



# When Bad Things Happen: Evil and Tragedy

**Rabbi Michael Lotker**


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# Overview of Our Discussion

- **Theodicy is the branch of theology that addresses the question of how a good, loving, just, powerful and all-knowing God could allow bad things to happen to good people.**
- **The discussion falls into two separate issues:**
  - **The problem of human evil**
  - **The problem of natural tragedy**
- **Note that if there is no God, there is no problem.**



# On Human Evil

## **Definitions & Discussion:**

- **What is good and what is evil?**
- **Who decides?**
- **Is it the same as what is legal and what is illegal?**
  - **What Hitler did was legal according to the laws of Nazi Germany**
  - **Slavery was legal**
  - **When President Obama was born, the marriage of his parents was illegal in 19 states.**



# If There is no God...

**In the words of Prager and Telushkin\*:**

- **“If there is no God, there are no rights and wrongs that transcend personal preference.”**
- **The laws of physics are not good or evil.**
- **“Without God, all we can have are opinions about morality, but our *opinions* about good and evil are no more valid or binding than our opinions about “good” or “bad” ice cream.”**
- **As the famous atheist philosopher, Bertram Russel conceded, “I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don’t like it.”**

*\*The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism, pp 21-23*





# If There is no God...

## More from Prager and Telushkin\*:

- Reason does not protect from immoral behavior, if often suggests it:
  - We have a special word for this – *rationalization*.
  - Nazi behaved “reasonably” when they obeyed orders to murder and so furthered their careers.
  - One can argue that the only people in Nazi occupied Europe that acted against reason were those who protected Jews.
- According to the New York Times, about one in three hotel guests steals something from his/her room.
  - They “rationalize” their behavior “Everyone else takes these *souvenirs* ...” or “hotels overcharge”
- Reason cannot demand good behavior

\**The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, pp 21-23



# Two Key Insights From Judaism

**People are neither all good or all evil**

- **What forces shape humanity?**
  - **Evolutionary forces**
    - Survival of the fittest
    - Tribal membership
    - Xenophobia – fear of the other
  - **Social forces**
    - Peer pressure
    - Groupthink
    - Influence of authority
- **Judaism understand this as ascribing to humanity two inclinations**
  - The *Yetzer Tov* – the inclination to good/morality/altruism
  - The *Yetzer HaRah* – the inclination to evil/selfishness/self gratification

# Back to Creation

- Evolution: God's tool for creation.
- Genesis 1:26: "God said 'Let us make humanity in our image.'"
- God was talking to the animals! We have divine (*Yetzer Tov*) and animal (*Yetzer HaRah*) natures.



***I believe this is a biblical proof text for evolution!***





# The War Between the *Yetzers*

**Judaism understands these two inclinations to be at war with each other.**

- Humanity is not all good! Duh!!!
- Humanity is not all evil – not plagued with Original Sin.
  - From the morning prayers said upon awakening: “*Elohai neshama she-natah tah be, terhora he*” [“My God the soul that you have given me is pure”]
- There is a story about the rabbis trapping the *Yetzer HaRah* and putting it away in a cage. Afterwards...
  - The urge to acquire disappeared – no one went to work
  - The sexual urge disappeared – even the hens stopped laying eggs
  - The rabbis begged God to weaken the *Yetzer HaRah* to no avail.
  - And so they released it.

**I think Judaism has this exactly right.**



# Free Will

**We get to choose what side we're on in this war between our inclinations.**

**I believe that this is the central lesson of the Garden of Eden. What if they hadn't eaten the fruit? Did God want them to eat the fruit?**

**Two amazing quotes from the Mishna**

- **Everything is in the hands of heaven except awe/fear of heaven [*"yirat ha-shamayim"*]**
- **All is foreseen (by God) yet free will is given.**

