

The Problem of Evil

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IN 1991 a terrible tragedy occurred just a quarter mile away from the day school in Philadelphia where I served as Headmaster. A plane carrying Senator H. John Heinz III of Pennsylvania and a helicopter collided over the Merion Elementary School. Falling debris killed two first graders at recess, both of whom happened to be Jewish. The crash occurred when my school was on Pesach break. When our students returned the following week and had to be prepared for Yom Hashoah observances, the branch principal, Mrs. Sybil Levine, said: "What happened at the Merion School was an accident, what happened in the Holocaust was evil, and the two are not the same."

The causes of pain and suffering are many, but the emotional impacts they create are similar. Jews from our earliest formative days have always had to ask the question: if God is good, why is there such pain and suffering in the world? Our latest share of storms, tsunamis, earthquakes, wars, and terrorism underscore the same religious question. It's important to admit to our children that though we really do not know the answer, we need to search for one together, and in the meantime continue to live and love. When children ask these fundamental questions of faith and doubt, it's important that we don't pretend to have answers we really do not believe. We should praise the question itself — a very Jewish thing to do.

So what is a theory of educational practice that might guide us in dealing with the question of theodicy, or the need to justify God, especially in teaching about the Holocaust?

1. It is important, I believe, never to leave a child with the notion that Jews died in the Holocaust because they were being punished. That kind of theological obscenity is akin to Pat Robertson's statement that Prime Minister Sharon's stroke was a punishment from God because of the withdrawal from Gaza.

2. Have the humility to admit that we do not know everything and that mysteries continue to exist.

3. Doubt, holding God accountable, questioning, being angry with God, are very Jewish emotions. Just read through Psalms or recall Moses' response to God after the golden calf episode when God wanted to annihilate the Jewish people: Moses basically asks: "What will the neighbors say?" And God relents.

4. A reflection on Jewish (not Greek) ideas of God reveals that God need not be omnipotent to be God, but can allow space for human free will and for randomness and complexity in the universe. The universe is a complex system that by definition contains randomness. Small variations can lead to powerful forces — thus the metaphor that a butterfly flapping its wings in China can lead to a hurricane in Florida. I would posit the following corollaries to this principle of a limited God:

- a. We should read the rabbinic maxim from *Avot* (3:19): "Everything is foreseen, but free will is given," as "Everything may be anticipated, and free will is given." We can anticipate the consequences of our actions from the choices we make. If I reach out to harm you, I can anticipate the result. Actions matter, and intentions are crucial.

- b. Randomness is built into the universe, like the cracks in the sidewalk that prevent the pavement from buckling. Why one person gets cancer and another does not is not a reflection of God's will, but a random occurrence. Accidents will happen. And yes, a la Kushner, God may be found in the way we are supported and support others in times of pain and tragedy.

5. While we have a need to intellectually understand why something tragic has occurred and have a religious desire to explain God's role, ultimately, evil exists (purposeful or random), and all we can do is cope with it. Jewish tradition came down not on the side of prescribing intellectual and theological reasons for evil, but on the side of providing coping skills through the creation of religiously-based actions that get us through the pain and restore us, hopefully, to continued living. We need to teach our

children Jewish coping skills designed to face evil squarely in the face.

The mitzvot of *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick), *nihum aveilim* (comforting the mourner), tzedakah, *tikkun olam* are all constellations of actions and beliefs designed to cope with evil in the world. Kashrut is a way of dealing with the evil of wanton and indiscriminate taking of life, setting limits to our appetites. Prayer is a way of venting emotion and receiving communal support and comfort at a time we'd rather be taking a swing at someone.

So if we help our children understand the difference between intentional evil and accident, between natural disaster as random occurrence and terrorism, we can encourage them to be duly vigilant guardians of a Jewish system of morals and ethics while giving them the personal religious skills to cope with what may come their way. I'm not sure there is anything else we can do.

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