

Why?

Innocent worshippers were shot outside a synagogue. Children were mowed down intentionally at a bus stop in Jerusalem. Seven people were shot in Monterey. Nineteen people were killed in storms in California. A hundred dead in mudslides in Peru. Over 40,000 and rising innocent humans were killed in Turkey and Syria by the earthquake and thousands more are left starving, freezing, and shelterless. Where was God in all this?

Not to mention all those horrible things that human beings have always done to each other all over the world. I am still traumatized by the very idea of the Holocaust and that anyone could take so many babies and blow their brains out or smash them against walls in cold blood the way so many Europeans did not so long ago. It could easily have been me. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are abandoned and neglected and no one seems to care. Money is squandered on arms and terrorism instead of humanitarianism. An evil man like Vladimir Putin thinks nothing of sending torrents of missiles upon innocent civilians simply because he wants something the victims do not. All the daily crises around the world with millions suffering.

If you are a rationalist, you will say that the natural world functions according to its own rules. Volcanos and earthquakes are simply the physical movements of the earth's crust. They don't intend to kill anyone. But if we are in the way we will get hurt. Floods have always happened. Avalanches engulf skiers, and we catch diseases, and we die. If we don't look where we are going, we may get run over, or if we go to a crowded rock concert, we may catch Covid.

If disasters, whether man-made or natural, are punishments from God then what did children in the Holocaust or Rwanda or Aceh do to deserve it? If God does control the world, then punish the baddies or protect the good. Is all this God's fault if as the Talmud says not a blade of grass moves on this earth unless God wills it?

The problem comes when you have to deal with Torah texts that appear to get God to conform to human standards, such as Abraham saying, 'Won't the Judge of all humanity be humane?' Or Moses saying "God is just and forgiving" or indeed God Himself saying He rewards the good and punishes the bad? One answer the rabbis gave was simply 'Not in this world.' You can take it or leave it. The whole point of God is as something not human that does not conform to our limited minds.

How often are we told that if we suffer it is because we must have done something to deserve it? Or that God works in mysterious ways? Or that we all have predestined life spans and if a child dies it is because it fulfilled some important role and who knows whether a short good might not be better than a long and bad one? Attempts to explain often fall flat. Even Hillel and Shammai concluded that life is so tough it would have been better not to have been born!

Yet when bad things happen people often ask why did this happen to me? Me? Not him or Her? But they don't ask why they have been so fortunate to have had a roof over their head, food on their table, a car to drive, and fine vacations. A spot on our nose hurts more than someone else's broken leg. What people want and need is comfort. Love and concern. These are emotional responses, not rational ones.

There is a very different way of looking at this. The mystical tradition sees things in a non-rational way and finds comfort in other ways. Just as some people are brighter than others or more emotional or spiritual, so in religious matters, some find comfort in simple faith and some in pseudo-rational explanations, and some in hocus pocus. The placebo effect is very powerful and often helpful. But it is not rational.

The role of God for the mystic is not to solve our problems, a cookie store, a slot machine, or Superman. A mystical or non-rational dimension compares God to love. It is an experience that gives strength and emotional support. I don't turn to God to solve my problems or answer why. I simply experience loving energy that is, rather than does. I accept forces beyond my control and focus on what I **can** affect. Some mystics claimed that you need to fight God, argue, and accuse and the very anger is at least a connection, an engagement. There is the famous myth of the rabbis in Auschwitz convening a court to try God and found Him guilty, but then got up to pray. God can be a kind of emotional punching bag. As well as comfort even in the darkest hour.

When someone is in pain and asks 'Why?' they don't necessarily want a rational answer. They want to be comforted and not necessarily with words.

My favorite opinion in the Mishna (*Pirkei Avot 4:19*) is that of Rabbi Yannai who said, "We can't explain why good people suffer and bad people flourish." At least he doesn't try to palm us off with answers that do not satisfy. I am suspicious of those who claim to know how God works. But I do think providing comfort is crucial. One can love someone madly and yet not understand them completely. The love remains despite the disappointment.

The Torah keeps on repeating the need for love and respect. Rules and warnings help with the disciplines and structures we need in life. But it is passion and love and helping others that can help us cope. Emotional intelligence matters just as much as intellectual. God falls within those parameters rather than philosophy (with apologies to Maimonides). Most of us just seek comfort. A hug rather than a sermon.

I have just read a book by an important rabbi and philosopher Sam Lebens "A Guide for the Jewish Undecided: A Philosopher Makes the Case for Orthodox Judaism." I expected better. He uses a variation of Pascal's wager to persuade us to consider believing in God. Blaise Pascal was a seventeenth-century French theologian and mathematician who argued that a rational person should believe in God. Because if God does not exist, such a person will not lose very much. Whereas if God does exist, he stands to receive infinite gains in the next world and avoid hell. So, if it's a fifty-fifty chance of God existing why not go for it? What have you got to lose? Sounds like a commercial. And even if you are willing to act on speculation, this still

does not tell me that God exists or how God thinks or works.

Much as I love philosophy, when it comes to God it is a very weak tool. I don't turn to God to solve my problems or answer why. I turn to God to feel things I might not otherwise and experience something that is, rather than something that does what I think it ought to.