

Why Are We Here Surrounded By So Much Suffering?

Shabbat Shuvah Sermon 5776

Back in the days when I flirted with ultra-Orthodoxy, I read a short essay by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan called “If You Were God.” Kaplan creates the situation in which there is an island on which there are violent and often competing tribes. Your task is to stop the tribes from warring without revealing yourself, because if you did so you would remove their free will. You have access to weather-changing equipment, super-surveillance and telepathic technology. Essentially, you play the role of God. What would you do? The idea behind the essay is to suggest that there is only one way that this Earth could be and that this is the perfect state as chosen by God. At the time, I thought it was rather clever but I have come to realize that the opening parameters are too limited. Essentially, Aryeh Kaplan assumes that the world must be this way, sets up a limited experiment to ask how else it could be different, and then concludes that it couldn’t be. But what if the tribes weren’t warring? Or what if there were already so many resources that they didn’t need to go to war, since that is actually the root of so much conflict around the world? What if war were ineffective? What if people couldn’t kill each other? This is all hypothetical theology, of course. One might retort, “If people couldn’t kill each other than their free will would be limited,” but that’s not true because our free will is already limited – for example, none of us can fly like a bird despite many people’s dreams to do so. The essay is Aryeh Kaplan’s attempt at theodicy, at explaining why God allows so much suffering. And that leads us to our next question in the series of “Why Are We Here?” sermons, which is “Why are we here surrounded by so much suffering?”

Of course, it's all relative. Our suffering is the suffering of loneliness, of bereavement, of illness. It's not the kind of suffering known by billions of people worldwide, who are deprived of clean water, food and safe shelter. It's not the suffering of dictatorships or of war. That is suffering the likes of which we are usually completely spared. And we have to look at ourselves and acknowledge that much of that suffering is our fault. We live in a society based on slavery, a society that flourished because of physical slavery and that now continues to flourish because of economic slavery. The Western world pillaged and plundered huge swathes of the globe, took resources like basic crops that had been used to feed locals and instead exported them, heavily taxing them, resulting in profit for the colonisers and starvation for the locals. And now we as consumers buy goods from multinational corporations who continually scour the earth for the cheapest labour possible, locking people into poverty and inhumane work conditions. So when we ask "Why are we here surrounded by so much suffering?" we have to accept that part of the answer is "Because that's the way we want it."

But there's a deeper question here, too, based on the distinction between what is usually termed moral evil and what is usually termed natural evil. Moral evil, such as the evils caused by slavery, we understand. Natural evil is something else, though. Why is there natural evil? Why are there earthquakes, droughts, tsunamis? How do these exist in a world where there's a God? In his text *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Moses Maimonides says that "the fact that some individuals are preserved from calamities, whereas those befall others, is due not to their bodily forces and their natural dispositions... but to their perfection and deficiency, I mean their nearness to, or remoteness from, God... those who are near to God are exceedingly well protected... those who are far from God are given over to whatever may happen to befall them."(III. 18, Pines, p. 476) In other words, good

things happen to people who are good in God's eyes but if you are not close to God then you are subject to the vagaries of existence, to elements of chance and chaos. As much as this may be a standard view of Jewish providence, though, it's hard to believe that Maimonides really believed it. After all, he was a doctor in the Middle Ages who must have seen good people die from terrible diseases! And this idea that God protects the righteous may have been expressed in Deuteronomy but was clearly refuted in the Book of Job. Job is described as being a perfectly righteous man and yet the worst possible things happen to him. His friends try to explore many reasons why and the conclusion of the book has God appearing and telling them that, essentially, it's impossible to know the reason why bad things sometimes happen to good people. But the point is that we know they do! So why are we here, in a religious context, and yet still surrounded by suffering? It's not enough to say, "Only God knows." That's not a satisfying response.

Maimonides seems to suggest another response when he also says that God "only produces being, and all being is good. On the other hand, all the evils are privations with which an act is only connected... through the fact that God has brought matter into existence provided with the nature it has – namely, a nature that consists in matter always being a concomitant of privation... it is the cause of all passing-away and to being attained by any of the evils. (III. 11, Pines p. 440) Complicated stuff. What he's saying is that the universe is, by its very nature, deficient. God's creation is perfect, given the matter that was used. But that matter was imperfect and therefore bad things happen. Maimonides was a neo-Aristotelian, influenced by the idea that the universe was eternal. In fact, he seems to suggest that it is impossible to know for certain whether the universe was created or had always existed. Certainly, his claim that God made the universe out

of imperfect matter suggests that he believed that the universe was eternal, otherwise why didn't God just make better matter in the first place?

And that's the core question. If God is Creator, why is creation so painful? What kind of God creates a world like this? As Charles Darwin once wrote, "There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidæ* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice." Going back to Aryeh Kaplan's book, if I were God, I probably wouldn't design a species of parasitic wasp that eats off its living host until it is killed from the inside. What's the point of that? In the Midrash, Genesis Rabbah 10:7, "our rabbis said: Even things which you may regard as completely superfluous to the creation of the world, such as fleas, gnats and flies, even they are included in the creation of the world and the Holy One carries out the Divine purpose through everything – even a snake, a scorpion, a gnat or a frog." Even the ichneumon wasp, cruelly burrowing its way through another living creature, even that has a purpose. But couldn't it have been a nicer purpose? After all, if the intention of this world is to get to a state whereby, to quote Isaiah (11:6), the wolf will lie down with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the goat, why have predators and parasites at all? Do we really learn from them? What do we learn, other than savagery and violence?

So, why are we here, surrounded by so much suffering? How can we pray to God to heal those who are suffering when that God creates creatures who cause untold suffering to others? There are at least two possible answers. The first is that we need to redefine God in the face of suffering, the second is that we need to redefine ourselves in the face of suffering and of God. The first response, which is a response taken by many people once they truly encounter real suffering, is to move

away from the long-held notion of God being omnipotent or omniscient, that is, all-powerful and all-knowing. Indeed, some move away from the notion of a supernatural God altogether. That's a perfectly acceptable religious response, and certainly one that is echoed by the many differing understandings of God that we can see in the new *machzor*. The second response, though, the redefining of ourselves in the face of suffering and of God, is more challenging. Just as in the Book of Job, we don't know why there is suffering. But we can spend our lives waxing theological about it, or we can respond to it. Talmud (Sotah 14a) teaches us, "Just as God clothes the naked, so you shall clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick, so you shall visit the sick. Just as God comforts the bereaved, so you shall comfort the bereaved. Just as God buries the dead, so you shall bury the dead." In other words, suffering is an ontological fact. Suffering exists. So instead of spending our lives wondering how that squares with the notion of God, our tradition enjoins us to simply accept that it exists, that God exists, and that we have a duty to imitate God in relieving suffering.

So, why are we here surrounded by so much suffering? Because suffering exists. That's it. What do we do with that fact? That's where *teshuvah* comes in. That's where returning to God comes in. That's the supremely relevant question to Shabbat Shuvah, to the time in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Because to engage in *teshuvah*, in returning to God, isn't just about prayer and reflection, it's about action. It's about relieving the suffering of others. It's about actively going out into the world and relieving suffering. Why are we here surrounded by so much suffering? Because we haven't yet completed our task of reducing it as much as possible. Because that is the role of religion, to go out and reduce suffering in the world. So may we, on this Shabbat Shuvah, not be paralysed by fear of suffering in the world, let us not be weighed down with the theology of

suffering and let us simply rise to the theologically-driven task of reducing suffering in the world. May that be our repentance, may that be our way back to meeting God – not by cross-examination but by emulation. May such be God’s will, and let us say, Amen.