



Oh, for God's Sake: Belief in a World of Suffering

14 May 2020 • Rabbi Jesse Paikin • rabbijesse@sixthandi.org

James Parker, *And Then Job Said Unto the Lord: You Can't Be Serious* (Atlantic, Sep 2019)

So god says to Satan, "You there, what have you been up to?" And Satan says, "Oh, you know, just hanging around, minding my own business." And God says, "Well, take a look at my man Job over there. He worships me. He does exactly what I tell him. He thinks I'm the greatest." "Job?" says Satan. "The rich, happy, healthy guy? The guy with 3,000 camels? Of course he does. You've given him everything. Take it all away from him, and I bet you he'll curse you to your face." And God says, "You're on."

That—give or take a couple of verses—is how it starts, the Book of Job. What a setup.

[...]

After his herds have been finished off by marauders and gushes of heavenly fire, and his children have been flattened by falling masonry, and he himself has been covered in running sores from head to toe—after all this happens to the blameless man, he cracks.

1:20-22¹

Job arose; he tore his coat; he shaved his head;
he fell naked to the ground and prostrated himself.
He said: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb,
and naked will I return there.
YHWH has given, and YHWH has taken.
May the name of YHWY be blessed."

In spite of all this, Job did not commit-a-sin –
he did not speak insult to Elohim.

¹ All translations are from *Job: A New Translation*, Edward L. Greenstein (New Haven: Yale University, 2019).

Mark Williams and Danny Penman, *Mindfulness* (New York: Rodale, 2011)

Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness or stress hovers overhead, rather than taking it all personally, you learn to treat them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly curiosity as they drift past... it will not deaden your mind... nor will it trick you into falsely adopting a Pollyanna attitude to life. Meditation is not about accepting the unacceptable. It is about seeing the world with greater clarity so that you can take wiser and more considered action to change those things that need to be changed.

2:9-10

...his wife said to him:

“You are still holding-fast to your wholesomeness?!

‘Bless’ (curse) Elohim and die!

He said to her:

“You speak the speech of unseemly women!

Can we accept the good from Elohim and not accept the bad?”

In spite of all this, Job did not commit-a-sin with his lips.

2:11-13

Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that had overcome him;
so each man came from his place...

They lifted their eyes from afar and could not recognize him;
so they lifted their voices and they wept.

Each man tore his coat,
and they hurled dirt over their heads toward the sky.

They sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights,
and no one speaks a word to him,
for they saw that his pain had grown very great.

Rabbi Sari Laufer, *When It’s OK To Say Nothing* (MyJewishLearning)

Judaism understands loss and mourning, especially in its early days, as murky and convoluted. Our tradition understands that it takes time to ease back into daily routines, to begin to look and feel and act like ourselves again... Because sometimes, there are no words. Sometimes, nothing that you can say, as heartfelt as it might be, is what a mourner needs to hear. Sometimes, the most powerful thing that we can do is bear witness to someone’s pain, to hold in our presence their silence. Based on these texts, Dr. Ron Wolfson, of American Jewish University, says that the essence of consoling the bereaved can be distilled to three actions: Be there, speak in silence and hear with a heart.

Job's Response

3:1-2; 10-23

After that Job opened up his mouth and cursed his day (of birth).
Up spoke Job and he said...

Why couldn't I die after leaving the womb –
Just go out the loins and stop breathing?
For what did knees have to receive me?
For what were the breasts that I sucked?

I could just have lain down in silence,
Slept and enjoyed my repose;
Together with kings and counselors,
Who build palace-tombs for themselves.
Or with nobles, possessors of gold,
Who fill up their grave-homes with silver.

Why couldn't I be like a stillborn,
Just covered over (in the sand),
Like babies who never saw light?

There (in the grave) no more restless are the troubled;
And there the failing of strength find repose.
All prisoners are (there) at peace;
They hear not the voice of their oppressor.
The small and the great, there are the same;
And a slave is set free from his master.

Why give light to one in travail?
Or life to those bitter of spirit?
Those waiting for death, but there is none,
Though they dig for it more than for treasure!
Those singing for joy at the mouth of the tomb,
Who are glad to be reaching the grave.

(Why give light) to a man
Whose path is hidden from Eloah,
Who screens him off from his sight?

Eliphaz's Advice

4:6

Hasn't your reverence been your backbone,
And your integrity your source-of-strength?

5:2

For exasperation can kill the rogue,
And passion can bring death to the fool.

Job's Response

6:1-5

Up spoke Job and he said:
Were my anguish weighed, yes, weighed,
And my vexation borne with it on scales,
It would be heavier than the sand at the sea.
That is why my speech is a garble (to you)

6:11-14

What strength have I that I should wait?
What span (of life) that I should show patience?
Is my strength the strength of stone?
Is my flesh made of bronze?

