

Shabbat Zachor 5774: Who Knows?

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March 15, 2014

Yesterday a colleague of mine, an Orthodox rabbi, posted an article he read in the Jerusalem Post: “Jew Saved From Malaysia Flight by Travel Agent Who Wouldn’t Book Him on Shabbat.” The article quotes from a travel discount blog called “Dan’s Deals”, which has posted an e-mail exchange between a customer known as Andy and his Orthodox travel agent in Israel. In January, Andy was in touch with his agent about an upcoming Asian business trip, and trying to get from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia to Beijing for a conference taking place on Saturday, a week ago today.

Andy wanted to stay overnight in Malaysia before heading to China, but the agent said he does not like to book Jews for flights on Shabbat. He was willing to book Andy to Beijing on Friday, but if he wanted to travel on Saturday he’d have to book it himself. It’s not clear if Andy is observant. In the end, Andy changed his mind. As he was about to board a flight in Los Angeles in January, he e-mailed the travel agent -- he decided to fly to China on the Friday and asked the agent where a good place to have Shabbat dinner in Beijing might be!

As a result, he was not on last Saturday’s Malaysian Flight 370, which went missing and is presumed to have crashed in the sea a week ago.

We hear stories like this, or know people, whenever there is a tragedy or a violent attack. As you can imagine, the report about this customer and his travel agent has generated all kinds of reactions. First of all, our prayers and thoughts are with the people on the plane and with their families.

Andy himself, the business traveler, waited until Shabbat had ended in Beijing, and e-mailed the travel agent in Israel. Andy thanked him, and called him a life-saver -- and asked him to change the last leg of his trip so he wouldn’t have to fly Malaysian Airlines, not this week or ever again.

The travel agent wrote back: It wasn't me, but God and Shabbat who were your life savers. You owe them something.

Then there's Dan, owner of the website that shared all of this. I haven't been able to figure out who exactly Dan is, but he's obviously Jewish and knows a lot about traveling to Israel. He knows and vouches for the travel agent who told him what had happened. Dan has apparently been flooded with criticism for singling out Andy's story, when 239 other people are missing and feared to have died. In an update on his blog, Dan says that he in no way is implying that the plane crashed because it was flying on Shabbat, and he prays against all odds for the safety of the passengers, who have not yet been discovered.

Then Dan says two other things: One is that the rescue of one life is always of infinite importance. Dan quotes the Talmud, which as you know teaches that a person who saves one life has saved an entire universe. And Dan says that no matter what else you think, it's because a travel agent was willing to put his religious convictions over the commission from a sale that a man is alive today.

All of these responses are worth considering. They all share one thing in common -- they try to bring some sense and some moral order to an event that seems so random. The urge to give some account of what happened is very strong. Especially when death and life, tragedy and good fortune are involved, along with some element of human decision. There is something very Jewish about seeking some purpose or giving some credit in a situation like this.

But before thinking through these responses, I want to put out one more frame. Purim is the perfect time to think about the story of Andy, his travel agent, the blogger, and Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

So follow me to a midrash that compares two Jewish ways of viewing reality. It's from the Talmud, in *Masechet Shabbat* מסכת שבת. The midrash compares two groups, two generations of Jews. One group stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and received the Torah from God. The other group was the Jews of Shushan, the Jews of the story of Purim.

Rav Avdimi son of Hama, son of Hasa said: When the Jews arrived at Mt. Sinai, God held the mountain upside-down over their heads and offered them a choice: If you accept the Torah, fine, but if not I will just drop the mountain on top of you. Rabbi Aha bar Yaakov said what I hope all of you are thinking: Wait a minute! This makes the entire Torah invalid. You can't say the Jews accepted the covenant if this is how it happened.

Said Raba: It doesn't matter, because the Jews eventually reconfirmed the covenant for all time in the days of Achashverosh -- the time of Purim.

I love this midrash because it's all about upside-down, topsy-turvy. You would think that the Jews who heard the Ten Commandments would have it all over these Jews in the Purim story, who don't talk about God or the Torah, who are named after Persian gods like Ishtar and Marduk, who are living in exile and seem to have no interest in the Land of Israel even though they were allowed to go back if they wanted.

You would think that the Torah is so much more important than the Megillah. The Torah is the Torah, but the Megillah is just a romp, full of drinking parties and harems and murder and details about the Persian postal system. The Torah is about right and wrong, and the Megillah is a completely upside-down moral universe, where parties last for 180 days and the king issues a royal proclamation demanding that all women in the kingdom, rich and poor, through all his 127 provinces, subject themselves to their husbands.

But this midrash says that actually it's Mount Sinai that's upside down, and the Jews of the Megillah who are right-side up.

Here is what I think the rabbis in the midrash are trying to say. The perspective of Mt. Sinai, of what we usually think as the Torah, is too perfect. In the Torah, even when things don't go according to God's plan, God is still watching, getting ready to reimpose order. The Ten Commandments given at Mt. Sinai say that those who obey the covenant will be blessed, and those who disobey will be punished. Maybe not directly, not today, but that's how it works out eventually. There is an order, a way things are

supposed to work.

