What's God Got to do With It? The Rambam and I Ponder the Nature of Evil

I have a favorite one page list of different religion's responses to the common slang phrase, "*You-Know-What* Happens," a phrase that is used as a simple existential observation that life can be capricious and even incomprehensible. This page appeared on my refrigerator during the hard time when my husband, a physician in the Army Reserves, was called up from his civilian practice and sent to Riyyad, Saudi Arabia to serve in the Persian Gulf War. I had two little kids at the time, and being a single parent whose spouse was living in a place where SCUD missiles fell each night had not been in the plan. The "Jewish" quote on my irreverent flyer seemed especially apt to me at the time: "Why does *You-Know-What* always happen to *us*?"

I expect that people have *always* struggled when the vagaries of life come their way. Jewish history is replete with our attempts to understand why awful things have repeatedly happened to us despite our sincere attempts to live in accordance with God's laws. The cries of the Biblical prophets rang out against the people's "sinfulness," sinfulness which the prophets were convinced presaged the destruction of both the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and of its smaller counterpart of Judea by the Babylonians less than one hundred fifty years later in 586 BCE. Despite the prophets' dire warnings, we were conquered and exiled from our land. What must it have felt like to the Jews who were living at that time and whose lives were so very intertwined with service to God in the one place they felt that this service was legitimate? Since the early days of our religious civilization, terrible things have happened to us as a people and to us, individually, and we are too often left with the anguished question of

"Why?" This is a questions of *theodicy*, the branch of theology which attempts to defend God's goodness and justice in the face of evil or injustice. In the vernacular, theodicy may be understood by many of us by the question posed by Rabbi Harold Kushner: Why do bad things happen to good people?

The question is age-old, and the answer given by the prophets—that the people had sinned—is hard to swallow for those who believe in God's justice: surely good people are not singled out by God for destruction. And what about God's mercy? Some people do all the right things but can't seem to "catch a break"; their situations make it hard to posit a merciful God. Or could it be that all Jews are judged by the actions of one bad apple in a basket filled largely with *good* fruit? These scenarios offend our sensibilities and make our attempts to be good people seem almost futile—why should we even bother? Some people thus espouse the view that the reward for righteousness only occurs in the next world, but this is also problematic, as it seems to be making excuses for God's actions in this world. And I suspect that it would be of small comfort for a good man whose family was killed by a drunk driver to know that while *this* world is an agony of pain for him, he will be rewarded by and by.

We are not the first Jews to believe that we live in an age of reason and must reject facile answers to complicated questions. One of our greatest teachers, the Rambam (Moses Maimonides, who lived in Andalucia, modern-day southern Spain, and later in Fostat, Egypt in the 12th century), was convinced that philosophical reasoning was the true path to God. For the Rambam, the goal of studying philosophy and of perfecting one's ability to reason was to be able to draw near to God's presence, to feel union with

God and thus to begin to at least glimpse God's immutable transcendence. In his work *The Guide to the Perplexed,* the Rambam says, in no uncertain terms, that when "*You-Know-What*" happens in this world, it has nothing whatsoever to do with God. God does not "cause" things to happen; God exists *outside* of time and space and does not interact with individuals; to think that God would do so is to basically misunderstand the nature of God. The Rambam insists that what happens to us is just happenstance, not connected to our actions or lack thereof. If one happens to be driving over a bridge which collapses during an earthquake, this is no more nor less than bad luck. If one were to ask the question: Where was God on September 11, 2001 or during the *Shoah* or during the Crusades or at countless dark times in the world's tragically painful history, the answer is, "You're asking the wrong question." Evil exists in the world, but not because of God. The Rambam calls evil a "privation," a clear demonstration that the perpetrator of evil is lacking in *knowledge*. We humans are mere flesh and blood; or, to utilize the Rambam's vernacular, we are made up of "matter," a condition of our lives *which is accompanied* by privations such as evil. How very contemporary this thought is! Clearly, some "privations" which occur are caused by nature, such as one's being struck by lightning. But for the Rambam, in general, the evil that exists in our world is our own doing. We seek to dominate others, and therefore, we start wars and treat those we deem our enemies with cruelty. Or, on a personal level, we over-indulge in food and drink and pay the consequences when our health takes a bad turn. We lust after material wealth instead of knowledge, and this path leads us to oppress our workers and others. These are not acts of God; they are the result of our being "matter" (flesh and blood), and matter is corruptible. The part of a human which is *incorruptible* is what the Rambam calls a

"form," which we could very roughly translate into our own notion of a "soul." The soul/form spends its existence yearning to be reunited with God, and the chances that it will do so increase as the form acquires knowledge of God through reason.

Does the Rambam's reasoning line up with our contemporary thinking on the issue of theodicy? Does it help us understand the evolving nature of Jewish civilization? While the Rambam's vocabulary and the neo-Platonic underpinnings of his religious constructs are mostly foreign to us, the answer is, well, kind of, after a fashion. We still struggle with ways in which to conceptualize God, and while we no longer look to Greek philosophy, the foundation of the Rambam's religious thought, to explain the basic structures of the universe, contemporary Jews are well served to consider the Rambam's concept of a non-temporal, non-corporeal, immutable God *who does not directly act in the lives of human beings*. According to the Rambam, *people* think that there must be a purpose for all things in the universe, including evil and tragedy, but he insists that a *perpetual, immutable, out of space and time Being* had no reason to create things in this world with a purpose, and thus it is pointless for us to try to understand why bad things happen. He also said something which I recently heard the Dalai Lama say in a somewhat different way. The Rambam said that people consider evil from their own viewpoints, and while it is very easy to feel overwhelmed by the bad, it is easier still for us to fail to notice all the good. Similarly, the Dalai Lama said on the television program I watched: "There are six billion people in the world; a few thousand of them are terrorists." We focus on the terrorists when logic would dictate that we should focus on the good, as it is present in overwhelming quantities when compared with the bad.

So, are we to be left with the Maimonidean/post-modernistic view that we should not even begin to *try* to understand the suffering that is in the universe? I think most progressive Jews today would agree with the Rambam that evil has nothing to do with God and that God has everything to do with *good*. But bad and even terrible things happen, and our hearts cannot be mended nor can our souls be soothed merely by the knowledge that God's hand was not in the disaster. As Jewish civilization has continued to evolve, we have come to understand our own need to create meaning out of suffering, and we do so by taking positive actions which serve as a counter-balance to the bad that happened. Ronald Reagan's press secretary James Brady's grievous injury by a handgun has led to this nation's most powerful anti-handgun lobbying group. Many, many others have turned personal tragedy into charitable foundations or political action. At the end of the day, it's not so much about what happened as about how we find ways to inject meaning into the grief-filled spaces following difficult and even tragic events.

We Jews have been influenced by the thinking of every age of Jewish civilization, and we continue to write the story and to seal it with a stamp from our own age which reflects our current needs and thinking as a people. *You-Know-What* will undoubtedly continue to happen, but we are blessed with a rich tradition and can call upon the thinking of our great sages such as the Rambam as we cope with contemporary challenges. We can reach back to the past and by reconstructing it, let it help to inform the present even as we develop new ways in which to understand the existential issues that we face today.

Sarah Newmark