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Second Naïveté

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Our world is surely the best of all possible worlds. Things cannot be otherwise than they are, for since everything is made to serve an end, everything necessarily serves the best end. Since this is the best of all worlds, no suffering is without just cause or does not serve a higher purpose.

When the young Candide in Voltaire’s radical novel learns these maxims from his childhood teacher Pangloss, the metaphisico-theologico-cosmologi-nologist, he exists in a sheltered environment, completely unknowledgeable of the world outside his castle’s walls. He lives a life of wealth and plenty, so for him how could life be anything other than ideal? However, Candide’s bubble of innocence is soon burst, as he is exiled from his childhood Eden, and he must face the inhospitable world of eighteenth century Europe on his own. His experiences with crushing poverty, dehumanizing exploitation, and disastrously corrupt clergy lead him to abandon his naïveté. He thus discovers that the world is not actually as it should be.

While Candide is a satire meant to provoke and agitate, its portrayal of the loss of innocence and the development of a jaded, disillusioned outlook on life is something that is quite universal. As we grow up, our childlike beliefs are one by one dispelled. We discover our parents are not perfect people, and we find institutions in our government often spurn progress and justice in favor of the status quo. Perhaps most heartbreaking is when we discover that forces beyond our control can prevent even our best efforts in our professional and personal lives from becoming successful. When our naïveté is proven to be just that, we, like Candide, can fall into a place of disillusionment.

Now disenchantment is a very natural emotion. After all, we do not want to live in a fantasy world, ignoring what’s real and what we experience. However, cynicism can also pose a danger, because it can lock us in seeing only what is, and not what could be.

In this week’s *parshah Eikev*, we are faced with these same struggles of when naïveté meets reality. In its narrative, Moses is nearing the end of his last address to the Israelites, and he describes the Covenant that they are entering into with God. It is here that we find the second paragraph of the *Sh’ma*, commonly called *V’haya Im Shamoa*, which is recited in traditional synagogues after the *V’ahavta*. The Torah reads: “And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love Adonai, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and your soul, I will give the rain of your land at its time…and I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be sated. Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods…the wrath of Adonai will be kindled against you…and there will be no rain…and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that Adonai gives you.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The theology we find here is fairly straightforward—it is the belief in reward and punishment. If you observe the commandments and do as God instructs, then God will reward you with prosperity. However, if you stray from God’s word, then God will punish you. The Torah cites rain and the connection to the land as a means of conveying that observing the commandments and fulfilling our part of the Covenant is not trivial: it is an existential matter of life and death.

*V’haya Im Shamoa* is just one example of an overarching theme within Deuteronomy of retributive theology. *Parashat Nitzavim*, the renewal of the Covenant that we read on Yom Kippur, repeats this theology, explicitly telling us that life and death stand before us, urging us to observe the commandments, and thereby choosing life.[[2]](#footnote-2) This straightforward belief began a long tradition of justifying Jewish suffering as the rightful retribution for immorality. The Talmud teaches us that we lost the First Temple because of idol worship, bloodshed, and adultery. And even though these practices ended during the Second Temple era, the same text explains the Roman conquest of the Second Temple by saying that *sin’at chinam*, baseless hatred between brothers, earned the Jews their second exile.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many ultra-Orthodox Jews even attempt to place the Holocaust within the context of retributive theology by saying that the death of 6 million Jews resulted from Jewish attempts to assimilate into European society.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This retributive theology found in Deuteronomy pushes our buttons as Reform Jews. In fact, *V’haya Im Shamoa* is so problematic to us that we have utterly struck it out of our prayer books. If you search through *Mishkan T’fillah*, you will not find the second paragraph of *Sh’ma* anywhere. Why is this the case? If we believe in an all-powerful, beneficent God, wouldn’t it make sense that He would mete out reward and punishment according to our merit, to encourage righteous behavior?

There are two problems I see with retributive theology. The first is that it simply does not stand up to the muster of history or many of our personal experiences. The Jews have suffered at the hands of the powerful, from the Babylonians to the Romans to the to the Spanish to every other nation in Europe. They have been persecuted under the rule of pagans, Christians, and Muslims alike. They experienced exile, forced evacuation, pogrom, economic isolation, scorn, and Holocaust. All of this because of the simple question of our Jewish identity. This suffering is not and has never been retribution from God, or part of a larger plan. Quite the contrary: the suffering of the oppressed is an affront to God, diminishing His presence in the world.

In our own lives, we know that bad things happen to good people every day. Cancer or car accidents that maim and kill people do not happen for a reason. Though people who suffer often can contextualize their plight within a framework of meaning, we cannot trivialize their suffering by saying it was part of a bigger plan. And anyone who has experienced the hell of losing a child will tell you that finding meaning in that is utterly impossible.

