

ROSH HA-SHANAH 5779 / 2018

TO FEEL THE QUESTIONS THAT HAVE NO ANSWERS

The battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, fought in the winter and spring of 1945, were among the bloodiest in the Pacific Theater of World War II.

Among the US infantry sent to the front lines of these hellish campaigns was the First Marines Division, nicknamed “The Old Breed.”

And among The Old Breed was a 30-year old Jewish combat medic born in the Bronx, educated as a pharmacist at Rutgers, and hailing from Trenton, New Jersey, named Harry Garb, but everyone called him “Acky.” After surviving the war, Acky would return to Trenton, to the pharmacy, to his wife Edna, and to his daughter Jane who was born during the war. Two years later, along would come Marjorie—my mom.

My Pop-Pop Acky never really talked about the War. He certainly never thought of himself as a hero. The real heroes, he would have told you, were the ones who never came back.

Acky loved his family, the New York Yankees, a warm bagel toasted almost black, cold brisket with Gulden’s mustard, and golf.

When Acky was 74 years old, after an afternoon golfing in Pompano Beach, Florida, while walking at twilight, he was struck by a passing car and died of massive head trauma.

Frederick Beuchner, a 92-year old American writer and ordained Presbyterian minister, is famous for having said that “[all] theology... is essentially autobiography.” In other words, what we come to believe about God boils down

to personal experience. Even professional theologians—that is to say, religious philosophers, people whose job is to think about God—cannot help but be molded in their views by personal experience.

Over the years I have come to believe that all theological writing, all our prayers, our *midrash* and *Talmud*, our law codes and folklore—even the Bible, even the Torah itself—are, in the final analysis, just creative attempts to put into words a personal encounter with the sacred.

Some words, to be sure, get it better than others. Some personal experiences come to us filtered through unhealthy minds, warped perceptions, and backward social mores. One of the authors of the Bible perceived the image of God within every human being. Another author declared that God had a problem with boiling a kid in its mother's milk. One called God "endlessly patient, loving, and true." Another called God "A Man of War." One had God describe to Abraham a promised land and a multitude of descendants. Another wrote of a God who told Abraham to sacrifice his son. Oh well.

But in the end, all theology is autobiography.

The sudden and brutal death of my grandfather, and the cruel irony of it—that this veteran, this soldier who had braved historic battles, would meet his death so haphazardly—taught me a lot about God, and it is probably no coincidence that around that time, at the age of 15 or so, I became a professed atheist, a condition from which I am still recovering, having, over the last thirty years, made my peace with the fact that the God who filled my childhood imagination with fantasies of a world governed by a just and compassionate ruler who cared intimately about me, and everyone else, would now have to give way to a God no less transcendent but considerably less concerned with my feelings.

So this morning is about the haphazardness of life, and about where God fits in, or does not fit in, to the picture. And because all theology is autobiography, while this is a conversation about God, it is even more about you, and me, and about how *we* fit in to the big picture.

On Rosh Ha-Shanah it is written

On Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many shall pass on

How many shall come to be

Who shall live and who shall die

Who shall reach ripe age and who shall not

Who by fire and who by water...

We do not know who wrote this prayer or what experiences may have prompted it. Legends ascribe it variously to Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, who chronicled the massacre of the Jews of the city of York, England, in 1190, or to the 11th-Century figure Rabbi Amnon who was given a choice by the Archbishop of Mayence: convert to Catholicism or have your limbs amputated. After three days, the legend goes, Rabbi Amnon was sent home, with his severed extremities, on a knight's shield.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer is, in all likelihood, many centuries older, and God only knows what originally moved the author to imagine a Book of Life and an all-knowing God who “writes and seals, records and recounts” every human deed.

What we do know is that the prayer gained popularity in the Middle Ages, following the massacres of Jewish communities during the Crusades, the wholesale expulsion of Jews from Medieval European communities, and the various atrocities visited upon our people during that period. It makes sense that a prayer acknowledging that death can, at a moment's notice, just drop in, would become popular in such precarious times.

Who by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast, who by famine and who by thirst...

Who by his own hand and who by another's

Who by cancer and who by heart attack

Who by stumbling down and who by slipping away

Who by gunfire and who by airplane crash.....

We demand a certain reasonableness from life and death. From earliest childhood we learn what's fair and what's not, what should and should not happen.

And we project onto God those selfsame attributes of fairness, of *should* and *shouldn't*. We imagine a God who is "judge and arbiter, counsel and witness," the ultimate standard-bearer of what's right and fair.

