

Why So Angry, O Lord?

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Tisha B'av raises for us the eternal problem of suffering and pain and evil. Permit me to discuss with you, however briefly, some of these timeless issues which, unfortunately, are always timely.

On Tisha B'av, as well as on other fast days, we read the portion which records the prayer of Moses when he was informed atop Mount Sinai that while he was receiving the Torah, his people, in their impatience, had built a golden calf and were worshipping it. The Torah tells us:

And Moses besought the Lord his God and said: why, O Lord, doth Thy wrath wax so hot against Thy people?

Exodus 32:11

ויחל משה את פני ה' אלהיו ויאמר למה ה' יחרה
אפך בעמך:
שמות לב:יא

In modern English, Moses pleaded with God: why so angry, O Lord? True, the people sinned, but why so angry? Why so harsh a punishment? Is there really a correspondence between the extent of the sin and the degree of punishment? In effect, Moses is presenting to God the greatest and most impenetrable mystery for religion and all humanity: Why so angry, O Lord?

It is a question appropriate not only to Tisha B'av, but also to every other disaster and cataclysm, every destruction and exile, that has befallen our people. It is a question that troubles us concerning Israel, which this past year has seen so much depression of morale and spirit. It is, preeminently, the great question of the Holocaust. And while all these instances are communal and collective, there is also the acute problem of the individual who suffers. Where is there a person who has not experienced a touch of grief, a taste of anguish; who does not someplace in his or her own heart conceal some great and terrible fear, whether the fear of death and mortality itself, the fear of disease and sickness, or the fear of loneliness and abandonment? All of these force us to confront the question of suffering and pain.

When the rabbis (Berachot 32a) analyzed this verse, they concluded with some rather remarkable insights. The word ויחל comes from the word in Hebrew which means, "to pray fervently." But the rabbis came up with a quite different and amazing derivation. They said the word comes from חולה, to be sick!

The Rabbis say that Moses remained in a state of prayer until he became sick. Abaye adds that he remained praying until God became sick! Indeed, suffering and the questions and challenges thrown upon suffering are a sickness and heartache, for both man and God.

Evil and suffering are a sickness for Moses, because he has no answers, only questions. And they are a sickness for God for many reasons, because in ways that are beyond our comprehension, He often afflicts the tzaddik (righteous man), as well as the rasha (guilty one); because He suffers with man – בכל בשר, He commiserates with man. God is not indifferent, He is sympathetic to man. And it is a

sickness for God because all genuine suffering and the very presence of evil in a world created by a good God are an insult to Him, a shame, a disgrace, a scandal, a desecration!

As the central mystery of life, Moses did not get any answers and God offered none. How then shall we approach such a vast and impenetrable mystery? Since we cannot have answers, our most creative efforts must be directed to trying to formulate the question properly. This is a task that can and should engage us for months and years. Today, however, we shall perforce restrict ourselves to a few brief comments.

An astounding and almost shocking Midrash expands on the dialogue between God and Moses:

Said R. Nehemia: at the time that the Israelites made the calf, the Holy One sought to destroy Israel. Said Moses, "Master of the World, this calf is good for You, it can help You." Said the Holy One to him, "how can it help Me?" Said Moses to Him, "if You bring down the rain, it can raise the dew; if You cause the winds to blow, it can provide the lightning." Said the Holy One to Moses, Have you too succumbed to the error of idolatry in the matter of the calf? Said Moses to the Holy One, "Master of the World! If so, why are You so angry, O Lord, at Your people?"

Shemot Raba 43:6

רבי נחמיה אמר בשעה שעשו ישראל אותו מעשה עמד לו משה מפייס את האלהים אמר רבון העולם עשו לך סיוע ואתה כועס עליהם, העגל הזה שעשו יהיה מסייעך ... אתה מוריד את הטל והוא משיב רוחות, אתה מוריד גשמים והוא מגדל צמחים, אמר הקב"ה משה אף אתה טועה כמותם והלא אין בו ממש, אמר לו א"כ למה אתה כועס על בניך הוי למה ה' יחרה אפך בעמך.
שמות רבה פרשה מג:ו

It is, of course, possible that the Rabbis endeavored here to stress the note of Moses's heroism and self-sacrifice. Moses acts as if he too were guilty of idolatry in some measure, because he knows that God will not destroy him, and he seeks thereby to spare his weak and fallible people.

But I see something that I think is perhaps more profound and more subtle.

