

GOD CREATED EVIL

We live in a world filled with evil. If God is good - and He is - and if God is almighty - and He is - why is there evil in the world? Why does evil exist? This question is difficult, not just because we do not have a satisfactory answer, but also because the fragments of the answer that we do have are painful and somewhat troubling.

When we ask, "Why do good people suffer?" when we ask "Why does God allow evil?" when we ask "Why the Holocaust?" or "Why the drunk driver speeding through the stop sign to destroy one young life and shatter many others?" we are asking the preliminary questions. We cannot satisfactorily answer these questions, certainly not completely.

The root question, however, is, "Why did God create evil?" God does not simply allow evil, He created it. The Scriptures do not offer us a dualistic way of escape. There is no other god. There is no eternally existent evil principle. The answer to this "Why?" at the end of all "Why?" questions must be found in who God is, His relationship to man, and His purposes for Creation.

Before I try to examine these things, I want to mention an evening I spent some years ago with three Holocaust survivors in Belarus. One man, who was a young teenager when the Holocaust began, asked me some questions. Perhaps they were, in a sense, rhetorical questions, but they were the questions that shadowed his whole life, and he wanted answers. He was not engaged in idle philosophical speculation. In different ways, he was simply, painfully asking, "Why the Holocaust?"

I'm sure that the question reverberated continually in the core of his being. Perhaps he was asking me because I believe in God, and say that I know Him. 'If you know God, ask Him about this.' Perhaps he wasn't asking me at all, but just letting some of his pain out into the world.

I responded, "I don't know, but I think there are some answers. The first answer is, 'There is no answer.' Once we settle that, we can talk about the other answers." On that evening, that was good enough to enable us to begin to talk. There are some things that are beyond us, but that doesn't mean that we can't think and talk and care about them. If we don't ask and wrestle with these questions, I think we imprison ourselves in an artificially small world. With that understanding, let's look at some of the other answers. We will probably still need that first answer when we are finished, but the other answers may be helpful.

God made the Garden of Eden. At the end of the third day, the day on which God created the fruit-bearing trees, "God saw that it was good." (Gen.1:12b) In the middle of the garden, God had placed the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil, which was soon to bear ripe fruit. Since the knowledge of good and evil was available, evil must have already existed. Why then did God see that "it was good"?

On the sixth day, God made "all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good." (Gen. 1:25b) How could that be? The Serpent which would soon deceive Eve was in the garden.

Then, on that same sixth day, God created Man and placed him in the garden. "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good." (Gen.1:31a) How could that be? God knew that the Serpent would tempt Adam and Eve. God knew that Adam and Eve would disobey Him, yield to the temptation, and eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. He knew what the terrible consequences of that disobedience would be, down to the present day and beyond. God knew that the Holocaust was in that act of disobedience. And yet, somehow, all that God had made, "it was very good."

I do know God. Sometimes I feel that I don't know Him very well, but I do know Him. Often I don't understand Him very well, but it always has to do with this same painful question. And I am afraid of God because what He calls "good" is not always the same as what I call "good".

God doesn't need me to justify Him, but I owe Him everything, and I'm willing to try. If I didn't try, I feel that I would be betraying the One who has always loved me.

God is good, but He created evil. "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create evil. I, the LORD, do all these things." (Is. 45:7)

God tells us that He created darkness. That means there is a darkness that is not simply the absence of light, it is something in and of itself. It is the opposite of light. God created it.

God tells us that He created evil. That means that evil is not simply the absence of good, it is something in and of itself. It is the opposite of good.

Darkness and evil are the opposite of what God is. They are unlike God, and yet God created them. They do not have His power, but they have a power that He gave them. Why did God create something that is the opposite of what He is? Why did He then put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden, where Adam and Eve were tempted by it? Why, if there had to be such a tree, didn't He make it inaccessible to Adam and Eve?

Evil is evil. It is not good. But the question is, in the ultimate plan and purpose of God for man, can it be good that there is evil? Can the existence of evil accomplish something good?

I understand that these may sound like meaningless, even foolish, philosophical questions. Maybe they are that for some people. But they are not that for me.

Evil is not an abstraction. It is really something very concrete. Evil is cruelty, degradation, abuse, and contempt. Evil is suffering, pain, and the crushing of human bodies, dreams, hopes, and lives. But the questions are not meaningless or foolish. They are simply an inadequate attempt to express what may be the most painful puzzle of human existence. They are the beginning of an attempt to wrestle with that painful puzzle.

We can say, and partially understand, that God created mankind with the ability to choose, and such an ability has greater meaning when man is able to make bad choices as well as good choices. We can say, and partially understand, that love and obedience have greater meaning when one can choose not to love and not to obey. Adam and Eve were created to love and obey God, and to love one another. Love and obedience are not necessarily made greater when hate and disobedience are possible, but certainly, for us, such a possibility, by providing a sharp contrast, makes them appear greater.

God did command Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree; and perhaps that was, and is, His way of making evil inaccessible to Man. They only needed to accept God as who He is. Had they done that, they would have obeyed Him, and evil would not have taken over the world. Instead, they decided to go their own way.

Or else that was God's way of making evil accessible to Man.

