

A Jewish Perspective on MERCY

Rabbi Edward Elkin – March 15, 2016, Scarboro Missions

I'm so honoured by this invitation to speak on such an important and complex topic, one that is relevant for all faiths and peoples throughout the world. What a terrific challenge Pope Francis has laid out for the Roman Catholic Church -- to devote this year to a reflection on the theme of mercy, and especially to do so with an openness to the perspectives of other traditions. Although on the publicity my talk is entitled "Jewish Perspective on Mercy", I actually prefer to present it as "A Jewish Perspective on Mercy". My tradition, like your own, is vast, with many different voices expressing feelings and views over the course of thousands of years beginning with the Bible and up until today, especially on a topic so fundamental to the human experience as this one. So I cannot, in the limited time I've got this evening, hope to convey "*The Jewish Perspective*", but rather will share with you a couple of those voices that are important to me personally in my own faith when I think about the topic of mercy.

I've had the opportunity to read Dr. Watson's wonderful talk last week on Christian Perspectives on Mercy, and I'm grateful that he set the stage for this series by establishing the theme of mercy as one that is common to the three Abrahamic religions. He introduced two key Hebrew terms regarding this theme – one of which is *Hesed* and the other *Rahamim* – both of which appear hundreds of times in the Tanakh (our term for the Hebrew Bible), reflecting the centrality of the theme of mercy in our most ancient Scriptures. And both terms also feature prominently in the teachings of the rabbinic sages in the period following the Bible. It is those Sages who really created Judaism as we know it, building on the foundation of the Bible, but taking the traditions and beliefs that they inherited from Scripture in very new and innovative directions. In so doing, they were responding to the very changed reality of a people no longer living in their own

land, but rather living as a minority in exile scattered in lands around the Roman Empire and the Middle East. In this reality, too, they often suffered from persecution, and had to find a way to cope spiritually with the fact that the Jerusalem Temple, the central shrine whose existence had confirmed God's presence among the people in a very concrete way for so long, had been destroyed and had no realistic prospect of being rebuilt any time soon. It is a perspective on mercy from the rabbinic period that I would like to focus on with you this evening, because I think it reflects a move made by the rabbis that has been influential on Jewish thought on the subject of mercy to this day.

The text is taken from a midrash on the Book of Lamentations. Before I go any further, I need to tell you a bit about the Book of Lamentations, and also a bit about the genre of midrash. Lamentations is a small biblical book, 5 chapters, which is a lament for the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. It is traditionally thought to have been written by the prophet Jeremiah, and it is read liturgically every year on the fast day of the 9th of Av, which commemorates the destruction of both Temples. The book conveys the terrible suffering experienced by the people during the siege: כלו בדמעות עיני – “My eyes are spent with tears, My heart is in tumult, My being melts away, over the ruin of my poor people, as babes and sucklings languish in the squares of the city. They keep asking their mothers, ‘Where is bread and wine?’ as they languish like battle-wounded in the squares of the town, as their life runs out in their mother’s bosom” (2:11-12). Listening to these poignant words, we wonder, how to understand such suffering? How could God have let this happen? Any number of different answers could have been offered to this most basic of questions. Perhaps our God is weaker than the Babylonian God. Perhaps our God doesn’t care about us any more. Perhaps our God never really existed. Lamentations doesn’t take any of those positions. Instead, it chooses a move that preserves God’s power, and God’s intense engagement with the people. Not uniquely in the Bible, but particularly forcefully here, it claims that it’s all our fault. חטא חטאה ירושלים

– Jerusalem has greatly sinned, therefore she is become a mockery. ..The Lord is in the right, for I have disobeyed Him... Alas! The Lord in His wrath has shamed Fair Zion...The Lord has laid waste without pity all the habitations of Jacob” etc.

This theological move of ascribing our suffering to our sins does a great job of preserving God’s power when we might have concluded otherwise, but in so doing it creates another very big problem. What about God’s mercy? Dr. Watson last week said, and I agree with him, that the vision of the Old Testament God as one of wrath, violence, and judgement is a stereotype, and we know that this stereotype has played a very negative role in the relationship between Jews and Christians across the generations. All those hundreds of references to *hesed* and *rahamim* are there in the Bible, and they proclaim God’s compassion again and again. But stereotypes are usually successful when they build on something that is real, and in this case we’ve got passages like the one I shared with you from Lamentations that depict an angry, punishing God. We can’t pretend that those passages are not part of our biblical legacy too. But the story doesn’t end there. Even before we get to the rabbis, the Book of Lamentations itself proposes that God’s anger won’t last forever. And while the idea that our suffering is a result of our own sins is problematic in many respects, the very notion that it’s all our fault sets up the means for a healing in our relationship with God -- because if God punishes us for our sins then God can also forgive us if we repent. And so this theological move does give us some measure of control, or at least influence, over our own fate that we might not otherwise feel in those very dire straits. Having said that, reading Lamentations, the issue of God’s mercy still hangs over us. It hung over Jesus, and the early Christians, and they took the theme in the direction that they did which you heard about last week. And at the very same time, it hung over the early rabbis, who took upon themselves the responsibility for maintaining Jewish faith following the destruction of the Second Temple centuries later.

