

SESSION THREE



uffering and Sacrifice: The Story of Job

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was whole-hearted and upright, and one that feared God, and shunned evil. (Job 1:1)

The land of Uz is a faraway, perhaps make-believe, land. What happens there is fantasy. Or hyper-reality. What follows is not logical but somehow echoes what we experience to be true.

Job, an exceptionally righteous man, is made to suffer severely. He never learns why he suffers and, while the divine being is as real to him as his own, he experiences complete isolation. He demands an explanation from God, but his voice grows hoarse from shouting and eventually he meets God's silence with his own. We know that the reason he suffers is a wager made between God and Satan, who has been allowed to toy with Job. Yet this reason seems arbitrary, if not downright sadistic.

The paradoxes in this book confound any explanation. Beyond the silence, God speaks to Job. Out of the whirlwind, there is a final revelation, but it is a resolution without a resolution. We still do not know why Job suffers. But Job is satisfied, or humbled, or at peace, or—as Elie Wiesel suggests—dissembling.

Who better to interpret Job than Elie Wiesel? Wiesel calls Job “our contemporary,” and he himself has often been identified as “the modern Job.” He observes in the video that “Throughout his dialogues with his friends one has the impression that [Job] is not talking to them; he is talking to God through them, and I understand that.” Similarly, Wiesel

Was it a game? We don't want to believe that. . . . Judaism teaches us that God does not play games. There must have been a reason. What could it have been? (Video)

And the Lord said unto Satan: "Whence comest thou?" Then Satan answered the Lord, and said: "From going to and fro in the earth, from walking up and down in it." And the Lord said unto Satan: "Hast thou considered My servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a whole-hearted and an upright man, one that feareth God, and shunneth evil?" (Job 1: 7-8)

is not simply talking to us about a text; he is talking to God through the text, a text that he has become one with. "All the questions [Job] asks," Wiesel comments, "are the very same [ones] we ask and, like him, we are still waiting for answers."

The Book

The Book of Job has long been considered one of the great classics in Western literature. It ranks in stature with Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Shakespeare's great tragedies. Francis Bacon found it "pregnant and swelling with natural philosophy." Thomas Carlyle considered it "one of the grandest things ever written." Daniel Webster described it as "the most wonderful poem of any age and language." And Thomas Wolfe claimed it to be "the most tragic, sublime and beautiful expression of loneliness" that he had ever read.

Details surrounding the Book of Job are as mysterious as the voice from the whirlwind. The author is unknown, although it is generally accepted that he was a Hebrew because, among other reasons, his command of the Hebrew language was so impressive. According to the late biblical scholar H.L. Ginsberg, the book as we know it probably dates from as far back as the late sixth century B.C.E., shortly after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the first exile, known as the Babylonian Captivity. The book seems to have been grafted together from earlier compositions referred to by scholars as "Job the Patient" and "Job the Impatient," each of which had its own history.

A Job is mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel as one of the righteous men of the past (14:14). His name is associated by the rabbis with figures in different centuries, living in different places, from Abraham, Esau, and Moses, to Samson, Solomon, and Ahasuerus. In talmudic-midrashic literature, Job is considered a pious gentile. Some rabbis held that "Job never was and never existed, but is only a parable" (*Baba Batra 15a*). Others claimed that Job did exist but that his sufferings were sheer literary invention. In his book

So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spoke a word unto him; for they saw that his grief was very great. (Job 2:13)

*"Let the day perish wherein I was born,
And the night wherein it was said:
'A man-child is brought forth.'
Let that day be darkness;
Let not God inquire after it from above,
Neither let the light shine upon it."
(Job 3:3-4)*

*"Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends;
For the hand of God hath touched me." (Job 19:21)*

*"Oh that I had one to hear me!—
Lo, here is my signature, let the Almighty answer me—
And that I had the indictment which mine adversary hath written!" (Job 31:35)*

Messengers of God, Elie Wiesel refers to those who make the strange claim that while Job never existed, his sufferings are undeniable.

The heart of the book is framed by a prose prologue and epilogue in which a folktale quality is maintained. In two very short chapters, God wagers with Satan, and catastrophes befall Job with shocking rapidity. Here, Job's wife tells him to "curse God and die," and he doesn't. Here, for seven days Job sits in silence, apparently patiently, with his three friends Eliphaz, the Temanite; Bildad, the Shuhite; and Zophar, the Naamathite.

