

# Thoughts on Chanukah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Why do miracles happen sometimes and not others? Is it because we deserved them?

Many rabbis like to claim that when bad things happen it is only because we have done something to deserve it. So why do horrible things happen to, say, newly born children who couldn't possibly have done anything to deserve it? Why are millions of innocent children murdered, or pious, learned, charitable people hacked to death in a Jerusalem synagogue as they prayed to God? Were they punished for being Jews? Or were the hundreds of thousands of women, children, and men of Aleppo tortured, raped, bombed, gassed, and exiled punished for being the wrong sort of Muslim? It is too facile to think that God works that way.

Some will tell you that it has to do with the gilgulim, the transmigration of souls and punishment for earlier crimes. Such irrational theories are a recent arrival on the Jewish scene, not found in the Torah or the Talmud. Rational minds find such ideas as illogical as resorting to astrologers and palm readers.

Religions tell us that repentance, prayer, and charity avert evil decrees, or that those performing a good deed are protected. And yet it is said that there is no justice in this world; it is all in the Next World. But since no one has ever seen the Next World or knows very much about it, these are non-rational solutions. So why then do so many of us think that rabbis, mystics, Shamans, and mindreaders can really know or guarantee us anything? Is it just our need for certainty that gulls us into believing what we want to?

It is true the Torah speaks as if God conforms to human standards. Promising good things if we obey and bad things if we do not. But one cannot learn law or philosophy from biblical metaphors. Yet we are warned not to think of rewards for our actions, but to do things because they are the right things to do. As Rabbi Yaakov says, we simply do not know why the good suffer and the bad prosper (Avot 4:16).

The simple answer is that while we may discover the rules of the universe, we just do not know how God works. The Torah itself says (Deuteronomy 24:16) that one is only punished for one's own sins, not for others'. But what if one has not done anything to deserve an early death? Bad things happen. Not in payment for actions, but simply the way of the world we live in. If a jet crashes, it is usually because of a malfunction or terrorism. Earthquakes, avalanches, or typhoons are part of nature. Not designed to pay humans back for some offense.

The function of religion is not, as is often stated, to answer all our questions. It cannot. That is, after all, why the Talmud said that sometimes it is better not to enquire too much about things we cannot know (they were

not talking about science). Rather religions function to help us cope, by giving us a framework for living that incorporates the unknown and the unknowable. We have to deal in life with things beyond our control as well as the consequences of our own daily behavior. Having a framework enables us to adjust to tragedy and loss. It's when one has no framework for living, that depression can so easily set in. Focusing on a mystical idea enables us to think beyond our immediate physical world, to handle pain by thinking of other, more comforting things. Exercises such as deep breathing and relaxing help us cope with physical pain, mental pain, and the unthinkable.

The biblical Hebrew word for faith is "Emunah". But Emunah is not a theological proposition. It has a root of being firm, strong, reliable. Having the resilience, the strength to persevere and survive. Belief in God does not necessarily mean everything will be taken care of or put right. God is not Superman, or a machine that you put something in that guarantees you get something out. Belief gives reassurance, something to hold onto—an alternative to an intolerable present.

We humans are biodiverse organisms with millions of microbes within us and without (see *I Contain Multitudes* by Ed Yong). They are constantly battling with each other and themselves to perform different functions in our bodies. They build and destroy different parts of us every second of our lives. Sometimes these microbes help break down food and help create blood cells. Sometimes they turn against us and cause malfunctions and what we call diseases. Sometimes they fight off intruders and sometimes, like fifth columnists, they welcome them in. Why are we not surprised when slowly our bodies deteriorate towards death? We may mourn and be sad at the loss. But we hardly need an explanation of "why."

When something goes wrong in our bodies, it is not a malevolent agent punishing us. All of this is simply how the world works. As the Talmud says, "The world runs according to its own rules." (Avodah Zara 54b)

Now it is true that when things go wrong we are encouraged to check to see if there's anything we have done wrong or could do better. If we survive an accident, we may be tempted not only to thank God, but also to determine to live a more meaningful life henceforth in gratitude for our survival. But that does not mean the accident or the disease was a punishment, a payback.

Is it a punishment if I was born with a poor brain but a strong body? Or if I am less gifted musically, but better at sport? Or if I am born into a rich family or a poor one? We all have some things going for us, even the most handicapped. And plenty of humans who seem gifted with enormous benefits squander them.

I guess that if we were to look back at our lives and at history, we would probably discover that there's a reasonable balance between the good things that have happened to most of us and the bad. Our task is to make the most and best out of our lives, our gifts, and our circumstances.

Chanukah (however you spell it) reminds us of the proactive-taking responsibility, of facing challenges and getting a second chance. It's a most

relevant idea. Of how two thousand, one hundred and sixty five years ago we were threatened with extinction and yet we survived. All these years later others are being threatened with extinction now. The world stands by as people are suffering in Syria. That's why it's so important to be in control of our own destiny. But it is also essential to care and be proactive about helping others beyond our own little Jewish world.

Chanukah also stands for the spiritual miracle of the oil, of keeping flames alight when others would extinguish them. It is a historical example of when things went right for us. Other days in the calendar remind us of our catastrophes. Neither we nor the universe is perfect. The world was made out of chaos and remains chaotic. There is no panacea. No perfect solution or answer. We only know we must do our best.

Maimonides, interestingly, in his laws about Chanukah, ends the chapter with a little homily on how important peace is, peace for us, peace for the world. We ignore the rest of the world at our peril, not to mention moral failure. At the very moment that we celebrate our deliverance we must, says Maimonides, think about others too.