

*"I lift my eyes to the mountains,
from where will my help come?"*

Psalm 121

Theologies of Suffering: How Judaism Can Help You Cope



By

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Introduction

The aim of this pamphlet is to provide Jews who are experiencing life challenges with a framework to help them cope with their suffering. Many Jews do not have a developed theology and are faced with a crisis of faith when they are diagnosed with a serious illness or experience a loss. Such an event often causes people to question God. Commonly asked questions are: “Why am I suffering?” or “Why is God doing this to me?”

There are no easy answers to these questions. Each person must struggle to create meaning out of his or her own suffering. Each individual has to find answers to these questions with in them selves. The theologies and exercises presented in this pamphlet are meant to help guide the individual in answering his or her own questions.

In the first section of the pamphlet, three different theologies of suffering from different Jewish theologians are presented. The reader is then asked to think about these theologies and to decide which appeals to him or her and why.

The second section of the pamphlet guides the reader to through a series of exercises which will hopefully help him or her to clarify his or her thoughts on God.

The third section provides the reader with ideas about how to cope with their suffering and continue in a relationship with God. Prayers, psalms, and meditations are provided.

Section One: Possible Theologies of Suffering

As Jews, we do not spend much time talking about our beliefs in God. “God talk”, referring to God as your protector or salvation seems to be very Christian. But the truth is that Jews through out the ages have wrestled with God. What are God’s attributes? How does God work in the world? Does God care about me as an individual? Why does God allow suffering to occur? Are all questions which have been widely discussed by everyday Jews and Jewish theologians. Most people, wonder about God at some point in their lives, especially when they are confronted with illness and death.

Questioning God is encouraged in Judaism. As long as you are arguing, talking and challenging God, you have a relationship with God. That relationship, no matter what form it takes, is what is important.

Judaism accepts a wide range of beliefs and opinions about God. This fact is reflected in the different theologies presented below. Indeed, these are not the only theologies possible. You may believe very differently about God, and how God operates in your life. As you read, take time to think if you agree with what you are reading. If you are able, read over the selections with someone else and discuss them. Or, you can write down your thoughts and reactions as you read.

Read slowly and give yourself time to reflect.

Job
We do not Know Why we Suffer, Yet we Trust God.

The Book of Job can be found in the Bible. In the book, it is related that Job, a good upstanding person, is punished by God for no knowable reason. Job loses everything that he loves. His wife and children die. He loses all of his material possessions, and he himself is stricken with a debilitating skin disease. In his desolate state, Job calls out to God and asks “Why?, Why me? Why did this happen to me? I do not deserve this treatment from God!”

Some of his friends come to comfort him. In answer to his questions, they insist that he must have done something wrong to deserve such suffering. Job in turn insists that he is a good man. Whatever sins he may have committed in his life certainly do not warrant such affliction.

So, Job calls God for an explanation. God’s explanation is a bit unclear but amounts to God telling Job, “How can you know what it is like to be God. You can not know why I do the things I do.”

Job accepts this explanation. He admits that, “I spoke with out understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know.” (Job 42:3). In the end of the book, God restores to Job all that he had lost. He becomes rich, remarries and has more children. Job dies “old and contented.” (Job 42:17).

Job accepts that he can never understand why he had to suffer. He puts his trust in the fact that God is all powerful and holy. A mortal person can not understand God’s ways.

- What do you think about the character of God in this story?
- What do you think about the character of Job?
- Can you put your trust in God with out understanding how God works?
- Is this explanation of suffering comforting to you?

**Kalpan and Kushner
God is limited. Suffering is the result of chaos**

In order to understand why people suffer, some theologians have concluded that suffering does not come from God. Rather, suffering is the result of chaos, or evil left in the world from the time of creation. God has no control over this evil. The fact that God can not control this evil means that God is not all powerful. God can not prevent you from getting sick. However, these theologians stress, God is there to give you support and comfort at the time of your illness.

Two prominent Jewish theologians who believe that suffering does not come from God are Rabbi Mordechi Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, and Rabbi Harold Kushner, a Conservative rabbi and philosopher whose son died at an early age.

In his book, Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers, Rabbi Mordechi Kaplan puts forth his views on God and suffering. Some of his answers are presented here.

Why does God permit the existence of evil, whether as sin or suffering?

“We might perhaps resolve the dilemma by assuming that God’s omnipotence is not an actually realized fact at any point of time, but a potential fact. That is to say, if we take in to account the infinite duration of Godhood, it is possible to conceive that the evil which now mars our cosmos will ultimately be eliminated” (Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers, p.116).