The folktale comes to an end with an abrupt change: Job's first lament, a curse of the day he was born. The simple prose of the prologue is replaced by some of the most exquisite poetry in the Hebrew language. Instead of the distance of narrative, we get the intimacy of speech. We are, for all practical purposes, in Job's festering skin. And, along with this immediacy, something is shattered. In the dialogue that comprises the core of the book (chapters 3 to 42:6), Job is no longer a submissive, saintly sufferer. He rails against the injustice rampant in the affairs of the world, against the reign of evil, against the Creator who refuses to answer His creature's outrage.

In three cycles of dialogue (plus the addition of one speech by Elihu, who appears inexplicably and is thought by H.L. Ginsberg to have been added later), Job's friends affirm the conventional doctrine of divine justice: God rewards the just and punishes the wicked. By deduction, they are convinced of Job's sinfulness; he suffers because he is wicked. What they know to be true of Job no longer matters; they would rather malign a friend than doubt their own dogma.

Isolated rather than consoled by his false comforters, Job turns from human discourse to address God directly. Bearing witness to the injustice in the world and his own integrity, he demands an audience with God.

God reveals himself to Job in two power-filled speeches that juxtapose the marvelous order of the universe God has created with human insignificance. Job's worth is so inconsequential that one wonders why this transcendent being bothers to inform him, why there is revelation at all.

*Then the Lord answered Job out of
the whirlwind and said:
"Who is this that darkeneth
counsel
By words without knowledge?
Gird up now thy loins like a man;
For I will demand of thee, and
declare thou unto Me."
(Job 38:1-3)*

*So the Lord blessed the latter end of
Job more than the beginning; and
he had fourteen thousand sheep,
and six thousand camels, and a
thousand yoke of oxen, and a
thousand she-asses. He had also
seven sons and three daughters. . .
And in all the land were no
women found so fair as the
daughters of Job. . . . So Job died,
being old and full of days.
(Job 42:12-17)*

The fact of the revelation stands in counterpoint to its message. In places sarcastic, and intimidating throughout, God's revelation is neither compassionate nor responsive to Job's demand for an account. But somehow Job's outrage subsides. "I am of small account; what shall I answer Thee? I lay my hand upon my mouth," Job says after the first speech (Job 40:4). And, after God scoffs at Job's request for an audience, Job retreats further: "Wherefore I abhor my words and repent, Seeing I am dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

What satisfies Job in this revelation remains a mystery, perhaps *the* mystery. One thing is clear: the sycophantic declarations of Job's comforters are disturbing even to the God they are meant to extol. In the prose epilogue that follows, God promises to forgive them only because Job will pray for them. Job has, in God's words, "spoken of Me the thing that is right" (Job 42:8). After offering a criticism of the theology of Job's friends and upholding the integrity of Job's words, the epilogue resumes the thread of the folktale. Job's former fortunes are now splendidly replenished by God.

And they lived happily ever after!

Interpreting the Book

In premodern periods, when belief in a benevolent, providential deity was strong, the folktale frame offered an escape route from a more direct confrontation with the whole text. By concentrating on the story of the patient, saintly Job, the reader could absorb the shock of the drama of the impatient, rebellious hero. In this way, early Jewish sources presented Job as a man of perfect, unquestioning faith. The Christian church maintained the ideal of a saintly Job. And Islamic sources extolled him as the pious and righteous servant of Allah. Even when Job's outbursts and alienation were not ignored, exegetical skill reduced the measure of his impetuosity and hostility. His protests turned into an affirmation of faith, albeit an imperfect faith.

Despite its origins in antiquity, this radically unorthodox book seems to us to exhibit a modern sensibility, one in which theology has lost its all-embracing grip. We, today, seem like Job, who rested authority in his own experience.

*"I was at ease, and He broke me
 asunder;
 Yea, He hath taken me by the neck
 and dashed me to pieces;
 He hath also set me up for His
 mark.
 His archers compass me round
 about,
 He cleaveth my reins asunder, and
 doth not spare;
 He poureth out my gall upon the
 ground.
 He breaketh me with breach upon
 breach;
 He runneth upon me like a giant.
 I have sewed sackcloth upon my
 skin,
 And have laid my horn in the dust.
 My face is reddened with weeping,
 And on my eyelids is the shadow of
 death;
 Although there is no violence in my
 hands,
 And my prayer is pure."
 (Job 16:12-17)*

But herein lies another contradiction of the book. Job was also similar to the early commentators. He shared some of the beliefs of his thoughtless comforters. He believed in the ultimate goodness of an all-powerful God. He believed in divine justice—so much so that he envisioned a divine court where his case would be heard. Job turned to God for comfort even as he accused God of persecution.

