

Rabbi Malik's Sermon at Temple Beth Ahm:
Yom Kippur 5772-2011-Sermon before Yizkor:
Theodicy: When Bad Things Happen To Good People

I should warn you. I'm a terrible joke-teller. But I have discovered that I have a shot of getting people to laugh if I tell them, in advance, that I'm about to tell a joke. So, here goes. Get ready to laugh... even if you don't think it's funny. It is Yom Kippur after all & you should try to have some *rachmanus* on your rabbi. So, here goes.

There was once a *tzaddik*, a righteous man, named Yitzchak. People called him "Izzy" for short. Izzy was very, very poor. Every year, during Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur, he would pray to God, saying, "*Ribono Shel Olam!* I really need you to help me and my family. I'm a good man, a righteous man who really deserves your help. So please, God, please, this year, let me win the lottery."

Every year, Izzy would repeat the same request. But every year, nothing happened. Izzy never won the lottery.

One year, Izzy had a strong feeling that this would be the year when God would answer his prayers. So, he called out to God again, "*Ribono Shel Olam!* Please, let me win the lottery. Please, *HaShem*. Please."

Unfortunately, he didn't win.... again. But this time, he complained to God, "Why won't you help me? Why won't you let me win?"

A big booming voice came from the heavens in response to Izzy's pleas. And the voice said,

"Izzy, You need to help me out here.....**Buy a ticket.**"

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Although this joke is meant to be funny, there are some serious theological issues and assumptions underlying Izzy’s conversation with God.

**First of all**, the punch-line conveys the belief that **people shouldn’t just sit around and wait for God to provide**. Even though Jews like to use phrases like “God willing,” (or “*Im yirtzeh Hashem*”), we still have to act as partners with the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* if we want to effect any changes in our lives. A man who is ill shouldn’t just sit around and say, “God will provide” without actively participating in attempts to improve his health condition; he should go to doctors, take medicine, do whatever is in his control to help God heal him. A woman who loses her job shouldn’t just sit around and wait for a new job to drop in her lap; she should rewrite her resume, network extensively, and submit as many employment applications as possible. God can’t help her if she doesn’t help herself.

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This idea is conveyed in the ***Unetaneh Tokef*** prayer that is part of the High Holidays **Musaf**. Together, we proclaim,

“*U-teshuvah u-tefillah u’tzedakah maavirin et roa ha-g’zerah.*”

I like to translate this phrase as follows, **“Repentance, prayer, and righteous giving, enable us to mitigate the evil decree.”** Even if *teshuvah, tefillah, & tzedakah* cannot annul the ‘evil decree’, even if these 3 ‘lottery ticket’ types of activities cannot change our external reality, they can ensure that the evil potential in reality will not come to pass. We might not be able to eliminate bad things from happening in the world, but we can mitigate the severity of communal suffering by “doing the right thing” through acts of repentance, prayer, & righteous giving.

There is **another message underlying the 'lottery ticket' joke**, and it is one that I find to be more problematic. When Izzy pleads to God, asking God to let him win the lottery, he prefaces his request by saying, "I'm a good man, a righteous man who really deserves your help." The idea that **a *tzaddik* deserves God's help** is the flip side of another theological assumption in our tradition: the idea that **wicked people deserve to be punished**. In an ideal world, **good things happen to good people & bad things happen to bad people**.

Consistent with this theological concept is the following teaching by Rava in the Babylonian Talmud (**Berachot 5a**):

"If a person sees that painful sufferings come upon him, he should examine his conduct."

The assumption in Rava's statement is that there is a direct correspondence between a person's actions and the consequences that befall him. This statement reflects the assumption that a person's sufferings are the result of bad behavior; the implication is that if that person were to change his behavior for the better, then his troubles would disappear.

But we all know that this is not always the case. If you are a *tzaddik*, that doesn't necessarily mean that you will win the lottery... **even if you buy a ticket**.

Like Izzy, God is also referred to as a "Tzaddik" in some of our prayers. For example, in **Psalm 145 (Ashrei)**, we refer to God as

"Tzaddik Adonai b'chol d'rachav" ("God is righteous in all of his ways").

