

Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die: The Limits of God's Power

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After the Holocaust, the Satmar Rebbe offered an explanation: The Holocaust was God's punishment for the advent of Reform Judaism. After all, both began in Germany.

The Satmar Rebbe was fortunate, confident that he fully comprehended God's power. Chaos does not reign in his world. Ultimately, for the Satmar, life is without uncertainty. God is in charge, and the Rebbe understands God's reasoning. The Satmar believed that God set the world straight, balancing out the scales of Justice. God meted out a punishment that fit the "crime" of innovation in Torah, when God used Hitler as the divine instrument to strike down the six million. The eighteenth century philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz, coined the term "theodicy," meaning "God's justice," to describe beliefs such as that rebbe's.

To us, words like the Satmar's are hateful and misguided. He does not represent Judaism as we know it. We more readily expect to hear theodicy like that out of the mouths of the Pat Robertsons of the world, proclaiming such idiocies as blaming the 9/11 attacks or Hurricane Katrina on homosexuality and abortion in America.

And yet, the Rebbe's theodicy may be supported by our very own High Holy Day prayer book:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written,

on Yom Kippur it is sealed: . . .

[W]ho shall live and who shall die;

who shall see ripe age and who shall not;

who shall perish by fire and who by water . . .

But repentance, prayer and charity

temper judgment's sever decree.

Can we pray these words? Do repentance, prayer and charity change God's plan? If so, this prayer suggests a theodicy, a belief that all tragedy is divine punishment to fit the crime. Do we believe that the victims of terror perish by

fire, at divine decree? Do we affirm that folks in the way of hurricanes drowned at God's command? Would they have been saved, had they been contrite, prayerful and charitable or had they remained true to traditional Torah observance?

We are more apt to agree with Rabbi Larry Hoffman, who wrote: "God hardly spends Yom Kippur manufacturing ways for us to die. Death remains as inexplicable to us as it was to Job. But when people told Job that suffering is inevitably deserved, God objected: 'I do not work that way.'"

Judaism does not teach that God kills people for finding new ways to study and observe Torah.

We reject the notion that any human being, even a rebbe revered by thousands, knows God's ways in such detail.

The bigger question, and one that still nags at us, is about whether God has power at all. Is God in charge of what happens in this world, life and death, hurricane and wildfire? And if so, we ask the same question that Jeremiah asked over two and a half millennia ago: "Why do the wicked prosper?" Or, to paraphrase Rabbi Harold Kushner's more recent, popular book title: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Since Rabbi Hoffman mentions Job, let's look there. Job is an exceptionally good and righteous man. Yet he is afflicted with *tsuris* none of us can imagine. Each of his ten children dies, suddenly and tragically. He loses his immense wealth, and is instantly poverty-stricken. Finally, his health fails, as he is covered in boils. So-called "friends" come to visit him, telling him that he must have committed some sin, for which he is being punished. In their view, like the Satmar's, no one suffers unless that person is guilty of sins. They promise Job that, if he repents, God will restore his blessings. Job doesn't believe them. Finally, God tells Job that Divine ways are a complete mystery. They are totally unlike our own. God is in charge, but we mere mortals cannot expect to understand the reasons for God's actions.

Indeed, assuming that God's ways have anything to do with us is nothing short of narcissistic. God may act, and we may suffer, for reasons that have nothing to do with us, for purposes that go far beyond any human lifetime.

Job's theodicy, while more acceptable to us than the Rebbe's, is still awfully hard to swallow. In the face of the six million, can we claim that God is in charge of everything that happens on Earth? With Hurricane Matthew still threatening

havoc today, do we imagine that all the death and suffering have a positive purpose? If God is so fully in charge, then everything that happens must, by definition, be good, no matter how wicked the tragedy seems to us. Mindful of tragedies that have stricken those we love, do we suppose that death and suffering have an overriding beneficial purpose? Remember, the purpose of believing in theodicy, in God's justice, is so that we can maintain the faith that all is right with the world, that God will punish the wicked and reward the pious.

