

WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE SUFFER?

A High Holiday Sermon 5744-1983
by Rabbi Herbert Baumgard
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of a best selling book, recently spoke here at Beth Am. The book, entitled, "Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People", was a success, not only because it was well done, but because of its timing. We live in an era when almost all of us good people are having bad things happen to us. In my lifetime I have never seen people so unhappy as they are today. Young people, who are free to make almost any kind of choice in their life, discover that complete freedom of choice can lead to dire consequences. The open sex scene has lured many adults into unhappiness. Some who want to get married can't; some who are married long for their freedom; some who are divorced feel betrayed; children of divorce are frequently confused; parents find their children turning away from them and from their inherited value system; many a parent comes to my office to tell a sad story of a child who is in jail, a child who is on drugs, a child who has committed suicide. And many an adoring parent is doomed to be without grandchildren.

All of these new kinds of bad things are thrown into the more customary grab bag of misfortune. As in past ages, we still find good people smitten with disease and poverty; and as in past ages, we see many a scoundrel raking in the dough and living in good health into old age.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Primitive people who experienced misfortune were certain they had displeased the gods, and that meant simply that they had not performed the magical rituals properly. Accordingly these poor people rushed to the priest and paid him a wage they could little afford, in the hope that the priest could undo the curse and perform the ritual of propitiation correctly. Some of the ancients in their misery would turn to the astrologers or to those who claimed to be able to appease dead spirits.

The early founders of Judaism, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, ruled out this superstitious approach to fending off evil. They taught that bad things happen not because of bad magic but because of bad deeds. God repays us in accordance with our ethical actions, they declared, in what was a new and radical doctrine.

As noble as this teaching was, there were more sophisticated Jews in later times who would not buy it. "Look at me," wailed Job, "I am a righteous person, and I am afflicted with all kinds of bad things". To his would-be admonishers, Job proclaimed, "None of you is more righteous than I, so don't give me that shallow advice that I have to be a still better person". *Rabbi Kushner's modern best-seller is just one in a long line of Jewish books addressed to the question, why do bad things happen to good people? The right to complain to God is basic to Judaism. We are not asked to accept quietly everything that life brings. Job tells his friends, "It is more righteous to complain about life's injustice than it is to utter pious phrases of acceptance in the face of inequity".*

Even Jesus on the cross, according to the New Testament story, utters a primary Jewish psalm of complaint (from Psalm 22). "Eli eli lamah azavtani; my God, my God, why have you forsaken me"?

The contrast between the society of Abraham and that of Job should help us understand some of the reasons for unhappiness in our own society. Abraham lived in an intimate

*Quotes are really paraphrases

society where family standards and tribal traditions were the very fabric of life itself. A person would refrain from doing harm to others because of family pride or out of fear of social ostracism. A person who severely challenged the ruler of the community risked public shame or even banishment. This meant that he would lose all his rights within the society, and he would have to leave the community to live as an outsider. Consequently, there were few rebels against patriarchal standards. In such a society, things were reasonably certain for those who followed the rules, and they could anticipate a life of full acceptance and protection.

Job, however, lived in a highly urbanized society, a thousand years after Abraham. In these intervening years, the strong ties to the family and the tribe had weakened. There was a growing attraction to the faster tempo of cosmopolitan life. Travel was more customary, and foreigners intermingled regularly with the local city folk. In such a society, it was more difficult for the family to control the actions of its members. Even banishment held less of a threat, for the person banished from the family would simply join the floating crowd of resident foreigners who had at least a minimum measure of privilege.

We can understand that in Job's time, approximately 400 BCE, the good that the family sought was often frustrated and denied. There were too many outside forces that affected the life of the family, like the growing inequities of economic life, the difficulty of holding on to ancestral farming land, the invasion of foreign armies, and the competition of foreign and more exotic life-styles. The Book of Job seems to describe the suffering of one man and one family; it actually is a play written to symbolize what was happening to an entire society.