“How would you answer the question of a child who asked, ‘Why did God make polio?’”

“God did not make polio. God is always helping us humans to make this a better world, but the world can not at once become the kind of world He would like it to be. When men make use of the intelligence God gave them, they learn more and more of the laws of health, by which all kinds of illness can be prevented or cured. When the doctor relieves your pain, when he helps you to get back more strength and better control over your muscles, it is with the intelligence God gives him..... Do not feel that God does not care for you. He is helping you now in many ways, and He will continue to help you. ... Be thankful to God for all the love and care that people show toward you, since all of that is part of God’s love, and do not hesitate to ask God for further help” (Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers, p. 119-120).

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In his book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, written after the death of his son, Rabbi Harold Kushner expresses his theology this way:

“I can not believe that God ‘sends’ illness to a specific person for a specific reason. I don’t believe in a God who has a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute, and consults His computer to find out who deserves one most or who can handle it best” (When Bad Things Happen to Good People, p.60).

“God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws. The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God’s part. Because the tragedy is not God’s will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are” (When Bad Things Happen to Good People, p.134).

- How is God portrayed in this theology?
- Can you relate to such a God?
- Are you comforted by this explanation of suffering?

**Blumenthal
A Theology of Protest**

Rabbi David Blumenthal, a philosopher and professor at Emory University, presents a very different theology than the two we have encountered so far. Rabbi Blumenthal asserts that pain and suffering are caused by God. Because God causes such suffering, God is an abusive God. This being the case, we have every right to confront God, and empower ourselves by expressing our anger at God. He asserts that expressing our anger is a way to be in relationship with God. And being in the relationship is important for our healing.

Rabbi Blumenthal's theology is explained in his book, Facing the Abusing God. In his book, he deals primarily with the pain caused by the holocaust and child abuse. However, he clearly asserts that illness is a kind of on going abuse. Though illness and loss differ from child abuse and the holocaust in many ways, they are connected by the same injustice of the event and the rage the experience provokes (Facing the Abusing God, p.260). He sets forth seven stages a person can go through in order to maintain a relationship with a God who is abusive. These are his stages:

“In order to have faith in God in a post holocaust, abuse-sensitive world, we must;

1. Acknowledge the awful truth of God's abusing behavior;
 2. Adopt a theology of protest and sustained suspicion [of God];
 3. Develop the religious affections of distrust and unrelenting challenge;
 4. Engage the process of re-new-ed spiritual healing with all that entails of confrontation, mourning and empowerment;
 5. Resist all evil mightily, supporting resistance to abuse wherever it is found;
 6. Open ourselves to the good side of God, painful though that is;
 7. We must turn to address God, face to Face, presence to Presence”
- (Facing the Abusing God, p.259).

- How is God portrayed in this theology?
- Is this a God you can relate to?
- Does this theology make you angry? Are you angry at Rabbi Blumenthal?
At God? If you feel angry, what about the theology makes you angry?
- Is this a theology which comforts you?

Theologies of Suffering

You have been presented with three very different approaches to God and suffering. Have you found a theology which speaks to you? Do you like different aspects within the different theologies? Feel free to mix and match them as you see fit.

Do you feel confused and overwhelmed? If you do, do not despair. Dealing with the issue of God and suffering is an extremely difficult topic emotionally and intellectually. Give yourself time to reflect on what you have read and what you think.

In the next section of this pamphlet you will find a few exercises which may help you think through your theology. If you can, find someone, a friend, family member, or rabbi to work through the exercises with you.

Section Two: Theology Exercises

Every individual forms his or her own relationship with God, and thinks about God in different ways. These exercises will help you work through your own thoughts.

Faith Interview

One problem many people face is a kind of loneliness in regards to their feelings and questions regarding faith and God. Too often we believe that because we have questions, we are, therefore, non-believers and write ourselves out of our religious tradition. Nothing could be further from the truth. Religious people of all times have had deep and fundamental questions. That's what being religiously alive is all about. The problem today is that we don't share our questions and doubts with each other. Be as honest as possible in answering the following questions. If you do this exercise with another person, alternate responses to each question to create a dialogue.

