

Reward, Punishment, Micromanagement

Some Thoughts on Rosh HaShana and Divine Justice

And who by fire, who by water

Who in the sunshine, who in the night time

Who by high ordeal, who by common trial

Who in your merry-merry month of may

Who by very slow decay

And who shall I say is calling?

And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate

Who in these realms of love, who by something blunt

Who by avalanche, who by powder

Who for his greed, who for his hunger

And who shall I say is calling?

And who by brave assent, who by accident

Who in solitude, who in this mirror

Who by his lady's command, who by his own hand

Who in mortal chains, who in power

And who shall I say is calling?

Leonard Cohen

Though I grew up in a diverse neighborhood in Jerusalem and followed the Ashkenazi practice at the daily prayers in school, the High Holidays were a sacred celebration of Babylonian tradition. I was therefore not very familiar with the Ashkenazi High Holiday liturgy, until Leonard Cohen introduced me, through his song, to the prayer which for many Jews is the essence of Kippur:

ונתנה תוקף

This ancient poem, written probably around the 7th century but erroneously attributed to an unknown author from 12th century Germany, contains a chilling paragraph where all the possible forms of death are mentioned:

כְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתָּבוּן וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתָּמוּן כַּמָּה יַעֲבִירוּן וְכַמָּה יִפְרֵאוּן מִי יִחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת. מִי בְּקִצּוֹ וּמִי לֹא בְּקִצּוֹ מִי בַמַּיִם. וּמִי בְּאֵשׁ מִי בְּחָרֵב. וּמִי בְּחֵיָה מִי בְּרָעָב. וּמִי בְּצָמָא מִי בְּרַעַשׁ. וּמִי בַמַּגֵּפָה מִי בְּתַנְיָקָה וּמִי בְּסָקִילָה...
 ...בְּסָקִילָה...

*On Rosh Hashanah they will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur they will be sealed –
 how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created;
 who will live and who will die;
 who will die at his predestined time and who before his time;
 who by water and who by fire,
 who by sword and who by beast,
 who by famine and who by thirst,
 who by upheaval and who by plague,
 who by strangling and who by stoning...*

In a documentary film about his work, Cohen explained that the ancient poem inspired both his lyrics and his music:

That song derives very directly from a Hebrew prayer that is sung on the Day of Atonement, or the evening of the Day of the Atonement: Who by fire, who by sword, who by water? According to the tradition, the Book of Life is opened and in it is inscribed all those who will live and all those who will die for the following year. And in that prayer is catalogued all the various ways in which you can quit this veil of tears. The melody, if not actually stolen, is certainly derived from the melody that I heard in the synagogue as a boy.

The concept at the basis of the poem is that Rosh HaShana is the Day of Judgment in which people are inscribed for life or death, with the exact moment of their demise, as well as the path by which they will leave this world, meticulously documented. This idea is promulgated in speeches and classes during the High Holidays, especially in the Orthodox world, and it makes many people feel uncomfortable. They might feel that they are negated free will, that there is no point in trying to do good or evil because all is predetermined, and that they are suffering for no reason.

That unease was evident in a recent article in The Forward, in which Jay Michaelson explained why he calls on people not to attend synagogue this coming Rosh HaShana. He argues that the rituals and liturgy of the holiday make little sense for 21st century Jews. He acknowledges that the problem is more serious for the conservative and reform communities than it is for the orthodox ones, but nevertheless, one of his statements caught my eye. He writes that:

“the holiday’s themes and liturgy focus on the least believable, most misunderstandable aspects of Jewish theology. Sure, introspection is great, and asking for forgiveness from friends and relatives can be extremely powerful. But the Man in the Sky with the big Book of Life?... Who are we kidding here? Does anyone believe this stuff?”

I know that the immediate and intuitive reaction of orthodox Jews to these words would be utter shock and disbelief. This is one of the principles of faith, they would say, very clearly stated by

Maimonides. But let us stop and think for just a second: were there times when we asked why God did this to me, to them, or to anyone at all? If the answer is positive, then we share this doubt with many others.

