

Why do bad things happen?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For thousands of years we have been asking why God lets bad things happen to good people and good things happen to very bad ones. On Yom Kipur we read the medieval poem *Eyleh Ezkera* which is a moving story of great rabbis tortured death for defending their faith against Rome and Christianity. Why did they suffer? All God can say, according to the Talmud, is that "It was My will."

There were earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian stories of good people suffering. But none that go into such theological and poetical detail. In the pagan world, humans are just the playthings of the gods. Think of Ulysses thrown around the Mediterranean by competing gods and goddesses. The mention of Satan in the Book of Job came from a period when many cultures believed that there were two conflicting forces at work in the universe, a force for good and another one for bad. On the face of it, this story ascribes evil to Satan. But clearly, it is not the case, because here Satan has no independent power. Satan can only function with the permission of God.

The Talmud offers many different responses, to this issue; in this world and the next. But the most moving and comprehensive attempt to find an answer, is in the Biblical Book of Iyov, we know as Job. It tries to explain the inexplicable. Did we do something to deserve it? Does God really care or intervene?

The book introduces us to Satan. The Torah usually uses the word STN as a verb meaning to block, to oppose or get in the way negatively. Anything that prevents us from doing the right thing. Only towards the end of the Bible, does Satan become personified. But in post-exilic Judaism, he is not seen as an opponent or competitor of God. Rather as one of God's underlings.

At a gathering of angelic forces in Heaven, God asks Satan whether he is not impressed by how God fearing and righteous Job is. Satan replies that Job is good only because everything has gone well for him in life. God allows Satan to test him. Job's property is taken away, his children are killed, his health taken away from him. Job sits on the earth in mourning and curses the day he was born. But he neither curses nor blames God.

The book is devoted to a series of conversations, in difficult and poetic Hebrew, between three friends who come to comfort Job. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Often called "Jobs Comforters." Ironically, they do not comfort him at all, only agitate him more. They sit with him on the earth for seven days in silence. From which comes the custom (more adhered to nowadays in the breach) of not starting a conversation with mourners until they start.

Job wonders why he was born if he has to suffer. And how can a human possibly come up to Gods expectations. We, all of us, inevitably fail to some degree. Humans are born to toil, to struggle.

Eliphaz replies that God has created an amazing world for us to inhabit. So that when bad things happen it is God disciplining and directing us to try to be better. Things will turn out well in the end. But then why does God seem to punish some and not others? Job can see no logic, no hope and just wants his agony to end.

Bildad says that God only punishes those who deserve it. It is just that Job like all humans may not know the whole story. Perhaps his family did wrong. God cannot be unjust says Bildad. We just do not know how God works. But Job replies that we cannot expect God to be just in the way humans can be just because God is not human. Besides if Job has done wrong without realizing it, then it is God's fault for making him that way. Why does God create humans altogether if they inevitably fail.

Zophar believes that Job is suffering because God wants him to. Bildad argues that there is a reward for good deeds or punishment for bad. He seems to be saying the world is random. Zophar says that God punishes those he loves. But what kind of love is that? Job is annoyed with the comforters who trot out the conventional banal wisdom. Job wants to challenge God directly. To put God on trial. Then Elihu arrives and says that God does indeed care. If God does not respond in the way we expect God to, it is because God does not want to for God's own reasons.

Finally God responds angrily asking them all to look at creation and see what God has done. It is so beyond human imagination or capability. Humans shouldn't think they are so important as to try to understand God. What do humans really understand? Job capitulates. God is angry with the comforters and demands they atone for their failure to comfort Job. God rewards Job by returning his wealth and giving him more children.

Notice that there is absolutely no mention of an afterlife or reward in the next world throughout the Book of Job. And the idea that God allows the world to function without intervening contradicts the Talmudic idea that not a blade of grass moves on earth without God commanding it. You might even say the book is heretical in terms of orthodoxy nowadays.

The simple person, Tuvia the Milkman, believes that the good are rewarded even if they suffer. They are being tested like Abraham. And God knows best and has a much longer view and agenda. Everything that happens, happens for the best. Goodness will be rewarded, if not in this world then in the next. The rationalist, on the other hand, cannot make sense of a world of divine intervention if tragedies like the Holocaust are allowed to happen. One simply has to stand silent in the face of horror. It is not that God does not care, or is remote or unfeeling. The mystics say that God suffers too when we do. Neither on the other hand, does God do whatever everyone asks for. It's like expecting God to ensure that competing soccer teams at the same game both win. God is the universe and more, and it is this sense of being part of something so much bigger than we are, that we cannot totally comprehend.

God is hidden as the Kabbalists say. We humans have to accept our fate and make the best of our lives. Some of us are created with better brains, healthier or stronger bodies. Some of us waste our talents. Others achieve

far more than anyone would have expected. The person of simple faith has no questions. The rationalist has no answers. The Mishna in Avot honestly admits that we simply do not know. We cannot explain it. The God that is small enough for my mind is not big enough for me.

I often hear such nonsense spouted by people (doubtless well meaning) who claim to know the mind of God and how God works. They say such things as that God only tests you to the limits of your capacities. Or God only gives you as much as you can bear. As if God has nothing better to do than to play games with us.

Rabbis, ministers, counselors, and friends are desperate to help (or to enrich themselves). They mean well but they often spout rubbish at houses of mourning or tragedies. They try to give simple answers when there are none. The greatness of Job is that he rejects false, irrational arguments. And yet his sense of God is so overwhelming and powerful that he accepts it as it is. Regardless of what may happen. And that is his comfort.

Nowhere in our tradition does it say that pain, suffering is good or necessary. But we do regard it as something we can learn from. That is as they say, after the event has happened one can draw conclusions from it.

At this time of the year, we have time to think about such issues. God is indeed a different kind of phenomenon. We can only know God in our own minds. And we can know how we are to behave and cope with life through Torah. God can offer an emotional support structure, even when we do not understand what or why something is happening to us. Just as a mother can only comfort a child in pain through her presence and love. The one thing we know for certain, is that it is up to us to make the most of our lives on this earth, as human beings and as Jews, whatever life throws at us for better or worse.

If anyone ever tells you he or she knows how God works, you know you are in the presence of a charlatan.