

Rabbi David Lerner  
*Bereisheet 5773 Theodicy*

Shabbat Shalom.

I hope you all enjoyed the *hagim* – our joyous and somewhat exhausting holydays and holidays that came fast and furious over the last month. Fortunately, we can catch our breath as the new month of *Heshvan* that we just announced descends upon us.

But, during the last few days, I felt as if I were being pulled out of the holidays fairly abruptly.

Speaking with a member of our community who was coping with a difficult personal situation reminded me of the pain and loss that exists in the world all around us.

Listening to the Vice-Presidential debate, I thought of the largely overlooked population of Americans who live in poverty.

Hearing the Vice-President speak of losing his wife and daughter in a car accident also led me to think about random suffering in the world.



And finally, the story of Malala Yousafzai really made me think of justice in the world – why do good people suffer? Her narrative was particular poignant. She is a 14-year-old Pakistani schoolgirl who has been campaigning for education rights in Pakistan.

On Tuesday, she was singled out by a Taliban terrorist and shot because of that advocacy. A Taliban spokesman said that she was shot in retaliation for her work in promoting girls' education and children's rights in northwestern Swat Valley, near the Afghan border. (NY Times)

Her actions inspire us and bring hope to the world, and her shooting reminds us of how much extremism there is in the world and, in particular, in parts of the Muslim world.

But I was also drawn to fairness – what kind of world do we live in that contains such injustice?

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But, of course, human evil is only a part of that question. The car accident that shattered the Biden Family was not deliberate – it was an accident, a random occurrence.

To quote the Torah, do we live in a world of “*tohu va'vohu*” – full of disorder, chaos, the state of the world at its inception? Or do we live in a world where God created

the heaven and the earth, vanquishing this chaos forever as the Torah also seems to teach?

According to our Torah, the Creator has a plan for the universe and for creation. That's a logical conclusion we might draw from this morning's *parashah*.

Of course, the only problem is that our daily experiences contradict this conclusion. We still find chaos and randomness in our lives. Time and time again, events occur that do not seem to fit in with any divine plan.

Here's a story on the much lighter side that demonstrates this point.

It took place on a Saturday night a number of years ago.

ESPN was broadcasting the semi-final game of the Little League World Series, and 12-year-old Micah Golshirazian was sitting in the dugout as his New England champion team was playing. Micah was sitting on the bench not because he wasn't good enough to play, but because it was still Shabbat - and Micah is *Shomer Shabbat*, an observant Jew who keeps the Sabbath strictly.

Like the great Sandy Koufax before him, Micah put Judaism before baseball. Micah's Orthodox rabbi told him that he could walk over to the stadium, but play only after the Shabbat was over, which that Shabbat was 8:43 PM. ESPN really got into this and added a clock counting down the minutes for the national TV audience to watch.

Finally the minute came. It was 8:43. It was during the 5th inning that Micah, to the cheers of all the fans, entered the game as a pinch runner. This 7th grader who later studied at Maimonides in Brookline (and yes, our own Mike Rosenberg knows him!) was able both to keep Shabbat in a strict fashion and to play in the Little League World Series. A young Jew kept the Shabbat to the applause of Jews and non-Jews in attendance. It was a sweet moment.

But the story didn't end there. Just as soon as Micah entered the game as a pinch runner, he was thrown out at second base!

What?!? How could this happen? Wouldn't God want him to score a run to show that all Jews should observe Shabbat?

At the very least, couldn't Micah have been safe at second?

Maybe God intervenes only in the majors...☺

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Baseball aside, the question of God's justice is most appropriate on this Shabbat when we begin reading the Torah with the creation of the world.

According to the Talmud, Adam asked this question at the very dawn of existence. When it grew dark towards evening, Adam was terrified. Would the darkness last forever? What was happening?

Had God created him and made human beings the pinnacle of creation only to abandon him to the chaos of night?

In a broader sense, Adam was asking what people, from Abraham to Moses, to Job, to all of us have asked in every generation: Why does God allow evil? Why is there evil in the world?

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In writing about God, Elie Weisel proclaimed: "to thank (Him) [God] for Jerusalem and not question (Him) [God] for Treblinka is hypocrisy."

So is God responsible for everything that occurs?

And if we don't think God is responsible for evil, what are we left with?

Just randomness and chance?

What about God's order and plan for the universe as it appears in the Torah?

Lots of questions...