And that brings me to this amazing text, from a midrash on the Book of Lamentations called Lamentations Rabbah written in the 5th century. Midrash is a genre of rabbinic writing which is notoriously hard to define, but which involves drawing out the meaning of biblical verses in a way that allows the authors to apply them to their own contemporary reality. Midrash involves a complex interplay between reverence for the received biblical text, and enormous imaginative and theological creativity. Midrash is not a commentary in the sense of a line by line analysis of a biblical text trying to figure out what it “originally” meant. Literal meaning was not the rabbis’ agenda. Meaning that would help them address the spiritual crises of their own age – that was their agenda. And part of the crisis that they faced revolved around this very issue of God’s mercy that we are reflecting on in this series. As heirs to a text like the one I shared with you from Lamentations, living in the midst of your own suffering, how do you experience God’s mercy? What do you do with the dissonance between your faith in God’s mercy and the reality you are living? That is the question that interested the rabbis, and that is the question that haunts many people of faith to this day. Let’s look at the text.

(Study Lamentations Rabbah Proem 24)

What do we learn about the Jewish perspective on mercy from this extraordinarily daring text? This is midrash, it’s not meant to be taken literally. This springs from the imagination of the early rabbis. But why create a story like this? I think the authors of this midrash wanted to convey to their suffering people that being in covenant with God means that resignation isn’t the only legitimate response to our misery and our pain. Yes, God works in mysterious ways, but sorry -- that idea just doesn’t solve everything. No, we’re not God, and no we don’t know everything. But when mercy is absent from our lives, we have the right to protest its absence. The case being made is not that the people

were in fact innocent. Rachel acknowledges that the people were drawn to idols. But, she says, so what? Those other gods have no substance, she (meaning the rabbinic authors) cries out. Human beings sometimes just have to suck it up, Rachel herself certainly did, and so should God. It's beneath God to be jealous of something that isn't real. Yes, Israel sinned, and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, even the Torah itself, were ready to testify against them for their sins. But the ancient heroes of the Torah rose to Israel's defense. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (in a section that I didn't have room to include), Moses as we've seen, most especially Rachel – all demonstrated their love for their descendants, a love that gave them the courage and strength to speak up to God Godself -- and ultimately, as we've seen, God's attribute of justice gave way to God's attribute of mercy.

This is not a text that is saying, if bad things happen to good people there must not be a God. There's nothing atheist in this text. God is very real to the rabbis who created it, their faith is strong, and they want to strengthen the faith of their people. But they understood that just to repeat God is merciful God is merciful God is merciful when the people are suffering so terribly would not do – it would not resonate to the fullness of their experience.

This cheeky text doesn't threaten my faith, rather it makes my relationship to God closer, more intimate. It is empowering, ennobling, it gives us stature. What we think, what we feel, what we're going through matters. If I'm in Babylonian exile, if I'm in Auschwitz, if I'm in a miserable Syrian refugee camp in Turkey or Jordan, if I'm a trafficked sex slave of Islamist militants, if I'm in a hospital room suffering from a terrible disease or injury, if I'm being abused by my partner or my parent or my clergyman, if I'm living on a reserve with no clean drinking water and no prospect for a job and feeling in the pit of despair, if I'm just feeling terribly alone in this world – in whatever way I'm suffering, that actually matters. *I* matter – and in this world that's not nothing. In the midrash, ultimately God listens, and the text ends on a note of hope for the future, and I think that

is its ultimate message. You may be feeling like God hates you, but God actually loves you – so hang on to your hope.

But when it comes to the theme of mercy, we are not only on the receiving end of its presence or absence. What we learn about God’s mercy is meant to be a model for us in our own consideration of our own conduct. What can we take away from this text about how we should behave in the world when it is we who have the power to dispense or withhold mercy?

I think that this text reminds us that if God can be challenged to be more merciful, then so too should we be willing to hear the message that we have not been as merciful or as compassionate as we could have been. No one is above hearing that message. Most of us have come up with strategies, conscious or unconscious, to make sure that we are able to think of ourselves as being virtuous. Sometimes those virtue-affirming strategies are necessary for the health of our ego, but sometimes they blind us to our faults and failings. The truth is, we are not always so virtuous, we’re not always as merciful or forgiving or generous or kind as we can be. I’m thinking of us as individuals, but also as communities, and as a society. In all these ways, we can do better. In all these ways, we need to be ready to be critiqued – as hard as that may be. If God can take it, so can we. But as the midrash conveys, the point is not just to wallow in our own sin but then to be moved to action. God’s mercy “crested” after hearing Rachel’s rebuke, and then God promised to bring the people back from exile. So too should we allow our mercy to crest, and act to be as merciful as we can be.

