

What Does All This Tell Us About God?

**We've traveled a good distance since Rosh Hashanah morning.
With the Holocaust as background,
we've addressed some not-so-simple questions,
"How Could People Do This?" and "How Could People Let This Be Done?"
Today's may be more challenging yet,
"What Does All This—all this human evil—Tell Us About God?"
Once again, we won't answer more than partially,
and if you like, we can continue the discussion this afternoon.**

**Let's begin with something slightly easier:
What is the hallmark of the Jewish people?
What, more than anything else, has defined us through history?
There are many ways to answer but if we asked enough people,
I'm guessing that "our relationship with God" would get the most votes.**

**According to the Torah, that relationship goes back to Abraham,
who entered into a covenant with the "One Almighty."
God basically set the terms.
Abraham's job was to "walk with God and be righteous."¹
In return, God would bless him and his descendants.
A few generations later, with Moses and the rest of the nation standing at Sinai,
the covenant was expanded.
We promised to keep the commandments.
God, in return, would protect us.**

**So how well has each party been keeping its end of the deal?
As far as we're concerned, the *machzor* outlines in some detail
the numerous ways that we have fallen short.
We've been reading and repeating them since last night.
In fairness though, in many ways we have also been exemplary.
God called us to be a "light unto the nations"²
and believe it or not, many people consider us to be that.
Polls in recent years have shown that we Jews
are the most admired religious group in America.
Yes! Go ahead and pinch yourself. It's true.³
Beyond that, Christians and Muslims,**

¹Genesis 17:1

²Isaiah 49: 6

³<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>

no small percentage of the planet's population,
 have adopted our "One God who demands righteousness" as their own.
 So let's say that our record is no worse than mixed.

How about God? How well has "he" held up his end of the bargain?
 Have we received that promised protection?
 Think of the Holocaust before you answer.

More than a few people consider the Shoah to be a deal breaker,
 or if you will, a covenant breaker.
 But Jews have been dealing with "gaps" in
 God's promised protection for a very long time.
 Since before there were even Rabbis, over 2000 years ago,
 Jews were struggling to fathom, in light of whatever the latest
 rampage, conquest, exile or enslavement may have been,
 how God could be doing this to us, or at least, letting it happen to us.
 The Shoah was unique in many ways.
 But as far our relationship with God is concerned,
 its questions are not new.
 We've been asking them personally, communally and existentially
 for a long time.

Before going any further let me say the following.
 I understand that many people become uncomfortable
 when their personal religious beliefs are disturbed.
 It is not my intention to upset anyone or anyone's relationship with God.
 On the contrary, I like to think I'm here to strengthen it.
 But if you are comfortable with your understanding of the Divine and
 you've answered questions like these to your own satisfaction,
 feel free to doze off. It's a long day. I won't be offended, I promise.
 On the other hand, if you've wrestled with these issues,
 if your relationship with God has its uncertainties, and especially,
 if the amount of tragedy in the world, past or present,
 distances you from a more living faith, you might want to come along.
 I don't claim to possess any higher or hidden truth.
 I only claim to have thought about the matter.
 Doing so has helped me enormously.
 Maybe it will for you too.

Every rabbi in the last seventy years has been asked the question,
 "How can you-we-I believe in God after the Shoah?"
 For many years, my answer was pretty simple, and I thought, pretty good.
 I said I believed that the Holocaust was not God's doing, it was our doing.
 God did not build the gas chambers. God did not murder the children.
 God did not march with the mobs. God did not fan the hatred.
 God did not put authoritarians in power. God was not a perpetrator.

To blame God for the Holocaust is a cop out, I said.

It was a human endeavor from start to finish.

I was comfortable with that answer. And I still am.

But eventually I realized that it was incomplete.

Because, “How can you believe in God after the Shoah?”

is not just a question about who did what to whom,

it is a question about that covenant, the one God made with Abraham

and then with Moses and the people at Mt. Sinai.

It is a question about protection.

And God did not protect us during the Shoah.

Certainly not as well as the Allies,

who unfortunately did not get their act together until we were 6 million fewer.

