

“May it be God’s Will”
Yom Kippur 2003 / 5764
Congregation B'nai Jeshurun

First story. It is the end of summer, and the Shapiro family is vacationing with their good friends, the Katz’s. They used to live in the same city, but ten years ago, the Katz’s moved, and their one time to spend time with one another is on their annual summer vacations. As they are getting ready to depart, the Katz’s bid farewell to the Shapiro’s. “See you next summer,” they say. “God willing, we will see you next August,” they respond.

Second story. It has been two weeks since Rose entered the hospital for her hip replacement surgery. Due to some complications, she has been there longer than expected. Her dear friend Ethel has come to visit, and when she inquired as to Rose’s departure from the hospital, Rose says: “please be to God, I will be out of here by the weekend.”

Third story. Stephanie and her husband Bob are expecting their second child. Since it is the holidays, she is seeing many of their relatives for the first time since they announced their good news. The question asked most is, of course, when is the baby due? Stephanie always answers: “God willing, she will arrive in February.”

Though we may not always notice it, we bring God into our lives on a day to day basis. Each of the three scenarios just presented not only reminds us of a person’s connection to God, but actually relies on God for their hopes to be realized. Whether we use the expression “God-willing” or “please be to God” or

“if it is God’s wish”, each expression assumes that the end result will occur if this is God’s desire.

Our youth do a similar thing when taking an exam, by offering a prayer to God that they receive a good grade. At happy times, we offer thanks to God for helping us reach this joyous occasion. At difficult times, we plead with God to make things better.

On Yom Kippur, it is our day to repent to God. We are supposed to do *teshuvah*, repentance, or to turn or return back to God. God tells us to “turn toward Me and I will turn toward you.” We try to repair the breach between ourselves and God, and by doing so, we might be able to repair the many breaches between ourselves and the many people with whom we have relationships.¹ This is the time for us to reevaluate our relationships, in particular our relationship with God.

But how do we determine where God is in our life? How do we deal with the unending questions and limited answers?

Over the course of this past year, I have spent many long hours, days, weeks and months contemplating these seemingly unending questions. As is unfortunately true for too many of us, this has been a year of challenge and pain for myself, my husband and our family. As most of you know, last October I was due to give birth to our first child. After more than nine months of carrying this daughter, (we knew she was a girl from early on), with only the normal discomfort that accompanies pregnancy, we were ready to bring our daughter into our lives and create our family.

¹ From The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary by Michael Strassfeld.

Like many first-time mothers, my due date came and went, and the doctors were monitoring me regularly. At ten days past my due date, we were scheduled to go to the hospital so I could be induced. The day would be Tuesday, November 5th, Election Day – a date that would be with me forever, though not for the reasons I ever expected. I had been at the hospital the day before, for my bi-weekly visit to the non-stress machine, and everything had been fine. The baby was moving more than I probably wanted, but all looked good.

When we arrived at the hospital in the afternoon the next day to check-in, suitcase in hand with our new digital video camera to mark this monumental occasion, we were taken to a room like all the expectant mothers. The nurses came in to chat with us and get us situated, and I got hooked up to the necessary machines. All of a sudden our world changed, and I didn't realize until much later that it would never be the same.

My doctor came in and was reading the machines, but I wasn't really paying attention to him. The next thing I knew, the doctor from the ob floor, whom I had seen the day before, was with him, and they were telling us that they had some terrible news – the baby's heartbeat had stopped. All of a sudden, I realized that no one was in the room other than the two doctors and my husband David and myself, and the quiet was deafening.

I didn't quite know how to respond, so I asked them to explain. They told us that the baby's heart had stopped some time between the time we were there the day before and now, which was about 24 hours later. Unable to truly comprehend this at the time, we cried, and then we began to make plans. I called my parents and they took the first plane out from Chicago. I still had to deliver our daughter,

and then we had to meet her, hold her, speak to her, give her a name and plan her funeral.

I suppose we were all very numb for weeks. I read a number of books, offered prayers, tried to write down my thoughts, and David and I had many questions. Why had this happened to Batya? (That is her name, meaning daughter of God – it was the best I could come up with when we were in the hospital, and it seemed to be a perfect fit for her and her relationship with God.) What had she done to deserve this? She had not even had a chance to take a first breath, and she would have no more. What had we done? Did I not do all the things I should have done during the pregnancy? Did we not speak with her enough? Love her enough?

And where were You, God? David kept saying that I didn't deserve this. But do people ever deserve the bad that comes upon them? Our list of questions was endless. If the tough times in your life teach you important lessons, what could this possibly be teaching us? Why couldn't I have miscarried early in the pregnancy, so I didn't have to bond with a beautiful, perfect, 8 pound 6 ounce little girl? Was this going to make me a better rabbi? Probably, but I was content without the lesson.

