

HOW CAN WE RECONCILE OUR IDEA OF GOD WITH SUFFERING?

A Sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard

Most of us are familiar with the oft-repeated story of the little boy who asked his mother, "If God created the world in six days, what is He doing now?" The boy's question immediately points to the weakness of a concept which indicates that the world was created whole and complete within a few hours by an all powerful omnipotent God. Of course, anyone who reads the Bible closely will discover that even the ancient account of creation in the Book of Genesis does not say that God created the world whole and complete in six days. Of this matter, we shall speak in some detail on Rosh Hashanah evening, since according to tradition the world was first created on Rosh Hashanah.

Tonight, let us limit ourselves to one phase of the attempt to understand God. Let us ponder the central problem which makes an atheist of many, and which strains to the utmost the faith of the religious. Let us ask the question which millions have asked before Job and after, namely, "Why do the righteous suffer and why do many of the wicked prosper?" The person who asks this question sincerely must operate with two hypotheses in his religious outlook: 1) First, he must assume that God is all-powerful and completely controls every minute situation in the world; 2) He must assume that the righteous are to be rewarded with the obvious material goodies of our world, including among them a long and healthy life.

When Martin Buber, the world-famous Jewish religious mystic, was asked at a public meeting how he could reconcile the death of six million Jews with the concept of a righteous, all-powerful God, Buber answered, "We can only assume that when God saw the evil that was in the world, He withdrew His spirit from the world. When men once again determined to be righteous, God returned to the world, and Hitler was defeated". The notion that God withdraws from the world in order to permit wars and programs is completely unacceptable to many deeply religious people. This concept, in my opinion, is an apology for God that is an insult to Him.

If God remains in the world, and wars and persecution still occur, how then can we square the triumph of evil with an all-powerful and good God? The answer of Christianity is simple. It contends that while God is the force for good in the world, there is also an independent source making for evil. That force is called Satan. When evil triumphs, it is because Satan is having a big inning for himself. This answer, of course, is taken from the Persian doctrine that the world is the battle-ground for two competing gods, the god of light, and the god of darkness. It is a thoroughly un-Jewish answer. Throughout most of the Bible, Satan is not important, and when he does appear in the allegorical book of Job, he appears merely as an angel who is a servant of the one God. To say that the world is a battle-ground between God and the Devil is to admit there is not one God but two, a good God and an evil God.

The pagans had an easy answer to the question of evil in the world. They never understood the gods as being any more ethical than human beings, therefore evil existed merely because the gods had the power to do whatever they pleased and there was no moral restraint upon them. In Judaism the question of evil in the world is much more difficult than in Christianity or in paganism, because we insist upon thinking; 1) that there is only one divine force who is responsible for both good and evil 2) God is holy moral. The Tradition Jewish view is that God creates evil as a means to furthering

the cause of good.

We are not the first to ponder this issue, and we might gain some light by studying the answers given within the Bible itself. You might recall the incident where God set out to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abtraham pleaded with Him not to destroy the few righteous with the wicked. According to the narrative, God agreed not to destroy Sodom if there were only ten righteous people. The ciyt was destroyed. Hence, we must conclude that when destruction comes to a people or a country, it is because the wicked far outnumber the righteous and the righteous will suffer when they cannot overcome the wicked in their own community. This is a profound answer. It teaches that reward and punishment is not distributed on an individual basis. On the contrary, we prosper or suffer according to the righteousness or evil of the community of which we are a part and for which we have a responsibility. This is an accountable answer, where the righteous are few and the wicked are many, but when the destruction involves six million Jews who obviously were detached from the evils of Hitler and the Germans, this is no answer at all.

Perhaps in the story of Abraham and Isaac we have another reasonable answer to the suffering of the righteous. Abraham, according to the narrative, is asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. With great hearache, Abraham procedes to prepare to kill the thing he love most. He lays Isaac upon the altar, and raises his knife, but then a voice is heard saying, "Now I know that you will hearken to My Voice, therefore take this lamb and spare you son". In other words, this story teaches, among other things, that suffering can sometimes by a test of the righteous, that their character may be strengthened and improved. There is a great deal of truth in this teaching, for to in this teaching, for to live is to suffer; to grow is to suffer; to learn is to suffer. Only the person who lives a completely sheltered and meaningless life does not suffer. We would be justified in saying that suffering is the price we pay for being alive. But suffering has its limits, and sometimes the price for the privilege of living is exorbitant. There is a point where the teaching value of suffering reaches its optimum, and it then begins to devalue the meaning of life. There is a point, where, suffering man as in the case of the afflicted Job, is entitled to say to God, (7:12) "Am I a monster that thou setteth a watch over man..and terrfiest me..so that my sould chooseth.. death rather than these my bones".

