

On Suffering & Faith
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Rabbi Francine Roston
Congregation Beth El, South Orange, NJ

One Sunday a few weeks back my morning was filled with life and death. First, I officiated at an Unveiling for a great man, Louis Rublin z”l who lived a good, long life and left behind a dedicated and inspiring family. And then I left the cemetery to drive to Maplewood and officiate at the Baby naming of Paloma Rose Szyfer whose mom grew up in this shul and who will hopefully attend Beth El Preschool just like her sisters.

Just this past week we had a funeral in this sanctuary to honor Irving Cohen z”l who died at the age of 93 and was married to his wife Helen for just over 70 fairytale years. The Cohens were part of a circle of families that formed the core of Beth El. And on that same day, a baby boy was born to the Stambler family and Gabriel Isaac became our newest member. The cycle of life is powerful, reassuring and healing. There is grief and there is joy. There is death and there is life. While these moments at the beginning of life and the end of life, bring a clarity to the human experience...there are many moments in between that challenge comprehension.

There are funerals for loved ones whose lives were cut short—by tragedy, by disease, by suffering. Many of us have watched people suffer for no good reason—we've watched loved ones deteriorate ravaged by cancer and illness; we've watched people suffer the destruction of natural disasters—earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, tsunamis; we've seen children born with cruel diseases and birth defects; this past year we watched in horror as nine miners, six trapped and three rescuers, died in a cave-in 1500feet below the surface of the earth in Utah.

Insurance companies call natural disasters “acts of God.” Callous religious leaders see the hand of God in life-threatening events actively punishing sufferers as sinners: Ovadya Yosef is the former chief Sephardi rabbi of Israel and currently serves as the spiritual leader of the Shas party. In a Shabbat sermon he recently made the claim that the Israeli soldiers who died in the war last summer, suffered death for the sins of their secularism. He also defined Hurricane Katrina as God’s punishment for the sins of the residents who didn’t study enough Torah.

We are repelled by such equations brought into clarity by Ovadya Yossef’s statements. How can a destructive force of nature be the hand of God? If God is all-powerful, though, maybe God does control the winds, rains, fires and diseases. But if God is just and merciful, than God could not possibly control hurricanes or disease. This is so clearly true as we look at a suffering infant, too young to have sinned a sin deserving of death. Suffering can not be caused by sin if God is just and compassionate...

In the midst of suffering, we want to believe that God is there for us, that God is right by our side—Yet we can’t accept that God was there and did not shield us from the loss, tragedy and suffering....We wish God was there but we are hoping God was not there...

Many of us will experience life's suffering and come face to face with a crisis of faith, an insolvable problem that alienates us from Judaism or religion or God or all of the above. Where is God? we will ask. If God is everywhere, all-powerful and all-knowing, then God must be in the earthquake, the cave-in, the hurricane.

But if God is all-knowing, just and compassionate, how could God send suffering randomly and indiscriminately. Where was God in Hurricane Katrina? Where was God in the Crandell Canyon mine? What does God do for us if God does not protect us from natural disasters, disease and suffering.

These are all good questions that many of us cannot help but ask. If we are trying to live a life of serious thought and inquiry, if we are trying to live a life in connection with God, if we are trying to understand the purpose of faith/God in our lives, how can we *not* ask these questions?!

When I came face to face with my own mortality and thought I might die, I did not know what to believe. When I was working as a hospital chaplain in Chicago, I was splashed at a bedside in the CCU. I was sitting with the patient and speaking with her nurse as her line was being flushed. The line clogged, backed up and splashed all over us in a few seconds. There was a question whether the patient had HIV/AIDS and I went home wondering if I would contract it as well. A dark cloud lingered over me for months until I had enough clear tests and good information.

But that first night when I lay in bed filled with fear and dread, afraid for my life, I was overwhelmed with darkness. I was in a deep, dark pit all alone. No one could understand my fear. No one could accompany me. Even God felt absent. I wanted God to be absent. How could God be the cause behind this accident or have allowed it to have happened. God must have been absent. I needed God but couldn't find God.

Just a few weeks ago, Time magazine ran a cover picture of a somber, tired-looking Mother Teresa titled "The Secret Life of Mother Teresa: Newly published letters reveal a beloved icon's 50-year crisis of faith." In a new book "Mother Teresa Come Be My Light", letters written by the famous nun reveal her periods of spiritual darkness and doubt. It seems that almost immediately after she started her ministry to the poor and dying in Calcutta, she experienced a spiritual darkness that continued through her 50 years of service.

As she described it: *"Where is my Faith—even deep down right in there is nothing but emptiness and darkness—My God—how painful is this unknown pain—I have no Faith...So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them because of the blasphemy—If there be a God—please forgive me...I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coolness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul..."*

Now, I am not Mother Teresa, and she was not a Jew, but this does not mean that we cannot learn from her struggles and journey of faith. Here was a woman who worked for

years taking care of people in desperate, hopeless conditions, offering them love, caring and faith. And yet, within she struggled and didn't even know if there was surely a God.