The second reason we struggle with retributive theology is the catastrophic implications such a belief would entail. Theologian Dorothee Solle explains that retributive theology is Judeo-Christian masochism, for it implies that God is on the side of the oppressors and not the oppressed.[[5]](#footnote-5) To say that suffering is meted out by God according to a person’s merit is to say that the Nazis were carrying out God’s will at Auschwitz, that God intended the Twin Towers to fall and kill thousands of people on September 11, 2001, and that Adam Lanza was supposed to kill all those innocent children and teachers at Sandy Hook elementary. To associate God with these catastrophes transforms God into something unrecognizable: cruel, uncaring, and arbitrary. We see then that retributive theology is an utterly unstable belief with a foundation in naïveté. Like Candide’s juvenile philosophy, it is a pie in the sky with little basis in reality.

It is very understandable to feel cynical about the Bible. When we experience undeserved hardship or fail to find a loving God in our lives, it can be so easy to dismiss much of our Torah. However, the question remains if perhaps we can transcend our disillusionment, and find something more powerful underneath the plain text. I strongly believe that we must find a way to relate to our ancient tradition and our Torah that is intellectually honest yet engages our hearts in these sacred words. And the way I see to accomplish this is through approaching our tradition with a second naïveté. What does this mean? If the first naïveté is the wistful belief detached from reality, the second naïveté is firmly grounded in reality.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur explains that in the second naïveté, scripture and religious concepts are seen as symbols. For example, in the first naïveté, we would accept the story of the Garden of Eden as an historical fact recorded in the Bible. Having discovered the lack of archaeological evidence for this event, we would then go through a rational phase in which we distance ourselves from the story, seeing it as a falsehood or pseudo-history. But when we arrive at the stage of the second naïveté, we still possess the rationality to not accept our Bible as fact, but we then begin to reengage the stories and concepts on a different level. Instead of accepting these stories at face value, we internalize them and interpret them for ourselves, seeing their symbolic value as far greater than their literal value could ever be.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the case of Adam and Eve in Eden, we could view the story not as historical fact, but as a metaphorical exploration into the process of growing up and losing innocence, or a story of the discovery of human free will, or the description of an untainted soul becoming affected by human culture. Second naïveté allows us to see that while the stories of the Bible might not constitute factual history, they are the stories of the universal human experience that happen over and over again.

What then might a second naïveté of our Torah portion and the retributive theology in it look like? While the theology of reward and punishment might not help us understand our world and our God, we can learn a great deal from the underlying assumptions behind it. When we say that God metes out reward and punishment according to our actions, what we are really saying is that God cares about us and what we do. Our tradition teaches that God deeply loves us, and when we hurt ourselves or each other, it causes God pain. We acknowledge this love in the prayers *Ahavat Olam* and *Ahavah Rabah* that teach us that God’s love can be seen in the Torah and the *mitzvot*. God is not apathetic towards His people, for He gave them laws and commandments to help them live meaningful lives.

What this tells us is that our lives and our actions are significant. While it can be easy when we reflect on our tininess within the vastness of the universe to say that what we do has no effect on the entirety of creation, when we say that we are in relationship with God, that tininess does not matter. Furthermore, we know that the actions of a single person can have enormous consequences on the entire universe. After all, all it took was one man from Austria with a hateful, anti-Semitic vision of German supremacy to bring the word “genocide” into existence. Conversely, a single person, Irena Sendler, managed to sneak 2,500 Jewish babies out of the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust and save their lives. We see then that just as our actions have the power to blot out the presence of God from the world, so do they have the power to invite God back in.

The other important assumption behind retributive theology is that we are ultimately empowered to choose the path we want in our lives. If the Torah teaches that we can earn God’s scorn by closing ourselves off to others and to God, then the converse has to be true: that we have the power to change our course and earn full forgiveness for our transgressions. A Midrash says that even though Adam was sentenced to death for eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God exonerated him once he confessed his crime.[[7]](#footnote-7) This teaches that when we approach those we have wronged with honest remorse and fully consign ourselves to not recommitting a wrong, we are empowered to receive atonement. Therefore, we cannot wallow in self-pity, hold fast to stubbornness, or claim that we are not responsible for our actions because of genetic predisposition. We are fully responsible for our actions, and we have the power to change our lives by unlearning negative habits and committing ourselves to not making the same mistakes over and over again. These insights cannot be derived from the plain text of our Torah, but they come forth when we take a look beneath the surface.

Our world is not the best of all possible worlds. It is not hard to see that millions of people are oppressed by corrupt dictatorships and that fully a half of the planet lives in poverty. Disease and human suffering are arbitrary, not systematically dealt out according to a person’s merit. It is also rather difficult to accept the Bible as the literal word of God for its archaic worldview, pseudo-history and transparent political bias. But we cannot allow disillusionment to define our relationship to the world and to our tradition. Yes, the world is not ideal, but that does not mean it can’t be better. Our Bible can seem unrelatable and its theology Medieval, but it is essential that we find the creativity within ourselves to see poetry, wisdom and a shared set of values that we can use to form the basis of our lives and a framework for redeeming our broken world within our tradition. For when we are able to transcend the binary of true and false, we can discover universal Truth. And isn’t that just sublime?

1. Deut. 11:13-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Deut. 28-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yoma 9b. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kershner, Isabel. “Israeli Protest’s Invocation of Holocaust Is Condemned,” The New York Times, 1/1/12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Solle, Dorothee. Suffering. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana [↑](#footnote-ref-7)