By the time of the Hebrew Prophets, it was clear to sophisticated Jewish thinkers that no matter how righteous an individual might be, he could suffer misfortune from the fallout of an unjust society. The Prophets emphasized the fact that if the individual is to experience good things, he must work doubly hard to make his society a caring society. The Prophets taught us that what we think of God is often colored by the kind of society in which we live. If the masses suffer from a cruel despot, it may well seem that God has taken a vacation. If society is permissive and old family values fall by the wayside, it may well seem that God doesn't care about the fate of the person trapped in a maze of conflicting value systems.

Job lived in such a society, but the authors of the book do not offer the kind of constructive solution offered by the Prophets. The Prophets taught, if we will only redirect our society back to the old Torah virtues, the good person will prosper once again. The authors of Job, who lived after the Prophets, do not offer such a pragmatic and optimistic solution. The Book of Job ends with the teaching that suffering can come to all, whether the person is good or evil, and we have to accept the fact that somehow human suffering is part of God's divine plan. If we do not understand that plan, it is only because God's wisdom is too great for us.

The Book of Job teaches heroic patience in the face of undeserved suffering, but it does not offer us a way out of our suffering as the Prophets did. There is a certain grandeur in the Jobian view which one cannot help but admire. The theme is echoed in the famous prayer of the Hasidic Rabbi from Berdichev who after complaining to God against all the sufferings that have come to the Jewish people, says, "I will be able to bear all this suffering, God of the universe, if you only assure me that I am suffering for Your sake." This famous prayer has been put to music and is known as, "A Din Torah Mit Gott , A Complaint Against God". You can get it on records. It is very touching.

Many of us are willing to suffer if we feel that our suffering has a profound purpose. We are willing to suffer to help our children. Time was when many people were willing to suffer to help their people or their nation. But what if the suffering seems to be meaningless? What if it is the children who are doing the suffering? What if no group purpose seems to be served by our pain?

The question is so persistent that different cultures and religions through the ages have attempted to provide an answer. The oriental religions like Hinduism tell us that we suffer because of our wants and desires. The way to end suffering, they teach, is to eliminate our wants and desires. Sex is evil in that view because it only leads to children, who in turn will suffer. Misery is obviously so rampant in India, for example, that not to be reincarnated, not to be born at all, is the greatest good.

Out of Persia around 500 BCE came the view that evil and suffering come into the world because of a god who specializes in evil. The world, taught Zoroaster, is a battleground between two gods, a good god and a bad god. If there is suffering, Zoroaster taught, it is surely not because of the good god, but simply that he doesn't have the power to overcome the force of the bad god. And so Ahura Mazda, the god of light, and Ahriman, the god of darkness, fight for supremacy in your life and in the world.

This simple formula of Zoroaster is very tempting. It puts everything into neat categories, and New Testament Christianity accepted this explanation for the existence of evil. In the New Testament, the bad god is called Satan or Lucifer. Many a fundamentalist preacher today calls his adherents to fight the Devil who, the preacher claims, is trying to influence them at all times. Skip Wilson, the black comedian who used to have a T.V. series, had a character who always explained away his misdeeds by saying, "The Devil made me do it". The problem with the doctrine of the two competing gods is that it does away with the idea of human responsibility. If the battle is between the two gods, all we have to do is sit around and watch.*

The Prophets of the exile, Isaiah, had to deal with Zoroastrian teaching in the land of Babylonia which the Persians had conquered. There is no god of evil, taught Isaiah, the supreme monotheist. It is the good God who punishes us and brings evil to us, but only as a parent who wishes to correct His children; and this good and punishing God also forgives eagerly! Isaiah hears God saying to His people in exile, "For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great compassion will I gather thee; in a little wrath, I hid my face from thee, for only a moment, but with everlasting kindness will I have compassion on you". Out of this doctrine of the punishing but compassionate God, ultimately emerges the teaching that God Himself suffers when His people suffer. "In all of our affliction", declared the prophet, "He has been afflicted", B'chol tz'rahtahm lo tzahr,"

Two thousand years after Isaiah, the Jewish mystics called this suffering aspect of God, the Sh'chinah, the feminine or feeling aspect of God; but the mystics rejected the idea that God brings evil. The mystics taught: the world would be an ideal place if it was up to God, but the problem is that God's full power never reaches the world. The Cabbalists speak of God's power as a great light, which, as it strives to permeate the world, is filtered out or blocked out by the stuff of human failings. Evil, they taught, is the result of God's power being muted.

