

Questions, Answers and Silence

REFLECTIONS ON THE TSUNAMI

By Berel Berkovits

Writing in *The Sunday Times* of London on the Asian tsunami, Minette Marrin (who describes herself candidly as “an unbeliever”) quotes a simple aphorism of the leading philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Remarkably, this response is (at first sight) almost identical to that called for on the part of *ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim* (a community of believers). Almost identical, and yet radically different. There is a vast difference between the silence of the “unbeliever” and the silence of the *ma’amin* (believer).

The unbeliever is silent because he has *no answers*. Unable to make sense of this world—of the seeming injustice that strikes down the innocent, the suffering that seems to over-

whelm good and bad alike—he concludes that there is indeed no rhyme or reason. In the words of Kayin, “*Leit din, veleit Dayan.*”¹ He cannot understand everything, so he refuses to understand anything. His is the silence that says “If I cannot comprehend everything, if I have no ultimate answers, nothing has meaning.” There are, quite simply, no answers. Equally, of course, it follows that there are no questions. Tsunamis happen because tsunamis happen. There is no point asking why, because “why” implies purpose and meaning, and there is—in this view—no purpose or meaning. The world simply evolved from nothingness; man developed by chance, over eons of time, from the protozoic slime; there is no Creator, and no purpose to life or to history.

To us it seems that these propositions are scientifically absurd. If the universe simply “happened” by chance, as a result of a Big Bang explosion of a pea-sized mass of infinite density, we are still faced with the questions of where the tiny mass came from, and why it exploded—let alone how it formed our infinitely complex universe. But more significantly, the unbe-

liever’s universe is also absurd and meaningless from an existentialist point of view. The *ma’amin* finds, on the whole, clear meaning, design, plan and purpose in his existence, despite his inability to find meaning in the tragedies of this world. He knows that “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways,” says Hashem.”² His inability to square the exception with the rule may well cause him considerable personal anguish, especially if he is sensitive to the pain of others. But he is not reduced to living in a universe of meaninglessness.

The unbeliever, however, throws out the baby with the bathwater. Instead of having to grapple with bits of the jigsaw puzzle that do not fit, he has to deal with a puzzle in which none of the pieces fit.

The *ma’amin*, by contrast, is silent because he has *no questions*. That is not to say that he is not troubled by the apparent contradictions in this world: by the difficulty of reconciling Hashem’s goodness with His power. Of course he is, and—at least according to some Rishonim—so he ought to be. “Blind faith,” in the view of Ramban, is not *emunah*; it is a refusal to face up

Rabbi Berkovits was a dayan of Great Britain’s Federation of Synagogues. “Questions, Answers and Silence” was written shortly before his untimely death on the sixth of Nisan. He was in Israel to observe the yahrtzeit of his father, Rabbi Moshe Dovid Berkovits, z”l, which fell on the next day. An obituary will appear in an upcoming issue.

to reality.³ But he comes to recognize that there are some things that are simply too difficult, too overwhelming, too incomprehensible for the human mind to contend with. His is the silence that says, although I cannot understand everything I nonetheless affirm that everything has meaning.⁴ He has no ultimate questions; he is honest enough to recognize that he is merely a mortal being, standing in awe in the presence of the Borei Olam.⁵ While never giving up on the possibility of finding answers to agonizing issues, he recognizes that it is equally possible that he may never find solutions.

Hence, the Chazon Ish refrained from expressing an opinion about the Holocaust. In response to a questioner, he said: "Is it possible for a person who just about manages to understand a *mishnah* to object to a Tosafot on the grounds that the reasoning does not seem right to him?"⁶ *Bemekom gedulotai, sham anvetonutai.* For all his greatness, he recognized his limitations.