But couldn't God have made Adam so that he had the ability to choose evil, but would, in actuality, always choose good? (Couldn't God have made me, or my children, or my neighbor, or my enemy, so that I, or they, or he, or she wouldn't choose evil?) Yes, He could have, but that would mean that Adam would not have really had the ability, the freedom, to make moral choices. That would mean that Adam could not accept or embrace evil. It would also mean that Adam could not consciously choose to reject or shun evil. Adam would have had to be less than what God created him to be. He would have been more like the animals, and less like God.

Even so, it would still be a better world if there were no evil in it. You think so, I think so too, and God does not disagree. But that is not the same as saying that God should not have created evil. Without doubt, Adam should not have chosen evil. His descendants should not choose evil today, but that is not the same as saying that the choice, i.e. the freedom, should not be possible. I wish the choice of evil were not available, but it is. And God, who is good, has His reasons for it.

Should we then say that God, after all, is the one most at fault? Should we say that God is the one who sinned most of all? That is what Adam said: "the woman **You** gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."

(Gen.3:12) I.e., 'If You hadn't created the woman as my companion, if You hadn't enabled her to disobey, and if You hadn't given her the ability and inclination to persuade me, then I wouldn't have done it. It's Your fault.'

That is also what Eve said: "The Serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Gen.3:13) I.e., 'If You hadn't created the Serpent, if You hadn't given it the ability and inclination to deceive, and if You hadn't put it in the garden, then I wouldn't have done it. It's Your fault.'

Certainly there is some truth in what Adam and Eve said. If God hadn't created them with certain abilities, if God hadn't created the Serpent with certain abilities, if God hadn't made the encounter possible, then none of it would have happened.

But if God were to respond to these charges in a similarly human way, He could have said: "I created you with the ability to choose, which is an inestimably precious freedom. I wanted you to be like Me. I created you in My own image and likeness. Without that freedom, you could not be like Me.

"I told you what you should do, and commanded you to choose what is good. You can't say that you didn't know. You did know. I told you. All you had to do was believe Me and do what was right. Nevertheless, you chose to believe I was lying, and to seek what is evil. And now you come and blame Me? You blame Me because I gave you the ability to choose? You blame Me because what I told you was true? You blame Me because you're unwilling to accept responsibility for what you did wrong?

"I know the way this world works; I made it. Your freedom will work if you use it in relationship with Me, according to what is true and good. If you don't use it that way, if you use your freedom to deny your own guilt, if you use your freedom to pretend that you are holier, wiser, and more loving than I, then you are going to have a mighty tough road ahead. Believe Me, I know."

Before God brought us out of the wilderness into the land, He set before us the same choice He had set before Adam. Moses told our fathers: "See, I set before you today Life and Good, Death and Evil. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, decrees and laws. Then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you Life and Death, the Blessing and the Curse. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to

Him. For the LORD is your life, and He will give you many years in the land He swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Deut. 30:15-20)

Is it God's fault that we knew what was right, but made a conscious choice to do what was wrong? Is it God's fault that we don't believe Him when He says that choosing evil will have bad consequences? Is it God's fault that we choose to serve our own desires instead of serving Him? As the Lord said to a generation long ago: "Why do you argue against Me? You have all rebelled against Me." (Jer. 2:29)

We also should note that anything and everything that God created is less than God. It is not God. It can be like God in some ways, it can even be like God in many ways — made in His image and in His likeness — but it cannot be God, and it cannot be equal to God. God IS. He has always been and He always will be; and what He is will not change. What He creates can be "good," it can even be "very good," but, compared to the Creator, it will always be less than His goodness. Whatever is not God, by that fact alone, will always be deficient when compared to God. It is part of humility, and sensibility, to recognize that we are subservient to God.

Shortly after God brought us from the wilderness into the land of Israel, we turned away from Him. We turned to violence, immorality and idolatry, just like all the peoples of the earth. Then the Lord said, "'Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their fathers and has not listened to Me, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died, so that I may use them to test Israel, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did.' ... He did this only to teach the ways of war to the generations of the sons of Israel who did not previously know war." (Judg. 2:20b-22; 3:2)

God wants us to know how to fight, not with each other, but for each other. He wants us to know how to fight against evil, and to be committed to doing it. It is a way for us to develop godly character, a way for us to learn what the holy character of God is.

God hates evil, and His children need to learn to hate it too, without compromise. "To fear the LORD is to hate evil. I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech." (Prov. 8:13) "Let those who love the LORD hate evil, for He guards the lives of His faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked." (Ps. 97:10) "Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts." (Amos 5:15a)

But if there were no evil, we wouldn't need to learn to hate it, we wouldn't need to fight against it. Life would be a lot easier then. It would be easier and simpler. It would be idyllic, but we would be less than God created us to be.

In Belarus, the man who had been a young teenager when the Holocaust

began, who had escaped from the ever-tightening noose of the ghetto to become a partisan fighter in the forest, asked, "But what about the children? What about the innocent children who were slaughtered? How could God allow that?"

This man knew more about fighting evil than I do. He knew more about destroyed innocence than I do. But it was an unanswerable question that demands an answer. I said simply, "The children died in the gas chambers, on the gallows, and everywhere else, because someone put them in, and no one else took them out."