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**But is God truly 'righteous' all of the time?! If God is such a "Tzaddik," then why do so many innocent people, including righteous ones, suffer?**

**If God is so just and righteous, then how can there be such a thing as "rasha v'tov lo" ("a wicked person who prospers") or "tzaddik v'ra lo" ("a righteous person who suffers")? Philosophers refer to this quandary as the problem of **theodicy**.**

If we were to **put God on trial** today, we might actually **find God to be guilty** as charged..... guilty of being **unrighteous** and **unjust**.

As a prosecuting attorney, there are at least 4 pieces of evidence that I could present to establish God's guilt:

## **EXHIBIT A: September 11, 2001**

When we reflect back on that fateful day 10 years ago, we remember where we were when we first heard the news & when we first saw those horrible images. Most of us remember the visual depictions and horrendous sounds that were broadcast on the news: the fire, the smoke, the melting of steel, the bodies leaping out of glass windows, the death, the destruction, the eerie silence after the devastation, the deep hole and the emptiness at Ground Zero in the months and years following the terrorist attack.

Some people may even remember more than the sights and sounds projected from their TV screens. Some people remember the pungent smells, as well as the horrific sights and sounds of the Twin Towers as they came crumbling down on **September 11, 2001**. Some of us were in Manhattan that day. Some of us were in, or near the World Trade Center. Some of us even knew people who perished on that fateful day. Some of us were mourners in the Jewish year 5662. Many of us still mourn the loss of the thousands of victims who were murdered on 9/11.

On that infamous day, 2819 people were killed. And in the days and months that followed, 19,858 body parts were found in downtown Manhattan. And behind each of these numbers was a person with a name, including **Stephen J. Fiorelli, Richard Rodriguez, Christopher M. Traina, Lance Tumulty, & Michael Uliano of Aberdeen, NJ** & one of the members of **Temple Beth Ahm**, our own **Robert Miller z"l**.

In the wake of September 11, many people asked: **"How could a righteous and just God have let this happen?"**

**EXHIBIT B:** The Holocaust, also known as “The Shoah,” which means “conflagration.” Between the years of 1938 and 1945, 6,000,000 Jews were slaughtered, including 1,000,000 children. Hitler and the Nazis persecuted and murdered millions of innocent people, while the rest of the world stood idly by in silence.

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EXHIBIT C: Hurricane Katrina, which struck the East Coast in **August of 2005**, was the costliest natural disaster in American history: costly both in terms of property damage and in human lives. Nearly 2,000 people were killed as a result of this deadly hurricane.

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**EXHIBIT D:** not a large-scale communal tragedy, but a tragedy nevertheless. On **July 20, 1997**, my daughter, Eva, was born. Adi & I named her after my great-grandmother, Babciu Eva z”l. But, we specifically chose the name “Eva,” rather than going with a variation, because we had many positive associations with the name in its original form. When I first began my tenure as principal of Congregation Beth Shalom’s Religious School in San Francisco, I had a student named **Eva Leah Gunther**. Eva was a conscientious, vivacious ‘ball of fire’ who made an impression on me from the day I met her. In the year before our Eva was born, Eva Gunther made an impression on Adi, as well. As Cantor of the synagogue, Adi had just finished teaching Eva to read the Haftarah connected to *Parashat Chayei Sarah* for her upcoming Bat Mitzvah ceremony.

The week after our Eva was born, Eva Gunther had her usual 30-minute lesson with Adi. Two nights later, I was nursing our Eva when the phone rang and Adi answered it. The call was from Eva Gunther’s mother. At the other end of the line, she uttered 2 words that will forever ring in his ears, **“Eva died.”**

"Eva died"..... Eva was just crossing the street, walking alongside her father, Mark, when a car zoomed by and hit her. She was killed in an instant. Her father remained unscathed, physically that is, but, to this day, he and his wife, Ann, bear the emotional scars of that moment. Though I could not even imagine the pain that Eva's parents must have felt then or now, I was able to imagine what it was like, what it is like, to love a daughter... to love a daughter named Eva.

