

Is this, too, for the good?

- Tish'a B'Av: Saddest day on Jewish calendar
- History full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on Tish'a B'Av:
- From 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 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, and
 - Jerusalem was razed a year later
- In the past 1,000 years:
 - In 1095, the Pope announced the Crusades, to free Holy Land from Muslim domination -- but they killed tens of thousands of Jews on the way.
 - In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds burned in Paris
 - In 1290, decree expelling all Jews from England signed
 - In 1492, decree expelling all Jews from Spain, including my own ancestors, signed
 - In 1626, Shabtai Tzvi, the false messiah, born. He dashed hopes of millions of Jews and severely disrupted their lives.
 - In 1914, World War I began, with Germany declaring war on Russia. Led to World War II and the death of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, and facilitated Communist Revolution, which ushered in 70 years of darkness for Soviet-dominated Jews.
 - In 1941, Goering the Nazi ordered implementation of Final Solution -- the Holocaust.

-To console us, Talmud says Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av.

[Yerushalmi Berachot 2:4]

-Why are these catastrophes happening? Why do bad things happen to good people?

One view: Good always emerges from bad

-Some believe that some good always emerges from bad occurrences, and justifies them; that all suffering is for some greater good

-For the individual, the community, the country, the world, the universe

- These are not all the same. The greater good of "the world" might require that some individuals suffer more than others.
- Does it "average out" in the World to Come?

-Religious angle: God is good:

-Vayyar Elokim et kol asher 'asa v'hinne: tov me'od

And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.

[Genesis 1:31]

-Tov HaShem lakol, verachamav 'al kol maasav

The Lord is good to all; and His mercies are over all His works. [Psalms 145:9]

-Scientific angle: Nature is always optimizing:

- Principle of least time: Between two points, light takes the path it can cross in the least time (e.g., broken line in refraction).
- Soap bubbles form so as to minimize surface area
- Principle of least action: The path followed by a body subject to forces is the path that minimizes a function called the "action".
- Some say evolution is nature optimizing life
- Why not assume nature optimizes **everything**, including matters where humans are involved? This is where the word "optimism" comes from.
- Leibnitz: "Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."
- Satirized by Voltaire in *Candide or Optimism*
- But what function, exactly, is God optimizing? Unknown...

-Why can't we always see the good?

- Our limited understanding. A primitive man in dentist's chair or surgeon's table only knows he is being hurt -- he does not see it's for his own good.
- Moses could not see the good either:
 - ...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, he has done worse to this nation; and You have not saved Your people!" (Exodus 5:22-23).

Jewish version: Gam zu l'tovah – This, too, is for the good

-First-century rabbi Nachum ish Gamzu 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.

On one occasion his students wished to remove the bed and then clear the things out of the house [which was in danger of collapsing], but he said

to them, 'My children, first clear out the things [from the house] and then remove my bed, for I am confident that so long as I am in the house it will not collapse.' They first cleared out the things, then they removed his bed, and the house [immediately] collapsed.

His students said to him, 'Master, since you are wholly righteous, why has all this befallen you?' He replied, 'I have brought it all upon myself. Once I was journeying on the road towards the house of my father-in-law. I had with me three asses, one laden with food, one with drink and one with all kinds of delicacies. A poor man met me and stopped me on the road and said to me, 'Master, give me something to eat'.

I replied to him, 'Wait until I have unloaded something from the ass. I had hardly managed to unload something from the ass when the man died [from hunger]. I then went and laid myself on him and exclaimed, 'May my eyes which had no pity upon your eyes become blind, may my hands which had no pity upon your hands be cut off, may my legs which had no pity upon your legs be amputated, and my mind was not at rest until I added, may my whole body be covered with boils.'

Thereupon his students exclaimed, 'Woe to us that we have seen you like this.' To this he replied, 'Woe to me had you not seen me like this.'

Why was he called Nachum of Gamzu? Because whatever befell him he would declare, 'Gam zu l'tovah -- This, too, is for the good.'

Once the Jews wished to send to the Emperor a gift. After discussing who should go, they decided that Nachum of Gamzu should go, because he had experienced many miracles. They sent with him a bag full of precious stones and pearls. He went and spent the night in a certain inn and during the night the people in the inn arose and emptied the bag and filled it up with dirt. When he discovered this the next morning, he exclaimed, 'This, too, is for the good.'

When he arrived at his destination, they undid his bag and found that it was full of dirt. The king then decided to put all [the Jews] to death saying, 'The Jews are mocking me'. Nachum then exclaimed, 'This, too, is for the good.'

At that point Elijah appeared disguised as [a Roman] and remarked, 'Perhaps this is some of the dirt of their father Abraham, [Midrash Tanhuma on Genesis 19 (ed. Buber); Gen. Rab. 43] for when he threw dirt [against the enemy] it turned into swords and when [he threw] stubble it changed into arrows, for it is written, 'His sword makes them as dust, his bow as the driven stubble.' [Isa. 41:2.] Now there was one province which [the emperor had so far] not been able to conquer, but when they tried some of this dirt [against it] they were able to conquer it. Then they took him [Nachum] to

the royal treasury and filled his bag with precious stones and pearls and sent him back with great honor.

On his return journey, he again spent the night in the same inn. He was asked, 'What did you take [to the king] that they showed you such great honor?' He replied, 'I brought there what I had taken from here.' [The innkeepers] thereupon razed the inn to the ground and took [some of the rubble] to the king and they said to him, 'The dirt that was brought to you [by Nachum really] belonged to us [and here is more of it].' They tested it and it was found to be [ineffective], so the [king had the] innkeepers put to death. [Ta'anit 21a]

-Rabbi Akiva, a student of Rabbi Nachum, followed in his footsteps:
Kol da'avad rachmanah litav avad
All God does is for the good:

...It was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiva: A man should always accustom himself to say 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good'. [As an example, consider] the following incident.

