

*Answering the Unanswerable*

*Rosh Hashana Day 1, 5779*

*Rabbi Steven Saks*

Renowned biblical scholar Dr. Bart Ehrman recently spoke about his new book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*. The book sounds fascinating, and I would like to read it, but it was something else that Ehrman said that got my attention. Ehrman explained that he used to be *frum* (observant), that is, an observant born again Evangelical Christian (okay he didn't actually use the word *frum*, but you get the point). And though Ehrman at one point even served as Baptist Pastor, he now considers himself to be agnostic (a person who claims neither faith nor disbelief in God).

In fact, Ehrman explained that, "If somebody says to me, 'Is there a greater power in the universe?,' my response is, 'How would I know!?' " Bart, what happened? Why did you lose faith?

Ehrman explains that his doubt has nothing to do with his scholarship. His doubt is caused by an issue we all should be struggling with – theodicy. Theodicy raises the question of how an all-powerful God who is good can allow for so much suffering.

While Ehrman's view should be accorded sincere respect, I don't think you came to shul today to hear your rabbi champion agnosticism. Besides, it would be a foolish move on my part: I

would be talking myself out of a job. But in all seriousness, Judaism engages in an act of theological Jiu-Jitsu, reversing the question of theodicy in the *Midrashic* tale (Bereshit Rabbah 39:1) of the *Birah Doleket* (Burning Palace). Avraham (Abraham) encounters a palace ablaze (the palace symbolizes the world) and wonders why the owner is not trying to rescue his palace from the flames. The owner (God) says to Avraham in essence, stop looking at me, Avraham; it's your world, too; you fix it.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood this lesson. In his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he responded to fellow clergy members who believed that it was *pas nish* (inappropriate) or, as they put it, "unwise," for a clergy member to be politically active and create a public stir as King was doing. In other words, religion was to be confined to the chapel and kept off the street. If King had acquiesced to the request, he would have been inadvertently giving credence to Karl Marx's dismissal of religion as "the opiate of the masses." That is, religion is a tool used to distract the downtrodden from their misery by busying them with ritual and the false hope of a better life in the afterlife. King refused to acquiesce, explaining that he was walking in the footsteps of the prophets of the eighth Century BCE (figures such as Amos, Hosea and Isaiah), who refused to allow justice to be perverted for the convenience of maintaining the social order. King, Israel prophets of old, and all who fight injustice and work to improve the world are the spiritual descendants of Avraham.

Before leaving the *Midrash* let us also note that indirectly this Midrash reminds us that we shouldn't expect Judaism to provide us with all the answers. The question of why God allows the world to be set ablaze in the first place is sidestepped by the *Midrash*. When the pious *Iyov* (Job) demanded to know why God had allowed him to suffer, God's response was that in essence there are some things which are simply beyond human comprehension. Despite the fact that this wasn't the answer *Iyov* was looking for, he remained a loyal servant of God. Furthermore, even though *Iyov* felt that he had been horribly mistreated, he came to the realization that there was still a value in serving God. And who can argue with that? Even if we unjustly suffer is there any downside to performing *Ma'asim Tovim* (good deeds)? Is there a downside to having faith? Is there an upside to not having faith? Does it contribute to the value of one's life?

You can counter by claiming that you can do good deeds without participating in organized religion or even believing in God. Fair enough, but first consider the research of Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam. Putnam, in his work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, lamented America's loss of "social capital," which he defines as social networks through which people help one another. But years later, after extensive research, Putnam found a silver lining. Storehouses of social capital still do exist today in houses of worship. Research demonstrates that people who attend

religious services regularly are more likely not only to give to religious charities but to secular ones as well. They are also more likely to volunteer their time to charitable causes and spend time with someone who is depressed. Most eye opening was the finding that these munificent behaviors don't correlate to individuals' religious beliefs but to the frequency with which they attend services. Putnam even speculates that an atheist who regularly attends service would be more charitable than a believer who prays at home.

Why does attendance at religious services inspire munificent behavior? Let's look at it this way:

When we pray we often make requests that God improve the world. The middle section of our weekday *Amidah* is comprised of *Bakashot*, requests we make of God. Over these *Yamim Noraim* (High Holidays, literally Days of Awe), we will make request after request of God. But life has taught us that often it's not enough to make a request, we have to do our part to bring the desired results to fruition. It's not enough to ask God to help others; we must roll up our sleeves and do our part. Muhammad Ali once said that performing good deeds was his rent payment for the space he had been granted in this world.

By attending services regularly, we surround ourselves with people who believe it's their God-given mandate to perform *Ma'asim Tovim*. That sense of mission is contagious. Instead of

focusing on the unanswerable question of theodicy, we can channel our energy in ways that can tangibly improve the world.

You can also personally benefit from attending services. A survey in Great Britain reported that the average Facebook user has over 200 friends on Facebook. When asked how many of those friends the user could actually count on to help him/her out of a jam, the average answer was two. The friends you make at services aren't your casual social media friends; they are the people you can count on when the chips are down. You'll be there for them, and they'll be there for you.

I'm going to conclude with a story which demonstrates the degree to which God has put his trust in us. This Talmudic story (Bava Metzia 59b), referred to as the *Tanur Shel Achni* (the oven of a man named Achni), relates a debate over a question of ritual purity regarding Achni's oven. Rabbi Eliezer took a lenient view regarding ritual purity of the oven, while the *chachamim* (sages), i.e., his colleagues, took a stricter view. Though Rabbi Eliezer was in the minority, he was not deterred. He declared that "if the *halacha* (law) is in accordance with me let this carob tree prove it." The carob tree was uprooted from its place and moved 100 *amot* (unit of measure).

The *chachamim* were not impressed, responding that one can't bring proof from a carob tree. Rabbi Eliezer, still undeterred, declared that "if the *halacha* (law) is in accordance

with me let the water of the canal prove it.” The canal’s waters flowed backwards, but still the *chachamim* were not convinced.

Rabbi Eliezer decided to give it yet another go and declared that “if the *halacha* is in accordance with me let the wall of this *bet hamidrash* (study hall) prove it.” The walls of the *bet hamidrash* began to lean downwards as if to fall, but Rabbi Yehoshua (one of the opposing sages of the majority) rebuked the walls, reminding them that they should not intervene in this *machloket* (argument).

Finally, Rabbi Eliezer pulled out his ace in the hole and declared that “if the *halacha* is in accordance with me let a *Bat Kol* (Heavenly Voice) prove it. A *Bat Kol* rang out proclaiming “What argument do you have with Rabbi Eliezer whom the *halacha* follows in all places!” It appeared as if Rabbi Eliezer had won; after all, who can argue with a heavenly proclamation. The *chachamim* responded with a verse from *Devarim* (Det. 30:12) *Lo Bashamayim Hi* (the Torah is not in heaven). That is to say, God transmitted the Torah to us, and it is our job to apply its teaching to this world. In other words, even though God agreed with Rabbi Eliezer’s ruling, the *chachamim* wouldn’t accept it. Rabbi Natan then met *Eliyahu Hanavi* (Elijah the Prophet) and asked him how God had been overruled by the *chachamim*. *Eliyahu* responded that God had laughed, saying *nitzchuni bnei, nitzchuni bnei* (my children have prevailed over me; my children have prevailed over me).

Though this story revolves around a technical point of law, its implications are far reaching. The broader message is that God has empowered us to take charge of His world. Instead of waiting passively for him to fix it, we should start the job. So this year let's try to spend less time asking "why" – that is "why does injustice take place?" and more time asking "what" – that is "what can we do about it?" Judaism doesn't always provide us with all the answers, but it teaches us to live with the unanswerable.