundreds of years after the fall from the Garden,
as the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land,
Moses warns that all sorts of curses will befall us
should we neglect God's mitzvot.

Listen to Moses' speech at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy:

"...if you do not obey your God, to observe faithfully all God's commandments...

God will let loose against you calamity, [and] panic...

so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evildoing....

God will strike you with consumption, fever, and inflammation,
with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew;

Your enemies shall hound you until you perish...

God will strike you with madness, blindness, and dismay...

you shall...be constantly abused and robbed...

The life you face shall be precarious; you shall be in terror night and day,
with no assurance of survival."

Of course, if we obey God, then we will receive all kinds of blessings.

As I discussed last night, the Unetaneh Tokef,
that awful prayer about who shall live and who shall die,
and by what means, seems to contain a similar message.

During the High Holy Days, God is the supreme judge,
deciding whether we have been good or bad,
and planning our fate for the coming year accordingly.

The Rabbis of our tradition also attempt to justify suffering in this way.

They tell us that, if you suffer trials and tribulations,
you must look to your actions.

No doubt, you will find that you have been less than a good person
and therefore you are receiving your just desserts.

As horrible as this sounds, it seems to assure us
that there is something we can do to make our life better
because, at the very least, we can control our behavior.

Many of us have tried fervently to believe that if we just follow the Torah,
we will be blessed rather than cursed.

This gives us a sense of security, of safety, of predictability.

We feel that if we do our share, so will God.

If we obey the commandments, God will protect us.

This is comforting to a certain extent –

it suggests that we have the power to summon the loving, parental God –

but it is also a harsh, depressing, and alienating theology –

especially since, so often, it is very clear that we do not deserve our lot.

Just take a look at Job, a famous character in our Bible.

Job is God's faithful servant, but he loses everything anyway –

his children, his cattle, his riches, even his health.

Job's friends refuse to believe that Job is innocent

despite his impassioned protestations.

If you are being punished, they claim ever more vehemently,

you MUST have done something wrong.

They get progressively angrier when Job refuses to accept this explanation.

They categorically reject the idea that Job's suffering is without divine purpose.

We too have a hard time letting go of this belief in divine purpose

because the alternative is accepting randomness as an explanation --

and that is even more terrifying.

It makes us feel abandoned by God.

If, instead, we believe that God is punishing us, it shows us that,

at least God cares about us.

And we are heartened by feeling that there is a way to FIX

what has gone wrong in our lives, that we are able to get back

on God's good side.

Rather than rail against God for perceived injustices, we want to feel that we can adjust our behavior and straighten out our relationship with God.

And despite their efforts to insist that reward and punishment is the way God runs the world, the Rabbis understood only too well that things are not that simple.

These were good, ethical men, who lived under the Roman Empire.

As we read on Yom Kippur afternoon, many of them were hideously tortured because they refused to stop teaching Torah.

Rabbi Akiba was flayed alive; Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon was burnt alive.

The Rabbis imagine Moses demanding to know why God would make a righteous man like Akiba undergo such a fate as to be flayed alive.

God's response is curt. God tells Moses: "Be quiet. Such is my will."

In other words, my reason is unfathomable to you, a mere human being.

The Rabbis also relay the story of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon's torture.

Rabbi Hanina is being burned to death.

His Roman executioner has placed wet wool on the rabbi's chest so that he will burn more slowly.

But the executioner desires the very greatest reward conceivable for the Rabbis—meriting the world-to-come, the perfect world that will exist following the advent of the Messiah.

As Rabbi Hanina is slowly being consumed by the flames,
the executioner asks him: “If I remove the wet wool,
will I merit the world to come?”

Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon answers in the affirmative.

The executioner removes the wool and then plunges into the fire himself.

A voice from heaven proclaims that the executioner,
along with Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, will enter the world to come.

So both a righteous scholar and a sinful Roman executioner
are granted the same fate, one for a lifetime of good deeds and Torah,
the other for a momentary gesture of kindness.

This is unfair and clearly baffling to our Rabbis.

Much as they try to rely on reward and punishment as God’s way,
they are constantly confronted by experiences that contradict this theology.

This is why Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai claims that suffering has absolutely nothing
to do with our behavior -- pain is NOT a punishment for our misdeeds.
It is simply part of the fundamental nature of the human condition.

To understand how this can be, let’s go back to that day,
five thousand seven hundred and seventy years ago
when God created the world. Here’s what God says about us:

“Let us make human beings in our image...They shall rule the fish of the sea,
the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth...”

According to Israeli Rabbi Donniel Hartman, one way to interpret these verses is
that God gives us control of the world.

In other words, once God creates the world, God is no longer involved in our everyday lives, looking to reward and punish us at every turn.

Last night, I suggested that we interpret the Unetaneh Tokef – the Who shall live and Who shall die prayer – not as reward and punishment either.

Rather, I suggested that tragedy strikes because of the limitations of the material world.

I suggested we try to focus instead on our response to suffering.

This morning, I would like to continue addressing our response but I would like to take it from a very different perspective.

This morning, I would like to explore Rabbi Donniel Hartman's understanding of suffering.

