

Dear Chavraya,

As a young husband eager to be a father, a miscarriage shattered what seemed to be such a natural unfolding toward the dream. It was a rude reminder that life doesn't always take the course we would chart in the garden of a bright summer's day. Soon after the miscarriage, a well-meaning rabbi called to offer comfort and proceeded to do so with the words, "it is God's will." I don't know if I gasped first, or hung up the phone first. A young man seeking to know God, to come close, I felt pushed away. These were not words of comfort to me, but of pain intensified. I do not see God as the source of my troubles. In times of distress, as I hope in times of joy, I turn to God for comfort and warmth, for encouragement. I am drawn to the image the rabbis offered of a God Who cries, Who sheds two great tears into the sea each night for our suffering. I believe that there is an overarching Divine plan that is the intricate web of creation. So grand and so frail are we human beings amidst the gossamer strands. Pain and suffering, along with joy and gladness nevertheless, are part of the human condition. While the full range of our creaturely experience is part of God's design, I do not believe that God brings to our doorstep the unique trials and tribulations that touch each of us in the course of our lives.

There are far more egregious examples than a long ago rabbi's effort to console that seek to attach tragedy to God's will. A few years ago, when a bus carrying a group of Israeli school children was hit by a train, there were rabbis who responded to national grief with straightforward explanations. It was God's will, but they took their obscenity further, suggesting punishment for such things as mezuzot not being kosher and other such presumed infractions. Before the enormity of the Holocaust, there have those who dare suggest that a loss of one third of our people was due to their and our sins.

The effort to explain tragedy in the context of God's will is called *tziduk ha'din*/justification of the decree. It can be an extremely problematic area of Jewish theology. There are times when it can be affirming and encouraging, and times when it can be destructive and debilitating. There is an instance of *tziduk ha'din* in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Sh'mini. Aaron's two eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, have been struck dead while ministering at the altar for bringing strange fire before God. It is not clear exactly what has happened or why. Moses turns to the stunned, grief-stricken father, his brother, and says, "This is what God spoke, saying: 'I will be sanctified by those near to Me and thus I will be honored by all the people.'" The Torah then says very simply and starkly, *vayidom Aharon*/and Aaron was silent. In response to Moses' effort to explain, there is nobility in Aaron's silence.

No reason or explanation can assuage Aaron's raw grief in that moment. Like the rabbi who called me in a sad time long ago, it appears to be Moses' need to speak, however well-meaning, and not God's. The

words that Moses attributes to God do not appear as said by God anywhere else in the Torah. Speaking to the dynamics that unfold between Moses and Aaron in the face of tragedy, the French Jewish philosopher, Andre Neher, writes in "The Exile of the Word:" "Aaron would be less disturbed in his human reactions by the mystery of death than by the interpretations which people strive to give to it... The silence of God in the event is less painful than God's silence in the interpretation, and that people can accept that God keeps silent but not that other people should speak in God's place."

Moses rises in the end to hear the wisdom borne of his brother's pain. When Aaron finally speaks from out of his silence, we are told, *vayishma Moshe vayitav b'eynav*/and Moses heard and it was right in his eyes. In Aaron's silence and in his words, there is neither justification nor rejection of God, but a fuller, more realistic embrace of life than in Moses' greater need to explain and attribute purpose to tragedy. There is *tziduk hadin* that is destructive in its inevitable separation of people and God, and there is *tziduk hadin* that is positive in its affirmation of life beyond sorrow. Upon hearing of a death, we say traditionally *baruch dayan ha'emet*/blessed is the Judge of truth. Rather than hearing these words as somehow justifying the death of one beloved to me, God forbid, I understand these words as an affirmation that truth still inheres in the world around me, that there is still beauty and meaning, even if it feels beyond my grasp in the moment. Similarly, in a lengthy prayer called *Tziduk HaDin* that is chanted as earth is being placed into the grave, we say, "You are just, God, in causing death and in giving life to the dead.... Far be it from You to blot out our remembrance.... The soul of all life is in Your hand. Your might is filled with justice. Have mercy on the remnant of Your flock and say to the destroying angel, 'stay your hand!'"

These words that are said at the cemetery are not words of justification in the face of death, but however fraught with our own inner tensions, they are an affirmation that death is part of life. This is a teaching that I learned most deeply from my mother, Sarah Chavah bas Yosef v'Rivkah, whose blessed memory I honor today on her seventeenth *yahrzeit*.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor