Va-Yeshev, 1 December 2007*
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In the King James translation, the twenty-third Psalm (*Adonai Ro'i*) is one of the most familiar poems in the English language. Yet perhaps because it is so familiar, we rarely notice the sudden grammatical shift at the heart of this Psalm: something that every English composition teacher would mark disapprovingly with red ink. The first three verses speak of God in the third person: 'The Lord is my shepherd, … He leads me, He restores me, He guides me.' But the next two verses abandon the third person and address God directly in the second person: 'For Thou art with me, Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me… Thou hast anointed my head with oil….' What is happening here? This is not a stylistic lapse; it conveys an important message.

A University community is good at speaking about God in the 3rd person. That is what the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Divinity does all the time, with high intellectual standards. But as we come to the 4th verse of this Psalm—'When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death'—all our competence and expertise in whatever work we do falls by the wayside. Each of us must decide whether we can say with the Psalmist, 'I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.' Here we have left the realm of philosophy and theology, and entered the realm of intense, immediate, individual relationship with the Ultimate. In this regard every one of us who was standing at the cemetery on Wednesday, and every one of us sitting here today—the most distinguished professors of the University and those who may never have completed secondary school education—is on the same footing. Mortal human beings, we tremble in the presence of unexpected death, poignantly yearning to find reassurance in words, *ki atah imadi*, 'for Thou art with me.'

I find it quite striking that Joseph, whose story we began reading today, never seems to make that shift to a direct personal relationship with God. Indeed it has been frequently noted that God as an active character disappears in the final one-fourth of the Book of Genesis, containing the Joseph story. In the opening chapters, God is described as doing everything—creating the world with all its fullness, giving direct instructions to the birds and fish and animals and human beings, making all

the decisions that need to be made. So close is He that the first two human beings heard the sound of God moving in the Garden of Eden, and enter into direct conversation with Him. He remains accessible to interaction and conversation with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.

The Joseph story is fundamentally different. Unlike Adam and Cain and Noah and the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, in this narrative, Joseph is never addressed by God. Joseph refers to God in the 3rd person on a few crucial occasions—

- 'How could I do this wicked thing and sin before God?' he says to Potiphar's wife (39:9);
- 'God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do' he says when confronted with Pharaoh's dreams (41:25, cf. 16; 40:8),
- 'It was not you who sent me here, but God' (45:8), he says to his brothers.

But It is all in the 3rd person, like the first part of the 23rd Psalm, with no direct encounter. The impression given by the narrative is that Joseph knows the correct, pious things to say, but that he is the first major character in the Bible does not hear the divine voice. In other words, the first major character of the Bible whose life is, religiously, like most of ours.

And this points to a major challenge in interpreting the Joseph story. In many ways, it is like a secular novella. Although the narrator asserts God's responsibility for developments behind the scenes, the reality is that people make decisions and act in certain ways and are forced to confront with the consequences of their actions without any direct interference from God. In this narrative, the Creator of the world seems to allow people to do their own thing without intervening, without becoming directly involved. Yet on the macro-level, this narrative, spread over four *parashiyot*, serves a major purpose: to explain how the children of Israel come down into Egypt. The descent into Egypt is absolutely central to the central narrative of the Torah – without Joseph's being sold into slavery by his brothers, there is no Egyptian enslavement, no Moses the redeemer, no Exodus, no Revelation at Sinai. All is connected with the events described in our parashah this morning.

Are these events, as they appear to be, the result of individual idiosyncracies—

- Jacob's favouring of the child of his old age,
- Joseph's immature insensitivity in insisting on disclosing his dreams,
- the brother's resentment and the rashness of their actions,
- Joseph's good looks and the infatuation of Potiphar's wife?

Each one of these seems as if it could easily have been different, with serious consequences for the entire story. Is the beginning of the history of the children of Israel the result of chance, fortuitous events, the randomness of quirky human decisions and character flaws, that build together into massive consequences? Or is there an invisible plan behind the human foibles, a master author who has written a script unknown to the actors, a puppeteer manipulating the individuals who erroneously think they are free agents?

That is the impression given by Joseph when he tells his brothers that they should not blame themselves for what they did in the past when they sold him into slavery, because the results were part of the divine plan: 'So now it was not you that sent me here, but God' (45:8). And later, 'You intended me harm, but God intended it for good' (50:20). Was God really behind these events? What is God's role in history, and in the events of our own lives? What is the role of chance?

Back in 1969, when I was a graduate student at the Hebrew University, I sat in on a course for Overseas Students taught in Hebrew by the master teacher of Tanach, Nehama Leibowitz, in which she raised this issue in a beautiful way. She focused on a single passage in the narrative. The older brothers, resentful at Jacob's pampering treatment of the young Joseph, and of Joseph's rather pretentious dreams, go off to pasture their father's flocks in the vicinity of Shechem (modern Nablus). Jacob sends Joseph off to find them and report back to him on their welfare and the welfare of the flocks. Now the verses that Leibowitz highlighted:

> When [Joseph] reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?' He answered, 'I am looking for my brothers. Please tell me where they are pasturing.' The man said, 'They have gone from here, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.'

We know the rest. He comes upon his brothers, they conspire to kill him, he

ends up sold into slavery and taken down to Egypt. Presumably, if he had not come across this man, and not been given this crucial piece of information, he would have looked around for a while, then decided to return home and report to his father, 'I went to Shechem, but they were not there, and there was no one around to ask.' And then, perhaps, the entire story might have been different.

