

“It’s God’s Will”

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The moment is tense: The children of Israel tremble in fear before the Prime Minister of Egypt, who suddenly reveals himself as Joseph, the brother they had sold into Egyptian bondage. What else should they think? Of course, Joseph is going to have them killed now. After manipulating them into bringing their youngest brother, his only full-blood sibling, to Egypt, Joseph can now send for his beloved father. He can be rid of his life-long nemeses for good!

Instead, Joseph tells his brothers not to worry. Yes, he suffered for many years, even as a slave in prison, before interpreting Pharaoh’s dream and being promoted to exalted office. Still, Joseph comforts his brothers. “It’s all God’s will,” he tell them. God, not the brothers, sent him to Egypt, with a plan to save Egypt, not to mention Joseph’s own family, from death by starvation.

For moderns like you and me, Joseph’s theology is hard to swallow. God planned the whole thing? Really? Are we to believe that the brothers are mere puppets, unwittingly acting on God’s behalf, when they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelite slave traders? What about their jealousy over the coat of many colors, which their father had given Joseph to identify his favorite son, stirring the brothers’ jealousy? Are the brothers not responsible for their sinful actions?

This story doesn’t stand alone. The implication of Joseph’s statement is that everything that happens is God’s will. That’s a phrase we hear often, particularly here in the Bible belt.

A person has lost his job, but takes that in stride, since what seems to be a misfortune is really “God’s will.” Another has accepted a new position, and is excited about the new place to which “God” has led her.

One person praises God for curing deadly illness. Another accepts “God’s will” that death is near. A third, with life in the balance, calmly expresses preparedness to accept whatever God has in store.

We are troubled. Is God really the source of all good and evil, blessing and misfortune?

A married couple of terrorists, inspired by an extremist, violent perversion of their faith, walks into a social service center, massively armed, brutally

murdering fourteen innocents in cold blood. Did God plan that horrific crime and the resulting tragedy?

At the last minute, a Parisian decided not to go to that concert, and therefore escaped the carnage wrought by terrorists there. Did God choose for that particular person's life to be saved, rather than somebody else's?

If Joseph's brothers aren't responsible for selling him into slavery, why should terrorists be held any more responsible?

And what about events that our insurance policies might call "acts of God?" If a tornado tears through one house, leveling it to the foundation, while leaving the one next door unscathed, does God choose one family to be devastated and the other, unharmed?

Complicating matters further still, we should consider our good fortune. We know how babies are made, but is the birth of a child a "miracle," that is to say, "God's will;" or is it no more than a natural, biological phenomenon? If we reap the benefit of a really good business decision, or our home's value appreciates beyond our wildest expectations, does God deserve the credit?

Is everything that happens, "God's will?"

Laying out the questions is much easier than answering. We are, after all, known as Israel, *Yisrael*, meaning "one who struggles with God." Finding answers won't be a simple task, but will require God-wrestling. Let me see, though, if I can take you through it, perhaps even with Joseph's help.

The brothers will dread Joseph's revenge again in next week's Torah portion. There, after the death of his father, Joseph's brothers fear that now, at long last, Joseph will mete out the punishment they deserve. Instead, Joseph replies, "Though you intended me harm, God intended it for good, in order to accomplish what is now the case, to keep alive a numerous people." Joseph seems to suggest that human free will and God's active hand can coexist.

We could choose to take Joseph's words literally: While understanding that this brothers acted with malice aforethought, he seems to believe God to be the real actor, utilizing the brothers' evil for divine purpose. Perhaps that's what a person means when saying that God willed that loss of a job. Sure, the newly unemployed person is angry about losing the job. Depending on the circumstances, she may feel at least partially responsible. Still, she sees even this

depending of her life as a place to which God has taken her, albeit through her own actions and those of others.

Another way to look at Joseph's words is metaphorically. Yes, his brothers meant him harm. By saying that "God intended it for good," Joseph is affirming that God offers him the possibility of making something good out of the grievous wrong done to him.

Similarly, consider the task of Scott Cowan, the President of Tulane University, after Hurricane Katrina devastated his city and threatened the future of the university he led. Challenged to chart a course for the university to survive, President Cowan took bold steps. He refashioned Tulane in ways that would not have been possible had Katrina not decimated its community. To cite but one example, President Cowan instituted service learning as a keystone of the Tulane education, with every student required to engage in service that improves New Orleans, a program that has become a national model.

Scott Cowan is a Reform Jew. I seriously doubt that he would say, "God sent Hurricane Katrina to improve Tulane," or New Orleans. In fact, he probably wouldn't suggest that God is responsible for unleashing the hurricane at all, at least not at that specific place and time. After all, we understand geography and weather patterns, and we also now know that the New Orleans levees were in deplorable condition. The catastrophe was just that. Still, God has created the world in such a way that hurricanes can cause horrible devastation. If so, then God has empowered us, human beings, God's partners in creation, to fashion something beautiful even out of a horrible circumstance, be it the most damaging hurricane in human history or being sold into Egyptian bondage.

No, none of us is going to be sold into Egypt. We pray that we will never face devastation like Katrina or the tragic results of terror like the victims of San Bernardino and their families. We may, though, face financial reversals. We will lose loved ones. We will get sick. We may lose our job, perhaps more than once. No, I don't believe that's God's will. At the same time, I affirm that God wills that we find blessing, or create blessing, out of whatever does befall us.

Joseph believes he has been richly blessed, even before his brothers arrive at his Egyptian doorstep. After all, he has been granted a magnificent gift, the ability to interpret dreams. That talent has landed him in a position of power, with the opportunity to save countless lives. Still, when Pharaoh has him rushed out of

the dungeon, asking Joseph to interpret his dreams, Joseph responds with humility: “Without me,” he says, “God will see to Pharaoh’s well-being.”

Of course, Joseph does go ahead to let Pharaoh tell him the dreams. Joseph interprets. Joseph accepts the job that Pharaoh offers. Joseph understands both his abilities and their ultimate source. Unlike his brothers in their youth, Joseph intends to use his power for good. After all, God creates humanity in the divine image so that we may do work here on Earth, work that God cannot do if we are to have free will. Joseph understands God’s will. So may we all, whether confronting unpleasantness or counting our blessings. As Joseph says, “It’s God’s will.”

Amen.