

Yom Kippur 5780
9 October 2019

God...How Could You!

When I was a rabbinical student, a dear friend of mine was diagnosed with cancer. He was barely 30 years old and we were spending afternoons together studying at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center while he received his chemo treatments. Several months passed and a healthy dose of medicine and prayer shrunk the tumors in his body. Life went on. We graduated, we built families, and we maintained our friendship. Never did I see my friend so happy than when I saw him dancing with his daughter last May at her Bat Mitzvah. The smile on his face extended from ear to ear, as he rejoiced with his family and close friends. Little did I know at the time that his cancer was recurring. The tumors returned with a vengeance, growing and spreading all over his body. Again, medicine and prayer controlled the cancer and another year went by. We saw each other over the summer, we bantered about the Yankees and Red Sox, and we reminisced about our days as students. And then the final strike was thrown. I got a phone call a few weeks ago. He was in the hospital again. The tumors were back, they were impacting his organs, and then the words you never want to hear: "The doctors said there is nothing else they can do." Palliative care is now involved and his children, 14 and 11, need to confront the reality that they will soon lose their father. He will not make it to his son's Bar Mitzvah, to his children's high school graduations, or his 19th wedding anniversary. Every parent dreams of seeing their children grow up, for my friend, the dream will soon vanish.

Minutes after Rosh Hashanah ended, I received a call about a different friend. This friend gave birth to a little baby boy on August 22. Born with a rare and challenging medical condition, this young child remained in the NICU, hanging on for dear life. On Erev Rosh Hashanah, this little boy took his last breath, he was 39 days old. His parents never got to hear his first words, watch him take his first steps, or know what flavor ice cream he would like best. What kind of books would he like to read? What would he study in school? Who would be his best friend? What contributions would he make to society? These questions and more will never be answered. The hopes and dreams of a parent for their child, vanished, in less than six weeks. To think about either friend literally makes me nauseated. I cannot begin to fathom the pain of losing a child, of watching a dream disappear before my eyes. I also cannot bear to think about the grief and pain of young children confronting a new reality without the love and support of their father. As I read the words of our liturgy this day, I am also distraught. *U'netaneh tokef kedushat hayom* – let us speak of the sacred power of this day...*mi yichyeh u'mi yamut* – who will live and who will die...*b'rosh ha'shanah yikkateivun, u-v'yom tzom kippur yeihateimun* – On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Two friends, two families, two futures that will never be written and sealed again in the Book of Life.

I enter Yom Kippur demanding answers. What could this precious child possibly have done to warrant such a decree? What about my friend, a faithful servant, who dedicated his life to serving God and the Jewish people. Can I possibly believe the sacred prayers of this day – prayers that suggest long life for those who engage in repentance, prayer, and acts of loving kindness? Just hours before Rosh Hashanah we read in the Torah: "If you and your offspring would live by loving the Lord your God [and] heeding God's commands...you shall have life and shall long endure upon the land" (Deut 30:19-20). What do I do with this? Must I believe

that God wasn't paying attention – like a hall of famer that just happened to strike out this time? Are the promises of our Torah and our liturgy simply false? Should I check my frustration at the door and pretend that God sits in perfect judgment over the world, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked?

A colleague of mine once said, “When I preach, I am talking to myself and I have no objection to others listening in.” I want to share with you this morning how I am working through this challenging reality and how I found inspiration from the most unlikely of places, the Book of Job. This book, the Bible's only full-length treatise on human pain and suffering, in many ways, challenges the entire Bible. It is a book that criticizes biblical theology and its naiveté. And it is a book that can offer a different way of understanding the vexing problem of bad things happening to good people. While still a work in progress, I want to offer three conclusions from my week of study and introspection.