Job's problem is the problem of theodicy: how evil can exist in the world in the face of God's goodness and omnipotence. Because God is all powerful, it would not have occurred to Job to blame Satan. No adversary could counter God's will. (In Jewish tradition, when Satan appears, he is often understood as an externalization of human inclinations, or simply a device to advance the plot. In the folktale, he signifies the evil that is in the world, but he has little power of his own. In fact, he needs permission from God to pursue Job.) Job knows very few things for certain. He knows his own righteousness. He knows that God is all powerful, good, and just. But he can't make sense of his experience and wants an accounting from God. Job wants to put God on trial, according to the laws of justice and righteousness that he understands to be divine. Where does Job's suffering come from? How does God abide by suffering of the righteous? These are Job's questions—and Wiesel's.

Questioning

Seeking an explanation of God's absence (or presence) during the Holocaust, a character in Elie Wiesel's novel *Gates of the Forest* says, "And I tell you this: if their death has no meaning, then it's an insult, and if it does have a meaning, it's even more so." Gregor, the character, is speaking to a rabbi in Brooklyn, but Wiesel, the writer, is addressing God.

Millions of God's children are slain. Why? God was silent during the Holocaust. Why? What possible explanation could be given? But that does not stop Wiesel from demanding an answer. Like Job, he trusts in God, in a God who is neither absent nor silent, who is not indifferent

*"Oh, that I knew where I might
 find Him,
 That I might come even to His
 seat!
 I would order my cause before
 Him,
 And fill my mouth with
 arguments.
 I would know the words which He
 would answer me,
 And understand what He would
 say unto me.
 Would He contend with me in His
 great power?
 Nay; but He would give heed unto
 me.
 There the upright might reason
 with Him;
 So should I be delivered for ever
 from my Judge.
 Behold, I go forward, but He is
 not there,
 And backward, but I cannot
 perceive Him;
 On the left hand, when He doth
 work, but I cannot behold
 Him,
 He turneth Himself to the right
 hand, but I cannot see Him.
 For He knoweth the way that I
 take;
 When He hath tried me, I shall
 come forth as gold.
 My foot hath held fast to His steps;
 His way have I kept, and turned
 not aside." (Job 23:3-11)*

*"Where wast thou when I laid the
 foundations of the earth?
 Declare, if thou hast the
 understanding."
 (Job 38:4-5)*

to human suffering. Human beings are not merely pieces in some divine game.

A "modern Job," Wiesel sits on a heap of ashes, his faith called into question. Perhaps it is better to say that while faith is still there, its content has gone up in smoke. What can he say about God? About suffering? All that he can do is keep questioning and continue looking for answers.

Wiesel suggests that Job's readiness to believe the messengers of catastrophe was indicative of his non-Jewish background—a reaction Wiesel contrasts with that of European Jews who refused to believe the messengers of catastrophe. Wiesel doesn't see this refusal as weakness or denial, a description that has cast blame on the victims and made their deaths ignoble. He sees in their refusal "a will to believe at all cost that man is good at heart." Jews, he tells us, "believe emphatically that life is sacred, that life is good."

Similarly, his empathy is rooted in his own memories of catastrophe. Wiesel is painfully aware of "Mrs. Job," who was lost in tragedy like so many millions of souls scorched by the flames of the European devastation. She is "invisible"; her story is never told. Wiesel understands the longing of Job, who needs God to be his witness, to comfort him, but who cannot abide flimsy offerings of human solace. And Wiesel knows that despite being a survivor, despite the fruits of Job's life that came afterwards, he "died when his children died, he died when his illusions died; he died when his faith was injured."

In trying to understand, as did the sages, why Job was made to suffer, Wiesel cites a midrashic explanation that Job was Pharaoh's advisor, who maintained neutrality while the Jewish people suffered. Wiesel states that he accepts this opinion "because I am also against this kind of neutrality and indifference." But his blaming of Job is momentary. Wiesel sees, just as Job sees, that the innocent suffer, and he cannot explain why.

God's revelation out of the whirlwind was not an explanation, and Wiesel overrides God's question to Job with one of his own. It is not a matter of where Job was when God created the world. We know that answer. Elie Wiesel wants to know where God was when Job was suffering. Seeking answers, he finds none. In the end, it is

the questions, the demand for meaning and explanation, that animate Wiesel. His very questions constitute his faith. It is this consolation that both Job and Wiesel seem to take.

While you watch, consider . . .