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●**How could this happen?**

●**Where was God** when this happened? Why wasn't God holding Eva's hand?

●If the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy One Blessed Be God, is capable of meting out punishments to wicked people & meting out rewards to righteous people, then **why didn't God prevent Eva's death?** If God is truly a "tzaddik" who is concerned with righteousness and justice in the world, then why isn't Eva Leah Gunther still alive?!

**If God is just and righteous, then how can we make sense of the tragic death of Eva Gunther, or of the deaths of any other innocent individuals?**

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How can we make sense of the death of the 6-month old infant, Gabriel Bauder, the injury and brain death of his 3-year old brother, Billy, and the death of the 23-year old *au pere*, Jannine Hayes, who was driving down Church Street in Aberdeen with the boys from Holmdel just a few weeks ago, on **September 6?**

How can we make sense of the death of Michael Kenwood, the EMT from the Princeton First Aid and Rescue Squad, who died trying to save another person's life during Hurricane Irene last month?

If God is just and righteous, then how do are we supposed to deal with an infant diagnosed with Tay Sachs Disease, a high school freshman diagnosed with dysautonomia, a newlywed bride diagnosed with breast cancer, or a young mother diagnosed with a brain tumor?

If God is just and righteous, then how can we explain the suffering of all of these innocents?

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**Rabbi Harold Kushner** wrote a book to address these very difficult questions. It is important to note that the title of Rabbi Kushner's book is not, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People," but, rather, "**When Bad Things Happen to Good People."** The particular "bad thing" that Rabbi Kushner faced was the terminal illness of his son, Aaron, who died of progeria (rapid aging) at the age of 14. One of the texts that Rabbi Kushner turned to was the **biblical Book of Job**. Job was a *tzaddik*, a righteous man, who suffered one tragedy after the next (the loss of his material possessions, the affliction of boils, the death of his children).

To try to understand the Book of Job, Rabbi Kushner says that we have to consider the following 3 statements that most religious people would like to believe:

- A) God is Righteous & Just, wanting people to get what they deserve (In other words, God wants the good to prosper & the wicked to be punished.)
- B) God is All-Powerful & causes everything to happen in the world.
- C) Job is a good person.

According to Rabbi Kushner, it is easy to accept all 3 of these statements, as long as Job is healthy & prospering.

But, when Job begins to suffer, there is a theological problem. We can no longer make sense of all 3 propositions together. We can only affirm 2 out of the 3 statements, and we must deny the 3<sup>rd</sup>:

**xC)** If God is Righteous and Just & God is All-Powerful (A & B),  
**then Job must have been a sinner who deserved his lot.**

**xA)** If Job was good (C)  
and God had the power to prevent his suffering (B),  
but yet God let him suffer anyway,  
then God is **not just.**

**xB)** If Job deserved better  
and God is fair and just,  
then God must **not be all-powerful.**  
(or else he would have stopped Job's suffering)

According to Rabbi Kushner, there are 3 ways to explain what happened to Job:

Either:

- 1) Job was not a good person & he deserved his fate
- 2) God is not Righteous & Just
- 3) God is not All-Powerful

It is the 3<sup>rd</sup> conclusion that Rabbi Kushner espouses: the belief that **God is not All Powerful**. Rabbi Kushner believes that Job was a good man, that God is Righteous, but God that did not have the power to prevent **Job's suffering**. And God did not have the power to prevent the death of 14-year old **Aaron Kushner**.

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But do we have to espouse a belief as extreme as Rabbi Kushner's '**Limited God' theory** in order to make sense of the suffering of innocents? There are **other Jewish views on suffering** that also try to explain the existence of evil and injustice in the world without going so far as saying that God's power is limited.

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Unlike Rabbi Kushner, the Orthodox **Rabbi, David Hartman**, asserts that God is All-Powerful. But, he claims that God chooses not to intervene in all natural occurrences or human affairs.