The questions continued forever, but the biggest question I struggled with, and continue to struggle with today, did not dawn upon me until many months later. Once I knew I was pregnant with our second child, due just a few weeks from now, I was understandably cautious and guarded. When we started to share our news with people, I would always answer the question “when are you due?” with “in November, God-willing.”

And then one day, I stopped replying in such a manner. If I am to have this baby in November, if it is God's will, does that mean that it was not God's will for me to have Batya last year? Was God's will to let me, David, and all of our family and friends, including so many of you, suffer? I began to pay attention as people shared news with me of all kinds, both as a rabbi and as a friend. So many people prefaced or followed their words and thoughts with some form of "God-willing". Does that mean if it doesn't work out for them, then it was not God's will? Or was it God's will to have this seemingly bad thing happen?

Though I may have a certificate of ordination hanging on the wall in my office, I truly didn't feel equipped to answer these questions any more than the average person, so I went searching through our Jewish texts to try to find an answer that suited me.

During this process, I realized that there were two main categories of pain that people feel. One, similar to my own pain, is suffering that seems to be caused by something other than a human being. This might include suffering due to illness or death, acts of nature or simply the unexplained. The other category is suffering due to acts by other human beings, whether it is a terrible murder and suicide, an event like 9-11 or the Holocaust, these acts were ultimately in the hands of some human being. Regardless, both leave people feeling empty and incomplete.

Some might understand the latter through the idea of free will. As we are reminded in our Torah portion today, we are asked to choose between life and good, death and evil. We are encouraged to choose life and good, but it is ultimately a choice that each one of us must make.

As Maimonides, our great Jewish philosopher, was known to say: “a man is given freedom of will. If he wishes to choose the right way and be righteous, he is free to do so. If he wants to choose the wrong path and be wicked, he is free to do so. Do not believe what the ignorant people say – that God decides at birth whether one will be righteous or wicked. No, every human being can either be righteous like Moses, or wicked like Jeroboam, for there is no compulsion exerted upon him and nothing draws him to one of the two ways. A person chooses his way with his own determination.”²

The nature of human beings is such that God created us with two inclinations: the desire to do good, *yetzer tov*, and the desire to carry out evil acts, *yetzer harah*. Even though God is all-knowing, human beings still must choose between these two. According to our ancient text of Pirke Avot, sayings of our ancestors, “everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given.”³

So suffering that comes as a result of human beings is still unfair, painful and horrific, and perhaps we still want to blame God, or be angry with God, which is our right. However, for some, free will takes some of the blame away from God.

And for those who can't possibly explain their suffering through other's free will, or who need more of an answer, where can we turn? Some people simply say that our expectations have changed. They are unrealistic. Due to advanced science and medicine, we expect every disease to be cured, every earthquake to be announced far in advance. And that is simply beyond realistic.⁴ For those who

² From Maimonides' *Misheh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2, found in [What Jews Say About God](#) by Alfred J. Kolatch, page 313.

³ Pirke Avot 3:19

⁴ From [What Every Jew Needs to Know About God](#) by Michael Levin, page 33.

think our expectations are not too great, Jewish texts and traditions cite several possible understandings of suffering, though you must determine whether these explanations work for you.

During the Talmudic times, the rabbis found several ways to understand seemingly senseless suffering in the world. They wrote in Pirke Avot “it is not in our power to understand the prosperity of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous.”⁵ Maimonides stated regarding the issue of reward and punishment, that he believes, and I quote: “with complete faith, that the Exalted One rewards those who observe the commandments of the Torah, and punishes those who transgress them.”⁶

Now, as you know from my Rosh Hashanah remarks, I believe strongly in Liberal Judaism, and since we, as liberal Jews, are consciously choosing not to observe all the commandments in the Torah, for we live in a different world from the one during which the Torah was written, it wouldn't seem right for us to be punished for not observing that which we don't believe. Perhaps for some Jews this line of reasoning works, and perhaps it works for some of us on certain occasions, but my guess is that it does not help us at our most challenging of moments.

Another way the rabbis chose to explain suffering in their world was that the “ultimate justice would be meted out, not in this world, but after death in ‘the world to come’.”⁷ For the rabbis, the world in which we live is “like a corridor to

⁵ Pirke Avot 4:19

⁶ from Maimonides' commentary to the Mishna Sanhendrin, from What Jews Say About God by Alfred J. Kolatch, page 312.