**So the question is not "Where was God at Auschwitz," but Where was Humanity at Auschwitz,"**



# **An Important Lesson From the Nazis**

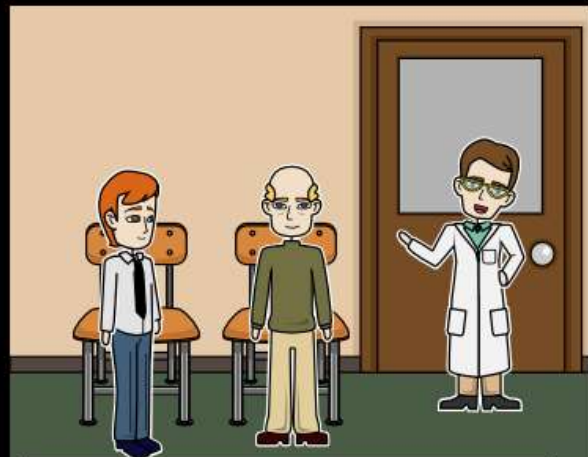
**Were the Nazis somehow aberrations of  
humanity? Born especially evil?**

**Germany, in this era, was the height of  
civilization - in the arts, sciences, and culture.**

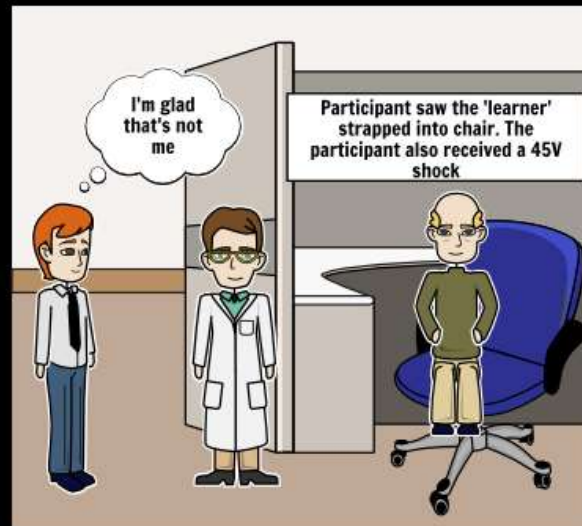
**All the guards at Concentration Camps were  
volunteers.**

**How might we react under similar  
circumstances?**

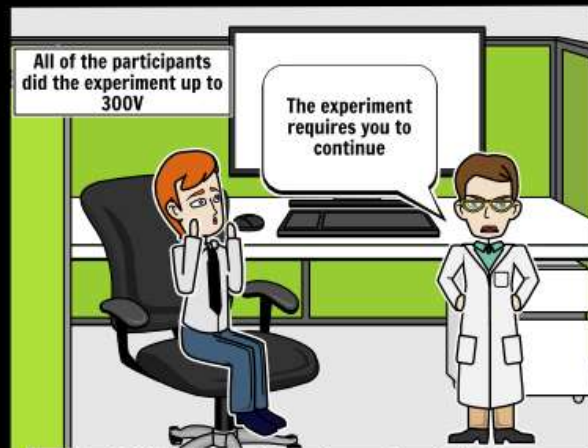
# The Milgram Experiment



Participants were told they were taking part in a study of memory. They were assigned the role of teacher by a rigged hat draw



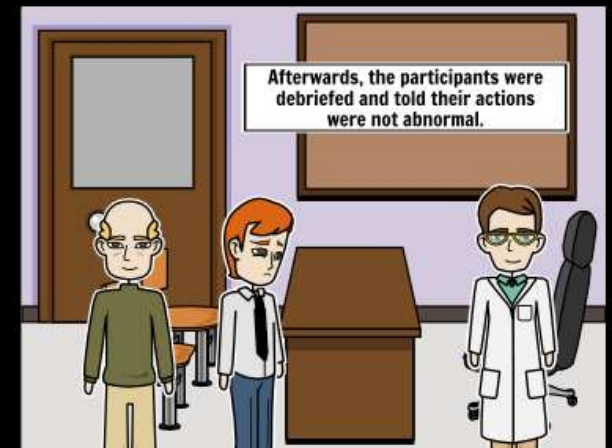
They had to administer shocks for every wrong answer. They thought they were giving real shocks to a person



After 300V, the 'learner' banged on a wall and asked them to stop, but the 'experimenter' told the participant to continue using verbal prods



Participants showed signs of stress such as sweating, nervous laughing fits and even seizures.

