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## Job Encounters the Machzor

Job--

Job

This summer I thought of Job.

When I learned of my dear friend's serious illness, I thought of Job. Like Job before him was, my friend is a righteous man.

When I told my friend this, he told me that he too has been thinking of Job.

Job along with Ecclesiastes are the Bible's two modern books. Together they are the books that reject the formulas and theologies offered in the Torah. You know the stories from Torah --the ones that promise rain for the crops if the mitzvot are followed. The ones that promise long life if you honor your parents, the ones that promise reward for the proper behavior.

The Torah is explicit- good behavior is rewarded. For example, in Deuteronomy we read:

"If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then ADONAI your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. 13 God will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. God will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land—your grain, new wine and olive oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you. 14 You will be blessed more than any other people; none of your men or women will be childless, nor will any of your livestock be without young. 15 ADONAI will keep you free from every disease."

This same formula also explicitly states that drought, disease, disaster of every sort is the result of failure to follow God's commandments. (Deuteronomy 7)

Sin, you see is punished.

Again, from Deuteronomy we read:

If you ever forget ADONAI your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. (Deut 8)

There are many such passages all telling us much the same thing--

crop failure, illness, plague, defeat and the like are divine punishment for some sin.

The rabbinic tradition--in large part accepts this formula. I say in large part but not exclusively.

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We, after all, read "schar mitzvah, mitzvah..."-- the reward of a mitzvah performed is the mitzvah itself.

But it is with Job and Ecclesiastes that the Torah is challenged from within its own corpus. It is as if the final editors of the Bible could not let the Bible stand alone without a Davar Acher-- another word. A not so fast. The system doesn't work that way.

Rain doesn't always fall for the righteous.

Prayer goes unanswered.

The race does not always go to the honest and fleet of foot.

Life is mysteriously and painfully random. Sometimes even, it is the wicked evildoer who succeeds—that one there who paid off the tax collector.

Job comes into our corpus as if to set the entire record straight--with his righteous behavior, his unyielding faith, his trenchant protest--his unswerving commitment to truth.

He has, after all, been seared by the most wounding of human experiences: loss of family, loss of fortune, afflicted with painful illness.

Job boldly asserts to anyone who will listen that even as he is plagued with affliction of all sort, they cannot be punishment for sin because he is blameless. Even God agrees that Job is free of sin.

So, this summer as the Holy Days approached and I thought of my friend and I thought of the Holy Days I came around to asking myself:

-What would Job do for the Holy Days?

Could he read the words "On Yom Kippur is it sealed, who shall live and who shall die....."What would I say to my friend?

Does Job stay home?

Does Job ignore the season and its call?

Would Job have given way to cynicism?

Would he think that the desire to be with community is for the weak?

Would he think that religion is for the naïve? prayer for the simple?

I think not.

Job would be here with us. My friend is in synagogue today.

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Job is much too strong for the easy path of cynicism. For Job cynicism is defeat. Job's faith and wisdom demand more. We must envision Job as brilliant and mighty.

And Job although alone—is no loner. He organizes feasts and celebrations. He welcomes his visiting friends. He is a social animal.

And Job is not afraid of the hardest of questions. Job comes to synagogue on these days because he wants God to know that he is watching--praying, striving, thinking deeply --seeking to understand the way of the world--seeking to discover the nature of the holy.

And finally, Job knows that prayer is not for the simple. He sees the complexity in the prayers and immediately seizes on THE one prayer-- Unetaneh tokef THE prayer of these days.:

ON ROSH HASHANAH IT IS WRITTEN

ON YOM KIPPUR IT IS SEALED

HOW MANY SHALL PASS ON, HOW MANY SHALL COME TO BE;

WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE;

WHO SHALL SEE RIPE AGE AND WHO SHALL NOT;

WHO SHALL PERISH BY FIRE AND WHO BY WATER;

WHO BY SWORD AND WHO BY BEATING;

WHO BY HUNGER AND WHO BY THIRST;

WHO BY EARTHQUAKE AND WHO BY PLAGUE;

WHO BY STRANGLING AND WHO BY STONING...

