

Kol Nidrei – 5781

Raise your hand if you feel like Job

I mentioned last week that my position as rabbi grants me insight into what others are going through in ways that others may not have. I have had so many folks come to me to tell me that, “they don’t know how much more they can take. They are feeling like Job.” I think for a moment about all the things that have been going wrong in our world. Loved ones dying alone in the hospital or nursing homes, kids stuck at home without enough to do and driving everyone crazy, jobs and financial stability lost, the news depressing us with every emerging headline, wildfires, hurricanes, and putting on those extra COVID pounds doesn’t help at all. Then, add a bunch of those into one individual’s life and you begin to see how it could be overwhelming.

What does it mean to say you feel like Job? He was the wealthiest man living at the top of the social pyramid – the envy of all. But he was also a good, pious and generous soul - who saw his ten of his children all die, his wealth evaporate, his friends abandon him and his health diminish – all in one day! As the reader, we are shown the interplay between God and Satan but, from the point of view of the mortal, it just seems like too much to bear. These days, when we say, “I feel like Job,” it is a veiled critique of God: how could God allow all of this to happen to me? ‘I have done my part, when will God uphold the other half of the bargain?’

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of the now famous book, When Bad things happen to Good People is addressing this topic also known by the fancy name, “**theodicy**.” He says later in interviews that he didn’t call it, “Why Bad Things Happen” because he doesn’t know the answer to that question. Instead, he uses the text to offer possible responses to one’s predicament. In his commentary on the book of Job, Kushner asks deep and poignant questions which have relevance for our lives today. On the surface, the story seems to portray a frivolous God who plays with humans the way a bored cat may bat around a miserable mouse until it dies. In a wager between God and Satan on Job’s faith, God allows Satan to do his worst to Job – so long as the man is left alive – wishing to prove God’s certainty that Satan’s most evil machinations will not shake Job’s belief.

As a result, we can't blame Job who rails at God demanding, "Tell me what I have done to deserve this! Certainly, there must be an explanation why all my blessings have been removed and replaced by the worst curses imaginable!" What he is really challenging here is God's ethics. It is his cry for help in a nonsensical world, "Please assure me that there is someone in charge; a God who operates by a set of guidelines!" In fact, Job maintains his innocence but, in a way, he wants to be proven wrong and deserving of punishment. At least then, he would be reassured that God is operating in a Just way. What would you prefer? Living in a world that is controlled by an all-powerful but arbitrary and unpredictable deity...Or life in an arbitrary world ruled by a God who does not always control what happens in it? In this modern, secular day many might question if there is a God watching at all!

A child recently cried to me, "why is this all happening?" She asking this same question as Job; demanding an answer to one of the most central questions of the religious person: what is the nature of God? **[SLIDE]** Our religious traditions tell us three truths: That God is All-Powerful; God is All Good; And, God is All-Knowing. But our lived experience of the world tells us that they can't all be true at the same time.

Why does a healthy young adult become infected by COVID and die? Is it because God is All Powerful and All Good but God simply isn't Omnipotent and didn't know about the sickness? Or, is it because God is All Powerful and Knows about it but isn't Good enough to do the right thing? Or finally, is it because God is All Good and All Knowing and *would* save the individual, but God simply isn't powerful enough to prevent the tragedy? One of those three characteristics isn't operating...Which one are you willing to sacrifice?¹

Why do some get laid off and others keep their jobs? Why do some contract the virus and coast through when others suffer so badly? Why do some have full access to the lush fruits of America while others are relegated to the sidelines to watch the prosperity, privilege and power from afar? Did the sufferers do something to deserve their lot?

Because this problem has plagued religionists for so long, many a theologian have tried to offer responses. Psalm 119 tells us: "It is good that I have been afflicted, that I might be well

¹ Kushner, Harold. [The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Man](#). Schocken, 2012. p.66

instructed and learn Thy holy laws.”² Sometimes called the Positive Model of Pain – many find that suffering can play a redemptive role in a human’s life...that out of his affliction Job derived some unexpected benefits.³ Or Martin Buber argues that this is a case of *Hastarat panim* – when God turns away for a time leaving Job vulnerable to the evils of the world. Kushner points to God’s response to Job from the whirlwind: God begins with no mention of humanity...only the nature of the physical world as if to say, “Job, it’s not all about you. There are elements of God’s design that you will never understand and you’re going to have to accept your inadequacy.”

