

Blaming God

This week's Torah portion, *Devarim*, begins as follows:

These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel on that side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain, opposite the Sea of Reeds, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazereth and Di Zahav. [Deuteronomy 1:1]

Sifrei Devarim, a halachic midrash written in Talmudic times, points out that these nine places are all the places where the Israelites sinned and angered God. For example, Hazereth is where the rebellion led by Korach took place. Paran is where the 12 spies left from, to scout the land of Canaan, and 10 of them eventually brought back a demoralizing report.

But *Di-Zahav* is a puzzle. There is no such place. Literally, it means "enough gold". *Di*, as in *Dai*, as in *Dayenu*, means "enough", and *zahav* is "gold". Because of the mention of gold, and the tradition that these are places where Israel sinned, the Talmud [Berakhot 32a] connects it with the sin of the Golden Calf:

The school of Rabbi Yannai [said]: ...What is *Di-Zahav*?... "Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, the silver and gold [*zahav*] which You showered on Israel until they said, "Enough [*dai*]": *that* is what led to their making the [Golden] Calf."

So Moses accuses God of giving Israel the riches that allowed them to make the Golden Calf, and therefore God is responsible for their sin. Indeed, God *told* Israel to ask the Egyptians for gold. They did not do it at their own initiative. So the Talmud continues:

Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse around his neck and set him down at the door of a house of ill-repute. How could the boy help sinning?

In the Torah, Moses accused God of intentionally causing harm to Israel:

Moses returned to God and said: "My God, why have You done evil to this people? Why have You sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, [Pharaoh] has done worse to this nation; and You have not saved Your people!" [Exodus 5:22-23]

The Midrash even charges that Moses told God that God doesn't care:

Rabbi Akiva said that Moses argued as follows: "I know that You will one day deliver them [from slavery], but what about those who have been crushed in the buildings [and have already died]?" Then, God's Attribute of Justice sought to strike Moses, but after God saw that Moses argued so only because of Israel, He did not allow the Attribute of Justice to strike him. [Shemot Rabbah 5:22]

The Midrash even tells us that we blamed God for having given us free will, because it makes us fall prey to the temptation to do evil:

Israel complained [to God]: "If a potter leaves a pebble in the clay, and the jar leaks, is the potter not responsible? You have left the Evil Inclination in us. Remove it, and we will do Your will!" God replied: "This I will do in the time to come. [That is, in the afterlife.]" [Exodus Rabbah 46.4]

The rabbis went so far as to criticize God for having created humanity at all. The Talmud says:

It was taught in a baraita: For two-and-a-half years the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel argued. The first said: It would have been better if man had never been created. And the second said: It is better that man has been created. They took a vote and decided: It would have been better for man never to have been created; but now that he has been created, he should be careful about his behavior. [Eruvin 13b]

Shammai won. In other words, now that we are here, let's make the best of a bad situation.

These are all instances of a common theme: Blaming God for whatever happens to us that we perceive as bad. With Tish'a b'Av only a few days away, when we recall all the terrible things that happened to us as a people, this is a good time to examine this tendency.

Is God responsible for giving us the things that tempt us to stray, and therefore is responsible for us straying? (At the very least, this does not absolve us, since we have free will.) When something bad happens, is God to blame for having put us in that situation – for having created our surroundings, our impulses, for arranging for us to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, etc.?

At first blush, yes, God is to blame. God is credited with all the infinity attributes – omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, immortality, immutability, etc. Therefore, He can surely stop bad things from happening. So, when they happen, it must be His fault.

Even the most proud and observant Jews blame God for “testing their faith” by making catastrophes descend on them to see if they remain faithful to Him. An example is the story of the Jew who fled the Spanish Inquisition by sea, with his wife and child, on a rickety boat. A bolt of lightning killed his wife. A storm rose and threw his son into the sea. He reached a small, rocky island, shook his fist at God and said:

God of Israel, I have fled to be able to follow Your commandments and sanctify Your name. You, however, are doing everything You can to make me stop believing in You. But it will not avail You. You may insult me, strike me, take away all that I hold dear, torture me to death, and I will always believe in You, I will always love You, even in spite of You!

In the Bible, Job did a similar thing. After God made terrible things descend on him, he told his wife:

Yea, though [God] slay me, still will I trust in Him. But I will argue my ways before Him. [Job 13:15]

“Though [God] slay me” means He blames God for his misfortunes (and justifiably so, in this particular case). But the second part of Job’s answer, “But I will argue my ways before Him”, is usually omitted in the quote, but it is the most important and most Jewish part of it. Job’s faith is not unquestioning. He accepts no fatalism. He rejects a “floormat” relationship with God. He will “argue his ways before God”.

And blaming God for allowing the Holocaust to happen has been done in a multitude of commentaries. There is even a story about a formal Jewish trial of God in a Nazi concentration camp. When he was at Auschwitz, 15-year-old Elie Wiesel witnessed a three-man Jewish court put God on trial for not saving His people, and found him guilty. Then they all recited the evening prayers. He wrote a play in 1979 based on this episode, *The Trial of God*. My favorite in the genre is a joke:

The scene is in heaven. A group of rabbis who died in the Holocaust are discussing the Holocaust. All of a sudden they burst out laughing. God hears them, walks up to them, and asks: “What’s so funny about the Holocaust?” And one of the rabbis, still laughing, says: “Oh, You can’t understand. You had to have been there!”

There are even modern instances of God being sued for damages! In 1969, a woman in Arizona sued God for \$100,000 for His “negligence” in allowing a lightning bolt to hit her house. In 2005, a Romanian in prison for murder sued God for failing to keep him away from the Devil. In 2016, a

lawyer in Bihar, India, sued the Hindu god Rama for mistreating his wife, the goddess Sita. All suits were dismissed.

So what did the Sages advise us to do in the face of bad times? They did not know why evil exists any more than the rest of us. They were not interested in speculation about the past, only in planning for the future. All they could do was ask the question, “Now that evil is here, now that it has happened, how can we extract good from it?”

They could blame God. They generally shied away from that because it might lead to loss of faith in their congregations, and they wanted to avoid that at all costs. Like God told Job, they declared that God knows things we don’t know and works for the best in ways we can’t understand. When someone dies, at any age and for any reason, we are taught to say *Baruch dayyan ha-emet* -- Blessed be the True Judge – an expression of faith that says: “God caused that death for a good reason.”

They could blame our oppressors. This would not accomplish much good, other than setting the record straight. In fact, it would make the survivors feel even more sorry for themselves and live in self-pity; and incite in them a destructive hatred for the oppressors, which would prevent them from rebuilding normal lives.

Or they could blame us -- the victims. And so they did! We are punished for our sins. That’s why bad things happen to us! They reasoned that only this would accomplish *some* good by getting us to become more religious and closer to the Tradition. Frequently that worked. In the absence of definitive answers, they felt this may be the best course to follow.

In the meantime, let’s remember the wisdom of the rabbis of the Talmud who said the best course is to try to make the best of where we are at any given point.

Shabbat shalom.