

**“God Plans and Man Laughs:  
When Life is Difficult, How We Can Turn it Around”  
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Robert Frost once wrote, “Alfred Nobel is known for starting the Nobel Prize. This prize is given every year to some of the greatest minds in the world who, through their work, help to better society. In opposition to the improvement of society is the fact that other known Nobel Prize inventions have brought much death and destruction to the world.”

Alfred Nobel’s will explains,

“The whole of my remaining realizable estate shall be dealt with in the following way:

The capital shall be invested by my executors in safe securities and shall constitute a fund, the interest on which shall be annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind. The said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: one part to the person who shall have made the most important discovery or invention within the field of physics; one part to the person who shall have made the most important chemical discovery or improvement; one part to the person who shall have made the most important discovery within the domain of physiology or medicine; one part to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency; and one part to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity among nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.”

Clearly, Alfred Nobel acknowledged the destructive capacity of the human spirit as well as the incredible creativity it embodies. He innately understood the need to generate incentives to better the world because the benefits of destruction can be enticing. We have to have a plan for creation, invention, innovation, and a plan that brings about good over evil; kindness over devastation.

This week’s Torah reading begins with the remarkable thesis which illustrates that God had a plan. God had a plan about creation and man. In chapter two, God had a plan about the perfect environment in which human beings might live, the Garden of Eden. Then God had an ultimatum for what would happen if Adam and Eve didn’t obey the rules, “Don’t eat of the tree of knowledge, for as soon as you eat of it you shall die.” However, God needed a new plan after they ate the apple. God had a plan for how the serpent might walk and talk and, as we all know, that didn’t seem to work out either. God had a plan about how siblings were supposed to get along, two boys complimenting each other, each with their own interests and strengths, and then one ends up killing the other. Well, time for a new plan. According to the very last line of this week’s reading, it seems as though God has worked out all of the kinks in the new world he has created. The Lord said, “I will wipe out all of the men whom I created, men together with animals... *Ki nichmati, ki asitem*, (6:7) I regret I made them. *V’noach matza chein b’aneinei adonai*,” Yet, Noah found favor with God and as much as this sentence leaves us with a sense of dread, it leads us to the story of a massive flood that wipes out all the life not saved on Noah’s ark.

Just as we see God throw up his omniscient and omnipotent hands in exasperation because he doesn’t know what else He can do to right the ship, it is a key phrase much earlier on that sends the clearest message. Just after Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden tree, God turns to Adam and says *b’eatzvon*

*tochalna kol yimei chayeacha*, “By work and by toil will you eat all of the days of your life.” (3:17) In that one phrase we are taught the very famous 99% perspiration 1% inspiration rule. You have to do the work. Day and in and day out you have to do the work.

With the holidays behind us, Rabbi Rozenwasser, Cantor Vogel and I sat together and took a deep breath. We had, once again, gotten through these most Holy High Days. No sooner did we finish that very short sigh when we started a conversation about what would be next. What would be next? Or as I say to our assistant, Suzy, most days when I leave, “We’ll try it again tomorrow.” It is hard to keep our focus. When life doesn’t go as planned, we can get pushed down and find ourselves depleted. After given his punishment to wander the earth, I can’t help but hear the words of Cain when he is told that “No matter how hard you try, nothing will grow.” He responds, *gadol avoni min’so*, my punishment is too great to bear.” (4:13) It doesn’t matter if you believe your lot in life is the result of a punishment or a simple accident. It happens. Every one of us can play the game of “What did I do to deserve this?” Or, we can identify behaviors in our own lives that have been less than exemplary. We should be able to learn from this, but in that dark hour, in that desperate moment, it really doesn’t matter. The strange thing about every one of these narratives is that each of these stories has the person saying the words, “I can’t do it. I quit, I can’t bear it.” It seems as though once we have said this, we are then able to do it. For some reason we are then able to move on and reconstruct our lives. Everyone has a plan “B,” because there has to be a plan “B.” However, first there can be a moment of exasperation.