A cursory reading of the Torah lays out very clearly our tradition's understanding of reward and punishment. Follow the commandments and you will be blessed with length of days. If not, great punishments await your future. The prophets come along and challenge this notion. We know this to be true from our haftarah this morning. Isaiah criticizes people who think they are so holy and close to God because they are fasting. Isaiah admonishes us by saying: You think God wants you to be pious, to have religious mannerisms, to bow down and fast? That's not what God wants. Feed people who are hungry, clothe the naked, help the poor. The real fast is to fight injustice. Many rabbis have used this as a call to action – myself included – but the message here is problematic. The prophets are still naïve.

This is where the Book of Job comes in. If the prophets offered a critique of traditional biblical theology, the Book of Job offers a critique of prophetic theology. Job asks, really? If I am righteous and I take care of the poor and I fight for social justice, God will protect me? You may recall that Job suffers three major catastrophes in his life. He loses his family, his fortune, and his health. Was he a bad person? Job is described as someone who always took care of the poor. He helped orphans that no one else cared for and made widows happy again. He was the eyes for the blind and the legs for people who could not walk. Job was the personification of the prophetic fantasy – a person who fought for justice and a person who *was* justice. And...Job still suffered. If the prophets tell us that rituals will not protect you, the Book of Job tells us that living a life of justice will not protect you either. My first conclusion is that I am not alone in wondering how such innocent individuals can suffer. This question is part of our tradition.

If you will indulge me for a few moments, I want to go back to the beginning of the story of Job. The book begins by describing Job as *tam v'yashar v'yireh Elohim v'sar merah* – perfect, upright, fearing God, and never doing anything wrong. How many biblical figures do we know never did anything wrong? The Patriarchs? The Matriarchs? Moses? King David? The answer of course is...none. Every one of our heroes was flawed. No one was perfect...until Job. Job is the first and only perfect biblical hero. In the meantime, something happens in heaven. God meets *hasatan* – often translated as Satan or the Adversary. God said to Satan, “Where have you been?” Satan answered, “I have been roaming all over the earth.” “Have you noticed My servant Job?” God said, “There is no one like him on earth: perfect, upright, fears God, and never does anything wrong.” It seems like God is a bit proud, perhaps even showing off. After all the sinners in the Bible, finally there is one that doesn't sin. Satan doesn't buy it. He responds, “Do you

think Job is good for no reason? Job is perfect because his life is perfect.” Satan represents classic cynicism. He doubts that human beings are actually good. God believes otherwise. God *wants* to believe otherwise.

Now the story gets interesting. Satan has an idea on how to solve this argument. Let’s take everything away from Job. Let’s kill his kids, let’s destroy his house, let’s put a plague on his body, and we will see if Job is still a good person. God agrees and they make a bet. I don’t know what God and Satan bet on, but they metaphysically shake hands. The next day, Job’s sons and daughters were at a party. Suddenly a mighty wind came and caused the walls to collapse, killing them all. When Job hears what happened he tore his robe, threw himself on the ground, and said, “*Adonai natan v’adonai lakach yehi shem Adonai mevorach* – the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken, praised be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). So who won the bet? God! Hooray...we settled the question. We know that human beings can actually be good.

There is just one little problem. We know that Job is good and we know that humanity can be good. But what about God? The next day, God encounters Satan again. They have a similar conversation as before. “Where were you?” “I’ve been roaming.” “Have you seen Job? He’s still perfect.” And then God says to Satan something amazing: “You convinced me to destroy Job for no reason.” Think about this. I couldn’t say it if the Bible didn’t say it. Just as we learned that Job was good for no reason, here we learn that God was *evil* for no reason! No longer are we asking if human beings are good. We are asking if God is good.

The story continues. Three friends come to console Job and they start a conversation. The discussion quickly turns into a heated argument. If anyone wants a lesson on what *not* to say to someone in mourning, this is it. These three friends say to Job: “God is not evil. If bad things happened to you, *you* must have done something wrong.” As the saying goes, with friends like these, who needs enemies! Job’s life keeps getting worse; his friends have betrayed him. Job fights back. “I *am* a good person,” he insists. Job’s only conclusion is that God kills good people *and* bad people. The reward system doesn’t work.

