Why Bad Things Happen To Good People?

Every time there is a fatal accident, or when a child, a young man or a young woman passes away, we wonder why God allowed this tragedy to happen. This question sometimes arises from an intellectual place. But most of the time it comes from a deep pain. Especially when it comes from the relatives of someone who recently passed away. We rabbis are often the recipients of this painful question, because people naively assume that we have all the Answers… Like my colleagues, over the years I have learned a considerable number of arguments to address this topic. But I must confess that these arguments should not be understood as satisfactory "answers" to the question of why the righteous suffers but as reflections to help us realize why we can't understand why the righteous suffer. Acknowledging our limitations would allow us to know more about ourselves.

With this disclaimer in mind, I would like to share with you a great lesson that we learn from an exceptional event involved an exceptional encounter between Moses and the Almighty.

WHAT WOULD YOU ASK GOD?

After HaShem forgives the people of Israel for the sin of the golden calf, a "conversation" took place between God and Moshe. Until that moment God's revelation to the prophets had always been a one-way operation: the Almighty conveys a message to the prophet, in a vision, while the prophet is in a state of trance, or in a dream. Prophets always play a passive role: they are the unconscious recipients of the Divine experience. But they never have the opportunity to perceive the Divine Presence while in a state of consciousness. A dialogue with God is then unthinkable. But on one exceptional occasion, Mosha has a conversation with God while being fully

awake, alert and conscious (in Hebrew פנים אל פנים). This allowed Moshe an extraordinary and unique privilege that no other human being had or will ever have: to be able to ask God a question. And what did a human being ask God at this exceptional moment? What is the deepest doubt of a man of faith? Moshe asked God to show him "His glory." " הראני נא את כבודך", *"Please, God, show me Your Glory."* The rabbis explained that Moshe was asking God to understand the most difficult subject: *"Why do bad things happen to good people?"* למה צדיק ורע לו. God is omnipotent, so why doesn't He prevent innocent people from suffering? And if He can prevent suffering, is God indifferent to the pain of good people? Based on this explanation, the biblical words *"show me Your Glory"* should be understood as follows: Moshe says: *"God, how should I explain the suffering of the just in light of "Your glory", that is, 'Your reputation as Just and kind God'?* The suffering of righteous men, Moshe hints, move men to think that God is not fair (or makes them doubt His existence). Moshe asks God to allow him to understand this enigma so that he can answer others and the "glory of HaShem" would remain intact.

YOU NEVER SAW AN ORANGE!

The Divine response is unexpected. The Tora does not give us an easy answer, nor does it tell us that Moshe suddenly had access to a solution to this enigma. The Tora is unique in asserting that human beings –even Moses, the man who reached the closest encounter with God– do not have access to this information. The way God administers His justice is beyond human understanding. God's answer to Moshe comes in cryptic almost poetic words וראית את אחורי ופני לא יראו. *"You can see My backside; but My front side will not be seen* ". "Back" and "front" obviously do not refer to a physical backside or front side, but to the reality as God sees it versus the reality as we humans perceive it. The multidimensional TRUE reality is referred to as "*the front of God.*" And we humans do not have

access to that dimension. We suffer from what the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset calls: “perspectivism”. “No one has ever seen an orange,” said the famous philosopher. We see the orange (or anything else) one side at a time. When we see the front, we do not see the back. And when we see the orange from above, we do not see it from below. Then in our mind we build a visual idea of the orange with all these partial images, but we never get to see the whole orange at once.

THE WOVEN TAPESTRY OF JUSTICE

I think that the simple example of the elusive orange, and the fact that the Spanish philosopher uses the idea of “back and front”, is extremely helpful to understand our pasuq. We are destined (or condemned) to see a very limited dimension of reality, what the Tora metaphorically calls: “the back side” of Divine justice, a perspective that absolutely limited and often misleading. I can offer one more example to illustrate this complex idea. When you look at the front of a beautiful handmade tapestry, you see its harmonious and intelligent design. The way HaShem administers His justice is like the front of the tapestry: an impeccable design. But when you look at the backside of the tapestry, the design disappears and you only see threads of all colors, lines and knots mixed in a chaotic zigzag without design, sense or meaning. Human beings can only perceive the back of the tapestry of Divine justice. And no matter how hard we try, we can never visualize or project the front of the tapestry when we only see the back.

To be continued