

Don't the Righteous Also Go Hungry?

Tish'a b'Av

Saddest day on Jewish calendar. History full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on Tish'a B'Av (accidentally or intentionally).

- This happened on Tish'a b'Av [Mishnah, Ta'anit 4:6]:
 - The spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report which demoralized the Israelites.
 - Both Temples were destroyed (586 BCE and 70 CE).
 - The Bar Kochba revolt against Rome failed in 135 CE when he was killed and the city of Betar was destroyed.
 - Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Exile began.
- Since then, on Tish'a b'Av:
 - In 1095, the Pope began the Crusades. On the way to the Land of Israel, the Crusaders slaughtered 30-50% of the Jews of Europe.
 - In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds burned in Paris.
 - In 1290, Jews expelled from England.
 - In 1306, Jews expelled from France.
 - In 1492, Jews expelled from Spain, including my own ancestors.
 - In 1626, false messiah Shabtai Tzvi was born. His apostasy dashed the hopes of millions of Jews (1/3 of the total) and severely disrupted their lives.
 - In 1914, World War I began:
 - Led to World War II and the death of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust.
 - Facilitated the Communist Revolution, leading to 70 years of darkness for Soviet Jews.
 - In 1941, Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

Question

Why did all these things happen to us? The eternal question of theodicy: Why do bad things happen to good people? We discussed the broad question before. Today let us discuss a particular verse in the Book of Psalms, which we also recite in *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after Meals:

נָעַר אֲנִי גַם־זָקֵנִי וְלֹא־רָאִיתִי צָדִיק נִצָּז וְיֹרְעוֹ מִבְּקֶשׁ־לֶחֶם
I have been young, and I am now old; and I have not seen the
righteous abandoned, nor his seed begging for bread. [Ps. 37:25]

What does this verse mean?

What does it mean? And why do we say it in the Grace after Meals? The plain meaning can't be right because we have all seen righteous people go through bad times. Life is not fair. Some Jews, especially Holocaust survivors, skip that line in *Birkat Hamazon* because they have seen too many counterexamples.

The Psalmist himself must have known that good people *can* starve and that being pious does *not* shield you from tragedy. (Example: Job.) So why did he say it?

Many commentators have provided alternatives to the plain meaning.

-It is an ideal, an expression of hope, not a fact.

-He does not say that's always true, only that it's his own personal experience. ("I have not seen".)

-He does not say the righteous never starve, only that he has not seen them *begging* for bread. The righteous don't beg. They bear their burden stoically and with dignity.

-So is the line merely glorifying stoicism?

-He does not say the righteous won't suffer; only that God won't abandon them.

-But isn't this a contradiction?

-He does not say the righteous will lack nothing, only that they won't lack *bread* -- the basics. No one starves in a Jewish community because the Torah mandates that the poor must be given a portion of the harvest (*peah*):

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick

your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. [Lev. 19:9-10]

But what if everybody is “poor”?

-He does not say *only* the righteous will be supported in hard times. Some less-than-righteous people will also get what they need.

-It means that righteous people may suffer, but they are on such a high spiritual level that they don't feel it and deny that they have any problems. In the Mishna, Ben Zoma says:

אֵיזֶהוּ עָשִׁיר, הַשֹּׂמֵחַ בְּחִלָּקוֹ -- Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot. [Avot 4:1]

Is the verse an exhortation to ignore earthly suffering?

-Midrash: It does not mean God never gives up on the righteous. It means the righteous never give up on God. [Lev. R. 35:2] It means that believers never really *feel* abandoned, even when they go through rough patches. God says in Psalms:

עִמּוֹ-אֶנֶכִּי בְצָרָה -- I will be with him in [his] distress. [Ps. 91:15]

So the line means: “I never saw a righteous person who *felt* abandoned by God, *even* if his children were begging for bread.”

This is reinforced by the fact that the preceding line in Birkat Hamazon is another line in Psalms that says:

יִרְאוּ אֶת-יְהוָה קְדוֹשֵׁי פְּנֵי-אֵין מַחְסוֹר לִירְאָיו

Fear the Lord, you, his pious ones; for those who fear Him lack nothing. [Ps. 34:10]

So the verse reflects what you feel, not the reality.