Just how merciful is that? How merciful are we expected to be? Mercy is an extremely important value, but in our tradition it’s not the only value. And sometimes it conflicts with other values, such as justice – and these conflicts require excruciatingly difficult judgements. Dr. Watson last week related the story of the Trappist monk in Algeria who

was killed, beheaded actually, by Islamic extremists and later a letter was found in which he anticipated his own death – forgiving his killer and even thanking him, “for you could not be aware of what you were doing.” That is an extraordinary level of forgiveness, one that I don’t know that I aspire to myself – although I am challenged by this example to think about how far I myself could go, and what is the basis of my limits. The rabbis imagine God having two thrones, a throne of judgment and a throne of mercy. Remarkably, certain actions that we can take can move God from one to the other. But ultimately God is God. Sometimes the answer is no.

And we too, in our work in the world, often find ourselves in the position of making difficult judgements, challenging ourselves to be as merciful as we can be but knowing that there are often no easy answers. Physician Assisted Dying. Abortion. LGBT rights. Terrorism and Civil Liberties. Safe injection sites for heroin addicts. Immigration and Refugees. These are all terribly difficult issues confronting our society, where some people will tell you they know what the merciful thing is to do, but I sure don’t. People on all sides of all these tough issues deploy the word “mercy” in defense of their positions. And we bump into limits. I think it’s great that Canada is taking in 25,000 Syrian refugees. My synagogue is sponsoring a family, I know many other synagogues and churches are doing the same. 25,000 is great, and there’s so far anyway a consensus behind this move in Canada and a good feeling about it, particularly when we hear the rhetoric coming from south of the border. But how about if it were 250,000? How about if it were a million or more? These are not crazy numbers, given what’s going on in Europe. And we’ve got the space in Canada, that’s for sure. But I’m thinking that some people here would be starting to think about mercy for our local people as well, when jobs and housing and resources are so limited, and I’m wondering how long the consensus would last in the face of numbers like that. And what about refugees coming from other countries besides Syria who are suffering just as much, what about them?

Sometimes, I think, the answer has to be no – and how do we think about that spiritually? How do we process those situations where we make judgement calls that are not experienced by others as merciful?

Before I conclude I need to mention that the theme of protest reflected in the midrash that I shared with you is not the only Jewish perspective on mercy. On the back of your handout is another text, this time from our liturgy, also composed by the ancient rabbis – which takes a very different approach. This is not a text about human empowerment, this is a text about human helplessness. At some point, we have to simply throw ourselves on God's mercy. This text is from the liturgy for Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement, a day in which the rabbinic tradition gives us an image of God as Judge sealing our fate for the coming year. With a prayer like this and many others of the same ilk, we'd expect a very somber mood in synagogue – and that is not in fact the Yom Kippur experience. Jews enter the synagogue on Yom Kippur serious, but ultimately confident in God's compassion and forgiveness. The Judge is, as it were, in our pocket. The Judge loves us. And it is therefore our duty to love and care for and be merciful to others, to the best of our ability, and stand ready to be critiqued for our failings as God was ready to be critiqued in the midrash.

I close with a Hasidic story. Hasidism is a Jewish movement that arose in the 18th century in Eastern Europe. Today Hasidim are mostly known for their distinctive dress, their long black coats and fur hats and the rigidity of their religious observance. At its inception, however, Hasidism was a movement of Jewish renewal, bringing much needed joy and song and spirituality to the communities where it took hold, especially for the simple people. This is a Hasidic story about one such simple person, in this case a tailor. On the eve of Yom Kippur, he addresses God. Here, Master of the Universe, is the list of all my offenses against You in the course of the last year, and here, Master of the Universe, is the list I've been keeping of all the afflictions and distresses and losses You've put us

through this year. If a proper bookkeeping be made, I'm afraid I've been more sinned against than sinning. But this is Yom Kippur eve, when we are all obliged to forgive one another. So I forgive You all, and You too will forgive us, all the sins we have sinned against You. Lechayim To life!

This story comes in a direct line from that midrash I shared with you earlier. It's about chutzpah, but it's also about being in relationship with God. When you're in relationship, you can talk to your partner honestly. Honestly, we're not perfect in the way we treat others, and honestly, we ourselves haven't always been treated perfectly. That doesn't let us off the hook from doing the best we can. I'm so glad that the Pope has extended this challenge to all of us, to think about the role mercy plays in our lives, and I look forward to further conversation.