Reductionist absurdity? Maybe. Immoral evasion of facing up to God's complicity and guilt in the suffering and death of a million defenseless little children? I don't think so. Maybe our own responsibilities are more and greater than we want to know. As Dostoevskii wrote, "little heart of mine, my joy, believe me, every one is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything. I don't know how to explain it to you, but I feel it is so." *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky, ed. by Manuel Komroff, Signet Books, NY, 1958, P.264

That is a larger responsibility than it is humanly possible to bear. But if we are responsible for one another, isn't God, who created all people, much more responsible? If He is good, then how could He create beings who would do what the Nazis did to little children? If He loves the little children, it is inconceivable that He would not prevent such evil from being done to them. God is all powerful, but He did not prevent that evil, and every day there is more evil that He does not prevent.

How can we believe in the goodness of an all-powerful God who both created evil and does not prevent its spread across the earth?

God created something that is the opposite of what He is, and God created Man with the ability to choose that something. Man could, and man still can, choose God, who is good, or His opposite, which is evil.

The animals God created are not capable of making these kinds of moral choices. God did not make them so they could. To a certain degree, a dog can know, and even love, its master. So can a horse, or many other kinds of animals. But that is not the relationship that God designed Man to have with Him.

Man can choose to know God. Man can consciously choose to love and worship God at a staggeringly high level. Man can choose to walk with God, and be like Him. And man can choose the opposite. If he couldn't choose the opposite, he could not know, love, worship, and walk with God in the same way. The relationship would become a somewhat greater version of God's relationship with the animals. That was not God's purpose in making Man in

His own image and likeness.

Adam was made in the image and likeness of God, but there is clearly a difference between the creature and the Creator. The Creator exists before time and outside of space. He exists unchanging, independent of all creation. Evil, which He created, cannot change His nature or character. It does not tempt Him. Man, the creature, exists within time and space. Evil exists within the same dimensions. Man can be tempted by evil, and his nature and character can be changed by it.

But man does not have to choose evil. As God said to Adam's son Cain, when Cain brought an unacceptable gift: "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is good, isn't there acceptance? But if you do not do what is good, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to have you, but you must master it." (Gen. 4:6-7)

It is up to you. Sin is waiting to swallow you up. You must master it. Do not let it master you.

It was then that Cain decided to kill his brother Abel, simply because Abel's gift, a sacrifice from his flock, had been acceptable to God. The existence of Abel was a continual reminder that it was possible for Cain to do what was good.

Cain chose not to humble himself to seek to do good. That narrowed his choices considerably. Even as God did not stop Adam and Eve from disobeying Him and choosing the evil of rebellion instead, so God did not stop their son Cain from killing their other son Abel.

Why didn't God stop Cain? Why did He allow it? Why did He create the evil that made it possible?

"Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' " (Gen. 4:9)

Cain was saying, "I don't know, and I don't care," but he was saying much more than that. There is a diabolical genius in Cain's reply. In saying, "Am I the *shomer* — the protector and guardian — of my brother?" He was rejecting any responsibility at all towards any other human being.

Cain was an existentialist, in that he thought he could define himself apart from a relationship with his brother and with God. He thought he could define himself any way he wanted to, independent of God and of every human being. When he said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" he was pinpointing the issue exactly. He didn't have to say that. It wasn't an answer to God's question. He said it because he was rejecting what God had created him to be.

In another place, many years later, the Scriptures tell us, "Behold, the *Shomer* of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps." (Ps. 121:4) God created Man and his family so that they would care for, protect, and guard one another.

"The LORD said, 'What have you done? The sound [or "voice"] of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.' " (Gen. 4:10) Adam hid when he heard the voice of the Lord. Cain killed Abel to silence Abel's voice. But there is no place to hide, there is no way to destroy the evidence of the evil we do. It ascends to heaven.

In the phrase, "your brother's blood," the plural is used, i.e. bloods. The Rabbis understood this to mean that Cain was guilty not only of murdering Abel, but also of murdering all his descendants. (cf. Sanh. 37a) One man, Cain, killed one-fourth of the world's population, Abel. This was the greatest slaughter that Man has ever committed against himself.

"Whoever destroys a single soul, Scripture imputes [guilt] to him as though he had destroyed an entire world. And whoever preserves a single soul, Scripture ascribes [merit] to him as though he had preserved an entire world." (Sanh. 37a)

Preserving, or saving, an entire world is a great good. But if there were nothing that could destroy that world, saving it would not be necessary. Is it necessary that such a great good be possible, only because a great evil is? The answer lies in the character of Man, how great is his capacity for good?

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in numbers, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to determine one's attitude in any given set of circumstances — to choose one's own way." Viktor Frankl

How big were these acts of kindness? How great was their impact? If we think that they were obscure, insignificant deeds, lasting only for a moment until the whip came down again or until the giver or recipient of the kindness was crushed in the gears of the Nazi machine, we have missed what life is all about.

Maybe kindness doesn't eliminate cruelty, but it overcomes. Maybe compassion doesn't undo the works of cruelty, but it still triumphs. Who can know the weight of a world of suffering? Who can calculate the value of self-sacrificing love? I can't, but God can.

