

SHABBAT SERMON

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Because of the Pandemic, this Friday evening service takes the place of the conference Shabbat service that we usually hold on Saturday morning. It has been my privilege for many years to give the sermon on that occasion and I like to use the opportunity to reflect on issues that may have arisen out of our studies together and our shared experiences during the week. But this year, for technical reasons, I have had to prepare the sermon well in advance. Since I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, at the time of writing this I have no idea what issues might have been raised during the course of our studies together. Nor can I sit in a café in Osnabrück this year and compose it as usual, inspired by the experience of the week and the quality of the chocolate cake.

What I do have to help me is the intensive work I have had to do in preparing the text of the Book of Job for our studies, and this has produced a number of ideas, stray thoughts and associations for me. So I would like to share some of these in the hope that they speak to others as well.

The wager with God of the heavenly servant called *'ha-satan'* with which the book begins is deeply shocking because of God's behaviour. But it is not a unique example in the Hebrew Bible. Another of God's creations was also used to tempt, tease and challenge a human being. It occurs in the familiar story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The serpent, too, is ultimately an agent of God, and if allowed by God to tempt Eve, where does responsibility lie for what happened? Nevertheless, the story can be read positively as a way of helping Adam and Eve, though at a heavy price, to gain their necessary independence as human beings – both to be free to choose their actions for themselves and to have to learn how to survive and flourish despite the consequences of sometimes choosing wrongly. In order to exist in the real world outside the Garden of Eden they needed to acquire a far greater awareness of who and what they are, discover, however painfully, how to conduct themselves in relationship with one another and with society and with the natural world. These are lessons and skills that we are all still trying to achieve with the same limited success.

So, was the God of the prologue ultimately acting in the best interest of Job? So much so that God was prepared to risk completely destroying Job in the course of what was about to happen? *ha-satan* was faced in the end with an impossible task, to attack Job's body but without killing him. As the rabbis expressed it: 'to break open the barrel without spilling the wine'. What possible benefit could Job gain through all that God put him through? In Job's daily activities, one thing stands out, his regular offering of sacrifices on behalf of his children, out of fear that they may have sinned, and blasphemed God in their hearts. As *ha-satan* points out, Job's relationship with God is genuine and sincere, but is ultimately transactional; it is based on the expectation of a benefit. If this is completely understandable from a human perspective, is that ultimately the kind of relationship that God wants to foster with human beings, one based on their dependency and fear? Even Job

appears to understand in his opening remarks that something along these lines may be what is at stake:

For the thing which I did fear is come upon me,
and that which I was afraid of has overtaken me.
I was not at ease, neither was I quiet, neither had I rest;
but trouble came. (Job 3:25-26)

I will return to this theme a bit later, but I want to introduce one other aspect.

When I was studying to become a rabbi at Leo Baeck College, my Bible teacher was Dr Ellen Littmann. A graduate of the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin before the war, she had managed to leave Germany for Palestine. Years later she was invited to England to teach when the College was founded. In the course of our studies we would occasionally talk about wider rabbinic concerns and she told us that she disagreed with a certain practice that presumably happened at funerals in pre-war Germany. At the end of the funeral service, the rabbi would quote from Job: *Adonai natan vadonai lakach yehi shem adonay m'vorach*. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). She was quite insistent that the rabbi had no right to say this on behalf of the mourners. Only the mourner him- or herself had the right to say it, and only then if they were truly able to do so.

The Job who said it, in the prologue to the book, was a mourner faced with the most devastating series of losses to his family. And the drama of the book addresses the outrageous behaviour of his friends, who not only ignored the enormity of his loss and his pain but denied him the right to express his anger at God for what he had suffered, and to demand from God some kind of explanation or justification. In this regard Job's reaction is not unique in the Hebrew Bible. Another survivor of a devastating personal loss also spoke about such feelings in the form of a poem, one that is not treated with the recognition it deserves. In the Book of Ruth Naomi suffers from the death of her husband and then, one by one, her two sons. Her response is both to rage at God and at the same time, somehow, to hold onto her trust in God:

To her friends and neighbours who welcomed her back to her homeland she said:

Do not call me Naomi (pleasantness)
Call me Mara (bitterness)
because *Shaddai* has greatly embittered me.
In fullness I departed
empty *Adonai* brought me back.
Why do you call me Naomi?
Adonai testified against me,
and *Shaddai* did me harm. (Ruth 1:20-21)

Like Job she refers to God with the name *shaddai*, one meaning of which would be 'destructiveness'. But at the heart of her poem she uses the name *adonai*, for the God who brought her back, whose name she still feels able to speak aloud.

I remember an elderly orthodox rabbi with whom I studied, another person who had come as a refugee to the UK and found a new home. He once said that a person of faith cannot say about something that happened to him: 'It is bad'. But he can say: 'It is bitter!'

To return to the question of the possible transformation in Job's relationship with God, we will only be able to judge what happens after next year's Bible Week when we complete the second half of the Book. But the Hebrew Bible presents us with at least three people, Naomi, the prophet Jeremiah, and ultimately Job, who shared a similar kind of extraordinary faith in God in the face of

great tragedy. The nature of their experience is well described by Paul Sanders¹ in his introduction to a collection of essays on Job.

Existence presents us the raw data of the problem: the inequities of life, its swift and inevitable end, and a contrary sense that it all ought to count for something; but there are many ways of dealing with the issues. Job's way is its own: not Greek, but Semitic; not merely Near Eastern, but Hebraic; not analytical, but expectantly religious. Its tone, though fully as anguished and urgent as that of tragedy, is yet more confident. Like Jacob at Peniel (Gen 32:24-32), Job would not wrestle so passionately did he not, paradoxically, expect a blessing. The unknown God must be also the God one has partly known in the past and trusts for the future.

I want to end on a lighter note, though the topic is also death. A few months ago Rabbi Willy Wolff, a graduate of Leo Baeck College, died at the age of 93. During the last years of his life he had found a new career as a much-loved rabbi in Germany. Moreover, he gained great popular recognition because of his contribution to a documentary about the Jewish cemetery in Berlin, Weissensee. The film ended with the quotation of a poem by Kurt Tucholsky (which was set to music by Hanns Eisler). Like Rabbi Wolff the poem has a seriousness and playfulness, and it was in my mind while preparing Job. Since death is such a central theme in Job I thought I would end with the poem in my own translation. The German original is available in the German text.

In Weissensee

Over there where bricks are made
– engines pound –
a special graveyard is arrayed
with walls around.

Here everyone's assigned their lot
a plot
and such a plot is listed by
an O or I ...

They visit here from near or far,
from sickbed, powder-room or bar,
sometimes from a hospice stay
to Weissensee,
to Weissensee.

If some are freshly planted there
with pious rite
then others enter dancing fair
as well one might.

Harmonium plays Adagio
Plot O...

The car awaits – taxis three
Plot E...

No cleric here himself can laud.
'How great his heart, let us applaud'
no buried banker hears them say
in Weissensee,
in Weissensee.

¹ Paul S. Sanders 'Introduction' *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Book of Job* Edited by Paul S. Sanders (Prentice Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1968) p 1.

There where I have often come
for friend
both you and I will one day come
at end.
You live, at best enjoy your due,
Plot U ...
In patience waiting for your day,
Plot A ...
Your grave can wait, no place to hide,
three metres long, one metre wide.
You still have time for foreign trips
perhaps explore another's lips.
Twenty, thirty seasons' play
and then Plot K
in Weissensee,
in Weissensee.

Kurt Tucholsky (1925) under the name 'Theobald Tiger'. Tr. Jonathan Magonet.

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