Alas, there is no more power in me;
And my wits are driven out of me.

Why is one who turns from evil put to shame?
And one who fears Shaddai accursed?

Isaac ben Moses Arama *Akeidat Yitzchak* 84:1:5 (ca.1455 – ca.1495 CE)

We observe in nature that the more sophisticated a creature, the more fragile is its physical composition. On the other hand, if something appears to be of very durable construction, its function and potential is simple and uncomplicated. Stones are durable, their impact on, and contribution to life is minimal. Humans are extremely fragile organisms, but their potential and actual impact on life on this earth is tremendous. Put another way: Beauty of form equals weakness of substance. Brute strength equals unattractive form or packaging. Job 6,12, refers to this when he says: "Do I have the strength of stone, is my flesh made of copper?" He means that if he were indeed constructed of those materials, he could endure his suffering. We observe simple insects such as ants, able to build for themselves elaborate homes, storage facilities etc. Powerful animals such as lions, on the other hand, are unable to make provisions for themselves. Their bodies seem exposed to all kinds of danger.

7:2-4, 13-14

...I am meted out moons of futility;
Nights of suffering are allotted to me.

When I lie down I think: When can I rise?
Every evening!
I am sated with tossing till dawn...

When I think My bed will give me comfort,
My couch will relieve my complaint,
You terrify me with nightmares,
You torment me with visions.

Daisy Jones, Why Your Anxiety Always Feels Worse at Night (Vice, 17 October 2019)

There are a number of reasons anxiety can feel more extreme at night for some people. "There are four 'baskets' that often come up... One is the tendency to reflect on the day and **ruminate** on things. Then there's sleep itself, and the challenges around being asleep for some people. There's the **loneliness, isolation and silence** that happens at night... And lastly, there's **worrying about the future**, and what that will be... Sleep and altered consciousness can be a particular source of anxiety for those with a trauma background." (Interview with Chris O'Sullivan, *Mental Health Foundation*)

7:11

And so I will not hold back my mouth!
I will speak out of tightness of breath
Complain out of bitterness of spirit.

Rashi ad loc

גם אני לא אחשך פי. הואיל ואינך חדל ממני גם אני לא אמנע דיבור מלצעוק על מדותיך:
Since you do not cease from me, I will not refrain words of crying at you/your character;

Bildad's Advice

8:8-9

Just inquire of the former generations,
And consider the deep-wisdom of our ancestors;
For we are only yesterday and have no knowledge;
For our days on earth are but a (fleeting) shadow.

David Rock, *Stop Trying to Solve Problems* (Psychology Today, 18 September, 2012)

New research by Neuroscientist David Creswell from Carnegie Mellon sheds light on this phenomenon. Creswell wanted to explore what happens in the brain when people tackle problems that are too big for their conscious mind to solve. He had people think about purchasing an imaginary car, based on multiple wants and needs. One group had to choose immediately. These people didn't do great at optimizing their decision. A second group had time to try to consciously solve the problem. Their choices weren't much better. A third group were given the problem, then given a distracter task – something that lightly held their conscious attention but allowed their non-conscious to keep working. This group did significantly better than the other groups at selecting the optimum car for their overall needs.

Eugene Borowitz, *The Idea of God* (2002)

An idea of God set before Israel must . . . meet the criterion of history past, present and future. It must demonstrate that it is an authentic development of the Jewish past. It must be logical enough in contemporary terms and standards to make the present generation want to live by it, and its content must be such that this life is recognizably Israel's life of Torah before God. It must also be willing to stand before the judgment of the lives of the generations yet to be. Past, present, and future; the *aggadic* freedom is given—but the responsibility is great.

Rabbi Margaret Wenig, *God is a Woman and She is Growing Older* (1990)

We speak too rapidly to truly listen. We move too rapidly to feel what we touch. We form opinions too quickly to judge honestly. While God, God moves slowly and with intention. She sees everything there is to see, understands everything she hears, and touches all that lives...

Now we understand why we were created to grow older: each added day of life, each new year makes us more like God – who is ever growing older. That must be the reason we are instructed to rise before the aged and see the grandeur in the faces of the old. We rise in their presence as we would rise in the presence of God, for in the faces of the old we see God's face.

Job's Responses

9:11-16

Since he can cross without my seeing him,
Pass by without my discerning him,

He can snatch – and who can restrain him?
Who will say to him: What are you doing?

(Since) Eloah will not restrain his anger –
Even the soldiers of Rahab (a primeval sea monster) cower beneath him –

How could I call him to account,
Choose my charges against him?

Even in the right, I would get no response;
Even if I implored my opponent in court.
But if I would summon and he would respond,
I do not trust he would hear my complaint.