A friend of mine, who is a recovering alcoholic of 15 years, once said it best, “I had to hit rock bottom first. I had to be out on the curb.” Then the very first thing she had to do to begin her recovery was to admit she had a problem. Was her alcoholism her fault? Was it her genetic makeup? Was her life a life of punishment for behavior that she did of her own free will? Was she compelled towards that path? It doesn’t really matter. All of the rationales and explanations in the world don’t make a bit of difference. Sure, understanding what got a person to where they are helps to prevent it from happening again, but those explanations do little for changing the circumstance in the here and now. In order to change your circumstance you must do two things. First, recognize that your circumstance is untenable and that you can’t go on like this any longer. Second, you have to say it. You have to say it to someone. You have to make the desire real by saying it out loud. You have to say either what Cain said, “*Gadol avoni min’so*, my punishment is too great to bear,” or you have to say what God said, “*Ki nichmati, ki asitem*, I regret I made them.” You have to say something and, in my opinion, you have to say it out loud, not in the quiet of your own bedroom although you may practice there first, you have to say it so others hear it. You have to say, “*ad kan v’lo ha’alah*, I have taken it this far but no more. I am not going to take it anymore.” You have to say, *ad kan*, “until now I have endured it, I have endured the misguided career, the difficult relationships, the self loathing, *ad kan*, until now I have put up with the degradation and the belittling, *ad kan*, until now I have put up with so much but, *lo ha’alah* but no further.”

Some spend their life planning while others react to whatever comes along. However, we all have the same thoughts about how things will unfold for us. We plan, we chart a course and we prepare for eventualities. I am reminded of the famous Yiddish phrase, *Mentsch tracht, Gott lacht*. “Man plans and God laughs,” as if to suggest that even the best laid plans can end in unexpected results. Yet, this morning’s reading seems to turn this age old cliché on its head. It is as if the phrase should be, *Gott tracht, mensch lacht*. “God planned and man laughed.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, quotes, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's 15th century Oration on the Dignity of Man. This was one of the turning points of Western civilization, the "manifesto" of the Italian Renaissance. In this manifesto, He attributed the following declaration to God, addressing the first man:

"We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which we have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody we have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may glance with greater ease round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."

For two and half years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued. Beit Shammai cited the horrible crimes humanity had done, and he said it was better that man had not been created. Beit Hillel argued, "Look at all of the great things man has done, of course it is better that humanity was created." Unable to come to a resolution, they concluded that it might have been better if human beings had not been created but, now that we have been created, let us examine our actions both past and future. (Talmud Eruvin 13b)

Each of us finds ourselves in circumstances not of our own making. Our world, like our own individual lives, often lies in a precarious balance. We have done great things and we have done bad things. We have done terrible things to our environment and to our bodies. We have polluted the air and we have ingested dangerous substances. We have destroyed life on massive scales and we have permitted madmen to share the world stage with peace-loving giants. But we have made extraordinary advances in science, and we have figured out how to snatch life from the grasp of death.

This past week the Nobel Prize winners were announced. Many were surprised by the announcement that President Obama had won. I, too, was a little shocked. I pray he grows to earn it. However, it was the Nobel Prize that was awarded to Ada Yonath that I want to focus on for a few minutes. Ada Yonath is an Israeli research scientist who has taken great efforts to live up to this standard of improving the world, and was recently rewarded with a Nobel Prize in chemistry.

Ada Yonath is the Martin S. and Helen Kimmel Professor of Structural Biology at Weizmann. She is the fourth woman to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry and the first since 1964, when Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin of Britain received the prize. Professor Ada Yonath, head researcher in the field of structural biology and biochemistry at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, is a pioneer of ribosome crystallography. Her research, which has revealed the modes of action of over 20 different antibiotics that target bacterial ribosomes, has enabled her to identify how bacteria become resistant to antibiotics. Bacterial resistance is a problem of great concern worldwide, especially in light of the growth of antibiotic-resistant super bugs. Her studies lay the groundwork for scientists to start developing new bacteria-resistant antibiotics that better target the ribosomes of pathogens to avoid the problem of resistance.

Yonath told reporters that from the very beginning her project seemed to her Nobel-worthy, but that along the way many had been wary of her ability to see the research through. "I must say I was shocked when they called me and said I was in the leading group. I was sure they were pulling my leg, so I said: 'Here, they found themselves a new victim'."

"I saw the number 46 on the caller ID, the country code for Sweden. So I said, 'they're taking this joke really far,' but the tone was very much Swedish, with a very Swedish accent, so it seemed fine after all. From the first indication that perhaps this project would work, I was told that this was a project of Nobel standards."

We agree, but more than agreement we feel great pride and satisfaction. It is satisfying, not just because she is Jewish but because once again, we have proven our value to the human project. It is gratifying because it is always wonderful for Israel to be recognized for the incredible contributions this little state, constantly under the threat of extinction, continues to make. Yes, not just surviving but thriving in all areas of social development. It is also truly rewarding because this prize was given to Yonath who is working on fighting that which threatens life. The result is advancement in science that will preserve and enhance life, fight illness, and make our lives better. However, the piece that is most compelling about Ada Yonath's story, is the number of times she was told that she would fail, that she was just a dreamer, and that this was impossible. Almost as if Theodor Herzl was whispering in her ear, "if you will it is no dream."