This is actually a question which extends beyond the idea of the Day of Judgment and becomes the millennia old question of theodicy, or Divine Justice: why do bad things happen to good people? We could digest the idea that a verdict was given on Rosh HaShana, but it does not mean that we accept or understand the verdict.

Leonard Cohen concludes his explanation of the refrain with the following words:

But of course, the conclusion of the song, as I write it, is somewhat different: "Who shall I say is calling?" Well, that is what makes the song into a prayer for me in my terms, which is who is it or what is it that determine who will live and who will die? What is the source of this great furnace of creation? Who lights it? Who extinguishes it?

Cohen's words convey a very deep insight and an important message, which we will now try to unearth from Jewish sources through an analysis of philosophical question and biblical texts.

God, Why Me?

In order to understand the idea of Rosh HaShana as a day of judgment, an idea which has evolved in Mishnaic times, we must first approach the question of Divine Justice, a question also popularly known as: "why do bad things happen to good people?"

Since this question is at the top of every believer's list of concerns and doubts, I had numerous opportunities to discuss it with friends, students, and congregants. One of my favorite exercises was modifying the question. I have realized that people don't ask why bad things happen to bad people, or good things to good people, but are concerned with good things happening to bad people. That has confirmed that we tend to see a link of cause and effect between people's moral and religious behavior and the probability of them being sick, struck by lightning, or going bankrupt. However, pursuing the question further, I have found out that most people do not seek correlation between actions and fate everywhere, but rather focus on bad things happening in three main categories:

- The sufferer is someone we know or identify with.
- The sufferer is someone who is clearly innocent.
- Mass disasters, natural or manmade.

We focus on all these three for a very simple reason. We believe in a system of reward and punishment in which the sinner pays for his iniquities while good health and long life is guaranteed to those who do good. We therefore understand when good people prosper and bad ones falter, and even when the bad ones do well, we are willing to ignore it, unless their evil is directed against us. However, we are extremely distraught if there is an indication that the system will not work for us, meaning that despite our efforts to do good, observe the mitzvot, and learn Torah, we could still be at the receiving end of a disaster.

In other words, the question which really bothers most people is: Why do bad things happen to ME? Or: Is it possible that I will suffer despite my stellar behavior?

The three categories mentioned earlier all correspond to these aspects of the question of Divine Justice.

The first category includes tragedies which befall, besides ourselves, relatives and friends because we are directly affected. It is also the reason why, when we hear of a tragedy, we want to know if among the victims were people who share our religion or country of origin. We feel that we belong to certain groups so if a member of the group suffers, not only we suffer with that member, we are now potential victims, because if it happened to him it could happen to us as well.

The second category, that of innocent victims, is one we are unable to fit into the system of reward and punishment. This is especially poignant when we see the suffering of babies and children because of war, disease, crime, abuse, or genetic flaws. There is no explanation for this kind of suffering and it therefore threatens our belief in a logical, trustworthy system.

The third category, that of mass disasters, overlaps the two others, since in a catastrophe such as the 9/11 attacks or natural disasters, there are bound to be young children and people we either know or identify with. It has an added element, though – the element of randomness. Massive-scale calamities sweep everything in their path and impact the lives of thousands or even millions of people all over the world. The random victims and the ramified repercussions of such cataclysmic events cannot be attributed to a Divine legal system which pays each person what he or she deserves.

We now return to the question of Divine Justice in its refined, distilled form, which most of us are too embarrassed to acknowledge because it will show how selfish we are:

Why do bad things happen to me?

Which is also:

How can I guarantee that bad things will not happen to me?

Let us now ask a third question: Does the Torah want us to do good for goodness sake, without expecting a reward, or to do it with the reward in mind?

A superficial reading of the Torah and the Bible seems to support the second option, since even when the Torah command us to support the poor, it rationalizes it by saying: (Deut. 15:10):

You shall give him, and not with a heavy heart, for in merit of that [giving] God will bless you all your actions and endeavors.

In addition, the Torah is rife with warnings of the curses and disasters which will pursue the sinners until their total annihilation, and of the blessings, abundance, success, and military prowess they will possess if they adhere to God's commandments. There is also abundant discussion in the historical books of the bible, from Judges to Kings, of the correlation between the vicissitudes of the religious state of the Jewish nation and their physical success and safety.

