

Confrontations with God: Theological Protest in the Bible and Midrash

Rabbi Dr. Joshua Brumbach
rebyosh@simchatyisrael.org

THEOLOGICAL PROTEST AND WHY IT MATTERS

- a. Theological Protest = An attempt to make sense of human suffering and injustice.
 - i. Originates within biblical stories of Moses, Abraham, David, Jeremiah and Job (among others).
 - ii. Such figures regularly voiced their frustrations with perceived divine unethical action and injustice.
- b. The Covenantal Relationship
 - i. The very identity of Israel as a people is birthed out of this relationship, in a relational tension, as indicated by the very word “Israel” itself (Gen. 32:25-31).
- c. Protest ≠ Blasphemy
- d. Faith as Protest

EXAMPLES OF AMPLIFYING PROTESTS IN MIDRASH TEHILLIM

Psalm 22:2-3

אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֵי לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי רְחוֹק מִיִּשְׁוּעָתִי דְּבָרִי שִׁאֲגָתִי:

2 *My God, my God, why have You abandoned me;
why so far from delivering me and from my anguished roaring?*

אֱלֹהֵי אֶקְרָא יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה וְלֹא תַעֲנֶנּוּ וְלֹא־דַמְיָה לִּי:

3 *My God, I cry by day — but You answer not;
by night, and I have no respite.*

Midrash Tehillim 22.6

וכיון שאמרה בקול גדול **אלי אלי למה עזבתני**, מיד נענית: **אלהי אקרא יומם ולא תענה**. אמרה להקב"ה כך עשית לאבותינו במצרים, ולא כיון שצעקי שמעת, שנאמר (שמות ג ז) **ואת צעקתם שמעתי**. ... אבל אנו צמנו זה שלושת ימים, והתפללנו וצעקנו וקראנו ולא עניתנו. אין בנו מעשים טובים עשה עמנו למען קדושת שמך. **ואתה קדוש יושב תהלות ישראל**:

It was only when Esther called out in a loud voice, *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*, that You immediately answered. *My God, I call out by day, but there is no response* (Ps. 22:3), Esther said to the Holy One, blessed be He. You responded to our ancestors in Egypt, but not us. When they cried out, You heard them, as it is said, *I have heard their cries* (Ex. 3:7). ... But for us who have been fasting for these three days, and praying, crying, and calling, You do not answer us. Even if there be no good deeds in us, deal mercifully with us for the sanctification of Your Name. *For You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel* (Ps. 22:4).¹

¹ All translations of Midrash Tehillim are my own, based upon Solomon Buber's 1897 Hebrew edition.

Midrash Tehillim 22.18

דבר אחר אלי למה עזבתני. אלי בים אלי בסיני למה עזבתני. למה נשתנה עלי סידורו של עולם וסידורן של אמהות. מה שרה אמנו על ידי שנשבית לילה אחת לקה הוא וכל ביתו שנאמר (בראשית יב יז) וינגע ה' את פרעה נגעים גדולים ואת ביתו. אמרה אסתר ואני נתונה בחיקו של אותו רשע כל השנים הללו למה אין אתה עושה לי נסים. אלי אלי למה עזבתני.

Another interpretation. *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?* (Ps. 22:2). Esther said: *My God, You were at the Sea, my God, You were at Sinai. Why have You forsaken me?* Why should the order of things turn out differently for me, or the order of the matriarchs? Wasn't our mother Sarah taken for only one night unto [Pharaoh], and he and all of his house [were afflicted with great plagues]? As it is said, *The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife* (Gen. 12:17). But Esther answered: I was given into the embrace of that wicked person for all these years, yet for me, You do no miracles. *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*

EXAMPLES OF TRANSFORMING PROTESTS IN MIDRASH TEHILLIM

Midrash Tehillim 38.1

מי שאינו יודע להכות כופתו ומכהו במקל על מח, או על העיניים, ומי שיודע להכות כופתו ומכהו על גבו, ולא על גבי ראשו, ולא על גבי עינו, שלא יסמא את עינו, אלא מכה במקום שאין בו סכנה. וכן הוא אומר (זכריה יג ו) **מה המכות האלה בין ידיך, [ואמר] אשר הכית בית מאהבי, מה המכות האלה גרמו לי להאהב להקדוש ברוך הוא.**

Whoever does not know how to properly flog a person, binds him up and hits him on the head or between the eyes with a stick. And whoever does know how to flog a person binds him and strikes him on his body, not on the top of his head and not between the eyes, so as not to blind him in his eyes. Rather, he strikes him on a part of his body (lit. 'in a place') where there is no danger to him. As it is said, "*What are these wounds between your hands?*" And he replies, *'They are the wounds I received in the house of my friend'* (Zech. 13:6)." What is the cause of my wounds? [They are the result of] loving the Holy One, Blessed be He.

Midrash Tehillim 120.7

אני שלום וכי אדבר וגו'. מהו אני שלום כך אמר הקב"ה למשיח (שם ב ט) תרועם בשבט ברזל וגו'. א"ל רבונו של עולם לאו אלא בשלום אני פותח לדבר לגוים. לכך נאמר אני שלום וכי אדבר וגו'.

I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war (Ps. 120:7). What is meant by *I am for peace*? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Messiah: *You shall break them [the nations] with an iron rod, shatter them like a potter's vessel* (Ps. 2:9). The Messiah replied: Master of the Universe, I will not. Rather, I will go and speak peacefully to the nations, as it is said, *I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war*.