Nature follows its own rules, and God doesn't break nature's rules. It wasn't God's decision to kill people during Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Irene; the deaths that occurred during these hurricanes are not to be viewed as punishments. God didn't cause these tragic deaths. Katrina came to New Orleans, just as Irene recently came to our area, because we live in nature & nature includes **natural disasters**. Unfortunately, nature also includes **disease....**and illness affects the young, as well as the old. Natural occurrences, like **hurricanes** and like **cancer**, can unfortunately lead to the suffering of innocent people.

A similar theology can be used to explain God's role in **the Holocaust** and **September 11**. God doesn't prevent nature from following its own rules, and that includes **human nature**. The most important part of human nature is free will, our ability to make choices. And just as God doesn't interfere when nature follows its own rules, God doesn't stop human beings from making their own choices- even when they choose the worst of evil.

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During the **Shoah**, there were **evil people** who **chose** to build concentration camps and gas chambers and to murder millions of innocent people; there were others who enabled the Nazis to perpetrate mass genocide in Eastern Europe simply by looking the other way and doing nothing to stop the spread of evil.

These were human choices by inhumane and indifferent people; God did not choose for millions of innocent lives to be taken as a result of these human choices.

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Likewise, on **September 11**, there were **evil people** who **chose** to hijack airplanes with innocent people aboard. Those evil people then chose to murder more innocent civilians by crashing into buildings in which thousands of people worked and were not likely to escape the flames and the smoke.

Again, these were human choices by inhumane people; God did not choose for these murders to occur.

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This is true in the case of the deaths of innocent **individuals**, as well as in the case of communal tragedies. A drunk driver was the cause of Eva Gunther's death, not God. Likewise, the murder of the father of one my rabbinic colleagues was caused by the evil man who mugged him in Brooklyn, not by God.

Now, lest you think that it's only modern liberal rabbis who have espoused these theories of God's role in the universe, think again. **For generations, the Rabbis and other Jewish thinkers have been grappling with the issue of theodicy.**

The Rabbis themselves acknowledge that the theology of "reward to the righteous" and "punishment to the wicked" expresses more of a utopian ideal than reality. In real life, there isn't always such a symmetry between behavior and consequences. We know that not all wicked people are punished and that not all righteous people are rewarded; *tzaddikim* and other innocent people do, unfortunately, suffer.

In the Talmud, even on the very same page in *Masechet B'rachot* where Rava asserts the utopian ideal, other Rabbis admit that **not all suffering can be explained in terms of sin & punishment.** And, in **Pirkei Avot**, **Rabbi Yannai** acknowledges the problem of theodicy in his teaching:

"Eyn b'yadeynu lo b'shalvat r'sha-im v'lo b'yisurei tzaddikim." "We cannot explain the tranquility of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous."

As for the theology of the 21st century **Rabbi Hartman**, **his ideas are consistent** with that of the 2nd century **Rabbi Akiva** and of the 11th century **Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon** (a.k.a. **Maimonides** or **the Rambam**).

In **Pirkei Avot**, **Rabbi Akiva** teaches: **"Ha-r'shut n'tunah"** ("Free will is given to humanity.") As human beings, we can choose to be good or evil. We can choose to be loving or hateful, to build or to destroy.

According to **Maimonides**, God chooses not to exercise power in order to enable human beings to exercise their freedom of choice, and to make their own mistakes- and sometimes these human mistakes are very costly. Unfortunately, at times, human freedom comes at the expense of human happiness or human life.

There is no one Jewish response to suffering---- not even in our traditional sacred texts. All of the ideas that I presented to you today, both the ones from ancient sources and the ones that appear in books written over the past 50 years, **are legitimate Jewish responses to suffering.**

But where do these theologies leave us?

If God isn't All-Powerful,

or if God is All-Powerful, but intentionally chooses to step back & not exercise power,

how can we find comfort when thousands or millions of innocent people suffer and die?

If God didn't cause the deaths on September 11 or during the Holocaust or during Hurricane Katrina, then where was God during these communal tragedies?