A deeper reading, however, suggests that there is room for the first option and that there might not be direct correlation between our actions and how we fare in terms of health, prosperity, and longevity. It is alluded to in the messages we derive from the narratives of our forefathers, and it emerges from an analysis of the full spectrum of the laws of the Torah and the emphasis put on social justice and equality.

As we shall see soon, the Torah's goal is to educate mankind to make the shift from selfishness to altruism, a fact stated by Hillel and Rabbi Akiva who said that the most important thing is to care for others. When we focus on our reward or on our share in the world to come, we undermine that goal by being extremely selfish. If we dedicate ourselves, however, to doing good for the sake of goodness and for making the world a better place, we are being altruistic and though we might not benefit directly from our actions, we can rest assured that someone, maybe now or maybe in the future, will benefit from them.¹

Our Responsibility, Everybody's Benefit

As explained previously, the real question in everyone's mind is: why does God make me suffer? We want God, in other words, to eliminate all evil in the world. To be accurate, each individual is concerned with the evil which impacts him or her, but when we combine all believers, the goal is total annihilation of evil. The problem is, when do we tell God to take a step back and let us live our lives our way. If we truly want to end all evil, I'm not sure we can draw the line at diseases, accidents, wars, and natural disasters. God might decide that smoking, drinking, and driving above the speed limit are bad for us, as are plastic products, red meat, and bungee jumping. Would any of us want to live in a world where God regulates all our actions to ensure that no harm befalls us? We want God to hit our brakes to prevent a fatal accident, but will we allow Him to do the same to slow us from speeding just enough not to be caught by police?

The answer to these questions is not easy and perhaps will require a worldwide referendum, but I believe they lead us to the understanding that what we really ask is why did God create a world with such inherent evil, or better yet, why did He create the world at all? This last question preoccupied many philosophers and theologians, and the favorite answer, taught in most Jewish day schools and Yeshivas, is that God wanted to share His abundance with people so He created us as recipients of His blessings – תכלית הטוב להיטיב. The only flaw with this argument is that it assumes God wanted something, and since to want is to lack, that would make God imperfect, which contradicts the basic tenets of faith.

I therefore suggest that we accept the fact that if we choose to believe we must know that there are some unanswerable questions, and that the question of why God created the world is one of them. The answer or guidance we do have, according to our belief, is that God gave us a means to overcome the world's evil, and that tool is the Torah. There's one catch, though, the Torah can guarantee us better life to a certain extent, but not perfect life. Even if I lead a life of observing the Torah in its totality, internalizing its values, and applying its messages to every thought, word, and action, there will still be a million ways in which I might perish before my time, whenever that might be.

This seems to contradict many of the promises the Torah makes about direct reciprocity between righteousness and total bliss, but come to think of it, we have not seen such correlation since Biblical times. Our sages have already noticed it almost 2,000 years ago. They even had a name for the phenomenon: הסתר פנים – Concealment of God's Face, meaning that God is not involved in human adventures any more. Now, many people understand this as a punishment, but I think we should take a different approach, based on what has been said here so far.

The goal of the Torah is to help us make the world a better place for future generations. It is a long and tedious process – the education of mankind. The problem is that this product would not sell. A basic rule in advertising and commerce is that you must provide the customer with an answer to WIIFM – What's In It For Me? Well, there was a lot that the Torah had to offer people, but most of it was long-term benefit, not necessarily directly impacting the investor, as we shall see soon. The Torah had to provide an incentive for the early buyers and investors – the Israelites, to accept the new and strange religion, which challenged everything they knew or believed in.

That new religion said that there is only one God, that He has no image, and that humans were created in His image. It introduced a mandatory rest day for all, free men, slaves, and animals alike. It rejected corporal punishment for financial offenses, and put in place a system to protect slaves and eventually to abolish slavery. It asked farmers to set aside ten percent of their produce for the foreigner, the orphans, and the widows, and commanded them to fallow the land for one whole year after six years of cultivation. So many irrational demands on behalf of the Torah required a satisfactory WIIFM which will convince people to join the ranks of the new religion and that WIIFM was the direct Divine intervention, tit-for-tat. That micromanager promised that the sinners will be severely punished while the believers live blissfully. It was a great arrangement, but at a certain point, God had to remove the training-wheels and ask people to start taking care of the world and of humanity, to do good for the sake of goodness, and to imagine, as John Lennon said that there is no hell below us, above us only sky.