⁷ From “The Changing Perceptions of God in Judaism” by Rifat Sonsino in Teaching about God and Spirituality.

the world to come,”⁸ where “the righteous sit enthroned, their crowns on their heads, and enjoy the brightness of God.”⁹

Again, for some, this understanding that we will ultimately be rewarded in the world to come has comfort, but for most liberal Jews, the concept of an afterlife and a world-to-come does not give the kind of comfort necessary in extreme cases of suffering.

So for many of us, after delving through the texts, we still sit, searching, seeking. After days, weeks and months of pondering and searching, perhaps the most suitable answer is that we cannot always find answers. Some things are simply beyond our grasp.

Rabbi Neil Gilman, a contemporary conservative rabbi and theologian, states: “I insist that God transcends human understanding and language. That is what makes God God. To believe that human beings can comprehend God is idolatry, the cardinal Jewish sin.”¹⁰ Perhaps Rabbi Gilman has stumbled onto something significant. There is a reason that God is God, and that we have limits as human beings. We can’t begin to understand God, and in some ways, God’s understanding of us is not as we might desire it to be.

Other theologians subscribe to the theory called limited theism, meaning that God is good, but not omnipotent. Albert Einstein, a man of science and concreteness, who was perhaps more like us than these other theologians, stated simply: “I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves.”¹¹ Think about that:

⁸ Pirke Avot 4:21

⁹ Brachot 17a

¹⁰ From What Jews Say About God by Alfred Kolatch, page 304.

¹¹ From Einstein’s Ideas and Opinions, in What Jews Say About God by Alfred J. Kolatch, page 302.

Einstein simply recognized that his God was in a different category than anything we, as humans, could possibly comprehend.

One of my favorite quotes, given by Rabbi Harold Schulweiss, a contemporary conservative rabbi and author, may shed some light on this situation for you, and for me. Rabbi Schulweiss said, in response to the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake that killed so many: “whether you call it an act of God depends on your understanding of God. Most assuredly, profoundly and emphatically, this was not punishment from God. I can think of a lot of other areas that are more deserving, like the heart of Las Vegas. Or the headquarters of the Skinheads. Theology gets into a lot of trouble trying to read God’s mind. If the earthquake is to be seen as punishment, then any catastrophe can be seen as punishment, and I just can’t accept that.”¹²

Perhaps, then, the best that we can do in trying to establish our relationship with God is to accept that some aspects of this relationship are inexplicable. And perhaps, we even need this relationship to exist in such a way, for that is what makes it unique and holy. And when we say “God willing”, let us understand that God’s will is different than ours.

Now for your assignment from the teacher in me. Each one of us has an assignment as this Yom Kippur quickly comes to a close. We have all had challenging situations in our lives, and perhaps we did not feel prepared, especially when it came to the role God played during those times. We must grapple with the unending questions about God and suffering when we are not forced by circumstance to address these questions. We should not wait until we are sitting

¹² From an interview with Ari Noonan in *Heritage Southwest Jewish Press*, in What Jews Say About God by Alfred J. Kolatch, page 316.

beside a dying parent, confronting terrorism and bombs, or told that our child is not going to live. We can not wait until those moments to understand what we believe, though those moments are typically what force us, one way or another, to create a belief system.

Though I have not shared my daughter Batya's story publicly until this time, I chose to do so not because I felt I was ready, but because the lessons I have learned have been ones worth sharing with all of you. Many of you shared with me your stories during these last twelve months, both in writing and in person, of your trials and challenges. We have all been in similar shoes at some time in our life. We have asked: why me?, why now?, why ever? Perhaps you, as I, have questioned what truly is God's will. And I'm sure you have had your doubts often. Please know, that you are not alone. If we did not doubt, we would not be human.

I'm certain you are all familiar with the well-known anonymous poem entitled "Foot Prints in the Sand". It seems so appropriate to hear it in this context one more time:

"One night a man had a dream.
He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand;
one belonged to him, and the other to God.
When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
He looked back at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of his life
There was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest
And saddest times in his life.
This really bothered him and he questioned God about it.
'God, you said that once I decided to follow you,
You'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that at the worst times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
How could you leave me when I needed you the most?'
God replied 'My precious, precious child,
I love you and would never leave you
During your times of suffering,
And when you see only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you.'"¹³

I know that God has done much carrying for myself and my family over the past year. Otherwise, I would not have the strength to stand before you today. Perhaps the times when we search hardest for God's footprints are the times God is most by our side.

On Yom Kippur, may we each have the ability to communicate with God, feeling good about our personal relationship with God and able to ask for proper repentance. And whenever we say "may it be God's will", may we remember that God's will is something beyond that which we can understand. May we all return together next year, with new understandings and new glasses through which we see the world, please be to God. And let us all say: Amen.

¹³ Unknown author, found at www.angelfire.com/Babebluz/Footprints.html