

Playing G-d

Moshe Taragin

Judaism asserts that nothing is random. Large-scale events in particular, are divinely authored and possess both purpose and design. Hashem isn't arbitrary and doesn't abandon His world to chance. Our successes and our failures, our triumphs and our suffering are all supervised by one all-knowing G-d. We may not always fully understand His design but it exists. Nothing is random.

The covenant described in parshat Bechukotai is premised upon divine providence. If we obey divine will, we prosper and live securely in Israel. If we betray Hashem's wishes and are disloyal, we are expelled from the land of Israel. Having absorbed the lessons of divine punishment we are expected to improve our behavior. If we remain callous and indifferent, insisting that our suffering is random or '*keri*', Hashem withdraws His supervision and subjects us to a world of chaos. In effect, we select our own arrangement. If we connect the dots and attribute suffering to our errant behavior, we continue to live under Hashem's providence. If we impute events to mere chance, our lives *become* random.

Every major event contains divine messaging. Over the past few months the search for those messages has intensified. Obviously, a tragedy as enormous as October 7th contains religious implications. Hashem is telling us something.

Not only do we probe tragedies, but we also assume divine purpose and authorship for victories and successes. The miraculous protection of our country against the vicious Iranian missile attack was, obviously, a divine intervention. The helicopter crash which took the life of a cruel and murderous thug serving as president of Iran was also divine reckoning. We look for the divine calculus behind tragedy and triumph.

Sometimes though, we go too far. Sometimes we are too self-assured and too self-confident. Playing G-d, we sometime hurl harsh accusations at groups whose wayward behavior we deem responsible for divine punishment.

What are the dangers of playing G-d and how can we search for divine meaning without crossing the boundary between heaven and earth?

Encroachment

Though we are encouraged to probe for divine purpose, and to discover meaning behind religion, there are areas which are meant to remain off limits, or at least severely restricted to human inquiry. Too much investigation of these issues encroaches upon the divine realm. For example, the study of kabbalah was traditionally limited to small groups and extended only to those above the age of 40. Popularizing the study of cosmological mysteries is an invasion of Hashem's "private" domain. Similarly, ambitious messianic prognostication trespasses Hashem's private realm of historical decision making. Playing G-d by attributing tragedy to specific sins is an appropriation of divine calculus and an affront to the divine mystery.

Arrogance

Not only is playing G-d invasive it is also arrogant. Bilam, the pagan sorcerer haughtily boasted that he alone discerned Hashem's will. In response to his false pride, he was reduced to a cartoonish parody unable to answer his talking donkey and blind to an angel who impeded his path.

Iyov attempted to comprehend the suffering of the righteous and to justify the ways of G-d to Man. By answering him through a blinding storm, Hashem humbled him, cautioning him not to arrogate even the presumption of knowing the will of Hashem. Playing G-d trespasses upon the heavens and additionally is conceited and arrogant.

An unruly world

Playing G-d also misdiagnoses our current historical phase. Earlier periods of history were characterized by obvious and transparent cause and effect. Good deeds were immediately rewarded, and sins were punished. Though this system seems harsh, it encouraged more conscientious self-examination: imagine if every serious sin was followed by a bout with Covid-19. We would probably avoid sins more successfully than we currently do.

With our expulsion from Israel the world shifted into a different system of divine management, called *hester panim*, in which cause and effect remain hidden from human analyses. Though we have achieved political sovereignty and returned to Israel we still labor in a world in which cause and effect are veiled. Playing G-d ignores this historical reality, while simplistically superimposing the guidelines of an earlier period of Jewish history. Just as the Torah cautions against assuming "randomness" in a world of divine providence, we should be careful about outlining direct cause and effect in a world which is still circuitous and convoluted.

Selective Calculus

Often, divine reasoning is articulated only when it suits our needs or our own predetermined ideological positions. Our mapping of divine logic ends up being both one-sided and intellectually dishonest. We celebrate the story of people who left the Azza communities before the attack and were spared, yet we ignore the outside visitors to those communities who were murdered. We revel in stories of individuals who missed a flight which ended up crashing. Yet we don't tell the full story of the hundreds of passengers who did board the flight and were killed.

This selective calculation of divine purpose manipulates divine calculus for our own personal agenda, is easily transparent, and often leads to ridicule.

Insensitivity

Finally, we often play G-d at the expense of human suffering. Even if divine reason exists, there is time and place for everything, including silence. The last thing people who suffer tragedy want to hear is who is responsible, or worse, that they themselves, directly or indirectly, share the blame. This is the worst crime of playing G-d. It is inhuman and hurtful.

A friend once remarked that in the immediate hours after Sept 11th his son's teacher issued a scolding critique of Western culture, pointing to the attack of the Twin Towers as evidence that Hashem punished the excesses of Capitalism. I responded that he should remove his son from

that school. Any person who doesn't possess basic decency not to dance on other people's suffering should not be instructing the Torah of a compassionate G-d.

Before pontificating about Hashem's reasons, human suffering must be acknowledged, and sympathy must be heartfelt. More often than not, when we speak in the name of G-d, we accuse others of causing our collective tragedies. This is ugly triumphalism as the cost of broken hearts and at the cost of human pain and suffering.

How can we calibrate finding divine purpose and avoiding self-righteousness?

Our comments must be phrased with humility. We should preface our ideas with phrases reflective of our own uncertainty and which exude humility and intellectual modesty. Prefacing our comments with phrases such as "perhaps", "possibly", "it may be true that" or "without fully knowing it seems that" convey honesty, unpretentiousness, and sensitivity rather than smugness or self-assuredness.

Furthermore, we should always turn inward. The gemara in Berachot (5a) claims that in response to suffering a person should inspect their own behavior rather than scrutinizing the flaws of others. Lessons should first be drawn inward rather than fingers being pointed outward. First improve our own prayer, Torah study and personal behavior before castigating others for their own religious flaws.

Finally, our thoughts should be broad rather than specific. Instead of pointing to specific flaws and highlighting specific sins we should ask larger questions: what lessons about our society at large does this tragedy underline? What lessons about Jewish history and our return to this land does Hashem want us to take away? Instead of blaming October 7th upon specific sins we should be pondering the larger questions of Jewish identity, our rights to this land, the relationship between different sectors in Israel and the relationship between our people in Israel and Jews overseas.

Stop the finger pointing. It's rude.

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