The Torah's ultimate goal is achieved by the introduction of a dual legal system. One set of laws governs our relationships with God, while the other takes care of inter-human relationships. The first one is there not for God, for a perfect and immutable God does not need our adulation or service. God does not benefit from our sacrifices, prayers, or observance of the Mitzvoth, as numerous biblical verses state. Rather, the laws governing our behavior toward God are there to teach us discipline and train us to observe the other, much more difficult part of the Torah, that of being nice, considerate, and respectful towards other human beings.

There is much more to be said about the matter and I am sure that there will be many who will oppose all or part of what was said here, so I will now turn to the Biblical book which I believe provides the basis for this theology. It is the Book of Job, which I have returned to in the days after 9/11, as I had the difficult task of addressing my congregation in New York. Those were days of shock and disbelief. Many of my congregants walked back from the city through the Brooklyn Bridge that day, we were alerted to pick up our children from schools, and while sitting in basements and shelters, soot kept falling on our homes and buildings like black, ominous snow.

Witnessing the tremendous evil which few hatred-filled individuals wrought on the city and on America on one hand, and the amazing outpouring of love, friendship, and support on the other hand, made me look at the Book of Job with fresh eyes. I understood it now as a guide to life and religion which puts the emphasis on humans and not on God.

I hope to present a more extensive analysis of Job in the future, but here is synopsis of what I believe is the enduring message conveyed by the author, who in my opinion is Jeremiah:

Job, who of course is a fictional character, is a God fearing man who observes all of God's commandments, but for the wrong reason. He does so because he believes that God is more powerful and that He will smite Job if the latter deviates from His laws. Job repeatedly complains that God is more powerful and that he therefore cannot present his arguments which will prove that he is right and God (God forbid) is wrong. Because of that approach, Job fails miserably in educating his family about doing good, to the extent that he brings sacrifices for his children in case they have offended God. He does not talk to them about the meaning or the necessity of belief and observance, but rather pays tribute to God to guarantee his children's wellbeing.

When Job is afflicted and reduced to a shadow of a man, sitting on the ground and using a shard of clay to scratch his ailing body, his wife suggests that he commit suicide. She tells him that the system he trusted in, that of reward and punishment, does not work and that he should curse God, thus bringing his own demise. In other words, she said that the world is inherently evil and that one should take the nearest exit door when suffering.

Job angrily rejects her offer and instead opens his mouth to curse his day. He wishes that the day in which he was born would have never existed, or, in the words of the poet "I don't wanna die, I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all." By cursing his day, Job reveals that he does not believe in God but rather in destiny, and that he thinks it is his date of birth that got him in trouble. According to that worldview, you could do all the good in the world, but if you were born on a bad-omen day, it will not help you one bit.

The twisted theologies of Job and his wife are joined by a third, that of Job's friends. Those lovely friends, such as whom I do not wish on anyone who is in need of consolation, first cry and mourn with Job, but then offer a very simple answer to his suffering. You think you are such a great Tzaddik, they tell him, but in reality you are a sinner, only you are not aware of it. If you search well enough, you will be able to recognize your faults.

At this point it seems that all is lost. Five gloomy figures sit on the ground. Job's wife wants him to commit suicide, Job believes that he must live and suffer as predetermined by the stars, and Job's friends convinced that he is a terrible covert sinner. And then the author introduces a new character, almost a Deus Ex Machina, who delivers a revolutionary message. As a matter of fact, this message is so revolutionary that it is hidden behind mountains of chatter, six chapters (32-37) and 160 verses, to be accurate. The man's name is symbolic and reflects the deep dichotomy between Job's behavior and his hidden beliefs: אֵלֵי־הוּא בְּרִי־בְרַכָּאֵל הַבּוֹיֵז מִמְשַׁפְּחַת רָם. The name translated roughly as: He is my God the son of he who blesses [i.e. curses] God, the disgraced one [בוזי] of a noble family.

