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A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

In this issue

How do we make sense of suffering, that of our own as well as others?

How can we turn the moment of suffering into an opportunity for holiness?

When god is wrong **David Kraemer**

It had been coming for a long time. But the morning I heard of Baruch Bokser's death, I was beyond consolation. I was at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I had spent many hours with my friend and colleague, but when the news came, the protective walls of that institution provided me no comfort. I escaped their confines and ran up the hill to Grant's Tomb. There in the Tomb, my tears were overwhelmed by waves of anger. I cried out against God and against the injustice of God's world. For months following, I felt nothing but anger toward God. My prayer was an exercise in protest. I knew God was wrong, and I would not find rest until God knew it too.

Railing At God

During that period, I did not know whether my protest and anger removed me from the tradition where I made my home. Was a good Jew permitted to express such anger? Or was acceptance and submission the necessary stance? Of course, I knew of Job, but I also knew that Job was rarely referred to by the rabbis—the founders of Judaism as we know it—and when they did refer to him, it was mostly in less than sympathetic terms. Did I, in my anger, have a place in this Judaism, or did my anger alienate me from the piety of this two-thousand year tradition?

At the time, I was already involved in research on classical rabbinic responses to suffering. I knew that some rabbis de-

manded that "when a person sees suffering coming upon him, he should examine his ways" (*Berakhot* 5a), implying that suffering is punishment for sin. But I also knew that other authorities denied the necessity of this connection, and I had some hope, therefore, that my angry alternative could also find a place in the tradition. Not knowing what I would find, I set out to see whether or not this was so.

Challenging God's Judgment

In the course of this exploration, I turned my attention to the various stories of the death of R. Aqiba. In the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli), this story appears in two, possibly complementary versions. At *Berakhot* 61b, the Talmud describes the torture and death of the great master. There, as Aqiba's flesh is being ripped by iron combs, his students cry out: "Our master! [Are we required to go] this far?!" Aqiba explains that, despite all appearances, he now has the opportunity to fulfill the commandment to love God

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"with all of his soul." He then recites the *Shema* and expires. Thereupon, the Ministering Angels cry out before God: "This is the Torah and this its reward?!" God comforts them, responding that Aqiba was assured a place in the World to Come.

What struck me as I read this story was that both the disciples and the Ministering Angels question Aqiba's suffering—and they pull no punches. In fact, it is hard for me to imagine a more challenging question from a religious Jew than the one attributed to the Ministering Angels here. Yet, remarkably, no voice in the text condemns such questioning. Answers are provided but questions of challenge or protest are unhesitatingly allowed.

In the other Bavli story relating to the death of Aqiba (*Menahot* 29b), Moses is transported to Aqiba's school, where he finds himself immensely impressed by Aqiba's brilliance. Why, Moses wants to know, did God choose him instead of Aqiba to receive the Torah at Sinai? Not denying that Moses might be right, God responds, "Silence. This is what it occurred to me to do." Taking the discussion one step further, Moses wants to know Aqiba's reward. God shows Moses Aqiba's flesh being weighed out in the market stalls. "This is the Torah and this its reward?!" exclaims Moses. Again, not challenging the truth of what Moses implies (i.e., the injustice of Aqiba's death), God replies, "Silence. This is what it occurred to me to do."

A Tradition Of Acceptance

I do not take God's direction of "silence" to be a condemnation of Moses' questions. Silence is demanded because, in this version, there is no room for discussion. God admits that it is all quite arbitrary. Still, the questions are good and legitimate, and that is why they are put in the mouth of Moses "our Rabbi", the greatest of all rabbinic heroes. What was in *Berakhot* expressed by the Ministering Angels is here articulated by none other than Moses. The most challenging question imaginable is voiced by the giver of the Torah himself.

But I had doubts. Was I right in seeing this as so significant? I had earlier discovered that the rabbinic tradition of the Land of Israel condemned such questioning. Was the same true of the Bavli and, if so, did this mean I was wrong in interpreting these texts as I did? And did the Palestinian rabbis, despite their condemnation, also provide opportunities for challenges this grave? My questions compounded. I still did not know whether

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I had truly found support for my own religious protest or whether I was merely misreading the model before me.

As I searched, I found that the rabbis of Palestine and those of Babylonia disagreed sharply concerning proper responses to suffering. The Babylonian rabbis, who place this awful, biting question ("This is the Torah and this its reward?") in the mouths of Moses and the Ministering Angels, nowhere claim that one may not question God's justice. They may support that justice themselves, but they also, from time to time, question it and—more importantly—they permit others to question it without condemnation.

Turning to the other side, I was at first surprised to find that the Bavli's critical question is also voiced in the Jerusalem Talmud (the *Yerushalmi*)—in one location but repeated twice. Alas, I said to myself, it appears that Palestinian rabbinic tradition is confused in this matter. But when I discovered who purportedly expresses the

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challenge there, I realized that the Palestinian tradition is indeed consistent. It condemns questioning, and it repeats the challenging question only to illustrate the abysmal end of one who allows him/herself to voice such a heresy.

A Holy Rebel

As it turns out, the questioner in the Yerushalmi is none other than Elisha ben Abbuya—the arch-apostate of rabbinic tradition. Seeing the tongue of a well-known sage being dragged along in the mouth of a dog, Elisha responds “This is the Torah and this its reward?” Allowing himself to express this doubt, Elisha turns away from God and tradition, ever after to be known as *Aher*, “the Other”.

In other words, in the opinion of the rabbis of Palestine, if you question God’s justice, you are likely to become an apostate, like Elisha. But in the opinion of their Babylonian counterparts, such questions are perfectly legitimate—not at all contrary to piety. In fact, if you challenge God’s justice, you are, according to these authorities, in the company of Moses and the Ministering Angels. There is no better company than that.

So, I discovered, by expressing my anger and voicing my doubts, I did not remove myself from the tradition of my choice. On the contrary, I could be a “rebel” (in Camus’ sense) and a good Jew at the same time. Thank God there is room for me inside. May others find the same. □

Suffering: useless and not

Ira F. Stone

Suffering is an intimation of death. To say that death is a part of life is banal, but having said it, to go on to investigate *which* part of life it is, has profound consequences. It is just such an investigation that the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas undertakes as the starting point for the development of his life’s work. With the recent availability of much of his work in English translation, this major Continental philosopher’s voice is being added to the American-Jewish discussions of Jewish meaning in the contemporary world. His importance as a philosopher who not only takes Jewish texts seriously, but draws on them for the direction of much of his thought, as evidenced by his program of

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talmudic commentaries, makes the dissemination and discussion of his work especially urgent.

That part of life, then, which death is, according to Emmanuel Levinas, is that part which cannot respond to reasonable analysis. We certainly cannot understand it and because we cannot understand it we cannot transform it into an extension of ourselves. It is a profound encounter with an other and as such breaks our total absorption with ourselves. It is also our first encounter with that Other which is not assimilable to being. Death introduces us to the Other who is otherwise than or beyond being. We learn that we are not alone, but that what resides with us is not in being. Levinas maintains also that all that we have said about death is already present in suffering. This is suffering that is, Levinas says, “surely a given in consciousness”. It is also “...the fact of being backed up against life and being. In this sense suffering is the impossibility of nothingness” (*The Provocation of Levinas*, pp. 156-7). That is to say, though I cannot comprehend death, because of suffering I cannot mistake it for nothing. It is something that is other than being.

Levinas precisely describes the ambiguity that suffering itself describes. “In suffering sensibility is a vulnerability, more passive than receptivity; it is an ordeal more passive than experience. It is precisely an evil” (*Time and*

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