God created life, and He defines it. These deeds, and those who performed them, were somehow bigger than the Holocaust itself. They were bigger than the most sickening display of Man's inhumanity to Man. These few passing shadows of goodness defeated Evil with a few kind words and a tiny hard crust of inedible bread. (cf. Ps. 144:4)

But what did they accomplish? They didn't stop the slaughter. They didn't end the suffering. The world didn't notice, and couldn't have cared less

anyway.

Wait a minute my friend. What is worth accomplishing? What is worth being? What would you like to accomplish or achieve with your life? Each of these who showed kindness, even at the expense of his or her own life, achieved a great victory. The evil surrounded them, but it didn't possess them. It didn't control them. They turned a place of slaughter into holy ground. They embraced the image and likeness of God within them and within those all but unrecognizable, emaciated and tormented human beings around them. By choice, they were solitary citizens of the Kingdom of God.

We should remember also that there were rescuers during the Holocaust. The Nazis and their accomplices were children of Cain, and they committed crimes against humanity, crimes against the very nature of being human. But there were others who recognized and accepted the nature of being human. They, though not Jewish, risked their lives, and in many cases lost their lives, seeking to save Jewish people. They were children of God, living in His image and in His likeness. To be human, by God's design, is to be the guardian of one's brother and sister, all of them.

In the Scriptures, God does not create a religion, He creates life. He does not give a name to what it is to know and serve Him. But if we were to help Him out, if we were to pick an appropriate name, it would be difficult, at least content-wise, to find anything better than "The Brother's Keeper Society."

That is why the Scriptures say, "Above all, set a guardpost to protect your heart, because life goes forth from it." (Prov.4:23) If a person accepts the responsibility of being the *shomer* for his or her own heart, then that same person will soon encounter the responsibility of being the *shomer* for his or her brother or sister.

Man can choose to reject and disobey God, and man can choose to kill his own brother. The ability to choose is an awesome and terrible thing, but that is how and why God made Man. God does not remove the possibility of our choosing evil. He does promise, however, that He will judge us and reward us as our choices deserve.

If there were no evil, would it matter whether or not we obeyed God? Of course we could say, as the Scriptures do, that disobeying God is in itself evil, but if it didn't cause any harm, if it didn't cause pain or some kind of damage to ourselves or someone else, what would be so bad about disobeying God?

But that is precisely what all evil is, disobeying God. All things exist for His purposes.

Yet even if we grant that God has a good purpose in creating evil, it still does not seem right, knowing that the Serpent was cunning enough to seduce

Adam and Eve to do evil, that God left them alone to face the Serpent. But God did not just leave them alone in the garden and say, "You're on your own."

Adam and Eve had been given what they needed in order to resist the temptation. God spent time with them and instructed them in what they were created to do. How do we know that? After Adam and Eve rebelled, they tried to cover their nakedness. From whom? From the animals? From the Serpent? From each other? No, from God. (cf. Gen.3:10) They knew that God would come by, and God would see.

"Then the man and his wife heard the sound [or "voice," *ko*] of the LORD God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden." (Gen. 3:8) They heard a sound, or a voice, and they knew that it was God walking in the garden. That means they had heard the sound, or voice, before, and they recognized it for what it was. They knew it was God walking in the garden, looking for them.

They had walked with God in the garden before. They had heard His voice before. God wanted to spend time with them, talking and walking. After all, He loved them, and He had put them in charge of the earth. In the beginning, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' " (Gen. 1:28)

God did not leave them on their own. He sought them out. He came to show them all the beauty of creation, and to teach them how to properly take care of the earth and all its creatures. Instead, they chose to disobey and then hide.

In the wilderness, our fathers chose to do much the same. And if we had been there, we would have done as they did. We are not better than our fathers. As Elijah prayed, in his weariness of serving God, "It is too much now, Lord. Take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." (1Kgs. 19:4) God had been close to our fathers. God had cared for them, and in so doing, had cared for us.

God reminded us as we stood at the base of Mt. Sinai. "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:4-6b)

God showed us special care, power, and closeness. "Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?" (Deut. 4:33)

But the people did not want to be that close to God, "and said to Moses,

'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.' ” (Ex. 20:19-20)

The fear of God, the beginning of wisdom, will keep man far from sin. The love of God will bring us close to Him. God uses physical circumstances to enable us to learn the great reality of our continual dependence upon Him. Not only did He create us, and the world, He sustains us, and the world.

"He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that it is not by bread alone that man [haAdam] will live, but man [haAdam] will live by all that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deut. 8:3) Adam and Eve had heard the voice of the Lord before, but they didn't want to hear it again. Our fathers had heard the voice of the Lord, but didn't want to hear it again.

Adam and Eve tried to hide from God. Our fathers turned away from Him. Jonah tried to flee from the Lord.

David asked, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there Your hand will guide me, Your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to You; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You." (Ps. 139:7-12)

Why do we want to escape from God? God is light, but men choose darkness. God is life, but men choose death. God is good, but men choose evil.

Yes, and men are responsible for their own choices. But still, God is the one who made those choices possible. God is the one who created man. God is the one who knew the choices man would make.