He says that suffering is actually what pushes us beyond our comfort level to strive for excellence.

More often than not, in order to achieve greatness, we must undergo a measure of pain.

It is what challenges us to go for the gold.

We certainly know this from the stories of great athletes, great artists, great entrepreneurs.

Rabbi Hartman says that, if we try to avoid pain, we end up in the realm of mediocrity.

Without pain, we become complacent and self-satisfied, valuing comfort and security over everything else.

Looking back at those early days in the Garden of Eden, we might well ask: Were we really meant to live in Paradise forever?

Is security and comfort what will really make us happy?

If we were meant to live without challenge,

why were we forced to leave the Garden of Eden in the first place?

If God had wanted us to stay there,

why did God point to the one tree in the vast garden

from which we were forbidden to eat?

Maybe God was actually daring Adam to eat from it?

Referring to Adam and Eve, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet asks:

“Did they fall or were they pushed?”

The fact is, Paradise may not be all it is cracked up to be.

In a letter he imagines Satan writing to God,

Mark Twain describes heaven as a pretty bland place:

“...there is nothing about man that is not strange to an immortal...

In man's heaven *everybody sings!* The man who did not sing on earth sings there;

the man who could not sing on earth is able to do it there.

The universal singing is not casual, not occasional,

not relieved by intervals of quiet; it goes on, all day long, and every day,

during a stretch of twelve hours. And *everybody stays*;

whereas in the earth the place would be empty in two hours.

The singing is of hymns alone. Nay, it is of one hymn alone.

The words are always the same, in number they are only about a dozen,

there is no rhyme, there is no poetry: "Hosannah, hosannah, hosannah,

Lord God of Sabaoth, 'rah! 'rah! 'rah! siss! -- boom! ... a-a-ah!"

Meantime, every person is playing on a harp -- those millions and millions! -- whereas not more than twenty in the thousand of them could play an instrument in the earth, or ever wanted to.

Consider the deafening hurricane of sound -- millions and millions of voices screaming at once and millions and millions of harps gritting their teeth at the same time!

I ask you: is it hideous, is it odious, is it horrible?"

Mark Twain's tongue-in-cheek aside, it certainly seems as though a life without challenge could become boring and uninspiring very quickly.

Though we might not welcome pain and suffering, nor choose them as an alternative to paradise,

Rabbi Donniel Hartman suggests a radical way to understand suffering.

His view is particularly appropriate during these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe:

He sees suffering as a wake-up call to rouse us out of the status quo, to goad us out of our satisfaction with mediocrity.

Suffering, for Hartman, is an opportunity for growth, for renewal.

Suffering allows us to break out of the security and stability that keep us in a state of just being average.

In order to grow, to change, to thrive, which is what real teshuvah is all about, we need to be destabilized, we need a measure of danger.

Indeed, would you have gone for that eminently more satisfying job, had you not been laid off from the one that was a dead-end?

Would you have started the business you had dreamed of for years had you not been anxious about money?

Would you have joined that art club and created exquisite paintings had you not felt desperately lonely?

Suffering and pain can serve a similar role to that of the shofar during the High Holy Days.

As Maimonides explains: "...the sounding of the *Shofar* on the New Year... has deep meaning, as if saying, Awake, awake, O sleeper, from your sleep; arouse yourselves from your slumber..."

The shofar's call is saying:

"you have become smaller than you ought to be.... be more!"

For Rabbi Hartman, we should not squander any opportunity provided by suffering to examine whether we are living as we ought to be.

The irony is that we are terrified of instability, of insecurity, of discomfort, when, in fact, it is what we desperately need in order to be the best we can be.

Because it is only when we are a little off kilter that we can review, reassess, reinvent ourselves, that we can find new and better ways.

Especially at this time of year, we need to make ourselves uncomfortable so we can ask ourselves the important questions:

Are we fulfilling our potential?

Are there ways in which we should be pushing ourselves more?

Are there relationships we need to mend?

Have we created a community with which we are satisfied?

How can we contribute to make this community better?

After spending 38 chapters in agony and anger against God,
Job becomes a changed man – deeper and more compassionate.

He began as someone who worshipped God out of fear that
he might make a misstep and lose God's favor.

At the end, Job has a much truer relationship with God.

He now worships God, not because he might be punished or rewarded,
but for the sake of loving God alone.

He accepts that life is not black and white;

that there are no simple equations between behavior and outcome.

From a man concerned with the appearance of being righteous,

Job is now a far more caring human being,

truly concerned about his friends and his family.

So, during this time of economic upheaval,

let us allow ourselves to be shaken up,

let us take advantage of this time of uncertainty.

Let us allow the prayers and the confessions we speak,

to upset our assumptions.

And let us spend the next 10 days gaining new perspectives.

Let us try to take a different road, as this poem suggests:

There's a Hole in My Sidewalk An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Chapter One

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost . . . I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter Three

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it there.
I still fall in . . . it's a habit . . . but, my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter Four

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter Five

I walk down another street.

Or, as Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan put it:

from the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,

from the laziness that is content with half-truths,

from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,

O God of truth, deliver us.