No one can be certain of why bad things happen to good people. We simply do not know enough about our universe or about God. Too much is hidden from our view.

But, our tradition does present us with some compelling insights. Let me share a couple with you.

One comes from the Book of Isaiah and another, from this morning's *parashah*.

Not too long after our Shabbat morning service begins, we recite the "*Barekhu*," the call to worship. The blessing that follows praises God as "*yotzeir or u'vorei hoshekh, oseh shalom u'voreih et hakol* – [God is] the Form-er of light and the Creator of darkness, the Maker of peace and the Creator of everything."

Let's look a little more closely: we have light and dark and peace and everything. Now, "light and dark" work, they are opposites. But the structure breaks down in the second half of the statement: is the opposite of "peace"- everything?

What's going on here?

To understand this prayer more adequately, we need to turn to the book of Isaiah, the source of these words. Isaiah presents two pairs of opposites, as you might expect. "[God is] the Shaper of light and the Creator of darkness, the Maker of peace and the Creator of evil."

Let's stop for a moment and think of what Isaiah is saying.

Does it make sense?

If God initiated the world and everything in it, and we do experience evil in the world, then logic would dictate that God created it.

Because God created everything, evil was created along with goodness.

Light and darkness, good and evil all emanate from God. But what exactly is evil? I would argue that evil is how we experience the chaos, the randomness in certain situations.

Evil is the result of the fact that God, when creating the world, chose not to completely subdue the forces of darkness which would have created in most respects a meaningless world. Without the possibility of evil, there can be no real good.

Similarly, according to modern science, the same randomness that allows for terrible tragedies to occur also enables all goodness to transpire. Without that chance, there would be no universe, no solar system, no earth and no people.

The fact that cells can mutate when they replicate allows for the good (evolution and all of us to evolve) and the bad (cancer, birth defects, etc.)

That is an answer I often present and while it holds true philosophically, it lacks an emotional and spiritual dimension. That is where this morning's reading assists us.

Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg points out that in the second verse in the Torah, we are told, "*V'ruah Elokim m'rahefet al p'nei hamayim* – And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" - the waters that at the time covered the entire earth.

Our sages were fascinated by the description of God as being "*m'rahefet* – hovering" over the world.

What does that mean?

They found the answer in the only other place in the Torah where we find that word. It's toward the end of the Torah, in Deuteronomy, where we are told, "*K'nesher ya'ir kino al gozalav y'raheif* - as an eagle arousing its nest, hovering over its young."

The biblical commentator, Rashi, explains that the eagle "does not press heavily upon its children, but hovers above them - touching them and yet not touching them. So too, the Holy One acts with God's children."

God is thus the ideal parent, hovering above the children, yet not suffocating them, like the eagle with its children, touching and not touching. The eagle wants to protect its young so it stays fairly close to them. But it also recognizes that there are some things from which it cannot protect its offspring. Perhaps it also understands that the cost of not allowing its young to fly on their own, to venture into the world, would prove too high.

So, therefore, the eagle hovers above its children, offering them support even as they learn to soar on their own. And whether or not the young eagles successfully fly is a result of many factors – the wind, the presence of other birds, and the strength of their wings. In other words, the young eagles' success or failure is largely due to circumstances of chance. But despite that, or really because of that fact, the eagle hovers above its young, offering them support.

So it is with us. God functions like a spiritual security blanket, like the *tallit* that we wrap ourselves in. God does not shield us from every arbitrary event, but gives us the strength and spiritual sustenance that nourishes us to confront those moments.

Without God and the Torah we would not only suffer at the hands of randomness, but we would also be without any moral and spiritual anchor to guide our journeys.

Thus, God is present even in a tragedy, in times of loss and difficulty and even on that Little League field – "touching and not touching."

Are there things that will occur to us that cause us pain?

Of course.

Do they also cause God pain?

Yes.

Since the Holy One is only "hovering," God does not prevent evil from occurring. The laws of nature, the constants of our universe, continue to apply.

So what's the good of belief in God?

It will not save us from harm.

No.

But, our faith in God affords us the strength to deal with with tragedy when it hits us. It lets us know that we are not alone in this world, that God's presence is hovering above us, sustaining us. It brings meaning and purpose and direction to our lives.

So on this *Shabbat Bereisheet*, when we read of God's creation of the world, let us remember that God is always above us, touching and not touching, hovering, even if not interfering, to grant us the strength to cope.

Even in moments of darkness, we can find God's light.

Shabbat Shalom.