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# Theodicy

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# THEODICY

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After college, I bounced back and forth between MIT and Yale. First, I took a year of economics at MIT. Then I returned to Yale (where I had been an undergraduate) and started law school in the fall of 1982. Soon after law school classes started, I made my way over to Yale Hillel and asked if there were any Talmud classes that I could take. An undergraduate woman looked at me suspiciously and asked me why I was interested in taking the class. She surmised (correctly) that I was not Jewish. I deadpanned that I hoped to help destroy Judaism through intermarriage.

A less snarky response concerns my love of gearhead basketball. When I was at MIT, a large proportion of the econ grad students would meet on Friday mornings to play a fairly physical brand of basketball. I had the pleasure of exchanging elbows with some of the greatest economists in the world today. One day, I happened to see in the MIT newspaper an ad for “Torah and chocolates.” I noticed that the meetings were on Friday, just after basketball was over, and the MIT Hillel was on my path back to the department, so I thought I’d give it a try. I was raised (and confirmed) as an Episcopalian. But even though I was an agnostic graduate student, I wanted to deepen my Biblical literacy. And I thought a close reading of text would stand me in good stead for law school the next year.

When I started law school, it was natural to take the next step and try to find a Talmud class. Yale Hillel had just what I was looking for. Rabbi Jim Ponet taught a course in English that collected an eclectic group that was diverse academically and spiritually. Some of the students were observant Orthodox Jews who began and ended each session by kissing the text; others, like me, approached the meetings much more as a theoretical exercise. Ponet’s class seemed to pull students from all fields of study. We had philosophy students, med students, divinity students, and more than one law student. Together, we spent hours parsing a different kind of legal text. I loved the disputatious tone of inquiry—where we were asked to join the sages in constantly questioning any claim with “why should that be true?”

But my attitude toward the class abruptly changed in the spring of my first year when my mother was struck by an unrelenting series of multiple sclerosis attacks. My mom had been suffering from MS for more than a decade. Three or four times a year, she would experience attacks of numbness in her arms or legs that would normally last for two or three weeks. But this time instead of numbness, my mom’s body started to cramp. Thirty or forty times a day, my mom’s entire left side would severely seize, bending her hand, arm and leg up and down her left side into painful contortions. I remember standing next to her bed in the hospital, holding her hand during one of these attacks, and feeling like this frail, bed-ridden woman might break the bones in my fingers as the cramping vise that had been her hand tightened involuntarily.

Even today, my heart aches at the memory of her pain, coupled with the tortuous knowledge that another cramp was just a few minutes away. After several days of this repeated cramping, the muscles on her left side were shred

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into constant agony. And there was very little that my dad, sister, or I could do to help.

[I came up with a small palliative that put me at loggerheads with the hospital. I brought in a couple of heating pads to wrap around her cramping arm and leg. The number of cramps immediately subsided—from thirty or forty a day, to ten to fifteen per day. But when I came in on the third day, I was enraged to find the heating pads were gone and my mom's more frequent attacks were once again back. The hospital said that electric heating pads were dangerous and after twelve hours finally installed incredibly cumbersome and less effective pads which circulated warm water around my mother's arms and legs. But then again, maybe I was looking for someone or something to lash out against.]

The big surprise is what happened when I returned to school and tried going back to Talmud class. While many people in the class analyzed the text as literature or, sociologically, as the word of humans searching for meaning in life, I had preferred to treat the text as the word of God. For me, it was more interesting to try to find the meaning of God's message and to struggle to reconcile seeming contradictions and ambiguities. But after seeing my mom's tribulations, I couldn't bring myself to play this interpretative game anymore. I remember feeling the overwhelming desire to end each of my comments with the caveat "but of course this is all bullshit." I suppressed this urge. But I didn't go back to the class after that first attempt. (And I never explained to Rabbi Ponet my sudden absence).

I couldn't understand why a just, all-powerful God would subject my mother to this pain. This philosophical difficulty was not new to me. I had read and reread the Grand Inquisitor chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov* long before I had taken Torah or Talmud. But living it, seeing it, feeling it as my mother's hand tightened around my own left an impression that changed my view of what I thought was largely an intellectual exercise. It is often said that adversity drives us toward God—that there are no atheists in foxholes. But for me, seeing my mother's undeserved and needless pain drove me away from a belief in a just, all-powerful God.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, I remember thinking if God does exist, we are truly made in His image in that our capacity to do evil may resemble that same capacity in our Heavenly Father. I did not consider the possibility that we are made in God's image in a different way: perhaps God's powers are limited just as ours are.<sup>2</sup> God might exist and be both good and just, but not able to prevent evil in the

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<sup>1</sup> My reaction might also suggest a role for secular chaplains, who can counsel the grief stricken from a shared belief that God may not exist. The mere possibility that professional psychologists or grief counsels may believe in God could limit their ability to counsel those with little faith. Adelphi, Columbia, and Harvard have appointed secular or humanist chaplains in part to provide just this service. See Secular Student Alliance, *Humanist Chaplains?* (July 10, 2007), <http://www.secularstudents.org/node/1552>.

<sup>2</sup> GREGG EASTERBROOK, *BESIDE STILL WATERS: SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN AN AGE OF DOUBT* (1999).

ways we desire. The same empathetic pain I felt as I helplessly watched my mother suffer might also be shared by God.

My mom died in 2004. Her massive seizures during my first year were the last truly painful attacks she ever had. From that point on, she remained bed-ridden and slowly lost feeling and motor control of her limbs. But she was largely pain-free and mentally sharp as a tack. She retired the undefeated crossword puzzle champion of our family. My law professor bride, Jennifer Brown, and I were legally married at her bedside in 1993.

During law school, I would have told you that none of this impacted my view of law—that I successfully compartmentalized my personal and intellectual lives. But as I look back across the decades, I am now not so sure. Indeed, the center of the story is a failure to compartmentalize my mother's pain and my Talmud discussion. I now wonder whether my turning from God was also a turning toward law as a bulwark against evil. As a world weary fifty-year-old, I'm amazed that a young Ian Ayres could be so exorcised by a classroom discussion. Notwithstanding this history, I find myself today teaching Sunday school (for the third year) at an Episcopalian church, with my son as a co-teacher and my daughter as one of the "Teen Bible Study" students. And yes, when we weekly read the chapter and verse, my dominant interpretive approach is still to try to understand the text as the word of God.