For many of us, we have clung to what Heschel called the "Leap of Action" rather than the "leap of faith." We act in the world as Jewish people, we do mitzvot and observe Jewish rituals and lifecycle events...but we are not sure that we truly believe in God or whether there is a God.

We know of the evil and suffering in the world and we can't figure out how God fits in so we remove God, do mitzvahs, and turn off the conversation with God.

Having faith is about keeping the conversation going even when you have doubts. Having faith is about asking the questions and refusing to accept unreasonable answers.

Our questions are good ones and we should not be silenced or tortured by attempts at answers. We should not be told to refrain from questioning out of humility, because we will never be able to comprehend God's ways. For some of us, accepting that something is beyond our understanding and is in God's hands, gives us comfort and soothes our souls. For some of us, we feel silenced by this understanding of God's all-knowing power and we feel constrained to ignorance.

Our questions should also not be answered with condemnation. The one who questions is not a sinner. The one who questions is staying engaged. And the One, with a capital O, who is all-powerful couldn't possibly override compassion and justice to send suffering to the innocent.

So, where *is* God? What is God's role in our lives? What do we do when, as Mother Teresa described, our ideal beliefs about God conflict with the reality that we experience. If God loves us and cares for us, then why are we suffering? Why are our loved ones suffering? If God is everywhere, the unified force of all creation, then how could God not be the cause of natural disasters and disease? If God is all-powerful why can't God intervene or why **won't** God intervene?

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, in his book "For Those Who Can't Believe" offers us a theological response to these questions that I have found challenging and engaging. He reminds us that Jewish tradition has always described God as a God of Polarities: God is Dayyan or Judge and God is El Rachum v' Hanun, a compassionate and gracious God;

God's presence in the world comes through middat haDin, the divine measure of Justice and middat haRachamim, the divine measure of mercy.

Schulweis reminds us that we have two names for God that are used interchangeably in Jewish text and tradition: Elohim and Adonai. Each one, he teaches, represents one of the divine impulses—Din and Rachamim, Justice and Mercy. He takes it even further than this offering the hope that God can be present in the reality of our lives and we can retain

faith, that we *can* believe in a moral god who is not blind to the reality of evil, that we can connect with God and find God in every experience under heaven.

If you think about it, the two names of God stand side-by-side in our prayers, blessings and Torah. **Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.** Hear oh Israel the Lord/ Adonai our God/Elohim shelanu, the Lord is One. Almost every blessing begins: Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, and last at the end of Neilah we proclaim over and over God's unity using both names: Adonai Hu haElohim, Adonai hu haElohim...The Lord He is Our God.

The name Elohim is used exclusively in the first chapter of Genesis. As Rabbi Schulweis teaches us: "Elohim is the God of nature, the life of the universe, the author of all creation. Elohim is the God who creates lion and lamb, light and darkness, the eagle and its prey. Elohim is the Jewish reality principle—our sages taught *Olam KeMinhago Nahag* "Nature pursues its own course"; Elohim is the ground of Nature. Nature includes earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, sun, moon and mountains. Through the eyes of Elohim the whole of existence is 'very good'. One can command nature by obeying it, understanding its ways." [from "Was God in the Earthquake" sermon, Dec 2004]

The universe is amoral, disease has no moral purpose or meaning. Disease and death in and of themselves are expressions of Elohim's middat haDin, and part of God's holy design of humanity and creation.

We have heard these theological premises expressed in such sayings as: this is the way the world works; it was out of our control, there was nothing that could be done, it was an act of God, an act of Elohim. Not the God who judges and punishes, but the God who set up an ordered natural world which exists apart from morality. Acts of nature are acts of God but not acts of moral judgment or punishment for sins. "The world of Elohim is not a court of justice. In this sense the world is not fair. **But that is not the whole world nor is Elohim the whole of divinity.** Were Elohim the only description of God's way we would be pantheists, equating God with nature. We would submit to nature and live according to nature.

But Judaism knows another dimension of Divinity, Adonai. Adonai is the name of God that is introduced with the creation of humanity (Gen 2:5; 4:26). If Elohim refers to that which is, Adonai refers to that which ought to be. If Elohim is the source of all that is given, Adonai is the power that transforms givenness, repairs the broken shards, mends the torn fabric, holds back the chaos."

Just as the Midrash taught that the world could not be sustained by God's justice alone and required God's measure of Mercy, so we can not be sustained, or maintain our faith, without an understanding and connection with the dual nature of God. *Where is God?* God is everywhere. Elohim is behind nature and reality, Adonai is behind the ongoing process of creation's correction, the striving towards the ideal, the transformation of nature's cruelty.

