

## Haiti and Theodicy

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In the January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010 issue of *Newsweek*, Lisa Miller, the weekly's Religion and Society editor,<sup>1</sup> wrote a column entitled, "Why God Hates Haiti".<sup>2</sup> While her original premise, "Haiti is surely a Job among the nations" might be considered overstated in light of Job 1:1, "...and this man was whole and straight and God-fearing and removed from evil", i.e., the quandary of what subsequently happens to the Biblical figure is compounded by objective testimony that he was an exemplary human being in every regard, nevertheless the fact that innocents are suffering horrendous conditions, let alone death and injury, very well call to mind Jobian trials. Miller's paraphrase of Job 9:17-18, "For He Crushes me with a tempest,<sup>3</sup> and multiplies my wounds without cause. He will not let me catch my breath...", rendering the verses in the plural in order to reflect the scope of what so many individuals are facing, resonates in the reader's consciousness and imagination.

While the immediate survivors of this catastrophe have to first and foremost cope with the physical destruction of the world that they had inhabited and try to stay alive as best as they can, Miller is interested in the manner in which people of faith who believe in a Benevolent God, can maintain their religious beliefs and not be led to conclusions that might deprive them of their deeply held assumptions about the Divine. Rabbi Norman Lamm, in his seminal essay, "Faith and Doubt",<sup>4</sup> describes three types of doubt that can beset a religious individual: a) Spurious, b) Methodological and c) Substantive. Spurious doubts are those that someone dishonestly fabricates after the fact when he is looking to exempt himself from some sort of obligation or commitment. First he decides that he no longer wishes to adhere to e.g., religious morals, and then comes up with a rationalization for the change in his behavior, i.e., I no longer believe that God Communicated to man what He Expects him to do or not to do. Methodological doubt, in contrast, is a legitimate challenge to assumptions and beliefs and constitutes the manner in which human beings learn. Rather than accepting another's or even an entire tradition's claim at face value, the student asks, "How do we know that?" "What is the basis for such a contention?" Is it possible to prove this postulate or assumption?" However, the individual's faith is such that even if he does not immediately receive an answer to his query, or for that matter never receives a satisfying explanation, his overall faith remains intact and he can engage in delayed gratification vis-à-vis the ideas that he finds curious or difficult to understand. As R. Chaim Brisker famously said, "Man Shterbt Nischt Von A Kashya" (one does not die because one of his questions goes unanswered.) The third category of doubt, that R. Lamm categorizes as "substantive" can lead to "death"—in a spiritual if not physical sense. This type of doubt doesn't originate from some self-serving impetus to be free of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/id/32230>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/id/231004> The end of the article states that Johannah Cornblatt also participated in its composition.

<sup>3</sup> The invocation of a "tempest" calls to mind not only the ultimate horror suffered by Job, the wind-induced collapse of the house in which his children were partying resulting in their deaths (1:19), but also God's ultimate Revelation to him towards the end of the book, "out of a tempest/storm" (38:1).

<sup>4</sup> *Faith and Doubt*, Ktav, New York, 1971, pp. 9-13.

responsibility or as part of a means for educating oneself; it comes about because of some existential issue that simply cannot be put to rest. The individual is haunted by the question and if he is unable to satisfactorily resolve it, could ultimately decide that he no longer is able to maintain the faith that once so profoundly informed his thoughts and life-choices. In an article in the January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 edition of The Forward, by Elana Estrin, entitled “No God? No Problem: A Non-Believer’s Quest to Pray”,<sup>5</sup> the struggles of Tzemah Yoreh, an atheist who still feels the need to pray, perhaps because of his formative religious upbringing, are described. The article dates his loss of faith to his Israeli army experience where unanswered moral and theological conflicts became overwhelming. Similarly, on our recent trip to Israel, we were informed that a significant number of young men who are raised in religious Kibbutzim and enter elite army units, perhaps due to the things that are seen and need to be done, typically develop substantive doubt that ends up obliterating what these individuals had believed and adhered to prior to their military service. Illness, poverty, persecution, hypocrisy and natural calamities are all potential sources for substantive doubt, and the recent events in Haiti certainly qualify as such an experience, whether one is caught up directly within it, or observes it from afar.

