

The traditional Ashkenazic text of the Kol Nidre Service begins:

אֶזְרָעַ לְצַדִּיק וְלִישְׂרֵי־לֵב שִׂמְחָה

Or Zarua L'Tzadik, u'l'yishrei Lev Simcha

Light is sown for the righteous,

and joy for the upright of heart.

We take these words from Psalm 97 (v.11)

and indeed, throughout much of the TaNaKh,

as representative of the fact that –

the theology of our people was essentially –

the construct of Deuteronomistic History.

The people of Israel have a special covenant with the Eternal,
should we remain faithful and obedient to God –
then we will be rewarded.

However,

disobedience and unfaithfulness lead to consequences.

Even so, even when we miss the mark,

because our God is a compassionate God –

there is always the possibility of return and redemption -

that's the deal.

We find it elsewhere in the Psalms, (92:13)

including those we sing together on Shabbat –

צַדִּיק כַּתְמָר יִפְרַח כְּאַרְז בְּלִבְנוֹן יִשְׁגֶּה

Tzadik ka'tamar yifrach, K'erez Ba'Levanon Yisgeh

The righteous bloom like the date palm,

And thrive like the cedar of Lebanon.

Indeed, this sentiment is expressed throughout our liturgy.

Consider the 2nd paragraph of V'ahavta –

And it will be –

if you vigilantly obey My commandments which I command you

this day,

to love Adonai your God,

*and serve God with your entire heart and with your entire
soul—*

that I will give rain for your land in its proper time,

the autumn rain and the spring rain;

and you will harvest your grain and your wine and your oil.

And I will put grass in your fields for your cattle,

and you will eat and be satisfied.

Beware lest your hearts be deceived and you turn astray,

and you worship alien gods and bow to them.

*And Adonai's fury will blaze among you,
and God will close off the heavens and
there will be no rain and
the earth will not yield its produce; and
you will perish from the good land which Adonai gives you.*

In the Musaf Amidah we will recite tomorrow we begin:

מִפְּנֵי חַטָּאתֵינוּ גָּלִינוּ מֵאֶרְצֵנוּ

Mipnei Chatateinu Galinu M'artzeinu

‘Because of our sins we were exiled from our land.’

We have no problem ascribing guilt and blame to ourselves.

But what about the other party of the covenant?

When we pray Avinu Malkeinu –

we acknowledge our own iniquities –

but what about God?

If God is our father –

can we not acknowledge that parents have faults?

If God is our king –

can we not recognize the inherent problems of monarchy?

We are by no means blameless –

but, as the saying goes,

it takes two to tango.

Are we solely responsible for the state of the world today?

Is it too much to ask for an interventionist God?

Even if one does not believe in a personal God,

Certainly, we can believe in –

a partner in creating a more explicitly just and fair world.

In the words of the Psalmist (22:2) I ask –

אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי

Eli, Eli lama 'azavtani –

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why do righteous people suffer and

why does evil seem to prosper?

Why does Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg,

May her memory be for a blessing,

die during the holiest time of the Jewish year –

only to have her last wishes ignored -

only to have her legendary legacy –

overshadowed by the partisan fight to fill her seat.

Where is the justice in that?

Where is the justice for Breonna Taylor,

May her memory be for a revolution (for righteous change),

what does God have to say about –

the wanton slaughter of innocent people?

This is the problem of theodicy –

and I am not the first to raise it.

Our ancestor Abraham challenged God.

When God first sought to wipe out Sodom and Gomora –

Abraham asked,

“will you wipe out the innocent along with the guilty?”

And he further presses,

“Far be it from You to do such a thing,

to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty,

so that innocent and guilty fare alike.

Far be it from You!

Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

God, like many judges, has the benefit of qualified immunity.

The prophet Jeremiah offers his own critique of God –

paying special attention to the imbalance of power,

“You will be in the right, O God, if I make a claim against You,

Yet I shall present charges against You:

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why are the workers of treachery at ease?

You have planted them and they have taken root –

They spread, they even bear fruit.

You are present in their mouths

but far from your thoughts.”

The middle of Lamentations,

which is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah,

contains what the biblical scholar Adele Berlin called,

“the most disturbing chapter in the entire book”

because it upends the traditional theological formula –
which undergirds our understanding of the covenant –
between God and the Jewish people.

