

The Power of a Limited God

If I were to ask you: “Why do people suffer?” What would you say?

While we might not ask this question every day, it comes up for everyone at some point or another. And I’m sure we all have some answers that feel intuitive to us. *I* do.

Before working as a hospital chaplain this past summer, I had my own set of logical and well-reasoned answers. Suffering, I thought, allows us to learn about ourselves and about the world. Pain is an important part of life because it helps us grow -- we learn the most during the most difficult moments of our lives. Everyone’s journey of hardship is different, but God stays with all those who suffer.

But in the hospital, something changed. My answers to this question were no longer abstract thought experiments. In the hospital, that’s where the theological rubber hit the worldly road. The more hospital rooms I visited, the more I knew that my answers wouldn’t totally cut it. When I walked into a room, greeted by a sick patient often in the throes of great physical and emotional distress, I had to wonder: Do my ideas about suffering hold up? Can they stand firm in the face of the pain that I am witnessing? Sometimes, they could. Often, they could not. I wondered if there were more possibilities.

As my summer work ended and I began to look forward to the High Holy Days, I began to notice many parallels between a synagogue on Rosh Hashana and a hospital room.

First parallel is that in both places, human emotions are amplified. Throughout these High Holy Days, many of us will feel that our pain, our relief, our fear, our regret and our sense of gratitude are magnified. During the course of our lives, we often relegate these emotions to a place outside of our consciousness-- we’re too busy to feel too intensely. Sometimes, our

emotional lives are painful and uncomfortable. We don't want to face them regularly. But on these days, we give ourselves permission to experience the full range of our emotional landscapes. I noticed that patients in the hospital often had similar experiences. In normal life, they don't have time to think about their biggest fears or their deepest gratitude. But place a person in a hospital, and her attunement to emotions becomes sharper.

A second parallel between a synagogue on Rosh Hashana and a hospital room is that on Rosh Hashana, like in a hospital, we have a lot of time to think. Our tradition, very wisely, requires that we set aside this time as an opportunity to reflect. This quiet time naturally leads us to think about our lives over the past year: the goals we have accomplished, the mistakes that we have made, the connections that we have fostered. Time in a hospital, which often feels drawn out and prolonged, allows for a similar type of deep contemplation.

The third parallel between a synagogue on Rosh Hashana and a hospital room is that the biggest spiritual questions, which we often deny during the course of our busy lives, are at the forefront during the High Holy Days. Where can I find the holy and divine in my life? Why have I suffered? Why is there so much distress and pain in our world? Even if we know that we can never find complete answers to those questions, today we ask them with urgency and fervor. For patients in a hospital, who face uncertainty about their health and even about their time left on earth, these same questions arise with a sense of exigency.

So how do we -- whether we be worshippers on Rosh Hashana or patients in a hospital -- start to form some answers? Many patients with whom I spoke came to strong conclusions. Some believed that God had ordained their suffering. Many believed that their illness was a punishment for sins or wrongdoings that they had committed. Others believed that they deserved their suffering, but that God did not give them more than they could handle. These explanations

of suffering are intuitive. If God is perfect and all-powerful, it must mean that God intentionally created the conditions of every life. If the circumstances of someone's life are joyful, that's what God must want. If they are miserable, that, too, must be what God wants.

To me, these intuitive explanations fall short. They might fit with our understanding of a powerful, just God who rewards the righteous and metes out punishment to the sinners. But they are not generous toward humankind. Nor are they generous to a God who deeply loves creation. We deserve our suffering? That can't be.

I want to suggest that our ideas about God might be wrong. Jewish tradition holds that humans are created *Betzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. But we tend to ascribe a limited number of traits to God. According to our scriptures and our musings, God can ONLY be mighty, perfect, and just. Our machzor gives us this image on the High Holy Days when it describes God as a king and a judge. The rabbis of the Mishnah even say: "On Rosh Hashanah, all the world passes before God like sheep...God fashioned the hearts of them all and knows all of their doings." If that's not complete power, I don't know what is.

But if we are truly created in the image of God, if we are God's mirror, then God must contain the ALL traits and tendencies of humankind. God, then, must be much more like us than we could even imagine. Humans are strong and powerful. So is God. But humans are vulnerable and meek, and God manifests these traits as well. Humans act in ways that are noble and helpful. So does God. But humans make mistakes and cause pain. So does God. Humans can show each other compassion, love, and acceptance, as does God. But sometimes the people we love the most do things that make us angry -- we, too, become angry at the God who shows us infinite love. Humans constantly seek and grant forgiveness. While we often imagine God showing mercy and granting forgiveness, we fail to recognize that God needs to ask our forgiveness, too.

We are limited, and perhaps God is also limited. And just as God shows us kindness and patience in the face of our human limitations, we need to show God that same patience when we encounter a limitation of God. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan spiritual teacher, goes a step further. He claims that God actually experiences suffering. “God is clearly not in control,” he says, “Look at the state of our country, of our world. It seems that God has almost no say. God allows into Godself all of the ecstasy and all of the agony of this planet. If you want to see God, look at the suffering and look at the joy. That’s God.”