1. If there is a God, how do you picture God?
2. Do you talk to God yourself?
3. Have you ever felt God talking to you, or have you ever felt God's presence?
4. What are some of your doubts about God?
5. If God is good, how can God permit evil in the world?
6. Do you know of any differences between Jewish conceptions of God and Christian conceptions of God?
7. Is there anything that makes you angry about God?
8. Has God ever answered any of your prayers?
9. Why don't you think or talk about God more than you do?
10. Does God still function in the world as described in the Bible?
11. What is a miracle? Do you believe in miracles?
12. Do you believe in life after death? What form does it take?
13. Do you believe God punishes the sinners and rewards the righteous?
14. Do you think that the Jewish people have been chosen by God for something special?
15. If you were God what would you do differently?

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16. Do you pray to God more when you are sick or in trouble? Do you think more about God when someone you love is in trouble or in danger?

17. Do you thank God for the good things in your life as well as relating God to the bad things that happen?

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Theologies of Suffering

A Meditation on God
By Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu

Close your eyes.

Take three deep breaths. In and Out. In and Out. In and Out.

Stretch your neck, shoulders, arms, chest, stomach, hips, legs, feet, toes

Relax your body.

Find your center of balance.

Imagine you are in God's presence.

What comes to your mind?

How do you feel emotionally?

What do you see,
smell,
touch,
hear?

What do you say to God?

What is God's response?

Continue the conversation in your head.....

Now come back and find your center.

Stretch your toes, feet, legs, hips, stomach, chest, arms, shoulders, neck

Relax

Take three deep breaths. In and Out. In and Out. In and Out.

Open your eyes and re-enter your surroundings.

Is there anything you want to remember from this experience?
Where you surprised by any of your thoughts?

Write a Letter to God

One way to open up your communication with God is to write God a letter.

Rabbi Elie Spitz, the spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, California suggested writing a letter to God to one of his congregants who was awaiting a diagnosis from her doctor.

“I told her, ‘Before you go to the doctor’s office, write a letter to God. In your letter, share your anxieties and fears over your illness and what the test results might reveal. Then reread your letter and write back “as if” you were God. Your letter back will be an act of cosmic empathy that will help you.’

Before she left she said. ‘Rabbi, a friend of mine told me that in this time of uncertainty I should do something spiritual, but I did not know where to begin. Regrettably I have never learned to pray. Your suggestion of writing a letter to God seems to give me access to that greater Power. I am glad that I came to see you because now I have a place to begin.’

A few weeks later, I spoke with the congregant. She had written her letters to God and it had made a difference. Through her letter writing, she shared that she no longer felt so alone in the doctor’s office. The letter writing had prepared her to meet her anxiety, and moreover, had given her a new awareness that in her time of need there was a caring, Divine Presence in her life.” (“Letters To (And From!) God,” Rabbi Elie Spitz).

Try it and see what happens.

Section Three

Another way to connect with God, and to sort out your feelings about God is to pray. Praying has many different benefits, some of which are listed below. On the following pages you will find some psalms and prayers from the Jewish tradition which will lead you in your prayers.

Eight Possible Ways in Which Prayer May “Work”

Compiled by Rabbi Amy Eilberg

(Borrowed from Acts of Lovingkindness: A Training Manual for Bikkur Holim by Rabbi Nancy Flam, Janet Offel, and Rabbi Amy Eilberg)

A. Prayer may “work” in that one may have asked God for something which indeed came about.

B. Prayer may “work” by invoking a greater sense of God.

C. Prayer may “work” by way of distraction, momentarily pulling the one who is ill out of his or her pain and suffering into a place of beauty or transcendence.

D. Prayer may “work” by way of focusing more deeply on the pain or discomfort in the suffering person’s life; in this way, prayer can be deeply grounding and clarifying.

(These last two examples may be compared to different techniques in childbirth preparation: one technique, Lamaze, uses distraction, while the Bradley method helps women to enter the pain more deeply and wholly.)

E. Prayer may “work” by quieting or centering the self.

F. Prayer may “work” by significantly connecting the one praying or being prayed for with the Jewish community and tradition.

G. Prayer may “work” by helping the one praying or being prayed for to connect to a deep level of the self which is already healed and whole, reminding the person of his or her essential wholeness. Music, for instance, often has the capacity to put us in touch with that deep place of essential wholeness.

H. Prayer may “work” in focusing the pray-er on the blessings in his or her life, enabling him or her to magnify his or her sense of gratitude.

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Psalms

There are many different ways to petition God for healing. Jews often turn to the Book of Psalms to provide them with the words to pray. Four different psalms are presented here. You can pray these words, meditate on them, or read them for inspiration. Hopefully, you will gain strength from these selections and the comfort of knowing that you are not alone in your thoughts and emotions. As you read reflect on how these psalms impact you. What are your responses to them?