9:22

It is all the same.
And so I declare:
The innocent and the guilty he brings to (the same) end.

Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 7a

What does God pray?

Rav Zutra bar Tovia said that Rav said:

“May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger
and may My mercy prevail over My other (punishing) attributes
and may I conduct myself toward My children, Israel, with the attribute of mercy,
and may I enter before them beyond the letter of the law.”

13:15; 17-24

I will accuse him of his ways to his face! ...
Hear, yes, hear my words –
My declaration – with your ears
Here: I am laying out my lawsuit.
I know I am in the right.
Who would argue the case with me?
I would then keep silent – and expire.

Only two things you must not do to me –
Then will I not hide from your face:
Put your hand far from upon me,
And terrify me not with your awesome mien!

Either you summon, and I will respond;
Or I will speak, and you will answer me.

How many are my crimes and my sins?
My transgressions and my sin – tell me what they are!

Why do you hide your face,
And reckon me your enemy?

19:7

Though I scream “I’ve been wronged!” I receive no response;
(Though) I make an outcry, there is no justice.

Abraham J. Heschel, *Prayer*, in “Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity”

The focus of prayer is not the self. Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart towards God, towards His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer in the moment in which we forget ourselves and become aware of God.

The Dubner Maggid, *The Night Watchman*, in “The New Mahzor”

Prayer is not a device to arouse God, to make God aware of us and our needs. God is always aware of us and our needs. God is always aware. The true purpose of prayer is to arouse *us*, to keep us aware of our obligations – toward our community, our people, our God, and even towards ourselves. In the *shtetl*, the night watchman walks the streets and every hour on the hour calls out the time. The purpose of “calling out” is not to awaken the residents in the middle of the night. The purpose is to indicate that he, the watchman, is alert, tending to his tasks, and has not fallen asleep. Prayer is a means of keeping us spiritually alert and morally awake.

19:13-14

My relatives he's kept distant from me,
And my friends have withdrawn from me.
My close ones have stopped (coming near),
And my familiar ones have rejected me.

Brian Resnick *Loneliness actually hurts us on a cellular level* (Vox, 30 January 2017)

The response to chronic loneliness isn't different than the response to other sources of chronic stress — like low socioeconomic status or living with post-traumatic stress. “You see the same general molecular pattern across a diverse range of bad human life circumstances,” [Steve Cole (Professor of medicine, psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, UCLA)] says. Loneliness activates the body's generic stress response...

People who are lonely are more susceptible to chronic diseases, and less able to fight off immediate threats. And that may explain the increase in mortality among lonely people. (It's not the sole reason, however. Having friends around makes life easier. They drive you to doctors' appointments. They help you through tough times.)

27:3-4

So long as there is life-breath within me,
And in my nostrils Eloah's spirit,
I swear that my lips will speak nothing corrupt,
And my tongue will utter no deceit.

Dede Henley (Leadership Strategist) *The Importance of Speaking Truth to Power* (Forbes, 28 December 2019)

Here are three things to stop doing right away if you are a leader:

1. **Don't wait for permission to proceed.** Instead, give yourself permission to do what's needed and what serves a larger ideal that you care about. Leadership is an act of creation. Go first and others will follow.
2. **Don't apologize.** You have a right to be. And yes, you are messy and imperfect and may not have all of the answers. But you have a right to show up and be part of the conversation that's going on. Stand tall and speak without apology.
3. **Don't wait until you aren't afraid.** You can speak up even when and especially when you are afraid. Yes, your voice may quiver — that's okay. But don't fall silent waiting for your fear to subside. Courage is experiencing fear and taking action anyway.

Job's Closing Discourse

29:2-6

If only I could be as in months of yore,
In the days Eloah would watch over me.
When his lamp would shine over my head,
When I could walk by its light in the dark.

Just as I'd been in my earlier days,
When my tent stood under Eloah's bond;
When Shaddai was still with me...

Kaitlyn Tiffany, *Is That Nostalgia You're Feeling?* (The Atlantic, 1 April 2020)

Since the start of social-distancing measures in New York City, I've made a habit of scrolling through my Instagram profile every night, thinking about how bizarre it is that I was standing near my friends whenever I wanted to only a month ago... I'm nostalgic for February, which feels ridiculous.

29:11

When an ear would hear me, it would affirm;
And when an eye would see me, it would attest...

30:16-23

And now my spirit is emptied;
Days of affliction take hold of me;
At night it gnaws on my limbs,
So my sinews cannot rest.
It takes all my strength to change clothing;
It constrains like the neck of my tunic.
It's thrown me down to the clay,
Making me seem like dust and ashes.