- ◆ The beauty of the poetry. The language itself conveys the power and drama of the Book of Job. It is not surprising that the text is quoted in this video more often than in the other videos in this series.
- ◆ The many and contradictory attributes of God—cosmic and personal: slayer, redeemer, witness, provider, judge, pursuer, and more. Similarly, watch the range of emotions and attitudes toward God—trust, belief, familiarity, distance, outrage, despair, rebellion, submission, to name a few.
- ◆ Job's universality.

Epilogue

The following Op-Ed piece by Elie Wiesel was published in The New York Times on Rosh ha Shanah, October 2, 1997. We include it here as an eloquent expression of his own journey through suffering, questioning, and faith, which can provide an added dimension to discussion of the issues raised in the video.

A Prayer for the Days of Awe

Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?

More than 50 years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Many things, good and less good, have since happened to those who survived it. They learned to build on ruins. Family life was recreated. Children were born, friendships struck. They learned to have faith in their surroundings, even in their fellow men and women. Gratitude has replaced bitterness in their hearts. No one is as capable of thankfulness as they are. Thankful to anyone willing to hear their tales and become their ally in the battle against apathy and forgetfulness. For them every moment is grace.

Oh, they do not forgive the killers and their accomplices, nor should they. Nor should you, Master of the Universe. But they no longer look at every passer-by with suspicion. Nor do they see a dagger in every hand.

Does this mean that the wounds in their soul have healed? They will never heal. As long as a spark of the flames of Auschwitz and Treblinka glows in their memory, so long will my joy be incomplete.

What about my faith in you, Master of the Universe?

I now realize I never lost it, not even over there, during the darkest hours of my life. I don't know why I kept on whispering my daily prayers, and those one reserves for the Sabbath, and for the holidays, but I did recite them, often with my father and, on Rosh ha Shanah eve, with hundreds of inmates at Auschwitz. Was it because the prayers remained a link to the vanished world of my childhood?

But my faith was no longer pure. How could it be? It was filled with anguish rather than fervor, with perplexity more than piety. In the kingdom of eternal night, on the Days of Awe, which are the Days of Judgment, my traditional prayers were directed to you as well as against you, Master of the Universe. What hurt me more: your absence or your silence?

In my testimony I have written harsh words, burning words about your role in our tragedy. I would not repeat them today.

But I felt them then. I felt them in every cell of my being. Why did you allow if not enable the killer day after day, night after night to torment, kill and annihilate tens of thousands of Jewish children? Why were they abandoned by your Creation? These thoughts were in no way destined to diminish the guilt of the guilty. Their established culpability is irrelevant to my "problem" with you, Master of the Universe. In my childhood I did not expect much from human beings. But I expected everything from you.

Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? What was going on in heaven, at the celestial tribunal, while your children were marked for humiliation, isolation and death only because they were Jewish?

These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades. You have vocal defenders, you know. Many theological answers were given to me such as: "God is God. He alone knows what he is doing. One has no right to question Him or His ways." Or: Auschwitz was a punishment for European Jewry's sins of assimilation and/or Zionism." And: "Isn't Israel the solution? Without Auschwitz there would have been no Israel."

I reject all these answers. Auschwitz must and will forever remain a question mark only: it can be conceived neither with God nor without God. At one point, I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. After all, Auschwitz was not something that came down ready-made from heaven. It was conceived by men implemented by men, staffed by men. And their aim was to destroy not only us but you as well. Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?

As we Jews now enter the High Holidays again, preparing ourselves to pray for a year of peace and happiness for our people and all people, let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you for so long.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

◆ The Book of Job stirs up many fundamental questions. It is a painful portrayal of human helplessness and vulnerability to suffering and it is a confrontation with God's omnipotence. God is cause, witness, and comforter.

◆ How do you explain evil and suffering in the world?

◆ How do you explain an omnipotent God who is witness to the Holocaust?

◆ Is there a way for you to make sense of the suffering of the innocent? How do you engage with God? What happens to faith?

◆ In the face of the content of the revelation from the whirlwind—that the distance between the omnipotent, transcendent God and inconsequential humankind is insurmountable—it seems paradoxical that a revelation occurred at all. How do you explain this?

◆ What, as you see it, is the power of God and what is the power—and responsibility—of humankind in the world?

◆ What does Wiesel mean when he writes that Auschwitz “can be conceived neither with God nor without God”? That the aim of those who made it was “to destroy not only us but you as well”?

◆ Are faith and anger mutually exclusive? How do we reconcile them?

◆ How does your view of God compare with Job's? With that of his comforters? With Elie Wiesel's?

Suggestions for Reading

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