"*Lecha dumiyah tehillah,*" says David Hamelech.⁷ Sometimes the greatest praise of Hashem, the highest expression of song to Him, is silence. "Vayidom Aharon,"⁸ Aharon's silence, says Rav Yaakov Mecklenburg,⁹ was not the silence of one who has a question, but suppresses it; of one within whom there is a protest, which he deliberately refrains from expressing. It is, rather, the silence and equanimity—the *shalvat hanefesh* and calmness—of someone who does not voice the challenge because he accepts that man is but man, and Hashem is the Almighty.

It is the silence of one who recognizes—as Hakadosh Baruch Hu demonstrated to Eliyahu Hanavi—that He is not to be found in the wind, the fire, the earthquake of questioning, but in the sound of a *kol demamah dakah*¹⁰—an exquisitely refined silence.

And yet, sometimes silence is an inappropriate response. I may be silent in the face of my own pain, but I dare not be silent in the face of someone else's suffering. My *rebbe*, Rav Chaim

Shmuelevitz, *z"l*, used to say that this is the message of *Sefer Iyov*. One of the three advisors of Paroh, Iyov kept silent in the face of the decree that all baby boys be thrown in the river. He realized that any attempt at protest was totally futile; it would have achieved nothing except his own death. And yet, his silence was unacceptable. When something hurts, one cries out; when there is pain, one cannot keep quiet. It was only after Iyov experienced his own *yisurim* (suffering), and cried out to Hashem as a consequence, that he learned this lesson.

This idea is implicit in a famous passage in Rambam's *Hilchot Ta'anit*.¹¹

It is a mitzvah aseih [positive commandment] of the Torah to cry out and blow the chatzotzrot [trumpets] for

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every trouble that befalls the community ... whether drought, epidemic, locusts or the like—cry out, and blow! And this is one of the paths of teshuvah; because if people cry out and blow when a calamity happens, everyone will know that it is because of their evil deeds that evil has befallen them ... and this will cause the lifting of the calamity from them. But if they do not cry out and blow, and say that "this happened to us because it is simply how the world functions, and the calamity is simply a random event," this is a cruel response, which will cause them to carry on in their evil ways, so that the first trouble will lead to further troubles.

This Rambam is often cited, but equally often misinterpreted or misused. There are those who see his emphasis on the belief that nothing in this world is random or accidental as his answer—a philosophical explanation—to the problem of undeserved suffering (such as the Holocaust). But if that were so, Rambam should have

placed it in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, or perhaps *Hilchot Teshuvah*, where he discusses fundamental issues of *emunah* (belief). Nor does merely stating a belief adequately address a question asked by Moshe Rabbeinu, Yeshayahu and Chabbakuk Hanavi, all of whom enunciated the problem despite their undoubted belief.

There are others who use Rambam as the basis for a worldview which sees tragedy and suffering that befall other people as events whose sole purpose is to spur us to do *teshuvah*. Once again, this is a distortion of Rambam's meaning. How could it be that the Shofet kol ha'aretz (Judge of the world) inflicts unwarranted suffering on innocent people in Asia or other faraway countries, simply so that Klal Yisrael should do *teshuvah*? (In point of fact, it is clear that Rambam is talking about *tzarot* [troubles] that befall Klal Yisrael, rather than the *umot haolam* [nations of the world].)

In this context, it is instructive to read what the Meiri says in his comment on the Gemara's statement¹² that "No punishment comes to the world except because of Yisrael." The Meiri says:

A person should always accept upon himself the justice of punishment that befalls him, and should understand [contemplate] that all that happens to him, is "a storm that is because of him." He should not make allowances for himself, saying, "I am OK, so how could such-and-such befall me?" because if he is indeed a tzaddik, Hakadosh Baruch Hu is more exacting with him to cause him to fear and to keep him away from any evil path. This is what [Chazal] meant when they said: "Punishment only comes to the world because of Yisrael," meaning, to cause them to fear and do teshuvah. There is an allusion to this in the pasuk: "I destroyed their streets, so that none pass through; I said—surely you will fear me, and learn a lesson."

