

Is Suffering Necessary?

Introduction

Tisha b'Av is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. A long list of catastrophes befell the Jews on that day on the calendar, the Ninth of Av. The fact that they all happened on that day is either accidental or intentional, but enough to make us dread the coming of that day every year.

The Mishnah, written 2,000 years ago, recalls five tragedies that occurred on Tisha b'Av up to that time.

- First, the spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report, which demoralized the Israelites.
- Then, the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple in 586 BCE.
- Then, the Romans destroyed the second Temple in 70 CE.
- Then, Bar Kochba failed in his revolt against Rome in 135 CE, when he was killed at Betar.
- Finally, Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Diaspora began.
[Taanit 4:6]

Then, in the last 2,000 years, many catastrophes also happened on Tisha b'Av:

- In 1095, the Pope began the Crusades, to wrest the Holy Land from the Muslims. But on the way there, the Crusaders slaughtered 30-50% of the Jews of Europe.
- In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds were burned in Paris.
- In 1290, the decree expelling all Jews from England was signed.
- In 1306, the decree expelling all Jews from France was signed.
- In 1492, the decree expelling all Jews from Spain, including my own ancestors, was signed.
- In 1626, Shabtai Tzvi was born. He was a false messiah, and after his apostasy to Islam he dashed the hopes of millions of Jews, one-third of the total, and severely disrupted their lives.
- In 1914, World War I began. It led to World War II and the death of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust. It also facilitated the Communist Revolution, spelling 70 years of darkness for Soviet Jews.

-In 1941, the Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

To console us, the Talmud says that the Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av. [Berakhot Y 2:4]

Why the suffering?

Is all this suffering necessary in the scheme of things? Why did these calamities happen to us? Why do bad things happen to people who do not appear to deserve them? This line of inquiry carries a fancy name. It's called "theodicy", which literally means "God's justice".

Throughout our history, we cried out loud the words of the Psalmist:

אֵלִי אֵלִי לָמָּה עָזַבְתָּנִי רְחוּק מִיִּשְׁוּעָתִי דְּבַרִּי שָׁאֲנִתִּי: -- *Eli, Eli, lamma 'azavtani?*

My God, my God, why have You abandoned me? Why are You so far from delivering me and from my anguished roaring? [Psalms 22:2]

Punishment

First, note that God frequently causes suffering as retribution for wrongdoing. For example:

- The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit;
- The Flood in Noah's day for "great wickedness", "corruption" and "evil";
- The multiplicity of languages on earth for the Tower of Babel;
- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for "wickedness and sin";
- Turning Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back;
- The earth swallowing up Korach and his followers for rebellion against Moses;
- Exile and destruction of the first Temple for idolatry, adultery and murder; and of the second Temple for "senseless hatred";
- Etc.

We can understand *this* suffering. Now let's turn to suffering that is *not* punishment.

Advantages of suffering

Are there advantages to suffering? A commentator said that suffering breaks our attachment to this world, and makes people more spiritually inclined.

There are many popular sayings that extol the importance of suffering:

- All births are painful.

-All beginnings are hard.

-What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Etc. Are these healthy attitudes? Yes, when they allow us to accept what we cannot change and fuel hope that it will lead to something good.

Jewish view

Unlike other religions, Judaism does not welcome suffering per se, does not view it as positive. The Talmud records three variations of this conversation:

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill. [Rabbi Yoḥanan went] to visit him, and said to him: "Is your suffering dear to you?" Rabbi Hiyya said to him: "I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward." [Berakhot 5b]

In other words: I don't want the suffering even if there is a reward that will come after it.

The story continues:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: "Give me your hand." Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba [did so and Rabbi Yoḥanan] restored him to health. [Berakhot 5b]

So, before applying faith healing, Rabbi Yoḥanan had to make sure the patient *wanted* to recover! If not, faith healing will not work. He did not assume the desire for recovery was automatic.

Yet, whether we welcome suffering or not, our tradition says that it is necessary. The Talmud says:

It was taught in a baraita: Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai says: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, all of which were given only by means of suffering: Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World-to-Come." [Berakhot 5a]

Let's consider the first one: the gift of Torah, which grew out of the bitter experience of slavery in Egypt. Why the slavery? We don't understand it. The Israelites had done nothing wrong to deserve this. In the Torah, God simply makes a terse prediction to Abraham:

Know for certain that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land, and will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years. But know with equal certainty that I will judge the nation that enslaved them, and that afterwards they will leave with great substance. [Genesis 15:13-14]

Sure enough, Abraham's grandson Jacob and his clan of seventy – all the "Jews" of the time – went to Egypt to escape a famine, invited by Pharaoh

through Jacob's son Joseph. But the next Pharaoh enslaved them for 210 years. Why this unspeakable suffering?

Reasons for slavery in Egypt

Evidently God thought slavery was necessary for His plan. But why, and why for so long? Let us explore some possible answers.

First, we were enslaved for our protection. In the Land of Israel, Jacob's small clan was an easy target for its neighbors. In Egypt, a superpower protected us, albeit to exploit us.

Second, slavery allowed us to build up our numbers in safety. If 210 years equal ten generations, and if numbers double with each generation (assuming four children per couple), the original number would increase a thousandfold: 2^{10} is 1024. To get to the three million people the Talmud speculates were at Sinai for the giving of the Torah, we have to assume six children per couple, which is not unreasonable for the time.