(IT CAN BE FOUND BEGINNING ON PAGE 208 AND ENDING ON PAGE 216 IN OUR PRAYER BOOKS)

Job seizes on this prayer. Let us do the same.

The prayer comes to us thru a legend from the Middle Ages. The story goes that Rabbi Amnon of Mayence in the 11th century was called on by the ruling authorities to convert to Christianity. He evades them but after some time, the rabbi is overcome with guilt and remorse for even considering this request—or demand to convert. He fails to appear before the court. Rabbi Amnon is thus punished, tortured and ultimately executed by the Church authorities. With his final breath of life, Rabbi Amnon is said to have spontaneously cried out this prayer which was magically transmitted to him by a long deceased Rabbi Kolonymos. A powerful tale for our prayers origin--but only a tale.

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What about Job? What is he thinking as he sits with the prayerbook open to this prayer?

At first blush, perhaps Job reads this prayer as a restatement of the theology of the Torah. God is the deciding judge with prayer, repentance and tzedakah as the path for hope. Job comes into the sanctuary to reject this –just as Job rejects the admonitions of his three friends.

As you know, in the course of the Book of Job, three friends come to visit Job, to offer him comfort for his losses, his suffering, his torment. The message of each of the friends comes in some way or another to be that Job's suffering is the result of his straying from God's righteous path even in some small way.

Job methodically rejects their reasoning no matter the good intentions with which it is offered.

In our setting, just as Job questions his friends' theology--Job asks questions of our prayer--

We ourselves ask these questions.

“Why do we say this prayer? How did the poet who wrote it read the prayer? How can I find the poet's voice?”

In simply asking these questions, Job is looking beyond the simplest reading that death and illness are punishment for sin. Job wants deeper answers.

Job finds a bit of consolation in the medieval commentator who wrote:

“ALL THAT IS CALLED “DEATH” IS FOR THE WICKED AND “LIFE” FOR THE RIGHTEOUS --REFERS TO THE LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME.”

In other words, the prayer does not refer to death in this life but in the world to come. The wicked get no life in the hereafter. Job likes this—but he sees this as a kind of evasion of what the prayer is saying.

Job studies Nachmanides who teaches that God's method of judging is beyond our capability of understanding. God, may, on Rosh Hashanah decide to reward the single good deed of an evil doer while the single sin of an otherwise fully righteous person may be punished.

Job considers this—It is not the simple weighing of all deeds. What judgment and justice means to God is very different from what judgment and justice means to us.

Job considers this and decides it absolutely unacceptable – it makes a kind of mockery of the way we try and live life. In defending God as a God of great mystery, this interpretation trivializes the meaning of righteousness, goodness and justice.

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Job learns how other commentators also found Nachmanides problematic:

"All these words (of NACHMANIDES) fail to bring satisfaction; indeed they are most astonishing. Is it acceptable to the mind that the patriarchs and prophets and other pious men who lived full and pleasant lives, when it comes time for them to ascend to the presence of God, should be referred to as evil ones—inscribed and sealed immediately for death? Or that a rogue who lives a long and evil life be described each year as a righteous one?" (Isaac Arama)

Job agrees that no interpretation can be allowed to make a mockery of our own earthly sense of justice.

This is the God that Job confronts in the whirlwind --that all powerful, all knowing infinite God that makes Job feel his own mortality and limitations in all ways. Job can accept this only from God—when God thunders at him—"Where were you when I created the world?" Job knows that he cannot understand God, but he simply cannot accept a prayer interpretation from another human being that proclaims only this and nothing else.

Job, you see, is a person of faith and **my** Job has been coming to synagogue for years. There is something in him that can never fully escape the prayer's grip. He too can be deeply moved by its magnificent words—their power to pierce the soul.

The prayer's utter conviction in the power of:

REPENTANCE

PRAYER AND

TZEDAKAH

Job does not want to give mere lip service to these words. What these words boldly proclaim is that change—personal change—real change—is possible for each one of us.

REPENTANCE is possible in our lives

PRAYER –can affect one deeply and move us to change

TZEDAKAH\GENEROSITY\ RIGHTEOUSNESS—can really redeem our very being.