The point of the *gemara*, according to the Meiri, is not to give an explanation of what appears to be the unjustified suffering of the *goyim* ("they

suffer so that we should become better”), but to reinforce the altogether different message that our *own* suffering should be viewed as a justified punishment for our failings. The focus is on us and our inadequacies, not on them and their punishments.

Yet, others believe that they can explain the recent tragedy in Asia by reference to the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the countries involved. Thus it is commonly said that the people affected are *ovdei avodah zarah* (idol worshippers); or that their lifestyle is morally degenerate or that they are given over to materialism, and hence are abandoned (as Rambam implies in *Moreh Nevuchim*)¹³ to the forces of the material world.

But while to some there may seem to be an element of truth in a few of these statements, a little reflection demonstrates that they are too glib and simplistic.

Firstly, at least two-thirds of the victims were Indonesian Muslims, who (while perhaps not well-disposed to Jews) are certainly not *ovdei avodah zarah*.¹⁴ Nor is it certain that those who are idol-worshippers are halachically classified as *ovdei avodah zarah*, since the Gemara clearly suggests¹⁵ that non-Jews “nowadays” merely carry on their traditions by rote, and are not deemed *ovdei avodah zarah*. And even though—in the opinion of Rambam¹⁶—ignorance of their *mitzvot* is no excuse for Bnei Noach, this is only the case (according to Rav Shimon Sofer)¹⁷ when they have an opportunity to learn, such as if they are living in an Eretz Yisrael governed by *halachah*, where they can see the example of *gerim toshavim*. Finally, what of the children, who comprised fully one-third of the victims?¹⁸

As for the degeneracy of the lifestyle of the peoples concerned, one wonders why the victims were not the town dwellers, where most of the degeneracy occurs. And if the focus is on the materialism of their lifestyle, is it really the case that the simple fishermen, struggling to make ends meet,

are really more materialistic than the worthy citizens of London, with their affluent lifestyle, their custom kitchens and en suite bedrooms?

It’s true that our *nevi'im* (prophets) constantly remonstrate over the failings of the world (*goyim* as well as Klal Yisrael) and often point to these

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failings as reasons for suffering. But we are not *nevi'im*, and we do not know the *darchei Hashem*. It is a little presumptuous for any of us to imagine that we are able to understand the actions of the Ribbono shel Olam, or to ascribe definitive “reasons” for those actions.

Rambam (in *Hilchot Ta'anit*) is not telling us why tragedies occur. He is simply telling us, firstly, that they are not just freaks of nature, but acts of Hashem; and secondly, he is telling us how we should react. It is not for us to explain how Hakadosh Baruch Hu runs His world. It is for us to respond to Him by living as He asks of us.

And there is another response that is called for—the instinctive human reaction that impels us to come to the help of those who are in trouble. It is a reaction that the world at large has demonstrated, in an astonishing outpouring of generosity and identification with those who have suffered. That is entirely as it ought to be; in the opinion of at least some Rishonim,¹⁹ Bnei Noach are obligated to give *tzedakah*. And it is also a reaction that we too, as *ehrllicher Yidden* and *bnei Torah*, should be demonstrating.

And yet, for the most part (the Orthodox Union—which raised significant money for the cause—and Zaka being notable exceptions), it seems to

have been missing. Whatever individuals may have personally contributed, there seems to have been almost no response on the part of the organized Torah world. There has been a silence, an apparent apathy and indifference, on the part of the Torah world and its leaders to this immense human tragedy.

To some extent, this is understandable. In part it reflects an insularity due to historical experience. Having seen how the world abandoned us in the Holocaust, we turned our back on the world. In part, it is due to the need for the Torah community to separate itself from the negative influences of “*goyische*” culture. And in part, it is due to the unique focus of the Torah world on self-improvement and the furtherance of Torah and *mitzvot*. But despite these considerations, it does not exonerate us of the need to act towards others with compassion.