Third, slavery allowed us to build up our identity and community spirit. We were all in the same boat and followed the same customs. The Midrash says that the Jews deserved redemption from Egypt because they kept their distinct names, dress and language. [Lev. R. 32:5 has names and language; Minor Pesikta, Devarim on Ki Tavo 41a has clothing and food]

Fourth, slavery minimized contact with the outside world. Such contact might have led to idolatry and other practices later forbidden by the Torah.

Fifth, slavery eliminated the possibility of intermarriage. Egyptians wouldn't want to marry slaves, and Israelite women raped by Egyptians would raise their children as Israelites.

Sixth, slavery created a scenario that allowed God to show the Jews and the whole world Who was in charge, with miracles and wonders that make a big impression. God did so when He freed the Jews.

Seventh, the gratitude we felt when we were liberated made it easier for us to accept the Torah. Indeed, the first thing God said at Sinai was:

I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the House of Bondage. [Ex. 20:2]

Eighth, the slave mentality made it easier for us to accept the Torah. Indeed, after being a slave for so many generations, the first instinctive response when given a command is to say “Yes, sir!” (However, once we accepted the Torah, the slave mentality became a burden, so God waited until the generation of the Exodus died out in the desert before letting us into the Promised Land. In fact, the Maharal went so far as to say that Pessah is not the time of true freedom, but rather the time when we changed masters from Pharaoh to God. However, it must be pointed out that the first “slavery” was for the benefit of the master, while the “second” was for our own benefit.)

So these eight reasons allow us to conclude that, even though we did not deserve slavery in Egypt, ultimately it was all God’s plan for our own good.

Another thought, advanced by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is that suffering makes us appreciate what we have. He says:

What we have and then lose we do not take for granted... Israel had to lose its freedom before it could cherish it.

So the Israelites appreciated their freedom more when they regained it after having lost it while being slaves in Egypt.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/unasked-question-taken-koren-sacks-haggada/>

Moses rebukes God, as it were, for predicting suffering to the people. In the Torah, we read this exchange between God and Moses at the Burning Bush:

[Moses said:] When I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is His name?”, what shall I say to them?”

And God said to Moses, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* – “I will be what I will be.” [God then] continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, אֶהְיֶה *Ehyeh* – ‘I will be’ -- sent me to you.” [Exodus 3:13-14]

The Talmud comments:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, told Moses to go and tell Israel: “[My name is ‘I will be what I will be’, meaning] I will be with them in *this* enslavement just as I will be with them in *other* enslavements [in the future].”

Moses said before Him: “Master of the Universe, they have enough [trouble now]. [There is no need to tell them about future] suffering – let it come at its appointed time.” The Holy One, Blessed be He, agreed and said to [Moses]: Go and tell Israel only that ‘I will be’ has sent me to you.” [Berakhot 9b]

Is it all for the good?

This leads us to wonder: Is all suffering for some greater good, one that we usually don't understand? A rabbi in the Talmud used to say, in spite of all the terrible things that happened to him:

Gam zu l'tovah -- This, too, is for the good. [Ta'anit 21a]

Perhaps God knows that the afterlife is not so bad, so is not as worried as we are when people die.

Does antisemitism preserve Judaism?

In discussing the story of Purim, the Talmud makes a remarkable point:

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: [When King] Ahashverosh [approved Haman's proposal to kill all the Jews, he] was more effective than the 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses who prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people. Indeed, they were all unable to return the Jewish people to the right way, but [the king's agreement to genocide] returned them to the right way. [Megillah 14a]

So Haman did more for the Jews spiritually than all the prophets in the Bible! The prophets told the Jews to repent and reform, and most Jews didn't listen. But Ahashverosh ordered all Jews killed, and all of a sudden the Jews went back to their traditions!

The message is clear: Antisemitism can preserve Judaism. There is historical evidence. After the Exodus, a lot of Jews lapsed into idolatry, and clung to it tenaciously and enthusiastically for 1,000 years. Then, after the exile in Babylon, idolatry disappeared from Judaism, suddenly and completely, and has remained absent for the next 2,500 years, to this day. What happened?

Here is my own explanation. During the thousand years of idolatry, the Jews were essentially free and masters of their own house. They felt they could indulge in whatever appealed to them, as free people do. Many found idolatrous rites colorful and attractive and felt free to engage in them. But for the next 2,500 years, the Jews were subjugated and persecuted – by the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians, the Muslims, etc. They felt they *had* to keep their own traditions and not adopt the practices of their overlords, as an act of rebellion. They were even willing to die rather than be forced to indulge in idolatry or reject their traditions. The story of Hanukkah is a perfect example.

This point has been made repeatedly in modern times also. Here are some examples. Spinoza said that only thanks to antisemitism do the Jews continue to exist as a separate people. [*Theological-Political Treatise*] Rabbi Hirsch said that antisemitism is the tool through which the God of Israel preserves his people. Freud said: "My language is German. My culture, my attainments are German. I considered myself German intellectually, until I noticed the growth of antisemitic prejudice in Germany and German Austria. Since that time, I prefer to call myself a Jew." [Quoted in: Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, 1998, p 448] Einstein wrote: "My relationship to the Jewish people has become my strongest human bond, ever since I became fully aware of our precarious situation among the nations of the world." [Letter to Ben Gurion] Dershowitz said that the absence of antisemitism in the US spells doom for American Jews. [*The Vanishing Jew*]

Conclusion

Jewish bottom line: Yes, we can sometimes recognize objectively that suffering is necessary. Still, we do not welcome it regardless of the benefits it brings.

Have a meaningful fast and may Tisha B'Av never bring us another catastrophe.