

Faith & Doubt

Opening Questions to throw out for Class Discussion

Does the world seem fair to you?

Do you think there is a lot of good in the world or a lot of evil?

Do you feel comfortable as a Jew questioning God about certain events that happen in the world?

Examples of Questioning God in Tanach:

1) Avraham objects to perceived injustice regarding God’s imminent plans to destroy Sodom, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” (Bereishit 18:25)

2) After Moshe follows God’s instruction to request Bnei Yisrael’s liberation from Paroah, the king increases their workload which incites their rage and resentment against Moshe. Moshe protests against God, “Lord, why have You dealt evil to this people? Why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Paroah to speak in Your name, he has dealt evil with this people; neither have You delivered Your people at all.” (Shemot 5:22-23)

3) Yirmiyahu challenges God regarding the general injustice of the prosperity of the wicked, “Right would You be, O Lord, were I to contend with You, yet I will reason with You: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are they all secure who deal very treacherously?” (Yirmiyahu 12:1) He later questions God on a more personal level about his own suffering, “Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, so that it refuses to be healed? Will You indeed be to me as a deceitful brook, as waters that fail?” (Yirmiyahu 15:18)

1. From the above sources what can you extrapolate when it comes to questioning God’s ways?

2. What is a common denominator in the questions of the 3 examples? What are some differences?

Now examine the following source:

אלה אזכרה Excerpt of Piyut

עוד הוא מדבר ומתאוונן ובוכה ומקונן, נשקפה בתו של הקיסר בעד החלון וראתה יפיו של ר' ישמעאל כהן גדול ונכמרו רחמיה עליו ושלחה לאביה ליתן לה שאלה ובקשה אחת. ושלח לה הקיסר בתי כל אשר תאמרי אעשה חוץ מר' ישמעאל וחביריו. שלחה לו אבקש ממך להחיות את נפשו, שלח לה כבר נשבעתי. שלחה לו אבקשך אי"כ שתצוה להפשיט את עור פניו כדי להסתכל בו במקום מראה, מיד צוה להפשיט את עור פניו, וכיון שהגיע למקום תפילין צעק צעקה גדולה ומרה ונודעו שמים וארץ, צעק פעם שנייה ונודעו כסא הכבוד. אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה צדיק כזה שהראית לו כל גנוי העולם עליונים ורזי תחתונים יהרג במיתה משונה מזה הרשע, זו תורה וזו שכרה!? אמר להם הניחו לו שתעמוד זכותו לדורות שלאחריו. אמר הקב"ה מה אעשה לבני, גזירה היא ואין מי שיפר אותה. יצאה ב"ק ואמרה, אם אשמע קול אחר אהפוך את כל העולם לתהו ובהו.

Caesar asked him, "What is this all about? Who is this old man that you are crying over him so much? You should rather be crying for yourself". Rabbi Yishmael answered, "I am not crying for myself because my friend was greater than me in Torah and wisdom. I am crying because he preceded me to the Heavenly Yeshiva". While he was still speaking, mourning, crying and lamenting, Caesar's daughter peeked out of the window. She saw the beauty of Rabbi Yishmael the Cohen Gadol, and her mercy was aroused. She sent a message to her father asked him to grant her a single request. Caesar replied with a message that she could have anything she wanted apart from Rabbi Yishmael and his friends. She sent a message to her father to spare the life of Rabbi Yishmael. Caesar replied that he had already taken an oath to kill him. She sent him another message, "if so, my request is that you command them to flay the skin off his face so that I can look at it instead of into a mirror". Immediately Caesar commanded to flay the skin from his face. When they reached the place of his tefillin Rabbi Yishmael cried *eleh ezkera*: the midrash of the ten martyrs 34 אלה אזכרה 35 a loud and bitter cry which shook the heavens and earth. He cried a second time and shook the Heavenly Throne. The angels said to God, "Should a righteous person such as this; whom you have shown all the secrets of the upper worlds and the lower worlds, be killed in such an abnormal manner? This is the Torah and this is its reward?" God replied, "Leave him, so that his merit can extend for many generations. What else can I do? It has been decreed and there is nobody to annul it." A voice came out from Heaven and said, "If I hear any more cries I will return the whole universe to chaos and emptiness"..

1. Is this source in line with what we have learned above? Explain why yes or no

2. If you see these sources as conflicting, what key factor can explain why there is no conflict? Think about who is asking the question in each source...

Take a look at the following insight of Rav Elya Meir Bloch (October 23 1894-January 22 1955, Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe Yeshiva in Cleavland)

ואמר רבי יוחנן, מאי דכתיב: "ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה" — בקשו מלאכי השרת לומר שירה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעשה ידי טובעין בים, ואתם אומרים שירה!

And similarly, Rabbi Yohanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "And the one came not near the other all the night" (Exodus 14:20)? The ministering angels wanted to sing their song, for the angels would sing songs to each other, as it states: "And they called out to each other and said" (Isaiah 6:3), but the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: The work of My hands, the Egyptians, are drowning at sea, and you wish to say songs?

R' Bloch noted that this Gemara seems to difficult to reconcile in light of the fact that we do recite Hallel in Shul during the days of Pesach.

Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch explains that we know that a Angel can only perform one task from Hashem at a time and that mission makes up his entire essence. A Angel is therefore unable to experience a nuanced emotion of feeling two things at the same time. Hashem therefore wanted them to specifically feel the loss of His handiwork. However, human beings are, by nature, nuanced in that they have both physical elements and spiritual elements. They are therefore able to experience two opposite feelings at the same time. Therefore, we were able to sing Hashem because it didn't take away from the fact that the handiwork of Hashem drowned.

How does this insight of R' Bloch help us understand God's reaction to man questioning Him versus an Angel questioning Him?

Idea to bring out with students: God created humans to have emotions, to have feelings, to sense injustice & conflict. Humans are not angels. Humans are not expected to be robotic. Humans are nuanced & complex. Therefore God does not get "angry" at man for questioning Him for God created man to feel that discomfort & to have the need to ask such a question.

Let us see how R' Sacks expresses this idea & additional insight we can gain into our understanding of the role of expressing questions to God:

"In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be. Faith lies not in the answer but the question – and the greater the human being, the more intense the question." (To Heal a Fractured World p. 27)

Questions for students

1. Does R' Sacks view questioning God as part of being human?
2. How does questioning God express faith in God? If you didn't believe in God, would you question Him?