

Bradley's drisha

By Bradley Sonnenberg

The underlying theme of this parsha is that through God one can find meaning. If one accepts God through the exercise of free will, then one's life has purpose. If one does not, then the consequences are severe.

At its core this parsha is about meaning. When God says " , " he is telling people the only way to have a meaningful life is to follow his laws. I find this troubling and difficult to reconcile with the supposed sentiment of free will espoused in the Torah.

God offers man a "no choice choice." God says, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life" But what sort of choice is this? You can pick one or the other—life or death. Seriously, I wonder how many of you guys would say you would rather be cursed and dead. In the very next breath, we are told that those that would think "I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart" are deluded and will be cursed for their infidelity. That is not a choice. If you accept this notion of punishment as a consequence of faltering faith then the meaning of suffering is lack of faith, while escape from suffering is in "choosing" faith, but at what cost? This oversimplification of something as complex as adversity doesn't accomplish what it is supposed to. We are told that we have power to control forces beyond our control merely by taking a theological position. This strikes me as superstition. Why do we knock on wood? Why do we pray for our safe travel home and why do Christians insist that display of an emblem consisting of two perpendicular lines on a gold chain will prevent disaster?

We do it to create a sense of control over the uncontrollable. We are overwhelmed by that which is greater than ourselves. When one visits the Grand Canyon, one is overwhelmed by the beauty and we say that we are "awe-struck." Similarly, we are overwhelmed by the meaning of life, its challenges, its futilities, its pains and its absurdity. Perhaps it is sufficient to explain what we do not understand through the acceptance of God. I propose that you face misfortune and like a "sailor [who] does not pray for wind [you] learn how to sail." The attribution of meaning to misfortune only trivializes the individual's ownership of their suffering. Some need something to reduce anxiety and difficulties that life presents through consultation of a god, ... I for one would prefer Prozac. But there are side effects that go along with absurdity, boredom, depression, helplessness and contempt for your own existence. But like every medication, you must weigh the risks versus the rewards and mitigate the remaining difficulties.

We can create an all-knowing power that has a plan and, in doing so, explain all of life's mysteries. I propose something more. With the proclamation that there is no external force on one's condition, your suffering becomes yours and yours alone. Truly this now unfettered beast of suffering is more lucid and pronounced but now the responsibility of suffering falls on you.

Albert Camus's commentary on the parable of Sisyphus illustrates a man who in a universe devoid of god, finds freedom in his choice of attitude. Truly, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." A man transgresses the wish of his god's by cheating death and is condemned to incessantly push a boulder up a hill. Indeed "His rock is a thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols." The parsha would agree with the dangers of these idols and the need to mute their tempting professions of a one-stop-shop solution. God remarks "you have seen the detestable things and the fetishes of wood and stone, silver and gold" I would agree that the construction of a being of this influence does not allow for freedom. When you concede that something has influence over you regardless of your action then freedom is not possible. The differences between the monotheistic god and the gods of antiquity, is the presence of a moralistic code, an addendum of laws and ethics to abide by. But if you are willing to bury the thousands of gods that have come before the Abrahamic god cannot this last vestige of the supernatural join those bygone deities residing in the pantheon of the detritus of history? Through his stoic interpretation of his suffering and the abandonment of any supposed understanding regarding the origin of his suffering the shapeless becomes the tangible and the uncontrollable becomes manageable. You, now, in the presence of absence, find yourself lost. That vacancy is all too familiar. But you are conscious and aware that you are lost, and can proceed from there. One of the manifest symptoms of absurdity is boredom, I hear the phrase "I want to find myself" often.

And so this parsha both troubles me but validates my thoughts. Gone should be all idols and all third parties that we imbue with meaning and purpose and who, if we believe in them, will bestow their kindness upon us. We need not find meaning outside of our own lives. Just as the stone is Sisyphus's "thing," so, too, are our lives our own things. We do not need to choose life and death. We need to live life for its own sake, with all of its problems.

The parsha is right. Let's abandon idols. Sure, we can worship a god, but in the modern day, this ought be less worship than a call to action to choose life for its own sake—not for God's sake, but for our own sake. Judaism teaches us, particularly in its reform movement, that the stories in the Torah are lessons for us, but not blueprints or

instruction manuals. Our lives are our own. Choose life, not idolatry. Don't spend your time praying and hoping that there is some structure or master plan for the unknowable. Our lives are our "thing." Let's make the most of them, through living a moral and purposeful life, as contemplated by the Torah and by the great thinkers who followed.

The human will is an untapped resource in many instances. n

Instead of placing a definitive cause and reason for suffering we can own our suffering as a personal responsibility

Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my

revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of

consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation

to death—and I refuse suicide."

"Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees."

I learned early on that commonality between your fellow man is a foundation needed before the construction of the complex. We lose people,

I wish there was a "how to be an absurd hero" Manuel, but there isn't. And there is significance in that. I strive not to find meaning in existence, but exert myself until every last drop of vigor is syphoned from my being, and if that was all for naught I would still have accomplished what I set out to do.

Side effects of absurdity

Living on pieces of paper