And we do so, I think, in utter defiance of how the universe actually works. That is to say, all our life experience teaches and re-teaches us that God's world is not calibrated to human notions of fairness. We wish for fairness, and even sometimes comfort ourselves with a belief in a God who is keeping it all in order. But look at things. That can't be so. Day in, day out, year in, year out, over a lifetime, we encounter a randomness Hamlet would have called "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

What I say is no heresy. The Book of Deuteronomy proposes a simple formula for life and death, blessing and curse: live by God's law and God will reward you. Disobey and face God's punishment. The righteous will prosper, the wicked be damned, and all the rest is commentary. Doesn't this sound like what, as children, we all learned from grownups?

A little while later, along came a Biblical author with a very different perspective, a different literary agenda, a different autobiography and a different theology. “There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job,” his story begins. “That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys, and so many servants that this man became the wealthiest and most powerful in the East.”¹ Every day, Job praises God with sacrifices and offerings and, above all, by keeping far from sin and wrongdoing.

On a whim, God accepts a dare from an angel named “*Ha-Satan*,” the Adversary or the Satan as he’s better known, and strips Job of everything. His wealth vanishes, his herds perish, his children are murdered, his robust health gives way to chronic sickness and pain. He suffers without warrant or recompense. His friends insist: “You must have done something wrong to invite this torment.” For thirty-seven chapters, Job maintains his innocence and demands God answer him.

The Book of Job gives a black eye to the theology of Deuteronomy, arguing that blessing and joy, life and health do not necessarily correlate to a person’s righteousness; that death and suffering do not necessarily correspond to moral waywardness; that God’s motives are not so easily fathomed.

“What did I ever do to deserve this?” Job demands.

Finally, God answers, materializing out of the whirlwind.

The answer is not comforting.

“Who is this who speaks without knowledge?” God thunders.

¹ Job 1:1-3

“Stand up and carry yourself like a man. I’ll do the asking now, and you’ll tell Me the answers.”

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” God roars at Job. “Speak, if you have understanding.”

“Have you ever commanded the day to break, assigned the dawn its place?”

“Have you penetrated to the sources of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been disclosed to you? Have you seen the gates of deepest darkness? Have you surveyed the expanses of the earth? If you know of these—tell Me.”²

In the end, God restores Job’s fortunes and resurrects his family but the message is permanently shattering: You want to know why good people suffer and die? Well, what do you know of how God’s world actually works?

Job is a brutal book. Parts of it seem designed to disturb—I mean, a God who bargains with Satan? Who blithely rips apart an innocent man’s life? Really?

Much has been made of the cruel and capricious God of the Book of Job. But what if the Book’s *theology* is just a window into an *autobiography*, one human being’s reckoning with the universal human condition?

Job speaks true in reminding us that we human beings are so small and our universe so vast. *Job* speaks true in its recognition of how unreasonably we suffer. *Job* speaks true in realizing that life has no upper limit to the pain it can inflict.

No logic can explain this seemingly relentless law of life, that would exact the price of sorrow for each of its joys, the penalty of loss for each of its gifts.

² Excerpts from *Job*, 38:1-18.

Why does life hurt so much? Why would a human being die before her time? How to account for the tsunami and the earthquake, leukemia and lymphoma, suicide and genocide, the air crash and the car crash? How reconcile these with the mountain and the sunset, the ocean and the wind, the mystery of consciousness and feeling, the love of family and the joy of friendship, the glory of nature, the marvel of civilization?

Well, where were you when the foundations of the earth were established?

In the end, some questions echo back only a silence as deep and ominous as the grave.

And yet, it is human—maybe the most human thing of all—to ask why, anyway.

One of my favorite films is *A Serious Man* by the Coen Brothers. I first saw it at an advance screening with, of all people, Rabbi Aaron Panken, of blessed memory.

The movie is basically a modern retelling of the story of Job. Larry Gopnik is a mild-mannered physics professor—that is to say, someone whose job it is to figure out how the world works—who has thrust upon him all manner of suffering. His wife leaves him for another man; a disgruntled student blackmails him over a bad grade; his bar-mitzvah age son is definitely smoking reefer; and why is his doctor asking for him to come in right away after a routine checkup?

Larry reacts as most of us would, utterly bewildered that his life is falling apart so absurdly.

Over the course of the movie, he seeks advice from a rabbi. Three rabbis, actually, one of whom says, “*Hashem* doesn’t owe us the answer, Larry. *Hashem* doesn’t owe us anything. The obligation runs the other way.”

Gopnik cries: “But why does he make us feel the questions if he won’t give us the answers?”

And if ever there were a more heartbreaking and eloquent description of the human condition, well, I have not heard it.

“Why does he make us feel the questions if he won’t give us the answers?”

The rabbi shrugs and says, “He hasn’t given me the answer to that.”