Rohr speaks from the Christian tradition. But within the High Holy Days, I see three manifestations of these ideas. These are opportunities to recognize God’s fallibility and they serve as quiet invitations to grant God the forgiveness that I think God deserves:

This first opportunity is through the reading of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. Over the next two mornings, Jews all over the world will read the story of the binding of Isaac. God will ask Abraham: “קח נא את בנך, את יחידך, אשה אהבת, את יצחק” -- Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. And once you are there, offer him up as a sacrifice.” I won’t tell you what happens -- it’ll give you a reason to come back to Temple tomorrow morning. But I will tell you that I see this request as one of God’s biggest mistakes. God is so excited to have Abraham as a follower, so excited that someone has finally chosen to love God. I imagine God saying: “This has never happened before. And I want proof. Abraham, show Me how much you love Me.” In this demand for the sacrifice of Isaac, God reveals all of God’s insecurities, God’s need for love and acceptance, and God’s loneliness.

At the same moment where we begin to take stock of our mistakes, and ask God for forgiveness, we read in our most sacred book one of God’s greatest blunders. “I will forgive

you,” says God during the High Holy Days. But through the binding of Isaac, God beseeches us: “Can you forgive Me too?”

The second opportunity to empathize with God’s limitations is through our omission of Hallel. On Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of each new month, we chant and sing a series of psalms in praise of God, and we refer to this set of psalms as “Hallel.” During Hallel, we proclaim *Ki Le’olam Hasdo*, God’s goodness is forever. We shout “The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains leapt like rams, the hills like lambs.” During Hallel, we -- and the natural world -- heap praise upon God. But on Rosh Hashana -- not only the beginning of the Hebrew month *Tishrei*, but also the beginning of the new year -- we don’t recite Hallel.

The ancient rabbis and medieval thinkers claim that we don’t recite Hallel because we want to preserve the serious nature of this day -- how can we sing joyfully to God when we know that God is determining our fates for the coming year? But perhaps as modern people we can use a different explanation. During the High Holy Days, we heap much praise upon God. But we stop short of saying Hallel. We are just as grateful to God on this day as we are on every other, but we also acknowledge the moments where God has mis-stepped. We acknowledge that God has limits. Perhaps we recognize -- and accept -- that God can’t always make the hills leap and dance. Just as we want God to be patient with us on the High Holy Days, perhaps God wants us to be patient with God, too.

The third invitation for cultivating patience for God’s limitations is through the metaphors used to describe God on the High Holy Days. During the High Holy Days, we primarily refer to God as a parent and a sovereign, *Avinu Malkeinu*. We think of God as compassionate like a parent, and just like a sovereign. But since when are parents or leaders perfect?

We might, as children, have believed that our parents knew everything. I remember being with a friend who asked her mother a question. When the mother responded that she didn't know the answer, my friend had a tantrum: "But you're my MOM," she cried. "You HAVE to have the answer." To my friend, it was unfathomable that her mother was not omniscient. Same with our leaders. When we are young, we often believe that they know how to keep us safe and know how to make good decisions.

But as we grow up, we come to see our parents and our leaders as fully human. On the High Holy Days, it is our responsibility to look candidly at ourselves and at the others in our lives -- including our parents and our leaders. On Rosh Hashana, we are invited to see everyone's shortcomings. Perhaps this is also an opportunity to see the shortcomings of God, the ultimate parent and sovereign. With God, just like with other human beings, we try to accept the shortcomings that we can tolerate, and we speak out against the ones that we cannot.

There will always be times when I stand in awe and fear of the deeply powerful God into whose hand I entrust my life. But this is only one way to relate to God. I think that a being who contains infinite possibilities and manifestations wants me to relate in more ways than one. I want to give God my awe and my praise, and I want to stand before God with my anger and my frustration at the mistakes that God has made. I want to stand in supplication, seeking forgiveness, and I want to demand apologies from God when God has wronged me or our world. And most of all, I want to cultivate patience and empathy for those times when God just couldn't do any better.

Maybe I'm wrong about it all. Maybe the admission of limitations on divine power will upset and infuriate God. But maybe we can spark God's own curiosity. Maybe we can create a season of introspection just for God. Maybe it will allow God a chance to explore and inquire.

Maybe we'll be doing God a favor. And maybe God will be relieved; someone has finally allowed God to stop pretending to be perfect.

I've still retained some of my notions of suffering from before I worked in the hospital. I still believe that we learn important lessons in our most painful moments. I still hold that God can comfort us while we suffer. But I also now believe that we can't justify the suffering of others. In the face of human pain, we cannot say: "This is what God wants." God does not ordain our suffering. God can't believe that humankind deserves it. Just like we, humans, created in God's image, behave in ways that we regret, so, too, does God. Just like we, humans, make mistakes, so, too, does God. Just as we want to be forgiven by God, let us return the favor. May we be granted a New Year in which we show increased capacity for patience with humankind... and with the divine. Shana tova.