According to the Jewish mystics, we humans have to prepare ourselves to receive God's light and to transmit it into society. To handle this awesome responsibility of mediating God's power, we Jews have to become students of God's law, the Torah, and we have to become masters at the art of prayer. To the extent that we are not true vessels for the flow of God's spirit into the world, we are responsible for both human pain and God's pain.

* Many Christians today do not view Satan as an eternal being with supernatural powers; in Judaism, Satan has been considered as merely a fallen angel with no real power (see Job)

The mystics tried to avoid the heresy of saying that God was not all-powerful and that He could not control all the forces of chaos. They placed the blame for the existence of evil on imperfect human beings. Dr. Henry Slonimsky, my great teacher, taught that disasters like the holocaust could not be squared with the concept of a good God who is also all-powerful. God is the Author of galaxies and atoms, taught Dr. Slonimsky; His greatness is beyond our comprehension, but He does not control all things. Said Dr. Slonimsky, "What if God Himself is imperfect, and what if God is growing, ever striving to gain more control over the events of the world and thus turning it more towards the good? For Dr. Slonimsky, the cosmic conflict is not between a good god and a bad god, but between the good and only God and chaos.

What are the ramifications of a belief in one good God who is himself growing as He wants us to grow? The ramifications are that you and I have to be more godlike. You and I have to understand that God is not going to do it all. He needs our help. Moses understood this when he heard God say, "I hear the cry of my suffering people in Egypt, and I need you to help me liberate them". In a very real sense, we are the hands and eyes of God. His mission and ours is the same--we must grow in goodness and in power to combat evil.

And what is evil? Evil is not itself a divine force called Satan or Ahriman. Evil is the chaos not yet made into order. It is our task then, as God's partner, to help in the ordering. Evil is the chance accident that makes our car turn over on the highway. It is our task then to check the engine more carefully or to test the tires more frequently, or not to let a drunk driver at the wheel. Evil is the disease we have not yet learned to conquer but which we must research and conquer because God urges us to do so.

In times of sharp social change, such as our own, evil is the result of the flippant arrogance with which some people attack the frail standards of civilization that humankind has struggled to piece together over the centuries.

The Jewish mystics tells us that humans, by their action or inaction, block out the light of God which makes for good. Dr. Slonimsky tells us that we must become more alert to God's need for human help. Each of these perspectives teach us that while God is a more powerful partner, we can not stand idly by while chaos challenges the good.

The holocaust was possible not only because of what the Nazis did, but also because of what the masses of Germans did not do. Hunger is possible in affluent America because some people are unable to help themselves but also because so many of us ignore the problem of hunger. Similarly family life in America today is ruptured, because so many of us do not seem capable of that kind of love and loyalty which used to hold the family together.

Difficult times are the great test of faith. It is easy to believe in God and in the triumph of goodness when times are easy. In our afflicted time, one has to search for the rays of light concealed by the layers of darkness. It is precisely in that moment when we are ready to surrender to pessimism that we must rally all of our energy and determination and join in the fray to make life what God intended it to be.

To be a Jew in any sense means that we cannot surrender to despair. The Rabbis tell us that when you get to heaven, you will be asked only one question, "Did you give up hope?". The wisdom of this teaching is that somehow we must find life's deeper meaning not in our victories, but in our defeats, not in our joy, but in our suffering. What is it that the Rabbi Berdichev said at the end of his complaint, "Master of the Universe, I do not even ask why I suffer, I only wish to know that I suffer for Your sake". And what is it that Job said at the end of his complaint?, "Oh Lord, I have heard of You by word of mouth, but in my suffering, in my personal turmoil, I have come to see You, face to face". It is those who never surrender the search for life's meaning who come close to God.