Miller notes that for some, recently articulated by the fundamentalist televangelist Pat Robertson, a simple calculus is created between sin and punishment, i.e., if I can find something wrong with the behavior of the victims prior to the disaster, the question of theodicy, i.e., why bad things happen to good people, is rendered moot. Such religionists would claim that I can even move on in my own life without feeling sorry for the victims—they got what was coming to them, and if anything, my belief in a Just and Avenging God is not only not challenged, but confirmed! The author of the column points out that there have always been movements that have sought to explain the difficulties that seem to be built into the human condition on an individual as well as grand scale in unnuanced, black-and-white terms; yet the great theologians throughout the ages have pointedly avoided suggesting that they or anyone else for that matter, can be privy to God’s “Thoughts” and “Calculations” and therefore prefer to cloak such matters in mystery and intellectual humility.

However, this does not mean that we simply shrug our shoulders and move on. R. J.B. Soloveitchik, in perhaps his most accessible extended essay, “Kol Dodi Dofek”,<sup>6</sup> a discussion of responses to the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, explores the dialectic of what he calls “Goral” and “Yeiud”, “fate” and “destiny.” On the one hand someone who has either experienced or witnessed horrific events can attempt to delineate why these things have been fated to happen to specific people at this point in time. The Rav argues that such strivings are an incredible waste of time and energy. “When the man of destiny suffers he says to himself: ‘Evil exists and I will neither deny it nor camouflage it with vain intellectual gymnastics. I am concerned about evil from a Halachic standpoint, like a person who wishes to know the deed which he shall do; I ask one simple question. What must the sufferer do so that he may live through his suffering?’ In this dimension the center of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.forward.com/articles/123336/>

<sup>6</sup> Shir HaShirim 5:2 “My Beloved is knocking”.

gravity shifts from the causal to the teleological aspect of evil...What obligation does suffering impose upon man?"<sup>7</sup>

Rethinking in light of the Haitian catastrophe and R. Soloveitchik's insight, a particular Talmudic passage that I often reflect upon, I have arrived at a variant interpretation:

Berachot 5a

Said Rava, or if you wish, R. Chisda: If a person sees that he is beset by afflictions, let him inspect his actions, as it is said, (Eicha 3:40) "We should look upon our ways and delve into them, and we will return to God." Once a person has engaged in such introspection but has failed to identify anything, he should attribute the need for improvement to the area of failing to adequately devoting time to Tora study, as it is said, (Tehillim 94:12) "Happy/satisfied is the man who God Afflicts, and Teaches him from Your Tora." If he attempts to make such an assumption but cannot justify it, he should assume that they are afflictions of love, as it is said, (Mishlei 3:12) "Whomever God Loves, He Afflicts, even as a father does to a son in whom he delights."

A simple reading of the text would suggest the assumptions that Miller derides in her article, i.e., when difficulties occur, the sufferer has to take stock of his life and attempt to identify areas that require improvement and which precipitated the afflictions. And while the caveat that perhaps these challenges are actually a form of some sort of "tough love" is suggested as a "last resort", I would guess that very few people would be able to make such a claim because they already have recognized things in need of improvement.

But what if we were to understand the shortcoming that the Talmud is underscoring not as something in our past or current routines, but rather in the future? What was, was, and there is little that I can do to undo it. However, there are situations going forward that I should become involved in proactively and positively, not necessarily in terms of self-improvement, but rather in contributing to making general society a better place. In other words, perhaps the proper focus for investigation and thought once a horrific circumstance has taken place, is what can/should I be doing next so that an earthquake will not be so devastating, a flood so destructive, a disease so remorseless? Whom could I help going forward to try to improve his/her quality of life? What assistance can I offer to others who might currently be suffering and who are in need of support and resources? Miller actually ends her column in this vein: "Even so, we will continue to do *tzedakah*<sup>8</sup>—and to pray."<sup>9</sup> We should heed her call.

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<sup>7</sup> Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel, Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, NJ, 1992, pp. 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> I was surprised to see "Tzedakah" appear in a Newsweek column. I wrote to the author wondering whether this word had now entered into American English lexicology in the manner of "Shalom", "Chutzpah" and "Matza balls".

<sup>9</sup> The statement is somewhat reminiscent of the climax of the Yomim Noraim liturgical poem, "U'Netaneh Tokef": "U'Teshuva, U'Tefilla U'Tzedaka Ma'avirin Et Roah HaGezeira" (And repentance, and prayer and charity can push aside the evil decree.) Only in this instance, we are not looking to push aside a decree, but rather respond positively to one that has already been enacted. It's not about our personal repentance, but rather what we can do for those who are suffering and dying, by means of heart-felt prayers—after all God's Assistance can always be welcome and constructive—and financial and other forms of tangible assistance that we can sacrificially provide.