And if God didn't protect us then, of all times,

what are we to make of that precious Covenant?

Again, it is not a new question.

The Holocaust was not the first mass scale Jewish tragedy.

We have had to respond to things of this nature before.

Some say we must have been so irredeemably evil that

God decided the Shoah would make a fitting punishment.

I suppose you can make that case that but I don't know

how many you'll get to sign on with you. Certainly not me.

However many Shabbas candles we didn't light,

whatever *treif* we may have eaten,

whatever gossip or *lashon hara* we may have spread,

however unethical we may have been personally or professionally,

on no conceivable scale of justice does it add up to 6 million death sentences.

Others have said that God didn't protect us because

God was “hidden” or “eclipsed” during the Holocaust.

Frankly, I have no idea what that means.

The moon gets eclipsed. The *afikomen* gets hidden.

Neither term makes much sense for a God who is supposedly ever-present.

Others say it happened so there would be a State of Israel

or so the murdered could be rewarded in heaven.

And there are those who say it happened because God is dead or

even because there is no God at all.

None of these are satisfactory to me and I'll explain why in a moment

but for some people they are and

again, if you are one of them, I am not here to separate you

from whatever beliefs keep you going.

But to me, if God is supposed to be the protector and doesn't protect,

it doesn't mean that God is hiding, eclipsed or dead.

It doesn't mean that there is no God.

It doesn't even mean that God wanted it to happen.
 What it does mean is that God may not work in the way we have imagined.

The idea that God protects his favored ones is in many of our sacred texts.

It is in the sacred texts of most religions.

The idea predates even the Bible.

Our idol worshipping pagan ancestors
 sacrificed everything from birds to oxen to children
 in the belief that God, or the gods,
 would keep them healthy, prosperous and safe in return.

That may sound to us like a primitive notion,
 an idea that maybe had its day—but its day is not today.

It may sound like an idea we need to outgrow,
 like so many others we've had to outgrow
 in order to reach a more honest understanding of the world around us.

Like the idea that the world was created in six days,
 or that the earth is at the center of the universe,
 or that we can tell our fate by looking at the zodiac.

What if the idea that God protects his favored ones
 doesn't stand up to the evidence any better than beliefs like that?

Karen Armstrong, in her book *A History of God*,
 notes that in both individuals and societies,
 conceptions of God can and do change over time.

Making use of Nietzsche's famous phrase, she writes that
 for many in the modern world, "God is dead."

"This is not to say that God is really dead,
 but rather our ideas of God have not evolved..."

Our view of God has not kept pace with the complex questions
 the modern world has forced upon us."

Bullseye. In other words, the fact that God did not save us during the Shoah
 does not mean that God is dead.

It may only mean the idea that God physically protects
 a particular and favored group of people is dead.

I am extremely grateful that my God is still alive.

After Auschwitz, Nagasaki, napalm and 9/11.

After cancer, drunk drivers and tsunamis. After it all.

Just because God does not supernaturally protect us from such things,
 righteous and faithful though we be,
 it does not necessarily follow that God is dead—or that there is no God.

Once again, each of us is free to believe as we choose.

Some people say the fact of Jewish survival
 is evidence that God protects us.

I've said that too.

And it may be true on a spiritual-communal level.
 But it is not really possible to say that it is true physically.
 Far too many innocent lives have been lost to claim otherwise.

On the other hand, if you believe that
 God does not protect us by intervening in history,
 or that maybe God did so in Biblical times but does so no longer,
 it does not automatically make you an atheist, or even a “bad Jew.”
 Maimonides, no less, did not make belief in an intervening God
 one of his 13 core principles of Jewish faith.
 So you’re in good company.

Centuries before Maimonides, and he lived over 800 years ago,
 the rabbis of the Talmud wrestled with these same issues.
 They looked at God in ways with which we may not be familiar.
 “*Olam k’minhago noheg*,” they said—“the world follows its rules.”⁴
 In other words, we cannot expect God to suspend the laws of physics
 or alter the rules of nature—
 not to punish the wicked, not even to save the righteous.