The prayer is saying that we can change our lives by changing our behaviors.

Job likes that.

So, Job comes to this text with the ambivalence of a modern.

Phrases capture him—the overall theology deeply challenges.

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Job must go deeper to find an acceptable interpretation of the prayer. He asks what is in the heart of the poet? He discovers that, like his own life, the prayer is filled with contradictions and tensions.

Remember Claude Levi Strauss- Myth is about overcoming life's impossible contradictions.

Job discovers six tensions through which the poet expresses himself.

Please—you can follow Job-- (PAGE 208):

#### CONTRADICTION #1: GOD AS WRITER VS. GOD AS READER

(1) On the one hand: "GOD INSCRIBES, SEALS, RECORDS AND RECOUNTS"  
but on the other hand: " GOD OPENS UP THE BOOK AND READS WHAT IS WRITTEN THERE. (FOR EVERY HUMAN HAND LEAVES ITS MARK)"

In other words

GOD AS JUDGE VS GOD AS READER OF OUR BOOK.

God reads our signature.

The prayer says that

God opens SEFER ZICHRONOT--THE BOOK OF MEMORIES.

God is judge but we are HA-CHOTEM YOD. We are THE SEALERS.

We are not mere passive objects of judgment. Our hand is the hand that writes the book.

The poet is struggling to assert human will.

#### CONTRADICTION #2: GREAT SHOFAR VS. STILL, SMALL VOICE--(PAGE 210)

"THE GREAT SHOFAR IS SOUNDED"

VS.

"THE STILL SMALL VOICE IS HEARD"

Great shofar vs Gentle whisper

These are two ways of experiencing God.

The shofar and the mighty revelation of Sinai –for Job –this was the whirlwind.

VS.

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God talking very quietly

The God we seek can be almost impossible to hear. We have to find ways to listen as closely as we can to God's stirring in our lives. This Job fully believes. We need to learn to listen to the quiet—God in the garden in the quiet of the day.

CONTRADICTION #3: GOD AS JUDGE VS. GOD AS SHEPHERD

(ALSO Page 210)

THIS IS THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

God as judge -- DIN

VS.

God as Shepherd

The shepherd is the opposite of the judge

A shepherd is a loving protector.

The shepherd is the one who walks us through the valley of death.

JOB sees that the image of God as shepherd is an important one for the poet as it has unleashed the poet's claim that GOD IS ALSO A PROTECTOR!

In this framing, the poet has really gone to work.

The poet who composed this prayer, you see has inherited from the Mishnah the following: (RH 1:2)

"B'ROSH HASHANNAH KOL BA'EI OLAM OVRIM

LIFANAV K'VNEY MARON"

"ON ROSH HASHANNAH ALL OF CREATION PASSES BEFORE GOD LIKE TROOPS OF SOLDIERS" (THE MISHNAH'S COMMENTARY STATES-- "KMO GEDUD CHAYALIM SHEHU BAMINYAN"--"LIKE A REGIMENT OF SOLDIERS THAT IS BEING COUNTED).

By transforming this image into one of a shepherd the poet was trying to change the meaning—the shepherd looks after the flock. The shepherd protects whereas the army musters its troops to go to war.

CONTRADICTION #4: FINAL JUDGEMENT VS. POSSIBILITY FOR CHANGE (PAGE 212-213)

IT IS WRITTEN

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IT IS SEALED

Again an idea that the poet inherited from rabbinic texts.

VS.

“REPENTANCE, PRAYER AND TZEDAKAH  
TSHUVAH, TEFILLA AND TZEDAKAH  
CAN CHANGE THE DECREE”

There is final judgment

BUT

There is something we can do to change the decree.

This emphasizes a different rabbinic understanding.

CONTRADICTION #5: WHO WILL DIE VS. GOD DOES NOT WANT DEATH

“WHO WILL LIVE AND WHO WILL DIE”—(Including the famous list of how people will suffer their deaths)

VS.

--And here we have to deal with a VERY challenging translation--

PAGE 214 SHOULD READ: LO TACHPOTZ B-MOTE HA-MATE

YOU DO NOT DESIRE THE DEATH OF THOSE WHO DIE (OUR TRANSLATION READS, "You do not wish the death of sinners..." )

God does not want death. THIS IS HUGE!