Elihu blasts Job for thinking he is righteous and his friends for deeming him a sinner, and then, after a long-winded introduction he drops this theological bomb (Job 35:5-8):

הֲבֵט שָׁמַיִם וְרָאָה וְשׁוֹר אֲשֶׁר לָקִים גְּבוּהוֹ מִמֶּנִּי
 אִם־חֲטִיאתָ מִה־תִּכְפַּעַל־בִּי וְרַבּוֹ פְּשָׁעֶיךָ מִה־תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי
 אִם־צִדְקָתְךָ מִה־תִּתֶּן־לִּי אוֹ מִה־מִּדְּנֶה יִקַּח
 לְאִישׁ־כְּמוֹךָ רִשְׁעֶךָ וְלִבְנוֹ־אֲדָם צְדָקָתְךָ

Look up to the sky and see the heavens, way beyond your reach

If you sin how do you impact Him [God], and how do your numerous transgressions affect him?

If you are righteous, what have you given Him, or what shall He take from your hand?

Nay, your wickedness affects humans, your equals, and your righteousness impacts the descendants of Adam!

There you have it, in simple, clear, and penetrating words!

God does not need our mitzvot and is unmoved by our transgressions. Our actions have an impact on people like us and on the world we live in. The reward for good deeds is the knowledge that we did good and the satisfaction derived from making the world a better place. Giving to others selflessly grants us a sense of fulfillment and helps us elevate above the daily grind. It also helps us overcome tragedies and misfortune because when we know that there are those who depend on our help and energy, we cannot allow ourselves to sink into depression, apathy, and indifference. Regarding evil, as much as we would like justice to be served and revenge to be taken, no evil-doer has ever paid for his atrocities. The death penalty cannot bring a murder victim back to life and life in prison cannot wipe the memories or heal the wounded soul of rape or abuse victim. Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun, Hitler, Stalin died after destroying the lives of millions. Was justice served? Was it served at the Nuremberg trials? Of course not. But what was achieved is that with every turning page of history humanity realizes that those who seek to destroy will eventually disappear while those who are engaged in helping society, whether through philanthropy, education, medical research, or technological development, are the ones who made the world a better place. But even if we are not great scientists, scholars, inventors, or philanthropists, there is a lot we can do. Just avoiding the little transgressions can have a tremendous impact on society.

Imagine, just for a second, that all people decide to drive and park legally. There will be no traffic or parking violations, which will allow law enforcement agencies to focus on greater crimes. If, in turn, thieves, robbers, and embezzlers all decide to repent and do only good, the money, time, and energy used to fight crime will be diverted to even greater causes and so on ad infinitum or ad utopium.

Good citizens such as you and me have already made this world a much better place. It's true. Despite of our complaints, kvetching, and nostalgic reminiscence, the world is a much better

place today than it was in the past. There is less violence, more knowledge, better health and dental care, and a million other things we take for granted. All these things happened because of humans who were, to use the words of Elihu, like me and you.

This, I believe, is what we should have in mind when we speak of God sitting on His throne on Rosh HaShana with the Books of the Living and the Dead open in front of Him.

We should think of the endless possibilities opening before us this coming year and that though we have no guarantee that we will live to celebrate another Rosh HaShana, it should not prevent us from making every moment count.

Rosh HaShana calls on us to be responsible and accountable, and to harness our talents and knowledge to the service of humanity, becoming ever more altruistic and less selfish.

May we have a year filled with the blessings of mutual love, peace, and support within and between families, communities, and nations, Amen!

שנה טובה ומתוקה

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

¹ I highly recommend reading the graphic novel *A Contract With God*, by the brilliant artist William Erwin “Will” Eisner (1917-2005), in which he accurately analyzes the problem presented here. Also recommended in that context are: *The Righteous Mind*, by Jonathan Haidt; *The Signature of All Things*, by Elizabeth Gilbert; *The Social Conquest of Earth*, by Edward O. Wilson; *The Better Angels of our Nature*, by Steven Pinker;