And you shall love…

A Rabbinic Theodicy

Laura Duhan Kaplan

Suffering visits all human beings at one time or another, regardless of their religious commitments. Theists and atheists alike cry out in pain over the troubles of the world. Sometimes the questions challenge the wisdom of making any faith commitment and point out weak links in a theology. At other times, the questions are directed by believers, in anguish, towards their God: Why do the innocent suffer? Why does God not stop people from harming their fellow creatures? How can one believe in a God who allows creatures to feel such pain? Can belief in God really help people cope with suffering?

Traditional philosophy offers answers to these questions through its examination of "theodicy" or "the justice of God." Philosophical discussions of theodicy are laid out in the form of a logical puzzle, as follows:

Here are three incompatible propositions:

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is perfectly good.
3. Evil exists.

How will you make them compatible?

If you take any two of the propositions and add them together, they seem to show that the third one is false. After all, if God is all-powerful and perfectly good, how could evil exist?

The usual route to solving the logical inconsistency is to reframe one of the propositions so that it is less absolute and therefore not in stark logical contradiction to the others. Perhaps God is not, in practice, all-powerful but has ceded power to human beings in the form of free will. Thus humans make the poor choices that lead to negative consequences. Perhaps our human limitations do not allow us to experience God as perfectly good; perhaps God appears awesome and terrifying to us. Or perhaps absolute evil does not exist. Instead, God allows relative evil in order to bring about a greater good.[1]

Discussions of theodicy thus seem to be a form of rational-emotive therapy. Reorganize your thoughts so you understand the source of suffering -- free will, limited human perception, or a strategy for greater good -- and your feelings will shift. You will no longer cry out in pain, but will endure in a steady faith. Perhaps some people are comforted to learn of God's immaculate logic. Perhaps they cope with suffering more easily, knowing that it has a logical function in God's universe. But many people are unmoved by the logical approach. For them suffering remains exquisitely painful, physically and emotionally, regardless of its logic. A simple change in thought will not suffice to bring relief. Instead they require a change at the gut level, at the level of feelings and bodily experience.

Rabbinic discussion in Sifre to Deuteronomy of the V'ahavta section of the Shema prayer offers a gut level approach.[2] Sifre to Deuteronomy offers the radical thesis that God allows suffering not out of logic but out of love. Suffering calls us to respond to God in kind -- with love. Suffering is a gift of divine grace. It provokes us to cry out to God in pain. Through the cry, we express and experience love.

Sifre's argument begins with a discussion of the sentence "And you shall love YHWH your God…"

> Rabbi Akiva says: if we say "with your whole being (b'chol nafshecha)," then it follows through the principle of kal va'chomer "with your all (b'chol me'odecha)" So why does scripture say "with your all (me'odecha)"? [3]

In other words, since "your whole being" includes "your all," the words "your all" seem at first to add no new information. However, an important rabbinic principle of interpretation states that there are no superfluous words in the Torah. Instead, each word in the Torah communicates important information. Thus, the words "your all" must communicate some additional information. Sifre extracts that information using a pun on the word "m'odecha." "Me'od," spelled mem-aleph-dalet means "very much"; hence, "me'odecha" is most obviously translated as "your all." This obvious reading of the word, however, makes it appear superfluous. So Sifre goes for a more complex reading.

> with every measure (middah) that God metes out (moded) to you, whether it is a measure of good or a measure of punishment.

The Hebrew word "middah," spelled mem-dalet-hey, means "measure" or "attribute." Most likely it comes from a different root than "me'odecha," but it is sufficiently similar in sound to serve as the basis of the pun. Sifre thus suggests that the Torah uses the word "me'odecha" in order to teach that you should love God no matter what experience you are undergoing. You should love God when God has filled your world with joy. And you should love God when God has filled your world with suffering.

Sifre explains how the psychological process works by offering three prooftexts. David proclaimed God's name whether he received salvation or suffering. Job blessed God whether God gave or took, and admonished his wife for suggesting they should accept only God's good gifts and not the bad. Even the generation of the flood, who behaved vilely in response to good fortune accepted their punishment, whether they liked it or not.

All the characters showcased in the prooftext have something in common: they are sinners. David is an adulterer and a murderer who often serves as a rabbinic archetype for repentance. Job soon retreats from the saintly posture expressed in the prooftext to curse the day he was born and criticize God. The generation of the flood was so depraved that the planet could no longer sustain them. And Sifre indeed goes on to link suffering with sin.

> Also a person should be happy with afflictions more than with good. Because if a person has [only] good for all his days, he isn't forgiven for the sins that he was responsible for. How is one forgiven? Through afflictions [or chastisements].

Sifre then explains the phenomenon of divine punishment in eminently human terms using a prooftext from Proverbs 3:12. Punishment, or chastisement, is an expression of parental love.

> For whom the LORD loves, He rebukes,
> As a father the son whom he favors.

A parent who truly loves a child will see to it that the child grows up knowing right from wrong. The process of teaching these values includes rebuking a child for wrong

behavior. A good parent has a reason for the rebuke, and adapts her or his goals and methods to the individual child. Every parent-child relationship is thus unique and particularistic. By analogy, the relationship between God and every individual who suffers is a particularistic one.

The effect of suffering upon an individual seeking a relationship with God can be understood through a brief digression into Stephen Mitchell's interpretation of the figure of Job, one of the sinners cited in Sifre's prooftexts. Mitchell reads the book of Job as two distinct stories. In the first story, told briefly in prose format, God plays with Job and Job never wavers. This story gives rise to the saying "the patience of Job." The second story, an extended poetic dialogue, introduces us to a completely different Job. This Job is not patient. He is angry not only about his own suffering, but about the injustice of all suffering in the world. He cries out: How could a just, orderly God permit this?