Moses, according to the Rabbis, is introducing at this crucial juncture of Israel's history, a redemptive touch of humor! There is a twinkle that glistens in the tears in Moses' eyes as he addresses the Holy One. His argument before the Lord is one which brings out the sense of the absurd in both sin and punishment. Not absurd in the sense of the ultimate meaninglessness of life, of the irrationality of existence, of its broken and fragmented and tragic nature. Rather, in an exquisite merging of humor and grief, he exposes the absurdity of sin and the absurdity of punishment in another sense.

Look at what those Israelites were worshipping - a mute, impotent, statue! Descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were bowing down to a fetish! How stupid of them!

No man sins until he is overcome by the spirit of madness
Sotah 3a

אין אדם עובר עבירה אא"כ נכנס בו רוח שטות
מסכת סוטה דף ג.

They are mad, these Israelites, they are crazy. Otherwise, they would never engage in such absurdity.

And then Moses uses the absurdity argument on God Himself. O Master of the World, are You really so furious at Israel that You are ready to destroy them for bowing down to something which is really nothing? I can understand an all-powerful Deity being upset by the challenge of a lesser Deity which has some power of its own. But You know and I know there is nothing in the world that can challenge You; that there is no sovereignty but Yours, that this calf can bring neither rain nor dew, neither wind nor lightning. Then why are You so angry, O Lord? Instead of your wrath waxing hot, You should be doubling up in laughter. You should be hurling at them not the threat of destruction, but the devastation

of ridicule. Considering the extent of their folly, Your reaction is disproportionate. The absurdity of Israel's sin deserves something more from You than the absurdity of utter destruction.

Moses, if I am right in interpreting the Midrash, is trying to transform a national tragedy into cosmic farce. His question, "Why so angry, O Lord?" is an emphasis on and revelation of the absurd. It is an argument that is in itself the holiest of prayers.

The point of Moses, as the Rabbis elaborated it, is not confined to the incident of the calf. It is well-nigh universal. All sin is bizarre, ludicrous, ridiculous. Whenever we place our ultimate faith in anything or anyone but God, we are simply being foolish.

Shall we trust power? President Richard Nixon aspired to and attained the most powerful position in all the world - the leadership of the mightiest nation on the face of the earth. And it seems that in a few weeks he may yet be toppled from power! Others place their trust in the great potentiality of America's wealthy markets. But today the stock exchange stagnates. Others place all their faith in the money they amass, and the new pessimistic economists tell us that it is quite possible that soon the money will not be worth half of what was paid for it. So many of us, with almost naive piety, place our confidence and faith in science and technology. What is happening? Technology often double-crosses us. For all the good it has done, it brings us, as well, warnings of mass destruction, of irreparable environmental damage, and the specter of irreversible genetic injury.

And so we turn to God and say to Him: because we were foolish, does that mean that You, as it were, Heaven forbid, should react to us in the same way? Spare us, O Lord! Laugh at us if You will, but no destruction!

Tisha B'av is the time that our historic memory turns into dire and somber expectations of a repeat of a tearful past. Jews who have not forgotten the woes of their ancestors are afflicted once again with the sickness that they share with God. The memories of ancient cataclysms and exiles and destructions merge together into a mighty underground river of collective apprehension. The recollections of ancient disasters segue into their consequences which are being played out this very day. The long chain of catastrophes intertwine with an occasional thread of hope - not quite enough to banish the deep sense of foreboding that holds us within its grip, but at least a glimmer of hope for redemption.

At a time of this sort we turn to God, and out of our tears we appeal for His smile, we ask Him to laugh. What kind of laugh? Perhaps it is best described in a great story about the prince and the son of the maid who were exchanged at birth, told by that most mysterious of all Hasidic masters, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav. In this tale, the prince who is banished from his kingdom and his home is lost in a strange forest. He is all alone, cold and hungry. The night comes, and he curls up under a tree. Suddenly, towards the very end of the night, before dawn, he is paralyzed with fear: from the distance, a weird noise issues, growing ever louder. Peals of unworldly laughter rock the earth and make the trees tremble and the leaves shiver in the entire forest - convulsive laughter that makes the very earth quake under the forest! The next day, the prince asks the strange man of the forest he had met for the meaning of this laughter. The latter explains: it is the laughter of the day as it takes over from the night.

That is the laughter that we await: the laughter of day that takes its revenge on the night; the joy of justice as it defeats evil in its final blow. So, with Moses, we plead for the sense of divine humor. We pray and hope for His laughter - not the laughter of sarcasm or derision or ridicule, but the laughter that will herald the conquest of suffering, the end of evil, and the beginning of redemption.