After some time passes, God appears before Job in a storm. For 36 chapters Job asks “why...why...” and finally God delivers an answer. God says to Job, “Who has such a strong opinion without knowing anything? (Don’t we all know people like that?) God continues and says, “I have some questions for *you*.” For an entire book we have been waiting for an answer and God answers with more questions. (This just proves God is Jewish.) God asks: “Where were you when I created the world...tell me!” God then goes on to describe the infinite complexity of the cosmos and the limitations of human intellect. “Since you don’t know how I created the cosmos,” God says, “you have no idea what cosmic justice looks like.” This is the classic answer from any course in theology. In order to have an objective judgement you need to have the full picture, and human beings never will. You think God didn’t answer the question? In reality, God undermined the question. Job responds: “I am small and unworthy. I realize my questions have no legitimacy. I cannot judge cosmic wisdom. I am not speaking anymore.”

Throughout history, many students of theology accepted the big picture answer. To this day it remains a common approach for understanding suffering. But it doesn’t work for me. Job accepts God’s answer, the big cosmic enigma theory. Can we accept God’s answer? I don’t think so, because we know the beginning of the story. We know why Job is suffering, and the answer

is not so mysterious. God is telling Job, “Oh, it’s a cosmic enigma,” and we’re thinking, “No, it was a bet.” And God did this *for no reason!* God’s monologue at the end of the book, in light of what happened at the beginning, seems completely ridiculous. Did the writers of the Book of Job assume that since the book is so long and difficult that by the time we got to the end we would forget the beginning? What is the purpose of this irony of ironies created at the end of the story?

The Book of Job not only raises *the* question: Why do bad things happen to good people; the Book of Job mocks the answer. The big picture theology is torn asunder and we are forced to reinterpret the Bible in light of the fact that a book like Job is in it. The Bible has a theology of a reward system, but the critique of that theology is also considered holy. The Book of Job does something vital for the Bible and for my own personal theology. The Book of Job *saves* the Bible. Without Job, the Bible is simply naïve. The Bible taught that good things happen to good people and the most radical retort from the prophets is to say that being good means feeding the hungry. We know that suffering comes to people who are vigilant when it comes to ritual and people who dedicate their lives to helping others. The Bible doesn’t work; it doesn’t fit the world we live in. And then comes the Book of Job. My second conclusion is: The fact that the Bible doesn’t work in the real world is *also* Bible. Upon witnessing the tragedies I have seen recently, my desire to dump biblical theology is actually a part of our traditional.

This brings me to my third and final point. The entire debate between Job and his friends was really an argument about whether we are allowed to criticize God. Job’s friends accuse him of not accepting his punishment. Job responds, “You are all liars. You know that bad things happen to good people. Because you are so self-righteous, you are unwilling to say that out loud. Are you going to lie to God about the world? Do you think you can deceive God like you deceive human beings, saying that everything is perfect when you know it’s not? You can’t manipulate God. God doesn’t want hypocrisy. God wants authenticity. My truth is my redemption.” So, who is right? Job or his friends? What does God want from us? What does God prefer? In the book’s final chapter God says to Job’s friends, “I am incensed and angry with you. Job spoke truth, and you expressed empty compliments” (Job 42:7). My final conclusion is that God doesn’t want false praise; God wants our truth.

If I have learned anything these last few weeks, it is the precariousness of life. Courageous and strong as people can be, *k’chatzir yavesh u-ch’tzitz novel* – we are like withering grass and a shriveled flower. Painful as it is to admit, some of us will not be here next year, and others will be diminished physically or otherwise. Whether “by fire or by...water,” in old age or in youth, frailty and death will be a part of our lives. But what really helped my religious life this week is the following. Being religious means sacrificing a lot. You sacrifice time and resources, you sacrifice doing things you want to do and eating foods you want to eat. Is our intellectual honesty one of those sacrifices? When I walk into the synagogue must I become naïve in order to be religious? According to the Book of Job, not only do we *not* have to sacrifice our intellectual honesty when we enter synagogue, but rather we *sin* if we sacrifice our honesty. Our intellectual honesty is not something we have to overcome to get close to God, it is something we have to cultivate and express. The Book of Job questions why good people suffer. The Book of Job validates our lived experiences. And the Book of Job makes the point that God’s desire is to hear the most authentic expression of our inner most thoughts.