My father, *alav hashalom*, was an East European *rav* through and through, brought up living Torah and steeped in the yeshivah world of the tradition of the Chatam Sofer. He was a Holocaust survivor, who led a *kehillah* under three years of German occupation and lost his family in Auschwitz. Yet, he never lost his compassion for humanity. I well remember as a child how, during the Biafran War in Nigeria, he made an appeal to his *kehillah* to help the victims of the conflict (man-made as it was). To him it was natural, and instinctive, that help was required. His sense of humanity extended to all.

And he was not just *naeh doreish*. He was also *naeh mekayem* (he practiced what he preached). We had a plumber who had leased a house from the Church Commissioners. Owing to a minor failure to comply with the terms of the lease, they evicted him from the house (taking with them, for good measure, the tools of his trade). Overnight, he became a wreck of a man.

My father went to the Archbishop of Canterbury to ask him to use his influence to rectify a moral wrong and reinstate the man in his house. I well remember my father’s reaction when he came home in shock and disbelief. “Is this a man of the cloth?” he said, “the leader of a religion? The Archbishop said to me: ‘My dear rabbi, you are perfectly right; but the Church and the Church Commissioners have nothing to do with one another. The Church deals with matters spiritual; the Church Commissioners, with finance and investments.’”

And so, my father, the *rav*, took into his house the Christian plumber who had been abandoned by his church. For weeks on end he lived with us; my father sat with him for hours, listening to him and encouraging him; and every morning (to avoid *kashrut* problems), my father personally prepared his breakfast for him.

There is a remarkable insight of the Netziv, in his introduction to *Sefer Bereishit*.

This Book, called the Book of Bereishit, is described by the nevi'im as Sefer Hayashar [the Book of the Upright].... Rabbi Yochanan explains that it is the book of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who were called “yesharim.” We have to understand why Bilaam described our Avot specifically as yesharim, rather than tzaddikim, or Chassidim or the like. [The answer is] that this was the distinction of the Avot, namely, that apart from being tzaddikim, Chassidim and ohavei Hashem in the highest possible manner, they were also yesharim. This means that they conducted themselves with love in relation to the umot haolam—even to the most disgusting idol-worshippers—and were concerned about their welfare since this contributes to the maintenance of the Creation.

Thus, we see how Avraham prostrated himself to daven for Sodom, even though he hated those people and their king with the most absolute hatred

because of their evil; but still, he wanted them to survive. The [Midrash] Rabbah in Vayeira comments on this: “Said Hakadosh Baruch Hu to Avraham Avinu: ‘Ohavto tzeddek, vatisno resha,’²⁰ ‘You love to justify My creatures, and you hate condemning them.’” Thus we learn a great deal from the conduct of the Avot in regard to derech eretz, which relates to the preservation of the world that is specifically dealt with in this sefer, namely, the sefer of Creation; and that is why it is called Sefer Hayashar.”

And so we have a response to Wittgenstein. The answer is, to adapt his own words, that whereof we can speak, thereof we must not be silent. Where we can help, there we must act. And where we can learn to improve ourselves, to reach out to others, and to live as *yesharim*, there we must do so. **IA**

Notes

1. *Targum Yonatan*, Bereishit 4:7.
2. Yeshayahu 55:8.
3. Ramban, *Sha’ar Hagemul*.
4. Ibid.
5. Rambam, *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2.
6. *Pe’er Hador* 3, p. 126.
7. Tehillim 65:2.
8. Vayikra 10:3.
9. *Haketav Vehakabbalah*, *ibid*.
10. 1 Melachim 19:11-12. Note that *dakah* qualifies *demamah* and not *kol*; hence my translation as “exquisite silence.”
11. 1:1-3.
12. *Yevamot* 63a.
13. 3:18.
14. See Rambam, *Hilchot Ma’achalot Asurot* 11:7.
15. *Chullin* 13b.
16. *Hilchot Melachim* 10:1.
17. *She’eilot Teshuvot Hitorerut Teshuvah*, at end of no. 186.
18. Children are not punishable for non-observance of the *Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach*, see Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim* 10:2.
19. See Ran and Rema, *Sanhedrin* 56b.
20. Tehillim 45:8.