Rabbi Akiva was once traveling along the road. He came to a certain town and looked for a place to stay but was turned away everywhere. He said 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good'. He went and spent the night in an open field. He had with him a rooster [to wake him up in the morning], an ass [to carry his luggage], and a lamp [to study Torah at night]. A gust of wind came and blew out the lamp. A weasel came and ate the rooster. A lion came and ate the ass. He said 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good'.

That same night some bandits came and carried off the inhabitants of the town. He said: Did I not say to you, 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is all for the good?' [The light from the lamp or the sounds from the rooster or the ass would have revealed my location to the bandits and I would have suffered the fate of the town's inhabitants.] [Berachot 60b]

-Note: The rabbis said "good", not "best". ('Best' could mean "least bad", but they meant "positively good".)

Can one always find a silver lining?

Can one always find a silver lining? Yes, especially when there is plenty of uncertainty:

- Destruction of Temple led to a Judaism centered on synagogue, prayer, study, spiritual matters
- The Diaspora helped us learn new skills from host countries
- The expulsion from Spain led us to do better elsewhere, seed our knowledge, bring new skills to the world at large
- The Holocaust led to the world allowing creation of State of Israel
- The State of Israel is under siege and surrounded by haters, but this:
 - Keeps the country together
 - Increases determination to keep state Jewish
 - Avoids intermarriage with Arabs, with resulting explosion in number of children with mixed parentage, uncertain identity, with little or no Jewish commitment, or even antisemitic, who might annul the Law of Return
 - Avoids possible civil war between secular and religious factions
 - Talmud says sin'at chinam -- senseless hatred -- brought down the Second Temple
- If no expulsion from Spain, my parents would not have met and I would never have existed.
- If not forced out of Egypt, I would never have met my wife, had my children and grandchildren, and led a satisfying life

Objections

- Some say: 'Even so, it's not worth it.'
- Is this attitude fatalistic? Does it lead to, not only acceptance of bad events, but also not doing much to counter them before they happen, or react to them after they happen?
 - Not necessarily, but for some people yes.

In-Depth analysis: Slavery in Egypt

- God frequently punishes us in Tanach for something we did wrong:
 - Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and were expelled from the Garden of Eden
 - In Noah's day, the people were guilty of "great wickedness", "corruption" and "evil", and they died in the flood
 - King Nimrod built the Tower of Babel, and the world was punished by being forced to speak different languages
 - Sodom and Gomorrah wallowed in "wickedness and sin", and were destroyed

- Lot's wife looked back, even though she was told not to, and was turned into a pillar of salt
 - Korach and his followers rebelled against Moses, and the earth swallowed them up
 - The people were guilty of idolatry, adultery and murder, and were punished with exile and the destruction of first Temple
 - Etc.
- But there is one calamity God sent us without us doing anything wrong: Slavery in Egypt.
- Jacob and his clan were 70 strong when a famine forced them to go to Egypt, invited by Pharaoh through Joseph, and the next Pharaoh enslaved them for 210 years. They had done nothing wrong to deserve this:
 - "[God] said to Abram: 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).
 - [No reason given.]
- Evidently God thought slavery was necessary. But why, and why for so long? Possible answers:
- For our protection
 - Jacob's clan in Israel was an easy target for neighbors. In Egypt, a superpower protected us, albeit to exploit us.
 - To build up our numbers in safety
 - If 210 years = 10 generations and numbers double with each generation (4 children per couple), number was multiplied by $2^{10} = 1024$
 - If numbers triple (6 children per couple), multiply by $3^{10} = 59,049$; to get to the 3 million at Sinai, need about 2.9-fold multiplication per generation.
 - To build up our identity and community spirit
 - We were all in the same boat and followed the same customs
 - Midrash: 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]
 - To minimize contact with outside world
 - It may lead to idolatry and other practices later forbidden by Torah
 - To eliminate the possibility of intermarriage
 - Egyptians wouldn't want to marry slaves
 - Victims of rape would raise Jewish children
 - To create a scenario that allowed God to show the Jews and the whole world, with miracles and wonders that make a big impression, who was in charge (as He freed the Jews).

- The gratitude felt upon liberation made it easier for us to accept Torah
 - First thing God said at Sinai: "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the House of Bondage" (Ex. 20:2)
 - Commentator: The suffering in Egypt was to break our attachment to this world: Suffering makes one more spiritually inclined.
- The slave mentality made it easier for us to accept Torah
 - But once we accepted Torah, slave mentality became a burden, so God waited till generation of Exodus died out before letting us into the Land.
 - Maharal: Pesach is not the time of true freedom, but rather the time when we changed masters [from Pharaoh to God].
 - But one was for the benefit of the master, the other for our benefit.

But why couldn't God have made slavery less brutal and more tolerable? Because then few would have wanted to leave.

- Even as it is, 80% refused to go and died in the plague of darkness [Mechilta, Tanchuma, Beshallah 1].
- The rest went but grumbled many times about going back.

Conclusion

- It is always possible to find some good emerging from bad times.
- In the absence of a definitive answer, looking for the good is not a bad attitude to have, if it does not lead to resignation and passive acceptance.

Let us end with the traditional greeting:

"May this be the last Tisha B'Av we spend in mourning."