Where is Adonai in the earthquake or disease? Adonai is in the generosity of the people who donate their time and belongings to those in need. Adonai is in the determination of the doctors to find cures and the caregivers' impulse to bring kindness, compassion and comfort to those who suffer. Adonai is in each and every one of us when we hold someone's hand, sit at their bedside, cook them chicken soup, or help them take a drink of water.

What is God's role in our suffering? What is God's role in our state of illness or despair, suffering and darkness?

God shines a light on the path through the valley of the shadow of darkness, God leads us beside still waters to revive our spirits after they have been shaken. God shows us the green valleys, the incomprehensible greatness of the natural world and God shows us a banquet table full of friends and loved ones. As we recite Psalm 23 during Yizkor and at other times of distress, hear God's call and seek God's guidance. We can endure, as the psalmist has, and move from darkness to light, again and again, with God by our side.

Rabbi Schulweis teaches that God is there to help us respond to life. Elohim guides us to accept the reality of nature, that which is out of our control and without judgment *and then* Adonai guides us to transform that which is within our control and bring God's goodness and kindness, God's mercy and justice, into the world.

There comes a time after mourning and accepting the reality of our fate—the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of a chronic condition, the loss of a job, the experience of tragedy—that we have to get up and start to participate in living and loving again.

How do we do this? How do we find acceptance and how do we find the drive to live again?

Elohim counsels acceptance and helps us to accept the facts of nature without feeling judged or condemned. Adonai calls out to us to transform nature and bring divinity into the world around us. How are we to do this? By following God's ways. Just as God clothed the naked, we must clothe the naked. Just as God visited the sick, we must visit the sick. Just as God celebrated with the bride and groom, we must celebrate. Just as God buried the dead and comforted the mourner, we must care for the dead and comfort the mourners.

There is a very challenging Jewish tradition that we are supposed to bless the bad with the good. In the Mishna Berachot we are taught: One is obligated to say a blessing over the bad just as one says a blessing over the good. This is proved using the first line of the *v'ahavta*: *Ve'ahavta et Adonai Elohekha...* You should love the Lord your God *b'chol l'vav'cha*, with your heart meaning with your two impulses, your good impulse and your bad impulse.

B'chol naf'sh'kha—meaning even if God takes your nefesh, takes your life, you must love God and, in a wordplay on *b'chol m'odekha*, the mishna teaches that we are to love

God not matter which measure or *middah* God metes out for you—whether a good measure or a measure of suffering, *middat hadin* or *middat harachamim*.

Every morning when I recited the blessing after the Barechu, I say it with the intention that I am blessing all of life— **Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh haOlam Yotzer Or u’vorei Khoshech, oseh Shalom u’vorei et haKol**. Blessed are you Adonai our Elohim, Ruler of the Universe, who creates light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates everything—the good and the bad, the suffering and the celebration, the judgment and the grace, the darkness and the light.

Rabbi Schulweis’ teaching allowed me to find God in the suffering without destroying my faith. It allows me to find peace and bless the whole of life. Many of us struggle. Many of us seek God. Many of us don’t but rather seek the power of community, the compassion of the other, a good way of life.

We sit for hours in prayer, reading a liturgy consumed with God, God’s mercy and God’s justice, God’s power and God’s judgment... What are we to do with this God? Where are we to find Him? Look around. Elohim is in the blue sky, the breeze that blows the leaves in the trees, the green of the grass and the falling leaves. And look around again: Adonai is in each one of us—God’s agents on earth created with the purpose of bringing Godliness to the world—healing and caring, kindness and mercy, justice and righteousness.

Auditorium: This Yom Kippur may we be inspired to find God in every experience. May we experience the revival of our spirits as we empty our bodies and minds and prepare our souls for renewal. This Yom Kippur, may we find a way to bless the bad with the good. May we find a way back to God so that God can return to us and bring us life.

Sanctuary PreYizkor: Through the Yizkor service we bless the Good with the Bad. Yes we have suffered; yes we have lost loved ones to death, tragedy and disease; and yes, at times, we have even lost our faith. But we stand here today to affirm life. We stand here to affirm God’s place in our world and God’s place in our lives. We are the survivors and we stand here today to affirm that the world is lacking for the presence of our departed loved ones, but it is not lacking in God’s presence. It is not lacking in the life-lessons that our loved one’s left behind. We affirm our commitment to maintaining their memories. We affirm our commitment to give *tzedekah* in their honor. We commit to living out their hopes and dreams. We commit to upholding the values, faith and tradition that they held dear.

And, in the end, we will stand as a congregation, united by our faith and hope, and we will praise God’s name together with the words of the Kaddish—with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our might.

At this time, it might be your tradition to leave the room if your parents are still living. I would encourage those of you who are not sure what to do to remain. There are many

who left this world with no one to recite their kaddish. These martyred Jews are also memorialized in the Yizkor prayers of the entire community.