

Census, Parah Adumah, and COVID-19
 Judah Kerbel ~ Parashat Ki Tisa 5780 ~ Queens Jewish Center

Why does a benevolent God allow bad things to happen?

This is one of the most natural questions to ask when we are confronted with a calamity. It is an ageless question, as tragedy is an ageless phenomenon. One of the most frustrating feelings is for something to not go our way and to not know that it is for a good reason. In our interpersonal interactions, we can be more successful in influencing others when we accompany a decision with a reason.

Yet, there are many events that transpire in life that do not come with a good explanation. For the believer in God, it can be challenging to balance faith and trust with doubt and uncertainty. Furthermore, it can be challenging to feel the love we are commanded to feel towards God when we experience something difficult to accept.

There are different ways to cope with this gap in our connection with God. The notion of “afflictions of love” (ייסורי אהבה) appears in the Gemara in Berachot. Suffering may be seen as an atonement for our mistakes, as the righteous are punished in this world in order to be rewarded in the next world, and the wicked are rewarded in this world in order to be punished in the next world. Those insights that appear in the words of Chazal have their place as a broader approach. Yet, again, inevitably some will feel that this approach does not mirror their reality.

Unfortunately, in the wake of COVID-19, some rabbis have once again attributed current events to whatever phenomenon is unbecoming of the world or the Jewish people. Someone declared that this virus is a punishment for gay pride parades. Some have suggested it's a punishment for the Trump peace plan potentially suggesting that Medinat Yisrael cede land or for not having built the third Beit Ha-Mikdash yet. Maybe it's a punishment for the lack of action on climate change. This is, of course, far from the first time that a sin has been suggested as a reason for a calamity.

In the beginning of Parashat Ki Tisa, we are told that we must take a census not by counting heads, but by collecting standard coins. Why? *ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד אותם*, so that there will not be a calamity in counting them. Rashi explains that count people by head is an “ayin hara,” presumably that when one counts people directly, it opens the possibility that maybe they will not all be standing later. Here, the Torah gives us a reason for a potential calamity. But that can only be suggested inasmuch that the Torah is God’s word. Of course, God can give a reason for a calamity. But can we, who are not prophets, truly apply a contemporary reason to contemporary suffering?

It is well known that our tradition distinguishes between commandments that are *חוק* and *טשנת*. A “mishpat” is considered a mitzvah whose reason is clearly identifiable. Rational logic can explain why murder is wrong, and even why we should observe

Shabbat. A “chok” is considered a mitzvah whose reason is unknown. The paradigmatic “chok” appears in the maftir for this Shabbat, Parashat Parah, which appears at the beginning of Parashat Chukat. How is it possible that the rite of the red heifer purifies the impure but contaminates the pure? It defies logic. One thing that is important to remember about a “chok” is that it does not mean that God does not have a reason; it just means that we may not be able to understand the reason. I believe that is an important insight for us to remember about a trying situation. Our belief in God’s providence assumes that God has a reason for why the way the world unfolds. Yet, these situations must remain a “chok.” We do not and cannot know the reason. To suggest that we do is problematic and dangerous. When I learned in Yeshivat Har Etzion, I learned Ramban on the parasha with Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein shlit”a. He read us a Ramban about the tochecha, the rebukes and punishments for not following the mitzvot. There is a tochecha in both Bechukotai and Ki Tavo. Ramban explains that the first one is for certain sins during the time of the first Beit Ha-Mikdash, and the second one is for certain sins during the time of the second Beit Ha-Mikdash. But Rav Mosheh said to us, Ramban was able to do this through pesukim, through Chazal’s understanding of the time, and events in the past. But when a rabbi says a bus crash happened because of faulty mezuzah, how does he know? How does he know it’s not because of sinat chinam?! Baseless hatred.

We do not, and cannot, know, beyond natural causes, if a particularly trying event is in response to a sin or what sin. Discussing what God might be trying to tell us is futile.

What are we left with?

We learned together last summer the importance of finding meaning in suffering. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt”l wrote in Kol Dodi Dofek, “The halakhic answer to this question is very simple. Suffering comes to elevate man, to purify his spirit and sanctify him, to cleanse his mind and purify it from the chaff of superficiality and the dross of crudeness; to sensitize his soul and expand his horizons. In general, the purpose of suffering is to repair the imperfection in man’s persona.” The Rav specifically says that we should not be focused on the “why” but the “what to do.” We cannot know why, and we may not find an answer. But we can take a message from suffering to commit to live our lives in a more meaningful way and to reflect on what we believe our purpose in life is. Dr. Viktor Frankl says something very similar in Man’s Search for Meaning. We can find meaning in all walks of life, including suffering. What meaning do we find in suffering? “When we are no longer able to change a situation – just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer – we are challenged to change ourselves.”

What opportunities do we have in the present moment, as our shul is empty on Shabbos?

- We should remind ourselves of all the blessings we do have in life.
- We should motivate ourselves to share our unique God-given gifts with others, in any way we can. Rabbi Norman Lamm writes that times like these, where we do

not have contact with others in the way that we are accustomed to, we should find ways to empower our sense of creativity.

- We should remind ourselves the value of being physically and emotionally present. Although technology is enabling us to continue certain aspects of our lives during this time, being together without it is a special gift. This is something we can really internalize going into this Shabbos. The most optimal tefillah will always be communal because of the power of people coming together and being present.
- At the same time, “Hitbodedut”, translated as alone time with Hashem, is not something many of us have the opportunity to practice frequently. We have the unique and special opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with God, free of the distractions present in our everyday lives.
- Finally, as I wrote earlier, while unfortunately, we need to reduce physical proximity, it is also important to ensure each other that we are not alone. "Social distancing" should only be physical, but not emotional. To whatever extent we can support each other, we should. Check in on each other. We can remind ourselves the importance of chesed and helping those who may need help during this time. Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, is an inspiration for employers to think about what it means for hourly workers to be dismissed indefinitely when a business closes. We remember that we closed shul even for those who will not get sick because *כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה*, we are all responsible for each other.

The spread of a novel infectious disease is a chok in our lives. But the religious mandate resulting from this is not to attribute others' sins to this situation, but to commit to being our best selves. We can use this time to work on ourselves, and we can use this time to show the best of ourselves in helping others.

Shabbat Shalom.