When Israel was overcome by strong military enemies and taken into exile, the Hebrews began to question the power of their god. "Let's be honest, some of them said, "there must be more than one god, and the gods of our enemies are greater in power than our god". This was a natural response. If there were only one god, and He was holy and all-powerful, then Israel should not have been conquered by its enemies not should it have been taken into exile. "Not so," answered the prophets, "your god is the god of your conquerors even if they don't worship him. They worship idols who are not gods at all. Our God is the God of all nations, and He uses other proples for His purpose, just as He uses Israel for His purpose. We have been conquered and taken into exile because we have betrayed our responsibility. We were to be a holy people, but we acted like all the other peoples. God has punished us, not because we are more wicked than other peoples, but because we were better educated, and we should know better". In this kind of answer, we see the growing spiritualism of Judaism. The prophets developed this lofty explanation of the

suffering of Israel to maintain the faith of a disillusioned people. In brief, they contended that the evil that had come upon Israel, was not an indication of God's weakness. **This is a grand doctrine, but when** applied to modern times, it has a limited application. We can blame some things upon ourselves, and we will probably be correct, but our guilt does not extend into every realm of endeavor, and every personal failure is not due to our own inadequacies. When after the most intense efforts, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, great groups of people still suffer, we feel compelled to ask, "Where is God?".

The Book of Job is one of the classic attempts to answer the question of human suffering. The answer it gives is that the old concept of reward and punishment must be discarded. Where the ancient Hebrews believed that the obedient were rewarded with material riches and long life, the author of the Book of Job contends that this is an outworn concept, and man should serve God even though he does not receive material reward. Ultimately, the Book says that the problem is that man simply does not understand the grand operations of God, and what seems like suffering and evil to many may really serve a good and worthwhile purpose. The Book of Job marks the end of one period of Jewish religiosity and the beginning of another. Abraham walked with God in his garden, but Job is told that God sits on the horizon of the earth and is distant from man. Moses talked with God face to face, but Job seeks only the pattern of the stars, and hears only the language of the cosmic ocean. Abraham and God understood each other and made a simple agreement. Job is forced to admit that he is incapable of understanding God and incapable of binding God to an agreement. The personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob recedes into the creator of the universe who is beyond the grasp of humanity.

The God who addressed Job is similar to the God of the scientist Albert Einstein, who said, "To know that what is impenetrable to us, really exists, manifesting itself in the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty--that fills me with a humble admiration for the Superior Spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That forms my idea of God". Once a counter argued with Einstein and said, "What kind of a God is He if He permits hunger and misery and injustice in His world?" Einstein answered, "God is subtle, but He is not malicious".

Einstein's answer is worthy of examination, "God is subtle, but He is not malicious". This is the scientist's way of saying, the maneuverings of this planned universe are so vast, and so complex that we cannot always understand its purpose. Yet, we may be certain, that it has purpose, only a part of which is clear to us. Evil, according to Einstein, is simply a temporary point on the way to good; an intermediate point on the road to the planned perfection which in some ways is mathematically demonstrable. The scientist's today are returning to a belief in god because they can see that the world is a plan. But their concept of God is that of the scientist-god who works with a slide-rule and a table of logarithms. Einstein may be right, but his definition of god would not satisfy most people who yearn for a more personal relationship with God.

It is clear, however, that the world is not what it was in the time of Abraham. It is only natural that man's understanding of god change, as he understands more about himself and more about the universe. The world is a great deal larger than Abraham thought it was, and we see God now, not

merely as the Lord of all nations, but as the Lord of all possible worlds and universes. Still, as Dr. Henry Slonimsky has said, what men have wanted most in all ages, a personal God, must exist in some way, otherwise this need of man which exists in every generation would not come into being. On the other hand, Dr. Slonimsky suggests, if God is intimately related with man, he cannot be all-powerful, otherwise the excess of tragedy which occurs is impossible to explain. Dr. Slonimsky's answer is a heretical one; he contends that in modern times we must understand that God is not all-powerful, that he does not control every situation; that, in fact, if God does not control everything in the world, makes it possible for men to build character and to grow in stature. Our role, then, is to be co-creators with God. To narrow down the areas where accidents may occur. To attack evil wherever it raises its ugly head. And to assume partial responsibility, at least, for all that happens on our globe.

While Dr. Slonimsky differs from the Hebrew prophets in that they taught that God was all-powerful, he is consistent with the best in their teaching when he says that man's role is to work at God's side in the service of those things that we commonly associate with God. It is Dr. Slonimsky's concept, that there is a give and take between God and man, a speaking and a hearing from each side, a mutual dependency, a fellowship in the highest sense. It is a corollary to Slonimsky's concept that human tragedy is the result of the joint failure of God and man; that suffering is not to be blamed on God alone nor on man alone. He holds that God himself suffers when men suffer, and is involved in both man's victories and his defeats. The virtue of this heretical concept is that it does not put God far away as does the scientific all-powerful God. Its further virtue is that it provides a reasonable answer to the question why do the righteous suffer? The answer is—the righteous suffer because other men who claim to be righteous and God himself together lack the power to conquer evil in this situation. When righteous men combine their power with God's, then evil is overwhelmed, and only then. Perhaps this is the proper religious approach for the age of rockets. It is the only approach which I have studied which does not make a mockery of the mind of man, and yet is capable of capturing his heart. It is the only approach I have studied which does not make of God either an all-powerful Jekyll and Hyde, equally capable of great good or great evil, or on the contrary, a super mathematician detached from man and operating the world from his push-button laboratory. If God is good, then he cannot sanction even the momentary triumph of evil. If God is good, then the evil in the world is due to his lack of control of all situations. It is my faith that it is precisely this imperfection in God which gives man the opportunity to grow in godliness. We shall speak more of these difficult things on Rosh Hashanah.