Heavenly Justice

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As we celebrate the miracles of Chanukah, we are bound to ask why sometimes some people are saved and at other times not. A month ago four men, all pious, learned, charitable and altruistic, were hacked to death in a Jerusalem synagogue as they prayed to God in tallit and tefillin. They were not ideologues or fighters. Just Jews who wanted to be good human beings and practice their religion in what they believed was their Holy Land. And we must not forget the death of the valiant Druze policeman who intervened.

If religion tells us that repentance, prayer, and charity averts evil decrees or that those performing a good deed are protected, why were they not protected particularly at that moment?

Why did Heaven decree hundreds of years of painful servitude before the Israelites were freed from Egypt? Why have two temples destroyed and the innocent as well as the guilty raped, sold into slavery, or killed? Why go through thousands of years of exile, oppression, torture, and death at the hands of Christianity and Islam or the Holocaust of innocents before being able to return home? Or why, simply, in the words of the Talmud, does a good person suffer?

Abraham asked the question first and we have been repeating it ever since. The answers fall into different categories. Peoples, nations rise and fall, succeed and fail as groups, not individuals. Individuals get caught up in wider conflicts and crises, to quote Proverbs, “like birds in snares.” If good people die as their nation slides into periodic decline, is it because they failed to alert or to change or to persuade their contemporaries to be better people? Unlike other cultures thousands of years ago, we recorded our errors and failures. Two temples were destroyed because good people failed, because we brought it all upon ourselves, says the Talmud. So, yes, we are often the authors of our own obituaries; but is that the whole story?

The legend goes that when Rebbi Akivah was being tortured to death the angels challenged God and He replied: ”Silence! It’s my decision.” That’s one answer. We cannot know the mind of God. A different opinion in the Talmud is that “the world functions according to its own rules”, although that avoids the issue of who made the rules in the first place. And there were great rabbis who honestly admitted that they had no explanation at all.

We are told that there is no justice in this world altogether, it is all in the Next. But even this position is modified by the opinion that no one has ever seen the Next World or knows very much about it. So why then do so many of us think that rabbis, mystics, Shamans and mind readers can really know or guarantee us anything? Is it just our need for certainty that gulls us into believing what we want to?

I want to suggest an alternative narrative. The function of religion is not,

as is often stated, to answer all our questions. It cannot and does not. That is, after all, why the Talmud said its better not to enquire too much about things we cannot know. Rather its function is to help us cope. By giving us a framework for living that incorporates the unknown and the unknowable, it forces us to think, instead, of our own daily behavior. Having a framework enables us to deal with tragedy and loss because it's when one has no distractions that one can dwell on what has gone wrong and why, and depression can so easily set in. That's the meaning of the sentence in Proverbs about the person who takes to his bed claiming there's a lion outside. Too much abstracting and not enough doing has been the downfall or religions as well as individuals.

In addition, focusing on a Divine non-physical being enables us to think beyond our immediate physical world. In a way it's also a kind of distraction. It enables us to handle pain in the way we try to think of other, nicer, more comforting things. Exercises such as deep breathing and relaxing, which help us cope with physical pain, also help us cope with mental pain, with the unthinkable.

The Biblical Hebrew word for faith is "Emunah". But Emunah has a root of being firm, strong, reliable. In other words having the strength to persevere and survive. Belief in God does not necessarily mean everything will be taken care of or put right. Rather it means that we have something to hold on to, a good friend or a transcendental experience that can take us out of our physical world and give us an alternative to an intolerable present.

Indeed that's exactly what so many expect from our rabbis and gurus and magicians, too. I just find it strange to rely on fallible humans for certainty when it is clear that they themselves cannot have all the answers.

The widow of one of the slain in Har Nof said it happened because of rivalry and hatred within the Orthodox community. Not unlike the tradition that Rabbi Akivah's pupils all died because they did not show each other respect. This does not mean that that really was the reason. I take it to mean that when a tragedy happens, any tragedy, we must use it as an opportunity for self-examination and repentance and to think that "there but for the grace of God go I." And if I have been spared I must use the gift of life well and fully.

Hanuka (however you spell it), precisely for this reason, gives two narratives: the proactive one of taking responsibility, defeating enemies, and getting a second chance, and the passive miracle of the oil, of things we don't understand. We must embrace the inexplicable. Much as I respect and admire scholars who are also good human beings and would trust them before most others, I know that throughout our history our good and our great have disagreed, argued, and often made what were with hindsight clearly the wrong decisions. Infallibility is a Catholic concept and one that emerged in response to the challenges of modernity. That is not the example that we should be following. Acceptance and appreciation of life is the gift of Heaven. So is trying to do our best.