"THOU HAST NO DESIRE FOR ANYONE TO DIE" Is the reading in the standard translation of the old Orthodox Birnbaum Machzor. (Our MACHZOR, as others, wants to try and edge this line towards a plea for repentance.)

CONTRADICTION #6: WE ARE DUST VS. WE ARE ETERNAL BEINGS (PAGE 214-216)

“WE ARE BUT FLESH AND BLOOD”

“WE ARE DUST...”

In other words—we are fragile mortals

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VS.

“ATAH MELECH CHAI U=KAYAM” “YOU ARE ETERNAL”

“GOD IS ETERNITY “

THIS ONE BECOMES THE CLINCHER FOR JOB.

Job reads this prayer with great care. There is a lot at stake for him as a worshipping faithful Jew. As the prayer unfolds its secrets to him, he sees its stunning brilliance and its artistry. He reads it slowly and he re-reads it—trying to grasp it all. Job sees himself and his life in this prayer. He is stunned. For he sees that the poet is citing and refuting, citing and refuting the inherited reward and punishment theology. He sees the prayer as his own debate with Torah.

Job sees that the prayer is set within the KEDUSHAT HA SHEM, the prayer that declares God’s name to be holy. The last three words tell it all —“SHMEINU KARATA B'SHMECHA”—“OUR NAMES ARE LINKED TO YOURS.” Our names—our very names are called out when we call out God’s name—our names are read into God’s. We are linked to God’s holiness.

This is our climax—our eternity.

Job sees the poet’s claim—in our very mortality, we are linked to God. This is the reason for its placement in the PRAYERBOOK --THE KEDUCHAT HA SHEM WHEREIN WE DECLARE GOD’S ETERNAL HOLINESS. UNETANEH TOKEF is about our human measure of immortality.

Job sees this.

Whether I live or die is not the measuring rod. No matter what the length of my days, I am connected to God. We all will pass on—mortality comes to all of us but Job, thru this prayer, comes to see that although he –like every other mortal was not there at creation--All humanity, each and every individual life is yet linked to God. GOD TOUCHES ALL OF US.

We are all images of God.

We are each like God in our ability to love, to create, to cry. This is how we are linked to the ETERNAL. When we live our lives in a holy fashion we are seeking to merit that linkage. This is the challenge and opportunity that separates us from the rest of creation. This is the very source of our holiness.

These Holy Days ask us to ask ourselves –are we worthy of that divinity that is within us? Do we live by that connection?

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UNETANEH TOKEF becomes a most powerful prayer for all of us when we can read it through the wisdom of Job as the poet's retelling of Job's great protest against his friends—his stand in protest against God. Death is real. It is part of the universe—water, fire, flood, earthquake.

But the poem comes to comfort—

ALO TACHPOTZ B'MOT HA MET

GOD DOES NOT WANT DEATH

SHMEINU KARATA B=SHMECHA

OUR NAMES ARE LINKED TO GOD'S ETERNITY

OUR NAMES ARE LINKED TO GOD'S

WE EACH TOUCH ETERNITY.

Claude Levi Strauss has it-

Myth is about resolving impossible irresolvable-contradictions.

thesis- anti-thesis This is Unetaneh Tokef

Mortal Human and Immortal God

A God Who Does not want Death and the Inevitability of Death

Synthesis-

SHMEINU KARATA B'SHMECHA

We are linked to God in God's immortality

OR--AS PHILOSOPHER WILLIAM JAMES SAID, BUT IN DIFFERENT WORDS--

WE HUMAN BEINGS ARE JUST THAT DEEPLY HUMAN AND THERE IS SOMETHING WITHIN US THAT LONGS FOR A SENSE OF CONNECTION TO THAT

"something in the universe that throws the last stone..."

OUR LIVES ARE BOOKS OF LIFE-

MAY WE WRITE IN THEM ONLY WHAT WE WISH OTHERS TO READ.

GMAR CHATIMAH TOVAH-MAY YOU BE INSCRIBED FOR A GOOD YEAR