Couldn't God have made the harm, the consequences, the penalty of doing evil less? In other words, couldn't God have made it less important whether we do good or not? Certainly it is less important in our own eyes than it is in His.

Maybe God could have, but why don't we ask the opposite question? Couldn't God have made doing good more important in Adam's eyes? in our eyes? in the eyes of every person? He tells us how important it is, but we don't seem to get it.

Who made us so hardheaded and hardhearted? Who made us so stiffnecked? Wasn't it God? No, it wasn't God. We ourselves, by the choices we make, bear that responsibility.

God says that if we spend time with Him, if we learn to imitate His nature (or follow His example), we will be different. What is important to God will be important to us.

The Talmud encourages men "to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: 'And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them,' so you should also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: 'And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre,' so you should also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: 'And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son,' so you should also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: 'And He buried him [Moses] in the valley,' so you should also bury the dead." (Sotah 14a)

What is God like in His relationship with Man? "The LORD is good to all. He has compassion on all He has made." (Ps. 145:9) He is good even to those who reject Him. He is a friend even to those who hate Him.

He wants us to share this aspect of His nature. "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you." (Prov. 25:21-22) Even your enemy is human. Treat him that way. You can get rid of your enemy by killing him, but the best way to get rid of your enemy is, as much as it lies with you, be his friend.

Will that work? Will it change your enemy? Sometimes it will, but usually it won't. But it will help make you the person God created you to be.

There is more to consider. God does not simply observe the suffering of mankind, He Himself is afflicted by it. We already know that God has feelings. The things that people do and the things that are done to people have an impact upon Him.

"For He said, 'Surely they are My people, children who will not be false.' So He was their savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them. In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He bore them, and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and grieved His holy spirit. Therefore He was turned to be their enemy, and He fought against them.' (Is.63:8-10)

God is afflicted when Israel is afflicted. The Rabbis spoke of this very difficult to grasp reality. God suffers when His people suffer.

"So far I only know that He shares in the affliction of the community. How about the affliction of the individual? Scripture says: 'He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble' (Ps.91:15). ...

"Likewise you find that whithersoever Israel was exiled, the Shekhinah went into exile with them. When they went into exile to Egypt, the Shekhinah went into exile with them, as it is said; 'I exiled Myself unto the house of your fathers when they were in Egypt (1 Sam.2:27). When they were exiled to Babylon, the Shekhinah went into exile with them, as it is said: 'For your sake I ordered Myself to go to Babylon' (Is. 43:14).” Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhet d'Pisha, parashah 14, cited in Norman J. Cohen, "Shekhinta ba-Galuta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution," JSJ, Dec. 1982, P.151

The Shekhinah is the visible presence of God that led Israel out of Egypt, and then dwelt above the ark of the covenant in both the Tabernacle and the Temple. It is the glory of God come into this world.

In the section above from Isaiah 63, God tells us that His holy spirit is grieved when Israel rebels against Him. Affliction comes to Israel because of that rebellion, but God also shares in that affliction because He cares for His people. When Israel repents, God is eager to remove the affliction and, by so doing, stop His own suffering. "And they put away the foreign gods from their midst, and served the Lord; and His soul was grieved with the misery of Israel." (Judg. 10:16)

When the nations plunder and persecute Israel, God feels pain as though someone had poked Him in the eye. "For thus says the Lord of hosts; because of His honor He sent me to the nations which plundered you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye." (Zech.2:12)

In a time of judgment for Israel's sin, Jeremiah said, "Because my people are crushed, I am crushed. I mourn, and horror grips me. ... Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people." (Jer. 8:21; 9:1) The Rabbis say that Moses said much the same thing: "As Israel are in distress I too will share with them. He who shares in the distress of the community will merit to behold its consolation." (Ta'anith 11a) If that was true of Jeremiah and Moses, faithful servants of God, how much more so is it true of God Himself.

God does bring judgment, terrible judgment, but it is not what He desires. "For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men." (Lam. 3:33) " 'As surely as I live,' declares the Lord God, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?' " (Ezek. 18:32; 33:11)

God has no pleasure in the death of anyone. He brought judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt, but it did not give Him pleasure. In rabbinic tradition, at the Red Sea, "The ministering angels spoke of singing songs, but the Holy

One, blessed be He, said, 'The work of My hands is being drowned in the sea, and you are speaking of songs?' " (Megillah 10b)

A father suffers pain when his children suffer pain, even if their pain is the result of their own negligence or disobedience. A father suffers pain, even if he is the one causing his children pain as a correction for their own negligence or disobedience.

The God of Israel knows that pain very well. "Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against Me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand." (Is.1:2-3, cf. Jer. 8:7)

God knows the disappointment and the hurt of having children walk away — more than that, of having His children spit in His face and blame Him for everything, though He never failed them. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from Me. They sacrificed to the Baalim and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them." (Hosea 11:1-4)

"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is My way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" (Ezek. 18:25,29; 33:17,20)

God knows the agony of a broken marriage, of a spouse turning to adultery and degradation, even though He was always a loving and well-providing husband. That's the message of the whole book of Hosea. God used the life of Hosea to demonstrate His own pain.

