

What was going through his mind? Was he thinking: “God! Could he be a bigger ass?” Was he trying to control himself, thinking: “Don’t lash out. It will only make it worse.” Was he frightened, thinking: “It could be me next time.” Was he just standing there in shock, unable to think of anything coherent at all?

Nadav and Avihu, priests and the sons of Aaron the High Priest, “offered before the Eternal alien fire, which had not been enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Eternal.” Was what they did so wrong that they deserved to die? They bring a surprise gift to God and zap! they’re dead. Remind me not to bring a surprise bouquet of flowers to God. Maybe God only likes Gerber Daisies and there I am with a bouquet of alstroemeria. Who knows? Maybe they were drunk. Maybe they were overly eager to take Moses and Aaron’s places. Maybe they were using incense used in idol worship. Who knows?

And then Moses! “Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Eternal meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.’” And Aaron? Vayidom Aharon. “And Aaron was silent.” What was going through his mind, while he stood there silently?

Mr. Hertzfeld, alav hashalom, lived down the street from me when I was growing up. On a warm day, like the one we enjoyed today, you could see that he had a number tattooed on his arm. I think of him when we approach *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, after Pesach. He and his wife were the only survivors of their respective families after World War II. And I remember that Mr. Hertzfeld came every week to Torah study with me and my father, specifically to disprove the Bible and to deny God. The horror of what he went through and loss he was forced to bear – I just can’t imagine it. And when he emerged from the fire, he was so angry with God that he did everything he could to deny God.

There is a name for this problem that Mr. Hertzfeld and humans through the ages have struggled with: Theodicy. How can one justify a good and loving God when there is such evil in the world? The ancient Greeks and Romans had it easy: there were bad gods and they caused evil in the world. But we who believe in only one God have a more difficult row to hoe. We have to struggle with the idea that God, a good and just God, allows such evil in the world. Sorry, but no. I don’t actually have an answer to the question of Theodicy. If I did, I would be a spiritual genius and I think you know me well enough by now to realize that I may be many things, but a

spiritual genius is not one of them. The question is, how do we react, how do we cope when we are faced with such trials?

Mr. Hertzfeld reacted with anger at God. One might think that his coming to Torah Study every week to deny God and the Bible made Mr. Hertzfeld an atheist, but you would be wrong. If he were an atheist, he would simply ignore God and religion and live his life without them. Rather, Mr. Hertzfeld believed deeply but was so furious with God for what God had allowed to happen during the Holocaust that he was compelled to argue with God, to struggle mightily with God. Fury at God is a reaction to the experience of evil in the world.

Aaron suffered the death of his sons directly at the hand of God in silence. His brother Moses, in a particularly insensitive remark, tells Aaron that this is what you get when you mess with God. Yet he still remains silent. The rabbis tell us that his silence was acceptance of the justice of their deaths, but we don't know. Maybe he seethed inside. Maybe he was too shocked to react. Maybe – who knows? Silent acceptance of that which we cannot change is another reaction to the experience of evil in the world.

Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son, his only one, the one he loved, Isaac. God was testing him, or perhaps Abraham was testing God. But at the climax of the episode, God does not speak to Abraham to stop the sacrifice of Isaac, but rather sends an angel. There's a rupture that occurs as a result. God and Abraham never directly speak again to one another. There is an estrangement in the relationship that is never healed completely. Abraham doesn't lose faith, but he also never quite forgives God. Evil in the world can estrange us from God.

There are those whose faith is greater than Abraham's in that they do not allow trials to estrange them from God. I am thinking of those victims of the Holocaust who never denied God, who never gave up their faith. They were starved, yet they believed. They were worked under cruel conditions, yet they believed. They were dehumanized and tortured, yet they believed. They knowingly marched to their deaths declaring, *Ani Ma'amin*, I believe with a perfect faith. There is evil enough and then some in the world, yet they continue to declare their belief and find comfort in their relationship with God.

There are those who, when confronted with evil in a world where God is supposed to be good and just, simply walk away.

Our reactions to the trials of evil in the world span a spectrum. We can declare our belief, argue with God, become estranged from God or even simply walk away. I don't know if I'll ever

have an answer that satisfies me as to why God allows evil to exist in the world. But perhaps I can know how I should react.

Shabbat Shalom.