

## Transforming Pain into Compassion

One thing I have learned as a parent is that it's not easy to be a parent. Not easy at all.

When we are younger, we may think, "When *I* become a parent, things are going to be different; I won't make the same mistakes my folks did when they raised me."

And then...we often make the exact same mistakes.

Sometimes, it's hard to get your children to do something that seems simple: clearing your dishes after dinner or getting ready for school in the morning. Sometimes, it gets frustrating when your kids do not listen to you and we turn to punishments.

"Let's go, brush your teeth and get in the car; we have to go!"

"What do you mean you're not going to brush your teeth? You have to or, or....

Or, you're not going to school!"

Wait a second. Wait a second. What did I just do there??

That wasn't even helpful, a helpful punishment, or consequence, as they are now affectionately called.

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Rewards and punishments, blessings and curses, promises and threats, incentives and consequences – those are the dominant motifs of this week’s Torah reading: *Parashat Ki Tavo*.

This list of curses is not easy to digest – some of the topics are not for the young, some inapplicable, although perhaps more vital thousands of years ago, and some are just harsh. Unduly harsh.

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There’s lots more to discuss here including why there are so many more curses than blessings, but I want to deal with one verse with which I have a major problem.

At the end of the *parashah*, the Torah states: “*V’hayah ka’asher sas Adonai aliekhem l’heiteev etkhem u’l’harbot etkhem, kein yasis Adonai aleikhem l’ha’aveed etkhem u’l’hashmeed etkhem* – And as *Adonai* once delighted in making you prosperous and many, so will *Adonai* now delight in causing you to perish and in wiping you out.” (Deuteronomy 28:63)

Ouch.

It’s one thing to have this punishment of being wiped out, but it feels so much worse to hear that God will find joy in that.

It’s the use of that verb, “*yasis*” that is most troubling: the notion of God DELIGHTING in the destruction of the people: that’s quite disturbing.

So, we have the same choices we had last week when I also raised a troubling verse, or what the Bible scholar Phyllis Trible calls a “terrible text.”



What can we do?

We can ignore it.

We can simply say this reflects a different time and place or we can seek to go deeper.

I want to go deeper.



Now, we are not the first readers of the Torah to be troubled by the text. It did not sit well with Rashi, our great French biblical commentator from 1,000 years ago or the rabbis of the Talmud two millennia ago.

They could not stomach this.

So, they reinterpreted the text. Even though it clearly states that God will rejoice, they said: well, actually, the text might be misleading: God doesn't delight in this; it's the other nations, our enemies that do this. That's what the rabbis say in the Talmud in Tractate *Megillah* (10b).

This is some fancy footwork – one that allows them to re-interpret the text so that the portrayal of God is not so negative.

But that begs the deeper question: how could anyone – anyone – imagine that God would delight in the destruction of the Jewish people?

And for that, I want to introduce a new idea of how to read Torah. First, some background in the form of a mini overview of my theology.

I believe that the Torah was written by people, inspired by God, and, more importantly, by their encounter with the Divine, but the authorship is human. And therefore, we can understand that someone wrote this

understanding of God. That does not mean that the Torah is not sacred – to me, it is our most ancient and most sacred text – made holy not merely by the divine encounter that initiated and inspired it, but also, and more importantly, through the generations of people who have made it holy - by reading, learning and honoring its core values, by retelling its narratives, living its lessons and re-interpreting it in every generation, as I am trying to do today.

Now, this understanding – that people – Jews, thousands of years ago wrote this understanding of God both gets God off the hook – first, because God did not write this text, and second, because now we can see that this understanding of God does not resonate with us – we do not believe it to be true.

I, for one, do not believe in a God who delights in the suffering of humans. In fact, the Talmud continues on the same page that I just cited to remind us that God does not even delight in the suffering of our enemies and that we should not rejoice in their defeat. That is not moral behavior.

So, what can we learn from this text? And here is the new idea I want to share with you.

If a Jew living thousands of years ago imagined that God could rejoice in our suffering, it is because he was imagining a very harsh ruler and perhaps he experienced that degree of harshness in his life (and, yes, I am presuming a man wrote this.)

The negativity of the *tokheha* – the rebuke – is inversely proportional to what this person may have suffered. From a psychological perspective,

this Jew may have experienced terrible tragedies and losses, which we know occurred to our people many times throughout our history.

He, in turn, internalized that pain and imagined that must be the dominant way of the world. A painful life points in the direction of a negative God. And we know that this often occurs. If we suffer as children, we are more likely to bring that negativity back into the world.

While I believe in divine light flowing into the world and into the authors of the Torah, this pain was so deep that it blocked out some of the divine flow. And thus, the resulting text captures human suffering, not the complete picture of the divine.

But, we do not have to lock ourselves into the cycle that trapped this writer thousands of years ago.

We know that pain and fear and suffering can push us in that direction, and today, we better understand these psychological realms. So, instead, we have to envision a different God and reinterpret the verse yet again.

Just as we can imagine loss and pain that has hurt our people and other peoples and continues to cause untold challenges for people around the world, we can imagine a God who goes with us into the pain as in the words of Psalm 91, God declares: “I am with you in times of suffering, I will strengthen you – *imo Anokhi b'tzarah, aḥaltzeihu*” and I will help you move to a place of compassion.

For me, as I read these punishments, I feel compassion for the authors, for what they must have suffered and I understand that they may

have felt the need to express themselves harshly, portraying the world and the Almighty in such a dark light.

That is my reading of the text – whether a *tefillah*, a prayer, or a biblical punishment, I try to understand the deeper place where the author was coming from. And understand them as I would try to appreciate where anyone is coming from.

And then, I try to move to a place of compassion. The harsher their writings, the more they were in pain. The more pain they were in, the more compassion I try to feel towards them. And that is another sacred dimension to this text and our understanding of it today.



That's what the rabbis started to do with their *midrash*, their re-interpretation, and I am trying to follow in their footsteps – relearning and revisiting the text for our time and understandings.

Both as a rabbi and a father – I am looking for the place of kindness – where we can transform the pain, which often presents as harshness and anger, into compassion in our texts and in our lives.

I believe that the more we understand pain and accept it (not simply ignore it), we can then work with it to help ease it into compassion.

May we all be engaged in moving ourselves and the world from pain to compassion.