The drama of the Book of Job, argues Mitchell, is the journey undertaken by the Job of the poem. This Job travels an enormous psychological, emotional, and spiritual distance. By his own admission, all his life he has heard God's word, but never seen God. He sees God face to face only when he cries out in pain. And he is utterly transformed by the encounter. The story concludes with the earthly markers of Job's transformation: restoration of his seven sons and daughters, and death of old age surrounded by friends and family. Job's loving relationships are restored.[4]

The restoration of Job's relationships can be connected with Sifre's discussion of sinners accepting punishment. Some philosophers have defined forgiveness as the restoration of relationship in the face of a breach. At the end of the book of Job, Job has restored and deepened his relationship with God. God forgives Job for any sins he may

have committed leading up to or resulting from the chastisement and Job forgives God for the painful chastisement. Job's experience of suffering is transformed. He himself sees it finally as God reaching out to him, giving him the opportunity to see, respond, and understand.

Sifre argues further that this experience of divine grace is available to every Israelite. Jacob Neusner describes the topical program of Sifre as an attempt to identify general principles of history and use them to understand multiple phenomena. Neusner's account of the general principles focuses on those that mirror the theology of reward and punishment presented in the Book of Deuteronomy. According to Deuteronomy, when the Israelites practice their religion as outlined in the book, they will be rewarded with prosperity; when they do not, they will be punished with poverty and invasion. The reward, however, carries its own risks, as prosperity tempts Israel to neglect sacrificial service to God.[5] It is also possible to identify other principles that Sifre discovers and applies widely. These include the general principles of relationship between human beings and God that are revealed in the story of Job. These principles can be summarized as follows:

1. Love God in your joy and your suffering.
2. Suffering is a sign that God has singled you out for teaching.
3. When God singles you out for teaching, use the opportunity to grow in your relationship with God.

Sifre applies these principles to the covenant between God and Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple.

> Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai says, Those who are chastised are beloved. Three good gifts were given to Israel that the nations of the world crave. They were only given to them as means of chastisement. They are Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World to Come.

Sifre connects each of the gifts to the idea of suffering by means of a prooftext, and then explains the connection logically. Torah teachings chastise us; the experience in the Land chastises us; and chastisements alone earn us a place in the world to come. Thus, even if it is difficult to be an Israelite in a time of national despondency and religious persecution, Israelites should take heart. Difficulties are not signs that God has abandoned the people; rather they are signs that God has set out the path for them. Torah and land are gifts of grace precisely because they have caused suffering. If Israel can continue to love God in times of suffering, then Israel will grow in its relationship with God. This analysis is consistent with the Deuteronomistic theology of reward and punishment showcased by Neusner. If Israel can recognize that chastisements are fulfillments of the covenant, they will be reminded to turn to God. It is also consistent with the psychological analysis of the book of Job. If Israel cries out to God with a genuine willingness to hear an answer, they will be reconciled with God.

Sifre recognizes that the experience of suffering leads both to personal questions and to a challenge to official theology. Thus, it applies to both individual and national experience the principle that God teaches beloved ones to renew their spiritual relationships through suffering. This application is far from a mechanical application of

Sifre's topical program. It is, rather, a thoughtful exploration of the personal and theological questions generated by the experience of suffering.

In addition to recognizing the importance of the questions, Sifre offers particular answers to them. Why do the innocent suffer? The innocent suffer because they, too, can grow from the experience. Why does God not stop people from harming their fellow creatures? God allows harm to befall those most beloved to God in order to give them the opportunity to grow through suffering. How can one believe in a God who allows creatures to feel such pain? The challenge is not merely to believe in a God who allows this, but to love this God who gives such difficult opportunities. Can belief in God really help people cope with suffering? No, but turning an open heart towards God can.

Sifre's answers are quite different from those offered by philosophical discussions of theodicy. Theodicy calls for adjusting one's conception of God's justice. Sifre suggests a revision of the conception of God's mercy, but only in order to make love of God possible. Sifre thus offers a wonderful illustration of the contrast Judah HaLevi draws between Greek philosophy and Jewish spirituality. The ultimate aim of philosophy, says HaLevi, is knowledge. Philosophy can lead only as far as contemplation of the idea of God. Judaism, however, aims not towards understanding of God but towards relationship with God.[6]

Sifre's discussion, then, along with Mitchell's discussion of Job, makes possible a novel interpretation of the juxtaposition of the first two sentences of the Shema: "Listen Israel, YHWH our God, YHWH is One. You shall love YHWH your God with your whole heart, your whole being, and your all." The first sentence presents a conception of God: God is One. The second sentence directs believers to move beyond a mere

conception to an active relationship: you shall love this God. The Shema also describes Job's movement from merely hearing God's word to loving every manifestation of the divine. Traveling the distance between the two sentences, Sifre implies, is made possible through suffering. Sifre thus seems to agree with Deuteronomy's view that prosperity alienates people from God. When people are happy, loving God requires little effort, little reaching out in relationship. The challenge of suffering, however, can renew the intensity of the relationship, making it possible to love God with all one's heart, all one's being, and all one's all.

Notes

[1] One example of the many critical summaries of the philosophical treatment of theodicy can be found in J.L. Mackie's essay "Evil and Omnipotence," reprinted in *God,* 2nd edn., ed. Timothy A. Robinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), pp. 230-244.

[2] For an extended summary and analysis of the importance of the issue of suffering in rabbinic literature, see David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3] All quotations are from Sifre to Va'etchanan 6, Pesiqta 32. All translations are mine.

[4] Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 1992). See especially the introductory essay.

[5] Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 328-351.

[6] Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, with an introduction by Henry Slonimsky (New York: Schocken, 1964). See Slonimsky's introduction, pp. 26-27 and Halevi's text, pp. 35-40.