

Parashat Emor

“Now the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out amongst the children of Israel; and this Israelite woman’s son and a man of Israel fought each other in the camp. And the Israelite’s son blasphemed the name of the Lord and cursed; and so they brought him to Moses. Then they put him in custody, that the mind of the Lord might be shown. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Take outside the camp him who has cursed; then let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. Then you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. And whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death’”...and they took outside the camp him who had cursed, and stoned him with stones (Lev.24:13-16)

Why was it a matter of a putting to death? Israel had a covenant with God and as the selected nation, Israel had to bear unimpeachable witness to God’s Name. Blasphemy cheapens that witness. In Judaism there are sins that are totally grievous to God; they deride His Name - idolatry, incest, and, murder. It is better to die than to commit such grievous sins. Such a death, to the faithful, is called ‘Sanctification of the Name’ - Kiddush HaShem. Generally, however, Sanctification of the Name means to remain resolutely faithful to God, especially when confronting opposition, disaster, aggressive unbelief, and evil intent - the more so, when the reason for it all is not at all clear.

Evil and suffering is given its greatest treatment in the Bible in the 3,000 year old story of Job. That is, apart from Yeshua’s. Job was seriously wealthy. He had 7 sons and 3 daughters. He was “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” Even so, he was hammered by natural disasters and man-made evil, in quick succession. Thousands of his animals were stolen, and the rest burnt in a huge fire. Servants were killed when Chaldean raiders stole his camels. His children were having a social in their oldest brother’s house when a hurricane destroyed them. What did Job do? “He arose, tore his robe, shaved his head; and fell to the ground and worshipped. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the Name of the Lord.’” (1:20-22) That is serious Sanctification of the Name.

You’d have thought that that was quite enough. But his health began to suffer - covered with boils, flaking skin, rotting teeth, insomnia, deep depression, fever. His wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!” But faithful, resolute, Job replied, “.....Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” His closest friends were initially sympathetic but began whistling a different tune when they told Job his suffering was punishment for deepest sin.

A baffled Job doggedly continued to seek truth for himself from God, accompanied by alternating mood-swings. In Job 3:11 he asks himself, “Why did I not die at birth?” By Job 19:25, 27, he declaims, in total faith, “For I know that my Redeemer lives.....and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God.” Then he wanted to know why God’s

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justice allowed the wicked to live so well: "They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave." (Job 21:13). He, himself, by Job 30:19, says God has cast him into the mire, and he has become but dust and ashes. At times he thinks God is far away, even deaf. He gets cheated off with his so-called friends preaching pious clap-trap - in 16:2/3, he cries, ".....Miserable comforters are you all! Shall words of wind have an end?"

Finally, God speaks directly to Job. No neat explanation of evil as expected but a powerful list of God's mysterious power as the Great Creator. Job 38:33-35 says it all, "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you set their dominion over the earth? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that an abundance of water may cover you? Can you send out lightnings, that they may go, and say to you, 'Here we are?'" And in 40:2, God says, "Shall the one who contends with the Lord correct Him (the Lord)? At last, Job tumbles to the great secret of life. It comes in 42:2-5, "I know that You can do everything.....I have uttered what I did not understand.....I have (now) heard of You by the hearing of the ear but now my eyes see You. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." And, as we know, as is written in 42:12, ".... the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning." He lived to 140 years of age. The boy did good, as they say in football!

For us the experience of redemption is easy. But it is only easy because it cost God and His Son, Yeshua, so very much. It is people like Job and the apostle Paul who bring us the basis of things. Their stories tell us why the basis of salvation is redemption. These great souls, saints, were hard hit in life. Their experiences and re-actions to suffering have been preserved for us by God in Scripture. It is our Lord Himself, and those like Job and Paul, who give us what to look for, for the foundation of our faith, when it is being shaken to the core. Our Lord suffered wrongfully. Suffering is the touchstone of faithfulness, just as temptation is. Suffering wrongfully will always reveal where we are at in faith. It reveals our ruling disposition; the more so because it takes us unawares.

I close with a short story written back in the 1960's. John Blanchard writes of it in his excellent treatise, 'Where Is God When Things Go Wrong?' At the end of time, people were assembled before God's mighty throne. Most were quiet but others were arguing with each other and aggressively demanding to know what right God had to judge them. "What does He know about suffering?" cried one young woman. She showed the Nazi death camp number tattooed on her forearm and told of the hideous evils she and so many others had had to suffer. Elsewhere, a middle-aged black man showed the burn marks circling his neck. "Look at this," he exclaimed, "Strung-up for no other reason but the colour of my skin!" In another group, folk listened to an elderly woman locked away for a lifetime in an asylum, simply because of an unfortunate pregnancy as a youngster, at a time when there was little loving compassion. "A lifetime lost, a lonely lifetime of suffering," she told the group.

So many people and so many complaints against God. He had allowed evil and suffering to rage unchecked through the world. "Heaven is a sheltered haven of peace," they said. "In

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such a place, how could He know of hate, hunger, thirst, fear, war, and total nothingness." And so, the story goes on, leaders were chosen from the greatest sufferers - such as a Jew, a black person, a terribly disabled youngster, and so forth. The leaders met and discussed their strategy of action,

"Before God could be qualified to be judge He must endure what they had endured. God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man! Let Him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of His birth be questioned. Give Him work so difficult that even His family would think Him deranged. Let Him be betrayed by His closest friends. Let Him face false charges, be tried by a biased jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let Him be tortured. At last, let Him see what it is to be terribly alone. Then let Him die in agony. Let Him die so that there can be no doubt that He died. Let there be a whole host of witnesses to verify it. As each leader announced the portion of His sentence, a loud murmur of approval went up. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence there was a long silence. No one spoke. No one moved. For suddenly, all knew that God had served His sentence."

There are stages in life when there is no storm, no crisis, when we do our human best. It is when a crisis arises that we instantly reveal upon whom we rely. If we have been learning to worship God and to trust Him, the crisis will reveal that we will go to the breaking point and not break in our confidence in Him. We will practise Kiddush Hashem.