Do one of these responses speak to you? Are you finding your salvation in the difficulty of these days? Does it make you appreciate the times when God’s face *was* shining on you? Or, perhaps, the enormity of this moment helps you see yourself as far less significant than you like to imagine and puts you in your place, so to speak.

But, here’s another possibility and one that I think has a lot of merit in my own set of beliefs. In the earliest verses of Genesis, we are presented a model of creation only slightly varied from pagan versions in which the gods do battle and divide up the world between themselves. In the Torah, God creates the sun and moon and takes control of Light but leaves some Darkness. God pushes back the void and chaos and sets up the heavens. God pushes back the waters to create dry land but leaves Leviathan (an ancient name for a sea monster) swimming around in the depths. Finally, at the end of the chapter, God creates humans but chooses to leave the evil inclination within them. In other words, God arranged the world so that some element of residual chaos and the unpredictable would always exist. There is a hint at this in the book of Kings when Elijah realizes that “God was not in the fire, not in the earthquake, not in the wind,”⁴ Our version today may be, “God was not in the climate change, not in the virus, not in the heartlessness of the politicians.”

The chaos remaining in the world would suggest that that God works a full-time job to continually hold back Leviathan and the waters of Chaos and disease and despotic leaders and perhaps, from time to time, God fails to do so and some of the messiness slips past. Doesn’t it

² Ps. 119:71.

³ See James Davies.

⁴ I Kings, 19:11.

often feel like you are fighting to just barely hold back the waters of chaos in your own life? We *want* God to have better control than this but, the world as it is doesn't suggest that this is so.

Viktor Frankl teaches us that the world is established such that we can choose our response to God. And our response? Last week I told you how important it is to provide care and help for others suffering alongside yourself. Those on the front lines, essential workers and anyone working to make other's lives easier may be picking up the slack for what God isn't able to do. But, the American Poet, Archibald Macleish⁵ suggests that this is just the moment that you have the opportunity to reverse the relationship – to provide God with the Grace – the Undeserved Love, we have always been told comes *from* God – If God feels any upset at the suffering of humanity as a result of the Chaos that still remains, what an enormous act of generosity it would be to send our comforting thoughts and prayers back at God.

When I promise my son that we'll get ice cream later on and then I get a call for an emergency end-of-life hospital visit – I have to renege on my commitment. It tears my heart to have to tell him and he knows it. When he's at his best, he might say something like, "It's OK Abba. I understand." When the child turns to comfort the parent, beautiful things happen in all directions. He grows up a bit. The Abba accepts his limitations in the world. The all-encompassing sense of disappointment is transformed.

We call God, *Avinu* – our Parent. Imagine, like the water overflowing the levies, God feels miserable over the chaos that is overflowing into our world down here and you have the ability to whisper, "hush, there, there, it'll be OK." Like my young son, in our relationship with God we grow up a bit. We become more capable of loving ourselves and others? Without our love, God ceases to be God – just creator. During the silent Amidah in a few minutes, try praying this sentiment - *Nachamu, nachamu Eili* – Comforted, Be Comforted, My God.

When God finally responds to Job from the Whirlwind, the man is satisfied. He backs down in his indictment of God quickly and completely - not so much because of the satisfactory answers God provided about the nature of the world and chaos – but by the simple contact with God. One of the last lines of the Book offers some insight here. Kushner amends it to read: "I reject [everything that has been said to this point by me and my friends] and [having

⁵ Macleish, Archibald. J.B. A Play in Verse. 1957.

met God and been reassured that I am not alone and abandoned in this world] I am comforted, vulnerable human being that I am.”⁶

These days, I so often feel the same as Job when he yearns, “If only I could return to the days when God was my guardian.”⁷ Do you remember any of those moments that you came to realize that your parents could not protect you from everything? Do you remember experiencing that same understanding *as a parent*? Somewhere, deep inside each of us is the child who wants protection from chaos. Somewhere less deeply buried, we sadly admit that won’t happen. Perhaps somewhere inside, we can find the courage to turn to God and offer traditionally renewed words of comfort: ינחם המקום בתוך שער אבלי יושבי תבל – May God Be Comforted Amongst All the Mourners of Humanity. And, let us say, “Amen.”

⁶ Kushner. p.160. based on Job 42:6.

⁷ Job. 29:2