Fear

Psalm 6

Translation by Rabbi Avrohom Davis, "The Metsudah Tehillim"

1. To the Chief Musician on Neginos,
on the eight stringed harp, a Psalm of David.
2. Adonai, do not rebuke me with Your anger,
nor chastise me with Your rage.
3. Be gracious unto me, Adonai,
for I am desolate,
heal me Adonai, for my bones are terrified.
4. My soul is utterly terrified,
and You Adonai, how long?
5. Return Adonai, free my soul,
deliver me for the sake of your loving kindness.
6. For in death there is no remembering You;
in the lower world who will thank You?
7. I am worn out with my sighing,
every night I cause my bed to float;
with my tears I melt my couch.
8. My eye is dimmed from anger,
it had aged because of my tormentors.
9. Depart from me all you evil doers,
for Adonai has heard the voice of my weeping.
10. Adonai has heard my supplication,
Adonai will accept my prayer.
11. Ashamed and utterly terrified
will all my foes be, they will return
and be instantaneously ashamed.

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Confusion/Guilt

Psalm 38

Translation by David Blumenthal, "Facing the Abusing God"

1. A Psalm of David, as a reminder.
 2. Lord, do not yell at me in Your wrath.
Do not discipline me in Your anger.
 3. Truly, Your arrows have struck me.
Your hand has struck out against me.
 4. There is no wholeness in my body because of Your fury.
There is no peace in my bones because of my sin.
 5. I am surely over my head in transgressions.
They are a heavy burden, too heavy for me.
 6. My wounds smell, they fester,
because of my stupidity.
 7. I am deformed.
 8. I have been bent to the limit.
I walk around morose all day long.
 9. Inside I am truly filled with shame.
There is no wholeness in me.
 10. I am out of energy.
I am depressed to the limit.
I roar at the hurt in my heart.
 11. Lord, all my lust is exposed to You.
My sighing is not hidden from You.
 12. My heart is dizzy.
My strength has left me.
- The light in my eyes - even that is no more a part of me.
13. My lover and my friends keep away from my misery.
My near relations too keep their distance.
 14. Those who are out after me set traps.
Those who wish me evil speak aloud their evil desires,
they construct plots all day long.
 15. And I,
I am like a deaf person, I cannot hear;
I am like a dumb person, who cannot open his mouth.
 16. I have become like a person who does not listen,
who has no rebuttal in his mouth.
 17. Truly, I look to You, Lord.
You my Liege and my God, will respond.
 18. Truly, I have said, Lest they rejoice over me;
when my step fails, they will lord it over me.
 19. Truly, I am destined to misfortune.
My pain comforts me always.
 20. Truly I tell of my transgression.

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I am anxious because of my sin.
21. But my enemies teem with life.
Those who hate me multiply lies.
22. Those who pay evil for good
detest me because I pursue good.
23. Do not ever desert me, Lord.
Don't You go away from me, my God,
24. Hurry to my aid.
My Lord is my salvation.

Theologies of Suffering

Comfort

Psalm 121

Translation by David Blumenthal, "Facing the Abusing God"

1. A song for the steps.
I lift my eyes to the mountain range.
From where will my help come?
2. My help will come from the Lord
Who makes heaven and earth.
3. May He not let your foot stumble.
May your guardian not nod off.
4. Certainly, the guardian of Israel
neither nods off nor sleeps.
5. May the Lord be your guardian.
May the Lord be your covering shadow.
May He be strong at your right hand.
6. Then the brazen forces will not strike you during the day,
nor the sinister forces at night.
7. May the Lord guard you from all evil.
May He guard your very being.
8. May the Lord guard your going out from this world
and you coming in unto the next.

