

SHABBAT SERMON

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After a second week of studying the Book of Job, and having spent many hours working through the text, I remain dissatisfied with what I am able to say about it. This is not modesty but simply a way of acknowledging something that many others have felt, even after a lifetime studying the Book. The complexity of the language, the density of the text, the repetitiveness of the arguments of the characters, the way in which it differs from any other Biblical book, all these affect us. Add to them the multiplicity of translations and commentaries and explanations that exist and the way that Job has been co-opted into different religious and even secular traditions, we are bound to experience a kind of mental and possibly spiritual exhaustion. But if my feelings have crystalized in any way this week, it is in my struggle to get into the mind of the author. I assume he is a man, just given the nature of Biblical culture, but who is he, or rather, what motivates him.

He sets his story in a kind of parallel universe similar to but significantly different from the more familiar Biblical world that we are used to, particularly in the depiction of God. The rabbis argued about whether or not Job actually existed, whether he was a Jew or a gentile, because these questions offer some kind of recognizable territory in which we might be able to encounter the Book and Job's experience. But the very beginning of the Book itself tells us that these comfortable and familiar associations do not help. For how could the God of Israel that we know be enticed by one of his advisers to test the truth of Job's faithfulness and morality in such a terrible way? Indeed, how dare the author present such an appalling image of Israel's God. We are catapulted into a world where all the assumptions about the God of Israel's covenant, the God who demands justice, the God who tempers his anger at our misbehaviour with compassion and mercy, is replaced by an arbitrary tyrant who plays with the lives of a man and his family just for the sake of a bet.¹

It is just as well that Job is not real, because the author has God treat him most viciously, robbing him of this material wealth, his family, his health, and perhaps most seriously of all, given his cultural background, of his standing and reputation in his society. No different than today, Job's world is judgmental and cruel when it turns on those that we have previously honoured. Job is driven to such despair that he curses the day of his birth and would welcome death as the ultimate release from his suffering. But, and it is an enormous 'but', something prevents him taking the obvious step of ending it all and killing himself. Such is his loyalty to the God who has actually betrayed him, that he is willing to fight to defend his integrity and his reputation in the face of the arguments and challenges of his peers, people with whom he actually shares the same values and assumptions. But he also does so in the face of the silence of God, a God who so often responded to the prayers of Israel in the Psalms.

¹ There is a sort of precedent in the Bible of God deliberately misleading the prophets of the king of Israel in order to bring about his destruction, but this, at least, has some justification in the political narrative in 1 Kings 22.

In preparing this sermon, two texts came to mind that help me understand at least some of the issues we are addressing here. Perhaps inevitably they are both related to the Shoah, precisely because of the nature of the challenges offered by the story of Job. The first is by the scientist, poet and witness Primo Levi. It is an ironic paradox, given our interfaith context here today, that Levi insists on defending his integrity as an atheist by *not* seeking the 'consolations of faith.'

I entered the Lager as a non-believer and as a non-believer I was liberated and have lived to this day ... I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield, to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in the October of 1944, in the one moment in which I lucidly perceived the imminence of death. Naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the 'commission' that with one glance would decide whether I should immediately go into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: you do not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, nor when you are losing. A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a non-believer is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise were I to survive I would have to be ashamed of it.²

I find that Levi's persistence and courage in defending his integrity in a real situation of life or death helps me at least understand something of the challenge faced by Job and the integrity of his stance.

My second quotation takes us to the far end of the book, the equally problematic conclusion. Job is restored to his wealth and position in society, even acquiring a new family. We do not know whether the author is satisfied with this as an acceptable conclusion or is writing this with the same irony that has permeated the book, pandering to our desire for closure to Job's story, a 'happy end'. What hurts is the lack of any expression of compassion on the part of God, as indeed seems to be the case throughout the Book. Can one simply replace one family lost in a tragedy with another as if nothing has happened, without acknowledge the ongoing awareness of the loss? My second reading is by the American poet and writer on Judaism and women's issues, Blu Greenberg, who quietly supplies what the entire book seems to be missing. The poem is called 'Second life'.³

Mr. S. celebrates his daughter's birthday
He is sixty, she twelve
I wonder if he is thinking
About that little girl
Whose picture I saw
In their hallway
Sweet face, curly hair all over her head
Blonde, shining, giving off shafts of light
Expensive frilly dress
A very small picture
Tucked into a corner of the hallway wall
Was that her birthday picture?
I hope he cannot read my thoughts
Nor I his
As he celebrates this happy family day
In his second life.

This brings me back to my question about the author and how to understand him. I do not think of him primarily as a theologian, that is just the intellectual discourse that he chooses to employ. I do not think that he is conventionally pious, otherwise I doubt that he could have dared to portray God in the way that he has. Clearly, he belongs to the world of 'wisdom', which he enjoys challenging and he amuses himself at the expense of its proponents. He sets them in a context he has created where the absurdity or indeed cruelty of their assertions are painfully obvious. But even that world does not seem to be where his ultimate loyalty lies. Instead, I find myself focusing on his deep commitment to his craft as a writer, to his seeming moral detachment, and his appar-

² Primo Levi *The Drowned and the Saved* Tr. Raymond Rosenthal (Michael Joseph, London, 1988) pp 117-8.

³ Blue Greenberg *Black Bread: Poems after the Holocaust* (Ktav Publishing House Inc, Hoboken, NJ, 1994) p 42.

ent inability to display compassion on the part of Job's friends, and ultimately from God as well. It suggests to me that he is driven by a different force. Perhaps it is one of which we say little in our study of the Bible except in the functional work of creating Temples and Palaces. His is the passion of an artist.

Art is a force of nature that is not easily tamed, and which shows little respect for conventions and regulations. In its own way it may be as all-demanding and all-consuming as religious faith for the true believers. Nevertheless, sometimes a synthesis can be made between them, and the artist stamps his or her mark such that the religion is never quite the same again. Perhaps that explains something of the power and disturbing nature of the Book of Job. Somehow it has found the courage to claim to speak with the actual voice of God, out of a conveniently staged whirlwind, to a silent Job and to us.

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