I cry out to you, but you do not answer;
I stand, and you just look at me.
You have turned cruel against me;
With your brute power you obstruct me.
You lift me to be carried off by the wind,
And you sweep me away in a tempest.

I know you'll return me to Death,
To the meeting house of all who've lived.

Rachel Adler, *God and Gender* (From Judaism Unbound Episode 138, 5 October 2018)

Human beings are really pretty limited. There are sounds that other creatures can hear that are out of our hearing range. There are colours on the spectrum that other creatures can see that aren't in our range. We get arrogant about seeing ourselves as the measure of all things, and that things are only real if we can see them or document them. If we're less arrogant, we can see language as a way to reach toward a God that we're never going to comprehend. The problem with moderns is that they're always trying to "eff" the "ineffable." It doesn't work.

Mordechai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937)

The fact that the nature of God is beyond our understanding does not mean that we can afford to think of Him in terms that are clearly not true in accordance with the highest standards of truth. Our conception of God must be self-consistent and consistent with whatever else we hold to be true... We must insist that whatever we say or think about God shall be in harmony with all else that we hold to be true.

Michael Marmor *God of Language: Should, Can and Must in "Imagining the Jewish God,"* (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2016)

The starting point of this investigation is my frustration with the inadequacy of much of what passes for discourse about God. When such discourse is reduced to crude binarity—God either exists or does not exist; God either speaks or does not speak—it ceases to hold any interest, and it promises little prospect for a breakthrough in understanding.

The God I experience and intuit, the God I strive to understand and perceive as somehow turning to me, addressing me—this God is not found in the binary hide and seek. The existence of many complex and essential aspects of existence don't fit into the ontological straitjacket according to which something either exists like the Eiffel Tower, or it simply doesn't exist. This kind of thinking has little to say about love or loyalty or hope, let alone God.

God's Response to Job

38:1-7

Up speaks YHWH to Job from the windstorm, and he says:

“Who is this who obscures good counsel,
(Using) words without knowledge?

Bind up your loins like a man!
I will ask you - and you help me know!

Where were you when I laid earth's foundations?
Tell me - if you truly know wisdom!
Who set its dimensions? Do you know?
Who stretched the measuring line?
Into what were its foundations sunk?
Who laid its cornerstone? —
Molding the dirt into solid,
As the clods are stuck together?

38:12-15

Have you ever in your days summoned daybreak,
Made known to the dawning its place?
Holding the earth by its corners...

38:19-21

On what path dwells the light?
And the darkness - where is its place?
Can you take it to its domain?
Do you know the route to its home?
You must know, for you were born then;
Your number of days is so many!

38:36

Who endowed the ibis bird with wisdom
And gave understanding to the cock?²

Birchot HaShachar, Morning Blessings

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לַשֶּׁכּוֹי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה.

Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the world, who gave the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night.

² *l'sachvei vinab*

Job's Response to God

40:4-5

Lacking respect, how can I answer you?
My hand I place over my mouth.
I have spoken once and I will not repeat;
Twice - and I will (speak) no more.

How Other Translations End

על-כן אָמַאס וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל-עֲפָר וְאַפָּר:

NJPS (1985): Therefore, I recant and relent, Being but dust and ashes.

OJPS (1917): Wherefore I abhor my words, and repent, Seeing I am dust and ashes.

KJV: Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

42:1-6

Up spoke Job to YHWH and he said:

I have known you are able to do all;
That you cannot be blocked from any scheme.

“Who is this hiding counsel without knowledge?”
Truly I’ve spoke without comprehending -
Wonders beyond me that I do not know!

“Hear now and I will speak!
I will ask you, and you help me know!”

As a hearing by the ear I have heard you,
And now my eye has seen you

That is why I am fed up;
I take pity on “dust and ashes!”

Epilogue

42:7

It happened, after YHWH spoke these words to Job,
that YHWH said to Eliphaz the Teimanite:

"I am angry at you and your two companions,
for you did not speak about me in honesty
as did my servant Job."

James Parker, *And Then Job Said Unto the Lord: You Can't Be Serious* (Atlantic, Sep 2019)

The quality or valence of this honesty, however, has turned upside down. It has become a kind of white-knuckle existential tenacity, a refusal to disown oneself even in the teeth of the windstorm. Maybe that's what this God, faced with this Job, is telling us: Bring it all before him, the full grievance of your humanity. Bring him your condition, loudly. Let him have it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Spirit of Jewish Prayer* (1953)

If our lives are too barren to bring forth the spirit of worship; if all our thoughts and anxieties do not contain enough spiritual substance to be distilled into prayer, an inner transformation is a matter of emergency. And such an emergency we face today. *The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.* One cannot pray unless he has faith in his own ability to accost the infinite, merciful, eternal God.