Is Everything Part of God's Plan?

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayigash*, Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers, as follows:

> אֲנִי֙ יוֹסֵ֣ף אֲחִיכֶ֔ם אֲשֶׁר־מְכַרְתֶּ֥ם אֹתִ֖י מִצְרָֽיְמָה
>
> I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.
> And now, do not be distressed or blame yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. But God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God... [Genesis 45:4-8]
> And so, do not be afraid... You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children. [Genesis 50:19-21]

So it was all for the greater good that Joseph had to suffer. Here we are told that God's plan for the many sometimes requires that the few suffer. Many people believe everything that happens ultimately serves a worthy purpose, even the most terrible calamities. A first-century rabbi was called Naḥum ish Gamzu because he always said *Gam zu l'tovah!* -- "This, too, is for the good!", in spite of the many tragedies that befell him in his life. One of his students, the great Rabbi Akiva, followed in his footsteps and used to say:

> כָּל֩ דְּעָבֵ֨יד רַחֲמָנָא לְטָב עָבֵֽיד -- *Kol d'aved Rachamana l'tav 'aved.*
> Everything God does is for the good. [Berakhot 60b]

To wit, after God created the world, didn't He say "It is very good"?

> וַיַּ֤רְא אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁ֣ר עָשָׂ֔ה וְהִנֵּה־ט֖וֹב מְאֹ֑ד
> *Vayyar Elokim et kol asher 'asa, v'hinne: tov me'od*
> And God saw all that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. [Genesis 1:31]

Didn't the psalmist write the line we repeat every day in the *Ashrei*:

> טוֹב־יְהֹוָ֥ה לַכֹּ֑ל וְרַחֲמָ֝֗יו עַל־כָּל־מַעֲשָֽׂיו
> *Tov HaShem lakol, verachamav 'al kol maasav*
> The Lord is good to all and His mercy is over all His works. [Psalms 145:9]?

These are the sources of the belief that nature optimizes everything to get the best possible outcome. This is where the word "optimism" comes from.

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But let's examine the matter a little more deeply. Is this attitude any more than the mind's propensity to see patterns in the events around us, to invest things with meaning, whether this meaning is really there or not? After all, life is a collection of happy events and sad events, good things and bad things. *Some* good things are bound to happen, sooner or later. When they happen, how hard is it to trace the chain of events that led to them and say: "Aha! If this bad thing hadn't happened in the past, this good thing would not have happened today!"?

If the Egyptians hadn't enslaved us, the Jewish people would never have grown to the numbers sufficient to start a new nation. Indeed, in Egypt a superpower protected them, whereas in the Holy Land any nearby small kingdom could have easily wiped out Jacob's small clan. If the Temple hadn't been destroyed, Judaism would have continued to be centered in a single site focusing on animal sacrifices; rather than in synagogues focusing on prayer, study, and spiritual matters. If we hadn't been expelled from Spain and so many other places, we would not have acquired so much new knowledge, would not have brought new skills to the world at large, and would not have been as determined to excel just to get equal treatment. If the Holocaust hadn't happened, the world would never have allowed the establishment of the State of Israel and would have smothered it in its crib. If the State of Israel wasn't under perpetual siege and surrounded by implacable enemies, it would not have retained its Jewish character, intermarriage with Arabs would have soared, and internal feuding between secular and religious factions would have reached the boiling point. If I had not been forced out of Egypt with only the shirt on my back, I would never have met my wife, had my children and grandchildren, and led as fulfilling and satisfying a life.

And so on. It is always possible to say things like that, whether one thinks the "price" was worth it or not. But it also works in reverse. People can single out a *bad* thing that happened to them, trace the chain of events that led to it, and find a *good* thing to blame for it. (For example: If I had not met that wonderful girl last week, I would not have been in such a hurry to go see her today, and would not have had this terrible car accident.)

However, while it is always *possible* to see a pattern, one does not *have* to. We can ask ourselves: Why did Joseph let his brothers off the hook so easily by invoking divine intervention? He didn't have to. He told them, "Don't worry and don't feel guilty: It was all God's plan." He could have told

them, "You did me a terrible wrong and you should be ashamed of yourselves. But I will not seek revenge. Instead, I will give you the means to survive the famine, because I am not evil like you." But he didn't. The sinners were even rewarded for their sin. Is this the proper way to confront those who have done evil to us, *even* if we really think God engineered it all for His plan? Doesn't the Torah enjoin us to rebuke our neighbors when they do something wrong? Yes. It says in Leviticus:

הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עֲמִיתֶךָ -- You shall surely rebuke your neighbor. [Lev. 19:17]

Can we perhaps argue that God directed the brothers' evil action for His plan; and so, as mere puppets, they are not guilty? But Judaism teaches that when God decrees that bad things will befall us, He does not decree *who* will make them happen; and those who make them happen, using their free will, *will* be punished.

What about free will? The same Rabbi Akiva tells us in the Mishnah:

הַכֹּל צָפוּי, וְהָרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה -- *Hakol tzafui, ve-harshut netunah*
Everything is foreseen, and freedom of choice is given. [Pirkei Avot 3.19]

As a physicist, I like to think that "everything is foreseen" means "everything that there is to foresee is foreseen". Quantum mechanics tells us that all that there is to foresee are the probabilities of events occurring. These probabilities are not certainties. This leaves room for free will.

Can we say, then, that when our free will causes us to do something forbidden, God makes sure that some good comes out of it down the line? Maybe so far down the line that we can't see it in our lifetime? Or is it all just a matter of our own attitude in interpreting events? Are we creating at least some of the resulting good by having a positive outlook?

There are many unknowns here. This allows us to view life in a lot of different ways. Yes, it is possible to argue that good things always emerge from bad things, even if the logic sometimes strains credulity. It is possible to argue the opposite also. In the absence of a definitive answer, looking for the good is not a bad attitude to have, provided it does not lead to fatalism and the passive acceptance of bad things, without us doing our utmost to prevent them from happening.

Shabbat shalom.