In chapter 3, the lament reads:

“Is it not at the word of the Most High, That weal and woe
befall?

Of what shall a living man complain?

Each one of his own sins!

Let us search and examine our ways,

And turn back to the LORD;

Let us lift up our hearts with our hands To God in heaven:

We have transgressed and rebelled,

And You have not forgiven.

You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us,

You have slain without pity.

You have screened Yourself off with a cloud,

That no prayer may pass through.”

Today, God feels far away or obscured.

We know that we have transgressed,

so, we gladly confess the sins we have committed –
knowingly or unknowingly,
intentionally or unintentionally.

But where is God in all of this?

It feels like we've been cut off from God –
as if our prayers have fallen on deaf ears.

After the Holocaust, in an effort to explain how –
God could allow something so terrible to happen –
theologians concluded that God hid God's face from us.

Now when the moment seems darkest,

I recall the Psalm (27:9) we recite together on the High
Holidays:

Do not hide Your face from me;
do not thrust aside Your servant in anger;
You have ever been my help.

Do not forsake me, do not abandon me,
O God, my deliverer.

I declare that with the court we have convened tonight –
established for our recitation of Kol Nidre –

in the midst of the darkness that currently permeates our
world, we are not the only ones on trial –

God must also be called to account.

Our liturgy describes God as robed in compassion and splendor-

Tonight, I declare: that with fear and hatred rampant in our
streets it appears that the emperor has no clothes.

For many these words by Leonard Cohen will resonate:

“If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game

If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame

If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame

You want it darker

We kill the flame

Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name

Vilified, crucified, in the human frame

A million candles burning for the help that never came

You want it darker

Hineni, hineni”

Yet, in the shadow of such dismay,

Today I also declare: I'm ready, my lord.

I do not believe that God is dead,

but rather that God must be drawn out.

Maybe God is just as broken as we are –

just as dismayed by the evil in the world –

just as powerless –

just as cut off from God's self.

This is certainly in line with the Hasidic notion of Tikkun Olam-

it is upon us to repair the Divine vessels –

whose shards are strewn throughout the universe.

We do so by finding those shards –

the little sparks of holiness that permeate the darkness –

and lifting them up.

In the absence of grand gestures –

we seek God in the miraculous mundanity of everyday miracles.

In the sun's rising and setting –

in the moon's waxing and waning –

in the twinkle of a child's eye,

reminiscent of the twinkling of enumerable stars.

This is what Heschel called radical amazement and,

while it does help us see God in our lives –

help us to find meaning in the absurdity of it all -

it does not solve theodicy.

Some are helped by the drash on Or Zarua—

Offered by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,

the founder of what we know today as Orthodox Judaism:

“the verse promises that evil cannot last forever in this world,

that the future belongs to the righteous,

and that with every human act of intervention against evil —

the sovereignty of God is brought nearer.”

To my mind this is still unsatisfactory —

too dependent on resolutions —

only borne out of the fullness of time.

But a human answer to a Divine question usually is inadequate.

“A man once came to Rabbi Menahem Mendel –

to pour out his bitter heart.

His wife had died in childbirth,

leaving him with seven young children –

including the newly born infant.

He had other woes and did not know where to turn.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel listened to him,

But while listening the rabbi kept his eyes lowered.

After a moment of deep meditation, the rabbi raised his head,
looked straight into the eyes of the man and said,
“I am not equal to the task of consoling you –
after such cruel suffering.

Only the true Master of mercy can do that –
turn to God.”

Job did just that.

We know that Job was exceedingly righteous –
but, for reasons still unclear to me,
God put Job to the test.

God took Job's home and family in one fell swoop,

God took Job's health and happiness.

When Job demanded an answer from God,

the only consolation God offered was –

You cannot understand because you are not Me.

Job acknowledges this and relents and recants saying,

“I am but dust and ashes.”

I too am but dust and ashes,

I cannot solve the problem of theodicy.

I can only acknowledge God's enigmatic nature.

In truth, we cannot demand answers from God –
we cannot hold God accountable for –
what we see as defects in the system.

In truth,

we can only do our part.

We can only sow light and hope that,

With God's help, it takes root.

May we all be inscribed for good.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