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Like many traditional Jews before me, I find comfort in the belief that **God is always with us in times of tragedy.**

There is a beautiful **teaching** about God empathizing with the Jews when they (we) were exiled from the Land of Israel. **God cried with us when we cried by the Rivers of Babylon, God continues to suffer with us when we suffer.**

**Midrash Tanhuma** teaches us that, from the beginning, God intentionally created an unfinished imperfect world. From the beginning, **God intended that human beings would serve as partners in Creation**- in each and every generation. God wants us, as His partners in creation, to accept the challenge of natural disasters, illness, and human evil by discovering ways of avoiding mass casualties and by acting in humane ways in response to tragedy.

**Rabbi Naomi Levy's** father was killed when she was only 15 years old. In her book, To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times, Rabbi Levy reflects on her childhood experience with tragedy, as well as with her congregants' experiences. She writes, (p. 91):

I suddenly realized that it was my own concept of God that had caused me to feel so abandoned by God when my father died. I had believed in a God who intervenes in our lives to protect the innocent and punish the evil. But, of course, if I had just once picked up a newspaper on any given day of the week and read it with true compassion, I would have known that this kind of belief in God was inaccurate. Every day the headlines remind us of the innocent lives that are taken, of the children who go hungry, of the millions of anonymous suffering souls. Yet for years, I retained my faith in a God who protects us because nothing had ever happened to me to disprove it. Once this world's ugliness invaded my own family, everything suddenly changed. I could no longer ignore the contradiction between my understanding of God and my father's senseless murder.....After my father's murder, I could no longer read about the horrors of this world with a dispassionate complacency.....I now had 2 choices. I could continue to resent God, or I could find a new way of thinking about God.....I now saw God not as a force who could control my fate or shield me from all harm, but as a presence who has the power to subtly point me toward the holiness that resides in simple acts.....I began to believe in a God who was just as outraged as I was, just as pained, and just as helpless to protect us from all harm.....God suffers when we suffer.....I came to believe in a God ... who was with my father as he lay bleeding on the street. I was no longer looking to God to prevent ugliness, I was looking to God for the strength to carry on in the face of ugliness.

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Rabbi Edward Feld specifically applies this theology to the **Holocaust** by asserting that **God was present in the random acts of kindness that people performed to help each other during the Shoah.** /Yes, there were the Nazis and those who assisted them in carrying out the Final Solution. / But there were also Righteous Gentiles who hid Jews in their homes in attics and haylofts, at risk to their own lives.

There were also the Jews who helped each other stand upright during line-ups in the concentration camps, so that they would not be selected for the gas chamber. **Life was given in these acts of *tzedakah*.**

Rabbi Feld also tells the story of a woman at Auschwitz who brought her friend a half-rotten raspberry for her birthday. That person gave the birthday girl the gift of hope, the gift of life.

The story the Holocaust survivor tells is not only one of horror & of tragedy; it is also the story of how men and women sustained a way of life that was opposed to everything Nazism stood for-**a holy presence even in Auschwitz.** There was a **divine spark, a miracle of life, even amidst the walking dead.**

Thousands of innocent people also suffered and died on **September 11.**

Yet, **there were some divine sparks that shone forth that day when police officers, firefighters, and other volunteers gave righteously of themselves to others.**

When we give selflessly of ourselves to others, God is present in these acts of righteousness. There are vestiges of divine light (“**divine sparks**”) that exist in the world- and **within each and every one of us.** For better or worse, God gave us the mixed blessing of free will (*b’chirah chofseet*) & God leaves it up to us to respond to chosen human acts of evil with our own chosen acts of righteousness and loving-kindness. We have can do this by reaching out to victims of natural disasters, disease, immorality, and human evil.

We might not be able to eliminate bad things from happening in the world, but we can mitigate the severity of communal suffering by giving of ourselves to others.

In this **New Year, 5772**, let us strive to discover and make use of the **divine sparks** within us. Let us resolve to **respond** to individual and communal suffering with **righteous deeds of loving-kindness** and with a sense of **responsibility** to one another.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah. May you all be sealed for good in the Book of Life- **a meaningful life that reflects the divine sparks within each of our souls** and that **recognizes those divine sparks in others.**