"When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD. ... 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned within Me, all My compassion is aroused.'" (Hos. 1:2; 11:8)

Was that fair to Hosea? From our perspective, no. But God was giving Hosea the opportunity to know Him and be like Him. God was letting Hosea share in His own life, His own pain. How great an honor and privilege is that? Would Hosea have preferred to decline the honor and privilege, and have had a good family life instead? Probably. But God's perspective is much broader in time and space than ours, and His mercy endures forever. In the age to come, will Hosea still feel the same way about what his life was. No, he won't.

God is not an impersonal force. He is a living, caring, feeling God, who created Israel and all mankind that we might share and return His love. We know our own pain, and it can swallow us up. But do we know God's pain because of what six billion people do to themselves and to each other every day?

How deep is His pain? It is piercing. "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on Me, whom they have thrust through, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son." (Zech.12:10)

The Rabbis say, "It is well according to him who explains that the cause [of the mourning] is the slaying of Messiah the son of Joseph, since that well agrees with the Scriptural verse, 'And they shall look upon Me whom they have thrust through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for his only son.' " (Sukkah 52b)

Messiah is the anointed of God, representing Him in a special way. In fact, the verses before Zechariah 12:10 make it quite clear that it is the Lord who is speaking, and saying, "They will look on Me, whom they have thrust through." It is in this capacity of representing God that Messiah suffers in a special way. The Rabbis say that all Israel will mourn for him in deep bitterness, having somehow been responsible for his death. The text says that God Himself has been fatally thrust through. There will be a day when we will see how much we have hurt God. We will see how much God suffered because of His love for us.

So why does God want to suffer? He doesn't, but the nature of genuine love includes a willingness to suffer for others. "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned." (Song of Songs 8:6-7) Because God loves, He suffers. Because God loves us, He suffers with us.

The nature of God and His love for us are such that He Himself is willing to be afflicted for us. He is more than willing, He designed the world so that He would be afflicted with us and for us. I wouldn't have designed it that way, but there is something about love that cannot be demonstrated without paying a price.

Somehow, in God's design, suffering, pain, and evil exist to enable us to imitate God. They exist to enable us to choose what is painfully right over what is pleasurable wrong. They exist to enable our hearts to break, even as

His does.

God revealed His eternal nature to Moses in the Thirteen Attributes. "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed His name, the LORD. And He passed in front of Moshe, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and their children to the third and fourth generation.' " (Ex. 34:5-7)

God came down to Moses, and revealed His loving, righteous nature. All that God is is good. All that God is is what Good is.

But how could we know these attributes of God and His goodness if there were no evil? How could we know His mercy or His grace? How could we know His patient endurance of what angers Him? How could we know His faithfulness and forgiveness? I may not think that all the pain and suffering in the world is thereby justified, but I cannot imagine an alternative way, if there were no evil, for Man to know and imitate these attributes of God.

We may know the pain of sickness or natural disaster destroying what is most precious to us, but do we know God's pain over the destruction that Adam's disobedience loosed in the world?

"And the LORD God commanded the man, 'Of every tree of the garden, you may eat. But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat from it, because in the day you eat of it you will surely die.'" (Gen. 2:16-17)

But didn't Adam eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and not die that day? We know that death entered into the world on that day, because "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." (Gen. 3:21) Fig leaves were not sufficient. Animals were put to death, and their skins were used to cover Adam and Eve.

But even more than that, from God's point of view, death is not just an event, death is a condition. In that same garden, there was also a tree of life. After Adam and Eve rebelled, God had to exclude them from the garden, and separate them from the tree of life so that they would not taste its fruit. Their changed condition made that necessary.

King Saul said to his son Jonathan, "As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he is a son of death!" (1Sam. 20:31) When Nathan the prophet presented David's own sin to him in a parable, "David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this is a son of death!' " (2Sam. 12:5)

What did King Saul and King David mean by "a son of death"? They meant someone whose death was at that moment fixed with certainty. They meant someone whose death was imminent, someone for whom death was inescapable.

Adam and Eve did die on the day that they disobeyed God. From that moment on, they belonged to death. The momentary event of death was in the future, but the condition of death became everpresent. It became inescapable.

How does the event of death come? It comes from sickness, from infirmity, from accident, from disaster, from hatred, from war, from a multitude of evils. Death has its ways, and its servants.

In choosing not to listen to God, Adam brought deafness into the world. In choosing not to see what God had shown him, Adam brought blindness into the world. In hardening his heart and feeding his forbidden lusts, Adam brought disease into the world.

He did not think he was choosing all those things, he did not understand the ramifications of the plague of evil he invited, he did not comprehend the magnitude of his decision, but none of that changed anything. He could have chosen to believe and obey God. That was the right thing to do.

In choosing to disobey, despite the Serpent's assurance to the contrary, Adam and Eve chose death, what brings it, and what it brings. "They have sown the wind and they will reap the whirlwind." (Hosea 8:7a) On that day, they were changed, and the world was changed. All of their descendants, whether righteous or unrighteous, have had to face the whirlwind.

