

Will we ever stop perishing?

Introduction

The Israelites have just endured the rebellion of Korach and his acolytes, which resulted in a lot of people dying. They are demoralized. The Torah says:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר הֵן גּוֹעֵנוּ אֲבִדְנוּ כָּלֵנוּ אֲבִדְנוּ:
הָאֵם תִּמְנוּ לָגוֹעַ:

The children of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold, we perish, we are lost, we are all lost! ... Will we ever stop perishing?" [Num. 17:27-28]

What a poignant statement! What caused them to say that?

Chronology

Korach, Dathan and Abiram, with 250 prominent men, confront Moses and Aaron, saying:

The entire congregation is holy and the Lord is in their midst. So why do raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly? [Num. 16:3]

Korach, a Levite, wants the priesthood, which went to Moses' older brother Aaron. Moses responds: You are already a Levite, an exalted position. Why do you want more?

Is it not enough that the God of Israel has distinguished you [Levites] from the congregation of Israel to draw you near to Him, to perform the service in the Tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them? He drew you near, and all your brothers, the sons of Levi with you, and now you seek the priesthood as well? [Num. 16:9-10]

Then Moses proposes a test. Let the three rebels and their 250 acolytes, plus Aaron, offer incense, which only priests can offer, and we'll see how God reacts. God's reaction was swift:

[After the offering,] the earth beneath [the three rebels] opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, and all the men who were with Korach and all

the property. They, and all they possessed, descended alive into the grave; the earth covered them up, and they were lost to the assembly. All the Israelites who were around them fled from their cries, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up [too]!" [Also,] a fire came forth from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who had offered up the incense. [Num. 16:32-35]

Nothing happened to Aaron. This presumably proved he was the legitimate priest and the others were not.

Then God says he is tired of Israel's rebellions. It's their fourth offense, after the Golden Calf [Ex. 32:4], the spies [Num. 13], and the incessant complaints. Indeed, earlier we saw that God did not look kindly to the complaints:

And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord ... and His anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed those who were in the outlying parts of the camp. And the people cried to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the Lord, the fire was quenched... The people of Israel then wept again, and said, Who shall give us meat to eat? We remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; but now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes. [Num. 11:1-6]

So God makes a drastic decision: Annihilate the entire people:

The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Stand aside from this congregation, and I shall consume them in an instant. [Num. 17:9-10]

God brings a plague to Israel to do so. Aaron, the High Priest, intercedes and succeeds in saving the day:

[Aaron] stood between the dead and the living, and the plague ceased. The number of dead in the plague was 14,700... [Num. 17:13-14]

The people are confused. They don't understand what is expected of them, why they are being punished. They ask:

Behold, we perish, we are lost, we are all lost! ... Will we ever stop perishing? [Num. 17:27-28]

They don't understand what is happening and fear for their lives. Could God not have "appeared", or made His voice heard, saying: "Aaron is the one I chose. Others need not apply."? Did Moses need to tell the 250 men to offer incense they are not allowed to offer, knowing it would anger God, without warning them about what would probably happen if they did?

Indeed, after the 250 die, the people tell Moses,
You have killed the people of the Lord. [Num. 17:6]

And what did the rest of the congregation do that they deserved to die by a plague, other than helplessly watch events unfold around them?

The people also remember what happened to two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. They were struck dead for "offering strange fire before the Lord". Evidently, God was saying, "You must perform the ritual mitzvot EXACTLY as I commanded or there will be drastic consequences. I need to make that clear at the outset, when Judaism is beginning. If I allowed any leeway, before too long you will start sacrificing your children to show your devotion to Me, torturing animals to death to offer Me their pain, and other such nonsense."

"Behold, we perish, we are lost, we are all lost! ... Will we ever stop perishing?" The Jews have asked this question since time immemorial, and are continuing to ask it, as they face virulent antisemitism in every generation.

One can argue that *here* it is God they are afraid of, not other men who threaten to cause them harm. However, traditionally, ALL Jewish suffering is God punishing us for our misdeeds. Even when the righteous die, it is interpreted as punishment for their few misdeeds.

What do we make of this philosophy of blaming the victims? And its companion philosophy that punctilious observance will shield you from all harm? The oppression at the hand of the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Inquisition, the Russians, the Holocaust, the Arabs, the Muslims terrorists... All of them, our fault? Even though the Holocaust in particular preferentially wiped out the most observant Jewish communities in the world? In light of this, how can we make the Sages' teachings relevant today?

Like this. The Sages 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, and we can't change it, how should we face the future and extract good from bad?" Blaming God would not get us very far, and would deprive the people of the faith that sustains them. As Job said: "Yea, though He slay me, still will I trust in Him." Blaming the oppressors would not accomplish much good either, 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 destructive hatred for the oppressors and desire for revenge, which would prevent them from rebuilding normal lives. But blaming the victims can accomplish some good by getting them to focus on improving themselves, become more religious and closer to the Tradition.

I think we can accommodate the Sages' intent by accepting our shortcomings and working to overcome them. We don't HAVE to accept ANY reasons why these terrible things have happened and are happening to us. After all, we are not even commanded to do so. But we accepted to continue to identify as Jews come what may, in spite of the high risk, and in spite of the high pressures to abandon our heritage, because something deep within us told us that our heritage was good, that it produced good people who did something good with their lives, and because we simply could not do otherwise and live with ourselves. So, does it not stand to reason that we should continually study what it means to be a Jew, learn what we Jews are responsible for, and live a little more Jewishly every day?