How to give voice to that terrible human yearning, the way we *feel the questions* that have no answer?

Because in the end, there really is no good answer to the great and terrible *why* of human suffering, no adequate response to why bad things happen to good people—except to go on living as vigorously and beautifully as we can.

We ask the wrong question. We ask *why the world is the way it is* when we should ask *why we are the way we are*, and *how we can be the most fully realized versions of ourselves that we can be*. Rather than ask “Why?” of life, we might ask “Now what must I do? Who must I become?”

Of course we can give up on life, and sometimes people do. Sometimes the weight and the agony of *feeling* overtakes the ability to live with hope or joy.

And of course we can conclude that it’s all random; that life has no meaning; that there is no God. The only problem is, to live by the nihilist’s creed also hinders our access to life’s immense potential for beauty, for joy, for purposeful action, for holiness.

The real answer is not that life is *meaningless*, nor that life is *meaningful*. It is that life's meaning is not inherent; we assign meaning to it.

Life is not good or bad, right or wrong; there is no divine blueprint for each human life, no plan for what might befall us on any given day. We *make* the meaning of our life. We paint the canvas of our days with whatever brushes and colors we've been given, with whatever imagination and wisdom we can summon, with whatever help we can get, for as long as we can do it. Life isn't meaningful or meaningless. We decide what meaning to give it. Life's meaning is not *inherent*; we *assign meaning to it*.

Now that we know that, we might find it harder to get out of bed in the morning. Or, we can swallow the bitter pill of uncertainty and get on with our day, trying to fill it with as much earnest love, eager learning, honest labor, and healing *mitzvot* as we possibly can.

When all is said and done, this is really the only choice.

The celebrated Sages Hillel and Shammai had an argument. Given the seemingly endless supply of human suffering, they asked: "Would it have been better for humankind never to have been created at all?" In the end, Shammai's opinion prevails—uncharacteristically, because Hillel wins almost every debate—"All in all, it *would* have been better for humankind never to have been created," Shammai says, where the Hebrew word for "better," *noach*, literally means "easier" or "more comfortable."

Given the choice between existence and non-existence, between Hamlet's "to be or not to be," non-existence, "not to be," is obviously the more *comfortable* option, the easier way.

But Hillel gets the final word:

“Now that we *have been* created, let each of us examine our deeds.”

So here we are, at the beginning of this ten-day journey of self-examination.

Whatever our autobiography, whatever our theology, whatever doubt or certitude, whatever belief or unbelief we bring to the table, it belongs here, in this sanctuary, on this new year’s day.

Because what unites us is Judaism’s insistence that our lives *matter*, and that because our lives matter, *our deeds matter*.

So now that we’re here, we might as well examine them.

And as we embark on this ten days’ voyage from here to Yom Kippur, let me share with you a thought that might serve as our north star. The phrasing comes from stand-up comedian Patton Oswalt, who, until 2016, was married to Michelle McNamara, author of a recently published best-selling book about the search for the Golden State Killer.

The worst day of his life, Oswalt tells his audience, is not the day he woke up to find that his wife had died in her sleep at age 46 of an accidental overdose of prescription medications. It was the day after, when he had to explain her death to their seven-year-old daughter. “I had to look at this little girl that was everything to me and take everything from her,” he says.

Over the past eighteen months, as he has had to rewrite the script of his life around this awful turn, Oswalt has ruminated on what it all means.

In his latest show he explains that he and his wife used to have a debate. He would say, “I don’t believe in an intelligent creator, *per se*, but I think that there

might be a latticework of logic and meaning to the universe that maybe we're too small to see."

Now, having written at length about horrific real-life crimes, the cliché his wife hated the most is, "everything happens for a reason," so she responded, "It's chaos. Be kind. That's all you can do. It's chaos. Be kind."

Meaning, the randomness of life may just as well senselessly rip a loved one away from us as offer us success and happiness. The only way to live with that terrifying chaos is to be as compassionate as we can, no matter what happens.

From time to time they'd go back and forth in this heated philosophical debate, Oswalt says, "And then she won the argument *in the worst way possible!*"

So maybe she was right. Maybe it's all chaos. Maybe Shammai was right—it would have been easier never to have been created in the first place. Maybe the God of Job was right—"What do you know of how My world works?"

It's true: the universe is *not* calibrated to human notions of fairness. Fairness comes not from *out there*, but from *inside us*. It's our moral imperative to bring human reason, human fairness, human compassion, into an unreasonable, unfair, often merciless world. Kindness is the ultimate antidote to the chaos of the universe.

That's the most important thing we could affirm on this first morning of a new year.

And even if I'm wrong—it couldn't hurt, right?