Again, this does not mean there is no God.
 It does mean that whatever God there is, is likely different from
 the one who makes people ask,
 “How can you believe in God after the Holocaust?”
 If we hope to live with a faith that is living and meaningful,
 as opposed to merely decorative, we may need to adjust our beliefs.
 It is far better that we do this than live with a broken faith,
 with a faith in which we don’t have much faith.

Again, our Sages were more than aware of
 the rampant unfairness and injustice in the world.
 They taught things like,
 “When the forces of destruction are unleashed,
 they do not distinguish between righteous and wicked.”⁵
 And, “There is death without sin and
 suffering without transgression.”⁶
 They seemed to be under no illusions about God’s ability,
 or lack thereof, to protect even the best of us.
 So, to return to our starting point, “What does the Shoah tell us about God?”
 Not much that has not been told before.
 God or no God, evil is real and it is our job, not God’s,

⁴ Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 54b

⁵ Talmud, *Bava Kama* 60a

⁶ *Tosafot*, *Berachot* 46b

to do our best to stop it.
That may be the most important communal job we have.

This answer may have made you wonder:
If God doesn't intervene in human affairs
why are we constantly asking God to do so?
It's a fair question.

The *siddur* and *machzor* are filled with prayers that ask God to
rearrange the natural order in order save us from it.
We ask God to heal our sick, provide for our families & bring peace to the world.
Students ask God to help them pass tests for which they haven't studied.
Sports fans ask God to help their team score touchdowns.
We do things like this because we've been taught and conditioned to.

But this is the kind of faith, and the kind of God,
that has a difficult time surviving disappointment, to say nothing of injustice.
The Rabbis were aware of this problem too.
They taught, if you are entering your city and see a house burning,
do not pray, "Please God, don't let it be my house."
Whose house it is has already been determined and no prayer can change it.
Similarly, if a woman is pregnant, she should not pray,
"Please God, let the child be a girl" Or "a boy."
That too has already been determined.
They called such prayers *tefilot shav*—vain, ultimately empty prayers.⁷
And if we don't want our faith to fail us,
it is best to avoid them and those like them—
and the God we may mistakenly believe is at the other end of them.

So why are all those prayers still in the book, Rabbi?
Another good question.
Maimonides taught that the Torah is written
in everyday language for everyday people.
It is filled with narrative, parable and metaphor.
The wise can distinguish between its higher truths and the veils around them.
The simple cannot, but they at least have something to hold on to.
But anyone who seriously asks,
"How can I believe in God after the Shoah?"
deserves an answer intended for the wise, not the simple.

We have all noticed the supplementary readings that fill our *machzor*—
and most *machzorim*. They are also in our year-round *siddur*.
These readings, chosen by the editors from our vast tradition,
do not usually speak of a protecting or an intervening God.
They speak instead about the holiness that can be found in each of us

⁷ Mishnah, *Berachot* 9:3

and what we can do to strengthen it within and spread it beyond.
We consider that holiness a manifestation of the Divine Spirit, aka God.

It's an open secret that most of us
do not believe that God will alter the laws of nature on our behalf
just because we've asked nicely.
We have too much experience to the contrary.
We do a disservice, to our personal faith and to our spiritual lives
when we say prayers we don't really believe.
Faith is far too important to treat that way.

So once more, "What does the Holocaust tell us about God?"
It tells us that God is not the sea-splitting, lightning bolt-throwing,
Pharaoh-crushing superhero we find in so many Bible stories.
But God can be found, before, during and after the Shoah,
in the spirit of holiness that lives within us and around us,
in the spirit that calls us to live righteously, kindly and even heroically,
in the spirit that says, repair the world and refine your selves.
This God may not intervene, but this God empowers.
This God places responsibility for our lives and the life of the planet,
in our own two hands.

This God is also a long way from dead. And we are grateful for that.
After the Holocaust, after every horror that has ever been
and after the ones that are yet to be,
having faith in what is right and working to make the right real
may well be the only thing that can save us.

May this Divine Spirit seal us with blessing in the new year.
G'mar tov and l'shana tovah.