But all was not right with the world, while the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz were humming, day and night.

All was not right with the world on September 11, 2001.

All was not right with the world when that hateful terrorist walked into the Pulse nightclub in June.

All is not right in Haiti tonight.

All is not right with the world when a young person dies of cancer or a child is born with a devastating birth defect, when an elderly person cannot afford her medications or a single mother can't feed her family, when hopes are shattered, when dreams are lost.

Perhaps, we should not be daring enough to claim that God is omnipotent. God's power is limited. God is not in charge, at least not on a daily basis.

Such a theology is not new to Judaism, or even radical. As early as the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that God had to limit Divine power, in order to create the universe. God had to pull back, if God wished to create. God could not be all-powerful, if atoms and molecules, cells and organisms, mountains, seas and storms would follow their own patterns by conforming to the laws of nature. God could not be omnipotent, if human beings would exercise free will.

We cry out to God, as we seek to come to grips with the tragedies that befall us. And yet, we know that God is not to blame.

God did not decide to direct Hurricane Matthew to Haiti or to skirt the Florida coast.

God does not send a fetus with Tay-Sachs disease to one womb and a healthy baby to another.

God does not decree who dies by fire, and who by water.

The most striking evidence of the limits on God's power are found in human failings. Surely, we agree that the Holocaust was evil. God limited God's own power by giving human beings free will to choose good over evil or evil over good. Yes, some good came out of the ashes of European Jewry, just as America claimed collateral benefits from the wicked attacks of 9/11. But let none say that the Holocaust was God's will.

Even in natural disasters, human failings can exacerbate the suffering, just as human heroism can save lives. God is not responsible when government response is woefully inadequate. God did not make Haiti the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, ill-equipped to respond to hurricanes that regularly afflict it. If global warming is to blame for the increased number and intensity of hurricanes in recent years, and if excess use of fossil fuels led to that warming, then God is not at fault for that, either.

As he rejects the idea that God "spends Yom Kippur manufacturing ways for us to die," Rabbi Larry Hoffman nevertheless embraces the conclusion of the same prayer that contains those haunting words, "who shall live and who shall die." The prayer ends: "But repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment's severe decree." No, neither Rabbi Hoffman nor I believe that a righteous city will escape an earthquake or that a person's goodness will protect her from heart disease. "But," Hoffman writes, "if the world is to last a few more millennia, it will be because with whatever power we have, we each admit how often we use it wrongly, pray that we treat people better, and deal charitably with those less powerful than we are."

Repentance matters. If we will reconcile with God, admitting that our own deeds have harmed ourselves and others, we can prevent at least some future tragedies.

Prayer matters. If our worship at this High Holy Day season sends us forth to care more lovingly for every one of God's creatures, we can bring healing in the face of evil.

Tzedakah, righteous giving, matters. If we will give generously to right the world's injustice, we will bring the goodness God wants in this world.

Ultimately, God's power in daily life comes from us. God did not decide to provide backpacks for needy Little Rock school children or Thanksgiving baskets for hungry families. God does not go down to Our House to provide dinner on the fourth Wednesday of each month.

Rabbi Harold Kushner imagines that, in the face of tragedy, God sheds tears with us. God is our spiritual support, at our side, calling upon us to aid those in need, urging us to embrace life, even in the face of death and desolation. The faith that we are not alone, that God mourns with us, sustains us in a world that is often chaotic.

Let us conclude with a prayer, which I offer in Rabbi Hoffman's words and my own:

O God, at this High Holy Day season, let us acknowledge that penitence, prayer and charity may not help us live longer. Righteousness cannot ensure us of a "good death." But let our confessions enrich the lives of our loved ones. May our worship send us forth to help people we hardly know. And let our *tzedakah* make a better world for men, women and children we will never meet. No matter how we die – by fire or by water, early or late – may we all be able to say that we did God's work, all of our days on Earth.

Amen.