The Megillah, though, represents a different perspective. In the Megillah, life is a crapshoot, literally -- that's what Purim means, "lots", a game of chance. Mordechai saved the king's life from an assassination plot, but this Haman pops out of nowhere and takes power. Esther vanishes into the king's harem, and even though she's called the queen, she really has no idea if the king has any interest in her when he has all these other beautiful girls around. If the king hadn't had trouble sleeping one night, he never would have remembered that Mordechai was the one who saved his life. All the drinking parties, the repeated *mishteh* מִשְׁתֵּה, suggest a world where everyone stumbles around, where cause and effect are becoming detached. We symbolize the crazy world of the Megillah in the idea that a person on Purim should lose the ability to discriminate between blessed in Mordechai and cursed is Haman, *Baruch Mordechai v'Arur Haman* בְּרוּךְ מֹרְדֵכַי וְאֲרוּר הָמָן.

There's a randomness that the Megilah recognizes, and no one tries to explain it away and say it's part of God's plan. This year, as I've been studying the Megillah, I've come to think that the most important moment comes when Mordechai tries to persuade Esther to go to the king, to ask him to annul the edict against the Jews. Dr. Aviva Zornberg says that if Mordechai was in the Torah, he'd talk like Joseph -- he'd say, don't worry, God is protecting you, this is obviously why you are queen. Instead he says, "Who knows -- מִי יוֹדֵעַ -- if for just such a time you have become queen?" Who knows? Mordechai suggests, but he isn't really sure. When Esther agrees to fast and go to the king, she says so with no certainty that it will do any good. "If I perish, I perish" וְכִאֲשֶׁר אֲבָדָתִי אֲבָדָתִי -- maybe it will work, maybe it won't.

Mordechai and Esther don't say that their situation reminds them of Joseph, or Moses, or anyone else. They have no ready-made prayers. The most they can say is that it's possible that things will turn out as they should. מִי יוֹדֵעַ -- who knows?

Last summer, when we went to Vienna for the Spira family reunion, I thought about all the chances that have created my family. As we met Laurie's cousins from ten countries,

from Australia to Israel to Scandinavia to British Columbia, I thought about where her father might have ended up instead of Birmingham, Alabama, when he made it out Austria by the skin of his teeth in 1938. As my son came up to the Torah on Shabbat morning in Vienna, called by the name he inherited from Laurie's father, I thought -- no Hitler, no Spira-Savetts. No wonderful children of mine, who I hope are bringing good into the world. What's the explanation for that?

מי יודע? Who knows? I spoke a few weeks about about Shalom in the world during the Olympics, hoping that the games would be complete without any act of terrorism. Who knew that just after that, Putin would invade Ukraine, and Russia would turn on a dime from representing peace to war?

The Megillah teaches us to try to live with the מי יודע, the who-knows-if quality of life. That's what Mordechai and Esther do. And it's because of this that the Talmud compares them favorably to the Jews of the Torah. Because they found a way to affirm Judaism without the perfect order that the Torah promises. They made sense of their lives, even in the fact of the randomness of life and circumstances beyond their control. They didn't seek more explanations than life can bear, but asked instead: what should I do?

And that is what we do, and how we live. It's what we do when we see suffering in our world, and we don't know that our caring or our *tzedakah* will make a difference -- but it might, so we care and we give. It's what we do when a friend has cancer, and we want to convey hope and pray for healing, even when we don't know what the outcome will be -- but our prayers might make a difference, so we pray and we hope.

Which brings us back to Andy, the world-traveler. I wonder what will happen to him. He said that his travel agent saved his life, and he will never fly Malaysian again. If that's all he takes away, then he's trapped in the perspective that says everything can be explained and controlled. And if, God forbid, something difficult happens to him or someone he loves, his whole world might crumble.

The travel agent says: God and Shabbat saved you, and you owe them something. I

think there might be some nuance to what he says -- the idea of Shabbat influenced Andy, and in that sense God and Shabbat saved his life. But the real meaning is in the last part -- that Andy owes something, that he has to figure out how to live in light of the knowledge that he was that close to death.

Blogger Dan, whoever he is, may have said it best: It's not that God protected Andy, or that God crashed the plane, because of Shabbat. There's no guiding hand deciding here who should live and who should die. Rather, Dan points out that the travel agent was willing to put his religious commitment first and walk away from a sale. He didn't know that Andy would reconsider and book the Friday flight, and spend a lovely Shabbat evening in Beijing. He had no idea the other plane would disappear or crash. He just stood where he stood, acted as he felt he should act.

Of all the people in this vignette, it's Dan who sounds most like Mordechai and Esther. Don't look for a complete explanation, I think he's saying. We don't need to find God's punishments and rewards around every corner. I know what I know -- that one life was saved, when someone acted with integrity and someone else resonated to that. Beyond that, who knows, מִי יָדוּעַ -- but let's figure out how to make as much meaning as we can, let's figure out our purpose, and let's decide what we should do.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Purim Samay'ach!