Yom Kippur is the one day a year we recognize that bad things happen to good people. When we read the Martyrology – a series of stories about righteous Jews throughout history who suffered – we recognize a theology that is not naïve, we see the truth as something we should say out loud. Our sages teach us that on Yom Kippur God revealed God’s thirteen attributes. Yom Kippur is the only day the High Priest, who represents humanity, would call God by God’s name. Yom Kippur is also the only day we were allowed to enter God’s private room, the Holy of Holies. All year there is distance between human beings and God. On Yom Kippur we say God’s name, we walk into the Holy of Holies, and it’s a day where part of God is revealed. Perhaps the purpose of the Book of Job and Yom Kippur is not only to see God directly, but to see reality directly. Only when we recognize reality can we get closer to God.

There is a story told of a tailor who every year on Yom Kippur would quietly enter his closet upon returning from Kol Nidre services. He would take out a ledger and declare, “Master of the Universe, the time has come for You and me to reckon up our sins for this past year.” At once he began to list the sins he had committed. Then he went back to the closet, took out a thicker, heavier notebook, and said, “Lord, first I listed my sins, and now I will list Yours.” And with that he began to enumerate all the suffering, sorrow, illnesses, and tragedies that he and his community had endured during the year. When he was finished, he said, “Master of the Universe, to tell you the truth, You owe me more than I owe You. You know what, though? I’d just as soon not keep strict accounts with You. We are commanded to forgive the wrongs that have been done to us. Why don’t I just forgive You and You forgive me?”

I looked at my ledgers this week. I am about to lose a dear friend to cancer. Another friend just buried their 39 day old son, and I am angry with God. I am regularly sickened by the cascade of images from natural disasters across the planet. And when I read stories of mass shootings, I feel like washing my hands of this abusive relationship. I want to scream into the whirlwind, into the void I was once sure God filled. I want to scream: “We are alone in the universe. There is no master plan. There is no Power or Creator.” That is how I feel when I look at the horrible tragedies that punctuate each year. And I should ask God to forgive me? Because I missed a *minha*? Because I forgot to light Shabbos candles two weeks ago? God, there is no polite way to say this, and if we were alone in private I might choose some choice words, but I am pissed off at you! How could you! How dare you!

The Ishbitzer Rebbe (Rabbi Mordechai Yoseph Lainer of Ishbitza) once taught that when we are trying to understand God and we reach a point of no return, don’t make up stories, don’t try to cover up for God, don’t make God look good. What gives me strength on this Yom Kippur is knowing that this is exactly what God wants us to do. We don’t check our problems at the door or hang them up in the coatroom. We bring all of our *tzuris* into this moment, lay it out and say it like it is. This isn’t heresy, this is honesty. God doesn’t want flattery, God wants a human partner that will be honest, that will speak with authenticity, that will share the meditations of the human heart.

One of the occupational hazards of being a rabbi is my children hear about death far too often. Abba has a funeral. Abba is going to a *shiva*. They hear about the pain of others in a way most children do not. The other night, my son said to me, “Abba, what’s cancer?” I tried my best to offer an answer that a seven year old could comprehend. Then he said, “Abba, do you think if I ask God on Yom Kippur to cure cancer that would be a good idea?” I said to him, “I don’t

know if God can cure cancer...but maybe we can? What if you ask God to help us find a cure?”
“Ok, Abba, that’s a good idea.” I squeezed him tight as we sang the *shema*. I tucked him in bed, and said, “Good night...I love you.” Sometimes in the face of unexplainable tragedy and suffering the most honest thing we can do is pull our loved ones close to our hearts and hold them tight. God...that is all I ask of you now. Pull us close to your heart...hold us tight...and wipe the tears from our eyes. And I...I will try to do the same for you.