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Thank You

Psalm 30

Translation by Rabbi Avrohom Davis, "The Metsudah Tehillim"

1. A Psalm,
a song for the inauguration of the Temple,
by David.
2. I will extol You, Adonai,
for you have upheld me,
and not let my foes rejoice over me.
3. Adonai, my God,
I cried out to You, and You healed me.
4. Adonai,
You have raised my soul from the Lower World.
You have kept me alive, lest I descend to the Pit.
5. Sing to Adonai, His pious ones,
and give thanks to His Holy Name.
6. For his anger lasts only a moment,
but there is life, in his conciliation.
In the evening, one retires weeping,
but in the morning there is a cry of joy.
7. I said, in my serenity,
I would never be moved.
8. Adonai it was Your will
that established my mountain as a strong hold.
When You concealed Your presence,
I was terrified.
9. To You, Adonai, I called,
and my Master I beseeched.
10. What gain is there in [the shedding of] my blood?
In my going down to destruction?
Will the dust acknowledge You?
Will it proclaim Your Truth?
11. Hear me Adonai, and be gracious to me.
Adonai, be a help to me.
12. You have turned my mourning in to dancing.
You have loosened my sackcloth
and supported me with joy.
13. In order that my soul might sing to You
and not be stilled,
Adonai my God, forever will I thank You.

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Prayers

These prayers are taken from the traditional Jewish daily prayer book.

Refaeinu

(Recited during the weekday *Amidah*)

Refaeinu/Heal us, Adonai,

And we shall be healed;

Save us

And we shall be saved;

For You are our Praise.

Lift up a complete and perfect healing,

A healing of body and spirit,

to all our wounds,

for You are a Ruler

Who heals

With faithfulness/trust/reliability/mercy/compassion.

Blessed are you, Adonai,

Healer of the sick

Among Your people of Isreal

Translation by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LMSW

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Asher Yatzar

(Recited as you get up in the morning)

Blessed are You,
Adonai, Our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who formed human beings with Wisdom,
creating pores, orifices, hollows, and holes,
openings, cavities, channels, and ducts...

It is clear and established
before Your Throne
that if one should open
or another should close
it would be impossible to endure
and to stand before You.

Blessed are You,
Adonai,
Who heals all flesh,
performing wonders.

Translation by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LMSW

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Mishberach

(Recited in the synagogue during the Torah service, or at the bedside of the ill person.)

May the One who blessed our ancestors-
Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
Matriarchs Sarah Rebecca Rachel, and Leah-
bless and heal the one who is ill:
_____ son/daughter of _____.

May the Holy Blessed One
overflow with compassion upon him/her,
to restore him/her,
to heal him/her,
to strengthen him/her,
to enliven him/her.

The One will send him/her, speedily,
a complete healing-
healing of the soul and healing of the body-
along with all the ill,
among the people of Isreal and all human kind,
soon, speedily, with out delay-
and let us all say: Amen!

Translation by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LMSW

Compose Your Own Prayer

Think of how you feel, and what you wish for. Then tell all of it to God. That is a payer. Spontaneous prayers from the heart are as acceptable to God as prayers written in the traditional prayer book. You can also paint, sculpt, dance or sing your prayer to God. There is no limit on spiritual expression.

Open your heart and Pray.

Conclusion

It is the editor's hope that this pamphlet has helped you begin to think about God and possibly to formulate your own theology. If you still have many unresolved thoughts and questions that is normal. Very few people are able to articulate a coherent theology. Continue the process. Contact your local rabbi or chaplain and ask your questions. Discuss your thoughts with friends and relatives. The more you struggle, the deeper your relationship with God will become.

*May God be with you on your journey.
May God bring you a healing of body and spirit.*

*May God bless you and guard you
May God show you favor and be gracious to you
May God show you kindness and grant you peace.*

Appendix
Guidelines for Use for Professionals

Many people who are suffering do not want to engage in deep theological conversations. Many are simply too sick to do so. The best thing you can offer as a rabbi, or chaplain is a sympathetic ear. Just being present and letting the person or patient know that you care about them is enough. Creating a safe space for someone to talk about their fears and concerns is the most important thing you can do.

Who should you give this pamphlet too? Any one who has questions about God, anyone who is trying to find meaning in their suffering, anyone who is seeking support or help from the Jewish tradition. First listen to the issues your congregant/patient presents. Then work through this pamphlet with them, or pick out the sections you think will be most helpful to them, and share those sections with them. Be careful not to push your theology on him or her. Help him or her grapple with his or her own theology. Hear where he or she is coming from and how he or she responds to the selections and exercises presented. In addition, do not be afraid to say that you do not have all the answers. Reassure him or her that it is all right to remain confused or angry at God.

In addition, a person does not need to read this pamphlet in the exact order in which it is presented. If, for example, you feel that someone will benefit from Rabbi Blumenthal's theology of protest, then present that theology first, and then go on to the others.

Encourage people to express themselves artistically through drawing, painting or music. Words are not the only way we have to communicate with God.

May you be blessed in the healing you bring to others.

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