"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil." (Job 1:1) Because Job was blameless and upright, because Job feared God and shunned evil, he was singled out for horrendous affliction. It was Satan, the Adversary, who attacked Job, but it was God who suggested the attack. "Have you considered My servant Job?" (Job 1:8)

God had blessed Job considerably. "He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East." (Job 1:2-3)

Then, in one day, without a moment of time to consider and mourn each loss separately, Job lost everything. "A messenger came to Job and said, 'The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

“While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, 'The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

“While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, 'The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

“While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, 'Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!' ” (Job 1:15-19)

As though that weren't enough, God suggests that Satan attack Job further. "Have you considered My servant Job?" (Job 2:3)

“So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. (Job 2:7)

Three of Job's friends then came to comfort him, but their comfort turned into an attack, only adding to his pain. Job was in agony, wanting to know why God had done this to him. He cried out for the opportunity to confront God and argue his case face to face, because God was distant, untouched by his suffering, inaccessible and unapproachable.

God finally does appear to Job, and answers his questions. But the answers are not at all what Job expected. God gave Job a different kind of understanding, and a different kind of wisdom. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Prov. 9:10)

So the Lord said to Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you understand. ... Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years! ... Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? ... Who has a claim against Me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to Me. (Job 38:4,21,36; 41:11)

I would have expected God to comfort Job, to assure him of His love, maybe even, somehow, to apologize a little. But that is not at all what God did. To the contrary, His response to Job is a very powerful expression of God's own sovereignty. God does not defend Himself, nor does He answer Job's questions. He simply makes Himself known to Job as the Almighty Creator.

I would have expected Job, in his last gasp, to challenge God: 'After what You've put me through, that's Your response?' But far from being outraged, Job, understood and accepted God's response. In fact, far from condemning

God when he sees Him face to face, Job apologizes to God. "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ... My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:3,5-6)

If ever there was a man who had a case against God, it was Job. Job was humbly doing what was right. He was living in holiness and caring for others. God was the one who instigated all the calamity. God was the one who suggested to Satan that he afflict Job. What possible defense could God have? But when Job saw the Lord, he said, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Then the Lord turned in anger to Job's friends, the ones who had attacked him in his misery. "So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not do to you according to your folly. You have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has." (Job 42:8)

Now wait a minute. Twice the Lord speaks of Job as "My servant," by which He means, "Job is working for Me." And God says that Job has spoken of Him what is right. That doesn't make any sense. If Job has spoken of God what is right, and if Job is working for God, why did God get so upset with Job? Why did God instigate all this evil against Job? And then, on top of that, God says that Job must pray for his friends, his "comforters who bring misery," so that they can be forgiven?

That is too much. Job should explode. He shouldn't let God talk His way out of this and blame everyone else. God didn't let Adam and Eve get away with it. There are a lot of people who go around thinking that they never do anything wrong, always blaming everybody else. But you know what? In God's case, it's true. He never does do anything wrong. By definition.

And you know what else? Job didn't murmur a word of complaint. Accusing God was the farthest thing from his mind. The closer we get to God, the smaller we become in our own eyes.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he melted. "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am destroyed! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.'" (Is. 6:5)

You think you have a case against God? You think you're going to call Him to account for what He has done wrong? I assure you that on the day when you stand before Him, you will not be able to charge Him with any guilt or wrongdoing. I assure you that on the day when you stand before Him, your mouth will be shut and your eyes will be downcast in shame, even as it was with Job and Isaiah.

I would even suggest that when we judge, doubt, or condemn God, it is a sign that we are in the wrong. It is a sign that we are just like Adam and Eve. Why is it that we, finite and guilty, on the basis of our own weakened sense of right and wrong, feel competent to judge God, the One who imparted to us the distinction between right and wrong? 'Your freedom will work if you use it in relationship with Me, according to what is true and good.'

We don't make God nervous with our questions. We don't make Him insecure with our doubts. We don't embarrass Him with our knowledge of the evils committed upon the earth. God is willing to explain to us what we are able to understand, and He is also able to demonstrate that He is beyond explanation and understanding.

But, "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?"

"Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?'"

"This is what the LORD says — the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker — Do you interrogate Me about things to come? Do you give Me orders about My children and the work of My hands? It is I who made the earth and I created Adam upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens. I commanded their hosts." (Is. 45:9-12)

"Your word, O LORD, is eternal. It stands firm in the heavens." (Ps. 119:89) In the heavens, the Word of God is everywhere. It is like the air of the birds, the sea of the fish, and the ground of the worm. It is the breath of those who breathe. And it is settled. There is no contradiction. When we enter a realm where nothing obscures our vision of who God is, then His word will be the same for us. Job found out that there was nothing to say, except to repent.

It is not just that God is bigger and stronger than we are, and so He doesn't have to answer. God is also wiser, kinder, and more compassionate. God is wisdom. He is kindness and compassion. Whatever we know of these things, it is only because He made us in His own image and likeness.

God chose and appointed Joseph above his brothers. In response, Joseph's brothers sought to kill him, but settled on selling him into slavery. In slavery, Joseph served his master faithfully and well. His master began to raise him up. Then his master's wife tried to seduce Joseph. When he refused, she accused him of the very thing he refused to do. His master threw him into prison. Even there, he continued to be faithful and conscientious, though he was forgotten and abandoned.

