**"*Bechukotai*: the folly of justifying tragedies theologically''**

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

''I will appoint terror over you, consumption, and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail and the soul to languish'' (Lev. 26:16).

Over the past few years, the whole world has been preoccupied with the effects of the Covid pandemic, with how to develop and deliver effective vaccines to keep it at bay, how to support overworked front-line medical and ancillary staff, and, on the part of government, how to provide the financial resources to the many sectors and households seriously affected by it.

Religious leaders must struggle hard to avoid the temptation glibly to explain away such theological challenges to faith that have mystified the greatest minds since biblical times, such as why the righteous suffer, why innocent babies may have their lives snuffed out, not only at the hands of the wicked and the violent who defy God's law, but also through the destructive power of nature, the very instrument of His will.

As a young rabbim, I received a phone call one day – It was the 15th May 1974 – from a Lubavitch emissary eager to share with me their Rebbe's insight into a devastating attack on a school in Ma'alot in Northern Israel by Palestinian terrorists that had just occurred, taking the lives of 25 hostages, including 22 children. He wished me to understand that the tragedy was a result of the fact that the mezuzot on the schoolrooms were found to have been *pesulot* (faulty)! My informant clearly espoused the view that the mezuzah was more a protective amulet than a religious symbol, a helmet rather than an outward sign. This

theologically controversial issue was subsequently aired in an article entitled, "Mezuzah: Protective amulet or religious symbol" (*Tradition*: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought" [NY: RCA, vol. 16 no.4, Summer 1977, pp.7-40]).

Presuming to fathom the mind of God, and to offer an unequivocal rationale of the justice of His actions in situations which may pose a serious challenge to faith – as in the case of Ma'alot – is a hazardous exercise. But, disseminating such "explanations" goes far beyond that, and strays into the potentially prohibited area of *m'galleh panim ba-Torah* – 'attributing baseless and speculative meanings to the Torah' – an offence for which 'one may forfeit one's share in the World to Come!' (Mish. *Avot* 3:15).

The commentary of Menachem Meiri, the distinguished Catalan Talmudist (1249 – 1306), elucidates the precise nature of the offence:

> It involves presenting oneself as privy to the mysteries of the Torah by stating, regarding something that is straightforward, that it is to be understood – contrary to the divine intention – as merely symbolic. For example, if, in relation to the prohibition against the consumption of pig, one were to suggest that the Torah did not mean that law to be understood literally, but, rather, in a figurative sense, suggestive that one's personal qualities should be pure, not ugly and reprehensible (*loc. cit*.).

Thus, to attempt to rationalise the massacre of schoolchildren on the basis that their school's mezuzot were defective is not only to trivialise their deaths (It goes without saying that the Torah does not categorise possession of faulty mezuzot as a capital crime!), but is also a

display of insensitivity toward the parents and the school's administration. Worse still, it shifts the blame from the terrorists and – dare we say it? – calls into question the very justice of God, the very opposite of what their 'explanation' set out to achieve!

We have no such explanations for pandemics, massacres, tsunamis, or any other misleadingly-dubbed 'acts of God.' Authentic faith may enable many to cope with them, but, for the spiritually sensitive, it does not necessarily dispel religious doubts and challenges and allow the clear illumination of comprehension to flood in. Faith is a mirror, not a window. If it discloses anything, it is the intensity and determination of the individual's attempt to reach out to God in the acknowledgement of his or her vulnerability and the limitation of their comprehension of His ways, as well as a means of cathartic release. It does not, however, guarantee moral clarity to the extent that it can make sense of the senseless or shed light on the mysteries of good and evil, reward and punishment. So, any thoughts we may have on that subject are, of necessity, random and superficial.

