



Parshat Shoftim
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Do We Believe in a God Who Punishes Us for Our Sins?
A Question for the Elul of Covid-19
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I am about to violate three cardinal rules of giving sermons. One: Don't talk about sin. That's too old-school. Two: Don't talk about punishment. That's too draconian. Three: Don't talk about God. That goes whoosh, over peoples' heads. Too many folks are not God people.

So in view of those three cardinal rules, here is my question: *Do you believe in a God who punishes you for your sins?*

Why bring up this heavy topic now, on a late August summer weekend? Two reasons.

First, the notion that God punishes us for our sins is not only reaffirmed many times in the Torah, but it is the main point in the Book of Deuteronomy that we are now in the middle of. Micah Goodman observes that Moses' long speeches in Deuteronomy come down to a single point: If the Israelites follow the laws of the Torah, they will be rewarded by being able to stay in Israel. But if they sin by violating the laws of the Torah, they will be kicked out. The language of Tisha B'av liturgy captures Moses's point: *mipnei chataeinu galinu m'artzeinu*, it is because of our sins that we were exiled from our land.

But this notion of God who punishes us for our sins is not only in the Torah portions we are reading now, but also in the calendar that we are living now. It is Elul, the month before the High Holidays.

How many times on the day of judgment, *yom hadin*, do we beat our breast and confess *al cheit shechatanu lefanecha*, for the sin we have committed against you by doing various offenses. This connection between sin and punishment is not only in the High Holiday liturgy but

in our daily prayers. The second paragraph of the shema says that if we follow God's laws, we get good weather and abundant produce, and if we sin, we get bad weather and famine.

So there is an idea in Judaism—that God punishes us for our sins—that is foundational. But here is the problem. The idea is not only demonstrably false. It is worse than false. The pandemic that we are in the middle of has revealed that this core idea of Judaism is offensive. There is so much suffering in our world. Any attempt to connect that suffering to God punishing us for our sins evokes the teaching of Neil Gillman that some biblical teachings are in his words a “broken myth.” It is not true. It does not and cannot explain the world around us.

Would we say that the people who died from Covid sinned, and that God punished them? That would be deeply offensive. A broken myth.

Would we say that the millions of Americans who lost their jobs, who are food-insecure, who are at risk of getting evicted, who wait in lines for hours for a bag of groceries, sinned, and that God punished them? That would be deeply offensive. A broken myth.

But here is the good news. We are not the first to reject the notion that God punishes us for our sins. The rabbinic tradition long ago offered a helpful alternative. In the tractate Avodah Zarah, 54B, the Talmud teaches that God does not come down to earth and whack you if you sin. If you don't keep kosher, or if you don't observe Shabbat, God does not single you out for some punishment because of your ritual infractions.

Rather, God creates a world where actions have consequences. When you make choices, those choices have consequences, and you live with them. When a society makes choices, those choices have consequences, and it lives with them. God does not interfere with the natural consequences of the choices we make.

The language of this passage is *olam k'minhago noheig*, the world goes according to its natural course. The Talmud offers the example of somebody who steals wheat and plants it in the ground. Since it is stolen wheat, we might wish that it would not grow so that the person who commits an immoral act not benefit from it. But *olam k'minhago noheig*, the world goes according to its natural course. That wheat will grow, and the person who stole it will have to render an account. Just this week I heard an NPR segment about a police officer who ran a fund with his colleagues' retirement and pension monies. This officer had a gambling problem. He embezzled the fund to pay off his gambling debts. God did not stop him. But the world goes according to its natural course. His offense was discovered. He was prosecuted. He was found guilty. He has to repay the money plus interest. He will lose his job. He is publicly shamed. Actions have consequences.

Individually and collectively, our unwise decisions have hard consequences. This teaching from the Talmud *can* help us make sense of the pain and pathos of our world.

Everything is politicized. Face masks are politicized. Anthony Fauci is politicized. Science itself is politicized. Actions have consequences. When that happens, the virus spreads.

We have deep structural inequalities in education, in health care, in economic resources and opportunities. How many stories have we all heard of families who crowd into small apartments because they have no choice, and they have no space, and they don't have the option of working from home, and the bread winners go out to earn a living, they get the virus, they bring it home to their small quarters, and the virus spreads.

But here is the good news. If the world goes according to its natural order, each of us has the power to change that world for the better. We see examples of that here every day. When the pandemic started, younger members volunteered to reach out to our senior members, to check

in on them, to see if there were practical ways we could help: Can we get you groceries, prescriptions, cleaning supplies? A volunteer named Ellen reached out to a woman named Lillian who was 92 to be helpful in these practical ways.

But soon the relationship deepened. They had real conversations about life, family, what it was like to live in a pandemic. The deep pride she had in her children and four remarkable granddaughters and their families. The special joy she got from her great grandchildren. The deep exaltation she felt when all four granddaughters were finally able to see her in person. She could finally hug them. They could finally hug her. These two women talked regularly. What began as a volunteer assignment grew into a real and caring relationship. What began as logistics support grew into love.

When Lillian passed away, Ellen joined the Zoom shiva call. Now Ellen did not know Lillian's children or grandchildren. She knew *of* them. Ellen joined the Zoom call and said: I don't know you, but I got to know your mother and grandmother these last six months, and I am here tonight for one reason: to tell you that she really loved you, and she told me so every time I talked to her. Strangers to one another until that Zoom call, the volunteer was able to give the daughter and granddaughters the gift of deep consolation. A connection between members of our community who had never known one another was forged in a furnace, and that connection now will only grow.

God does *not* punish us for our sins. We will just have to reinterpret all those passages in the Torah, in the siddur, and in the machzor. But God *does* create a world that goes according to its own natural course. Actions have consequences. The choices we make, for good and for bad, have dramatic consequences for our world and the people in it.

In a world that has too much suffering all around us, what choices will you make to add grace, generosity, and love? Shabbat shalom.