Then God raised him up out of prison and made him the second most

powerful man in a great empire. Eventually his brothers came down to Egypt for food, and Joseph had the opportunity for revenge. He didn't take it.

When Jacob died, Joseph's brothers came to him and pleaded for forgiveness and mercy in their father's name. Joseph wept because of their mistrust of his goodness. He had learned something invaluable through his suffering. "You meant it to me for evil, but God intended it for good to do as it is this day, to save a multitude of people." (Gen. 50:20)

What they had done, following in the steps of Cain, was evil. No question about it, it was evil. But God brought good out of it, and Joseph realized it. Joseph was not a philosopher or an ivory tower academic. He wasn't someone whose wealth and popularity shielded him from everything negative. His brothers had sought to kill him. They sold him into slavery. He spent years in prison in the Egypt of the pharaohs. But He could see that God had worked His good purpose through the evil that his brothers had done.

Naomi, her husband, and their two sons left Bethlehem to stay in Moab during a famine in Israel. Her husband died there. Her sons married, but then each of them died too. She came back to Israel as a broken, bitter woman. One of her daughters-in-law, a young woman named Ruth, came with her.

"So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, 'Can this be Naomi?'

"Don't call me Naomi,' she told them. 'Call me Mara, because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has afflicted me, and the Almighty has done evil to me.'" (Ruth 1:19-21)

"Naomi" means "pleasant," "Mara" means "bitter." It is easy to understand why Naomi felt the way she did. But Naomi was missing something when she said, "the Lord brought me back empty." She could see what God had taken away from her, but she couldn't see what God had given to her.

Ruth was an unusual woman. Naomi had told her several times to stay in Moab, because there was no point in following a hopeless, bitter, old woman, especially when God was the one who had caused her bitterness. "The hand of the Lord has gone out against me." (Ruth 1:13)

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." (Ruth 1:16-17)

Naomi said, "the hand of the Lord has gone out against me," but Ruth replied, "your God will be my God." Ruth saw something Naomi couldn't see.

Ruth was a young woman whose husband had just died. But despite the pain and death, Ruth could see the hand of the Lord upon Naomi, and upon Israel, for blessing. Ruth could see that it was better to die with Israel and Israel's God than to live in comfort in Moab.

As the poorest of the poor, Ruth gathered what was left over from the harvest in the fields of a man named Boaz. Boaz turned out to be a kinsman redeemer of Naomi. When he decided to redeem Ruth and Naomi, he gave Ruth a large quantity of barley, saying, "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty." (Ruth 3:17) God was saying to Naomi, "You think I brought you back empty, but I brought you back full."

Boaz and Ruth married and had a son. "The women said to Naomi: 'Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.'"

"Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and nursed him. The women living there said, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David." (Ruth 4:14-17)

Naomi probably didn't live to see the birth of Obed's son Jesse. Certainly she didn't live to see the birth of Obed's grandson David or to see him become God's anointed king over all Israel. If she had though, would she have said it was worth it? We don't see a relationship between the suffering and the kingship, but God does.

As David later said, before he became king, "There are many evils to the righteous, but the LORD delivers him from them all." (Ps. 34:20) As he said in anticipation of the dedication of the Temple of the Lord, "You have turned my mourning into dancing for me. You have torn off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that glory will sing to You and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give You thanks forever. (Ps. 30:12-13)

The Scriptures speak of one whom the Lord will anoint "to provide for the mourners of Zion — to give to them beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a weakened spirit. They will be called trees of righteousness, a planting of the LORD to beautify Himself." (Is. 61:3) There will be redemption, deliverance, and new life for those who mourn, for those who have lost everything.

One of the psalm writers said to the Lord, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your word. ... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn Your decrees. ... I know, O LORD, that Your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness You have afflicted me." (Ps. 119:67,71,75) Is it true? I don't understand it, but I believe it's true.

Truly, fortunately or not, God is greater than we can understand. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Is. 55:8-9)

Towards the end of our evening together, I hesitated, knowing that our discussion of evil was not theoretical, but vital. Then I shared with these Holocaust survivors a song I had written some years before.

Where was God on that day
When my people knelt to pray
And the soldiers with their guns
Came and shot them, every one?
Where was God? Where was God?

Adam, Adam, where are you?
Have you done what I told you to?
Do you think I cannot see
The secret sins you hide from Me?
Where are you? Where are you?

Where was God through the years
When we feasted on our tears
And the heart within our breast
Was torn and trampled without rest?
Where was God? Where was God?

Tell Me Cain, surely you know
Where your brother had to go.
With your fists you struck him down
His blood cries to Me from the ground.
Where were you? Where were you?

Where was God my whole life through?
Pain and sorrow were all I knew
Every time I tried to rise,
The darkness came down from the skies.
Where was God? Where was God?

Tell Me child, where have you gone?

I've waited for you oh so long.
I called and called you without cease
You never came to Me for peace.
Where were you? Where were you?

As we said goodnight, the man who had been a young teenager in a world that was destroyed by evil, losing everything and everyone, said, "Maybe tonight we have learned something." Maybe we have.