At the very beginning of the Torah we are given a description of two worlds: An inner one – termed *Gan Eden* – symbolic of an idyllic, spiritual place of harmony and innocence, wherein few rules and restrictions were considered necessary to sustain the obedience of man and to maintain his awareness of God's existence and sovereignty; and an external world – or, more accurately, a world wherein the pursuit of externals was the primary objective – a world of turbulence and competitiveness, the fruits of which were largely attainable only by means of blood, sweat and tears, and where kindness and altruism would be far rarer commodities than jealousy and greed. The trees of the inner world were offered

as reward for the cultivation man's higher instincts; those of the external world did little more than serve his appetite.

Adam and Eve were banished from the inner to the outer world when their thirst for the physical became unquenchable, and they chose the fruit of the tree rather than the fruit of God's lips.

Unlike the blissful tranquillity of the inner world, the external world to which Adam and Eve were banished was subject to the seismic physical traumas we refer to as "natural disasters," symbolic of nature's retribution for the progenitors of the human race's plunder of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and for their, and their offspring, having blurred the difference between them.

While in the inner Garden of Eden, everything good was available to Adam. But his desire to experience also the evil fruit of 'the tree' could only be fulfilled in the outer world of danger and turbulence wherein the serpent did not commune with Adam and Eve, but sought to harm them; wherein the lion did not lie down with the lamb, but sought to devour it; where nature was largely untamed and unpredictable; and wherein man was as often the vanquished as the victor.

So, man's eternal struggle with nature is portrayed as having been of his own making, and nature's response as commensurate with it. And if there *is* any theological explanation for tsunamis, pandemics, or other natural disasters, perhaps it lies within the realm of the allegorical story at the beginning of the book of Genesis.

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One of the commendable facets of the pandemic, however, was the quality of sympathy, helpfulness, and charitableness that it engendered. But Jews don't need crises to activate within them such responses, for those attributes are built into our DNA and represented as a central pillar of our religious way-of-life: 'And you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19:18). Abraham already taught us the meaning of hospitality, of seeking out the stranger, the lonely, and the wayfarer, of sheltering them in our homes and accommodating them as honoured guests at our table (Gen. 18:1-8). Built into the ancient Israelites' agricultural mindset was the law that prescribed leaving part of their fields for the stranger, widow, orphan and poor, to glean freely so they might never go hungry (Lev. 19:9; Deut. 24:19). That this was not some idealistic, theoretical principle, but a practical commitment, is clear from the book of Ruth, where that agricultural law is central to the drama.

The world must learn this lesson which lies at the heart of the Jewish concept of *tzedakah*, 'righteous giving.' Giving alone is not enough. It must be accompanied by *tzedek*, a kind word of encouragement, and an attempt to lift the person out of his or her undignified situation and into a situation of self-reliance. We must refocus the eyes of society from the macro to the micro level: to a more friendly, helpful, and interactive mode of relating to all whose acquaintance we make.

Elie Wiesel defined the Messianic condition as one where 'man transcends his solitude in order to make his fellow man less solitary' (*The Oath*, p. 80). It is as good a definition as any. When we all begin to feel the pain of others, and to remove the barriers of solitude,

selfishness, and indifference to their plight, then we become fellow members of a 'global family,' rather than mere inhabitants of a 'global village.'

Wiesel, in that same novel, uses a well-known Hasidic tale to illustrate his definition. It is that of an old Rebbe who disclosed that in his youth his burning desire was to improve the world. In his more mature years, he realised that this was unrealistic, so he set his goal on changing his community. When he saw that even that was too ambitious, he made it his goal to change his family. Finally, in his old age, he came to appreciate that the real struggle was to change oneself!

Of course, the emotional and charitable response to the pandemic has been admirable. But if we really wish to help our neighbours globally, then we must go far beyond addressing the financial, medical, or psychological crises in their lives. We must also address the pain of inequality, and the discrimination on the grounds of colour, religion, race, and poverty, from which millions suffer worldwide. And, although financial contributions to disasters may qualify as charity, they may not necessarily qualify as *tzedakah*, '*righteous* giving,' reflective of a holistic response from hearts that truly feel the pain of every individual, community, and society.

*Shabbat shalom,*

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