Who was this 'mystery man'? The Bible gives us no hint of his identity. The 12th-century Spanish rationalist commentator Abraham ibn Ezra wrote, 'According to the plain sense, that man was one of the wayfarers', an ordinary human being, traveling for a purpose that is not disclosed to us; he happened to be passing by at the crucial moment and happened to overhear the brothers and happened to meet up with Joseph and engage him in conversation. Ibn Ezra implies that the entire subsequent narrative, according to the simple meaning, was the result of chance.

The thirteenth-century Spanish mystical commentator Ramban, inserts a critical detail into this comment that radically changes the meaning: "God appointed an unwitting guide in order to direct Joseph into their hands." In this reading, the mystery man was still a human being, but his encounter with Joseph was not by chance: it was part of the divine plan to set into motion events that would ultimately have such enormous consequences. In Ramban's world-view, things do not happen randomly, by chance. They all reveal a divine purpose.

The fact that two great medieval commentators differ on what appears to be a minor detail but actually has enormous significance indicates that both positions have Jewish legitimacy—for an understanding of the Biblical narrative, and for the experience of our world as well. One position holds that history reveals the providential purpose of a divine author in sovereign control of events, reflecting standards of divine justice in a manner that may not be apparent to those who live through them but become clear in the larger perspective. The other holds that there a contingent factor in the great events of history; that they could have been different if certain human beings had made different decisions at critical moments, or if luck had simply been better.

And the tragedies that occur in human life? Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote what turned into a mega-best seller called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* in response to the experience of his son Aaron, who was

born with a rare, genetic, progressively debilitating disease called 'progeria', which causes rapid premature aging. Aaron died of the symptoms of old age when he was 14 years old. Kushner recognized that there are many who believe that even this kind of excruciating ordeal serves God's purpose, whether as a punishment, or as a test, or as an inscrutable cause of greater good. But he wrote that he simply could not believe that God selected one mutant sperm cell out of tens of thousands of cells to fertilize the egg that would cause the affliction of his son's disease. Kushner insisted that there is randomness in the world, bad things that happen for no reason or purpose, that do not in their specificity reflect the will of an all-powerful, all-knowing agent. That is why the title of his book is not '*Why* Bad Things Happen' but '*When* Bad Things Happen to Good People.'

And when a beloved, multi-talented man, a gifted teacher and a brilliant philosopher, active, energetic, not overweight, a man who had so much still to give to his family and friends and students and colleagues, suddenly dies without preparation or warning? Again, there are many who will say *Barukh Dayan ha-Emet*, 'Blessed is the Judge of Truth,' not just as a sign of continuity with an age-old tradition but as an expression of belief. There must be a reason, that God only knows.

Last Monday night, I mentioned Peter's death to a thoughtful Muslim I know. He is by no means a fundamentalist or an extremist; indeed he seems like a model of acculturated moderation. His response: 'There are some people who are just too good for this world; God wants them to be with him.' To which I could not resist responding, 'If you say that to children, there is a danger that they might conclude that it's better for them not to be very good.'

It is not my purpose this morning to challenge the beliefs of those who are intellectually convinced and emotionally comforted by a God who controls human affairs, who is the sovereign master of historical events, and whose decision and judgment is reflected in the life or death of every human being. There is certainly basis in classical Jewish texts for such a theology, and it is abundantly evident in our liturgy. But there is also legitimate space in the Jewish tradition for alternative views.

My own academic discipline is history, not theology, and I generally avoid discussing personal theology in public. But I will not avoid it on this occasion, with this congregation. I do not believe in a God who manages the

details of our lives, who inscribes us for life or death each year on the Days of Awe. I believe that God's will is expressed through the natural order explained by science: if someone carelessly steps in front of an oncoming bus, no miraculous intervention will save him no matter how good he is. And there is an element of contingency, randomness, chance in the world: the mystery man whom Joseph met and directed him to his brothers may have been a chance passerby; the death of a young and good person may sometimes occur because of a random set of circumstances producing a tragic result that does not reflect God's will.

Can we then say as did the Psalmist, "For thou art with us?" Where can we sense the presence of God in the tragedy we experienced this week? I believe we could sense God's presence

- In the outpouring of a community, indeed of many communities, that came together not only to express profound grief but to reorient its values in a more profound perspective;
- In the tearful embraces, of which we all saw so many on Wednesday, indicating not that a friend or colleague had anything useful to say, but simply that they were there, and hurting as well;
- In the looks of pain and bewilderment on the faces of those standing at the cemetery and then participating, one by one, in the mitzvah of burial;
- In the unexpected inner strength that enables us to survive, to transcend, and eventually to continue flourishing when our world has come crashing down around us.

Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death:

- when we lose someone we love deeply,
- when we confront the brutal realities of life's finiteness and fragility;
- when we face the truth of our own mortality;

let us fear no evil. Ki *atah* imadi, For *thou* art with me. Our loved ones remain with us even when they are physically removed; through their continued presence, and through the extended arms of others, we feel the presence of a greater, ultimate Thou. Let us fear no evil, for we are not alone.

[*] This sermon was delivered on the Shabbat following the death and funeral for Professor Peter Lipton, one of the co-chairmen of the Beth Shalom Reform Congregation of Cambridge. On the same morning *The Guardian* carried an article about Professor Ronald Levinsky, a pioneer of bone marrow transplants and the vice-chancellor of Plymouth University, who was instantaneously electricuted on New Year's Day 2007 while walking along a footpath with his wife, when his head brushed against a concealed, live 11,000-volt cable that had fallen in severe winds the previous day (*The Guardian*, December 1, 2007, p. 19). It is hard to think of a more compelling example of randomness.