-It means that even when the righteous suffer, they are convinced it is somehow for the best. Example: First-century rabbi Nachum of Gamzu. He was severely afflicted, yet always optimistic. No matter what happened to him or around him, he would say: “*Gam zu l'tovah* -- This, too, is for the good”. He always saw a silver lining:

It is related of Nachum of Gamzu that he was blind in both his eyes, his two hands and legs were amputated, his whole body was covered with boils, and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed whose feet were standing in bowls of water to prevent the ants from crawling on to him... Why was he called Nachum of Gamzu? Because whatever befell him he would declare, “*Gam zu l'tovah* -- This, too, is for the good.” [Taanit 21a]

-The Midrash mentions a saying that goes, “Most kohanim are wealthy” and concludes that the line applies mostly to kohanim. [Sifrei Devarim 352:1]

-When he says “I have not seen the righteous abandoned”, he is referring to the rewards the righteous will get in the World to Come, the afterlife; not in this life.

-Maybe he never saw a righteous man [Hayyim Paltiel, 13th-century France, on Genesis 28:15] because there are no righteous men, period. He is just encouraging us to strive for the ideal of true righteousness by following all commandments scrupulously, and promising this reward in exchange.

-Contradicted by the Midrash:

There is no time in which the Holy One, blessed be He, permits the world to be without righteous ones. In fact righteous men appear in every generation. [Midrash Tanchuma, Miketz 6:1]

-What the verse says was true in biblical times, when God was closer to us, but is not true today. This is the Talmudic concept of *Yeridat haDorot* -- “the decline of the generations”, the notion that Torah scholarship and spirituality have been steadily decreasing since the revelation at Sinai. The Talmud says:

If the early generations were sons of angels, then we are sons of men. And if the early generations were sons of men, then we are asses. [Shabbat 112b]

-An observation: What does the line “I have been young” add to the thought? “I am old” should be sufficient. But nothing is superfluous in Bible. Maybe the answer holds yet another meaning. Missing is midlife. Perhaps young and old are the only stages during which one can recognize these things.

Possibly the best explanation

Rav Soloveitchik notes that Queen Esther asks King Achashverosh to spare the Jews using these words:

כִּי אֵיכָכָה אוֹכֵל וְרֹאֵתִי בְרָעָה אֲשֶׁר-יִמָּצֵא אֶת-עַמִּי וְאֵיכָכָה אוֹכֵל וְרֹאֵתִי בְּאֶבְרֹן מוֹלֶדְתִּי

How can I bear to see the disaster which will befall my people, and how can I bear to see the destruction of my family? [Esther 8:6]

He then proceeds by analogy in wording. The same word (רֹאֵתִי – to see) is used in both places: “I have not seen the righteous abandoned” and “Can I bear to see all this?” But in the case of Esther, she clearly means: “Can I bear to see all this *and do nothing about it?*” Indeed, Esther took great risks and saved her people.

Likewise, the line in Psalms means: “I have not seen a righteous man abandoned, nor his seed begging for bread, *and done nothing about it.*”
“I have not seen a righteous man abandoned, nor his seed begging for bread, *because I helped him and gave him what he needed.*”

So the common word, *raiti*, does not mean just “I have seen”, but “I stood by as a passive and uninvolved witness”.

This explanation also answers the question: Why is this verse in the conclusion of the Grace after Meals? Because the Grace after Meals begins by thanking God for giving us food. It is fitting that it should end by us stating that we will do the same and give food to the hungry. This line is next-to-last; the last line is:

The Lord will give courage to His people. The Lord will bless His people with peace [Psalms 29:11].

Who said that?

As an aside: Who wrote that verse? Psalms are usually attributed to King David. But the Talmud teaches that this one should not be:

Who said: “I have been young, and I am now old; and I have not seen the righteous abandoned, nor his seed begging for bread”. [Ps. 37:25]?

[Could one say] that [King] David said it? [No, because he] wasn't that old. [It is believed David was in his 30s when he wrote Psalms.]

If we say that it was the Holy One, Blessed be He, [it would be wrong because God is ageless].

Rather, we conclude that the line was said by the ministering angel [Metatron, the “Prince of the World”, appointed by God to rule over] the world. [Yevamot 16b; also Zohar 1:181b:5]

In Torah, God tells Moses in Mount Sinai:

Behold, I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Beware of him and obey him; do not defy him, for he will not forgive your transgression, for My Name is within him. [Exodus 23:20-21]

That angel was Metatron. Mystics: The gematria of Metatron (מטטרון) is 314, same as that of God's name Shaddai (שדי).

But the Talmud says that the Israelites rejected Metatron:

[The Israelites] did not accept [Metatron] even as a guide because it is written [in Exodus]: “And [Moses] said to [God]: Unless You Yourself lead us, do not [free us from Egypt]. For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth?” [Exodus 33:15-16] [Sanhedrin 38b]

Conclusion

“I have been young, and I am now old; and I have not seen the righteous abandoned, nor his seed begging for bread.” [Ps. 37:25] Let us hope for a near future when this verse will be literally true.