

Sparks

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Why is life so difficult? Making Peace with Our Battle

In this week's portion, Jacob asks for peace and relaxation but G-d had another plan.

"Jacob settled (down) in the land of his father's dwellings, in the Land of Caanan"
~~Genesis (37:1)

The commentary Rashi explains:

"Jacob wanted to settle down in tranquility but then the ordeal of his son Joseph (sale into slavery) fell upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility but G-d says 'Is it not enough for the righteous what has been prepared for them (reward) in the World to Come that they need to seek tranquillity also in this world!'"

Why is life so difficult?

Some people turn to G-d and religion, hoping to find refuge from all the turbulence of life, from doubt, from inner conflicts and mental turmoil. They want instant inner peace, spiritual contentment, and tranquillity for their troubled souls.

According to Kabbalah, that is not the purpose of life on earth. In fact, it is just the opposite. We have been dropped right in the middle of the stormy seas of daily living. We are confronted with the problems from within and without. And we are commanded to fix them and ourselves. The theme of life is precisely about embracing the difficulties of life and rising to the challenges.

Why did G-d create such an imperfect world filled with imperfect people?

The very first verse of the Book of Genesis tells us: "In the beginning G-d created heaven and earth, and earth was in a state of chaos." This sounds like G-d did a pretty crummy job. The minute He creates the world, it's already in a state of chaos.

But the truth is that G-d did a perfect job. What's perfect about this world is the chaos! It's the perfect place for growth. It's the perfect place for challenge. It's the perfect setting for triumph. It is the perfect stage for an exciting drama about personal transformation.

This world is meant to be difficult, and your life on earth is meant to be a struggle, filled with adventure, challenge, and victory. This is your divine mission if you are willing to accept it. And if you accept it, you will have the power to succeed.

Are You Ready to Play Your Part?

The Torah, in the Book of Genesis, makes an outlandish claim. It says that G-d created us in His image. What's that supposed to mean? G-d created you and me in His image in the same way that an author creates all his characters in his image. Each character in the story expresses a different aspect of the author. Even the interaction between the characters is in some way an unfolding of the truth of the author.

Every good story, however, has a problems and problem characters who create all the tension. Why? Because the problem and the antagonist play the essential role of bringing out the inner selves of all the other characters. That's an important factor. The difficulties help the characters in the story reveal their deepest selves -- rise to their challenges and demonstrate extraordinary courage, tremendous fortitude, and new commitment.

The Talmud refers to the evil forces in the universe as the yeast in the dough. Yeast consists of microscopic fungal organisms. Who wants to eat fungal organisms? But it's the yeast in bread dough that acts as a catalyst to make the dough rise. So, too, evil was created in the world to be a catalyst for the growth and personal enrichment of others. It, too, is serving the author within the context of the whole story.

The *Zohar*, the classic work of Kabbalah, metaphorically describes the power of evil in the world as a prostitute who has been hired by the king to seduce his son, the prince. Of course the king does not want her to succeed. However, he wants to create an opportunity for the prince to realize his own royal integrity by resisting this great temptation and choosing to act in the way that is befitting his nobility. Until this test, the son's royal status was merely an inherited title and a wardrobe of regal clothing but not the genuine expression of himself, accomplished through the power of his own choices and determined efforts.

The antagonist in every story is actually providing the opportunities for the other characters to make great choices that embody great goodness. He is actually serving the best interest of all the other characters, and, of course, the author (whom the story is really all about).

In truth, every character is serving the author. However, some characters are serving the author directly, as direct expressions of himself in the world he created. And some are serving the author indirectly by creating opportunities for others to be of direct service.

This is the essence of all choices of every character. To serve or not to serve is not the question, and it is not the choice. Every character serves the author. The choice is only about how you serve—directly, playing the hero or heroine, or indirectly, playing the villain.

And what difference does it make if you serve directly or indirectly? It really does not make a difference to the author—his story will be written. But it sure does make a difference to you, the character. Your choices determine not only the outcome of your final scene but also the quality of your life throughout the whole story.

As we all know, the good guys win in the end. Sure, they might lose some battles along the way, but they always win the war. However, even when they appear to be losing, often they are really winning, because in every moment of their struggle they achieve personal transformation and enjoy a profound sense of identification with the author.

The Talmud teaches that the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, which is the feminine manifestation of G-d, desires to live in this world. How? Through you and me when we choose to follow the

commandments and directly serve G-d, the Author. This is not the case for the villain. He is not only heading for the worst ending but even his journey, the quality of his daily living, is devoid of the divine fulfillment that life in this imperfect world offers.

The villain gets clobbered in the end. He may think he is a winner, but all his apparent successes are only setting him up for his ultimate demise. Worse than the great punishment that awaits him in the final scene is the pain he suffers daily over his existential insecurity. He is not striving to grow, overcome evil, and choose goodness. He is not interested in using his imperfections as a starting point toward becoming more perfect and thereby serving G-d and being His agent.

Therefore, the villain denies himself the greatest pleasure of all—living a life filled with G-d’s Presence. His soul is alienated from its Divine Source, and his inner world has no connection with G-d’s absolute reality and is therefore devoid of any lasting value or meaning.

In the world at large he may have much money, live in an elegant mansion, wear the most expensive and latest fashions, and act out all his sexual fantasies. But his inner world is hell. Indeed, he creates his own hell. *“The evil ones are like the driven sea that cannot rest, and its waters throw up mire and mud. There is no peace, says G-d to the wicked”* (Isaiah 57: 20–21).

Often, when people pick up the Bible and read about serving G-d, they feel put off, feeling: Why would I want to *serve* G-d? Be *servile*? It seems kind of demeaning. But if you're a character in the story, how could you not want to serve the author? It's who you are. And it's the greatest honor in the world.

What does it mean to serve the author directly?

It means that I am a vehicle for the expression of the author in this story. I can't wait to serve the author, because the more I serve the author, the more the author's presence permeates my very being, and the more I discover that I am actually a spark of the author. It's not about obedience. It's about self-expression. It's about who you are, why you are, who G-d is, and why He creates.

Using this metaphor of author-character, you can start looking at your life a little differently. You can say to yourself, “I really want to serve a higher purpose. I really want to fit into the greater story. I really want to directly serve G-d, the Author, and play my part the best way possible. All the problems in my life are really opportunities to be more. ”

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