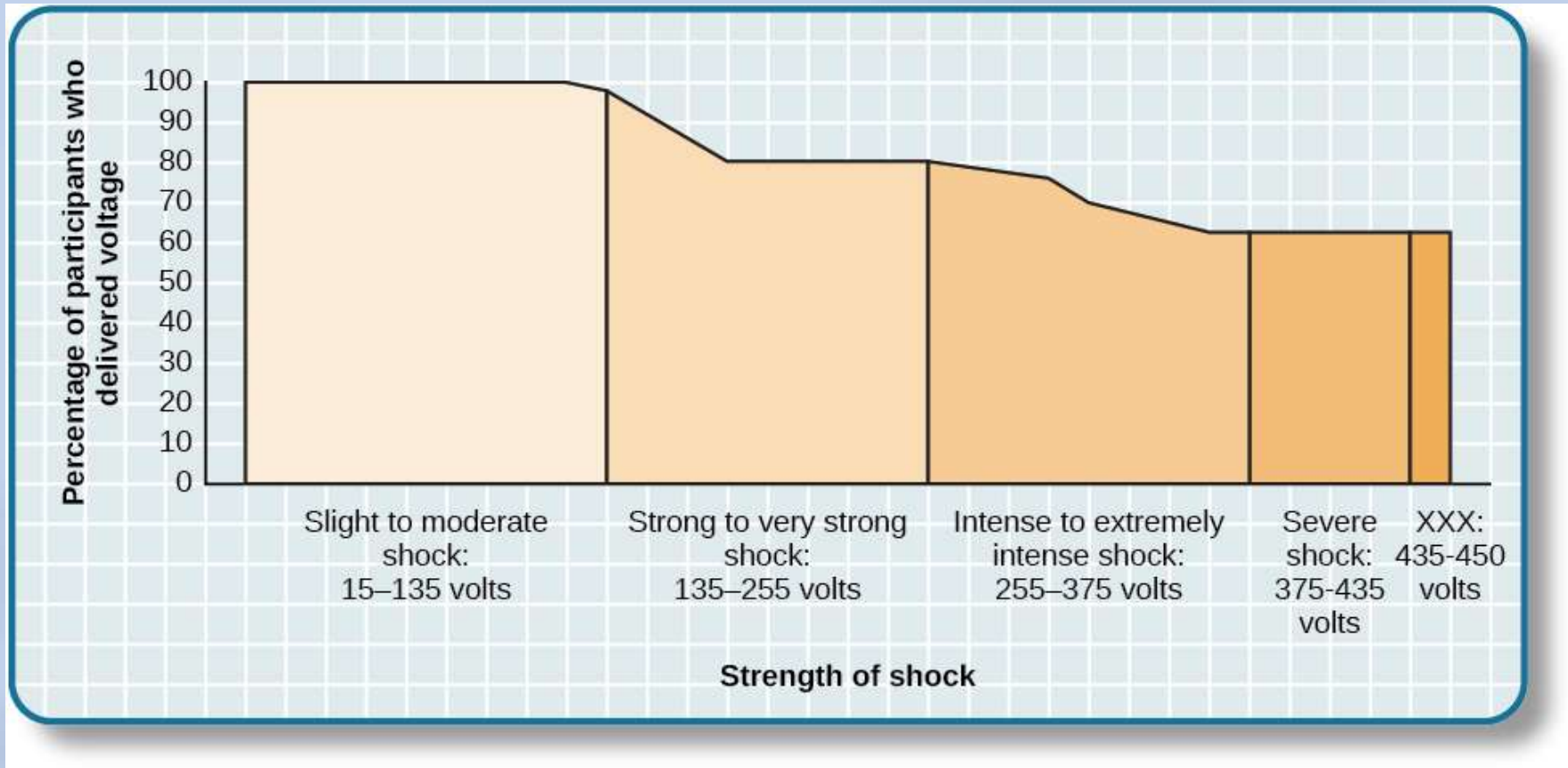


They had simply been obeying the authority of the 'experimenter'.

# The Milgram Experiment



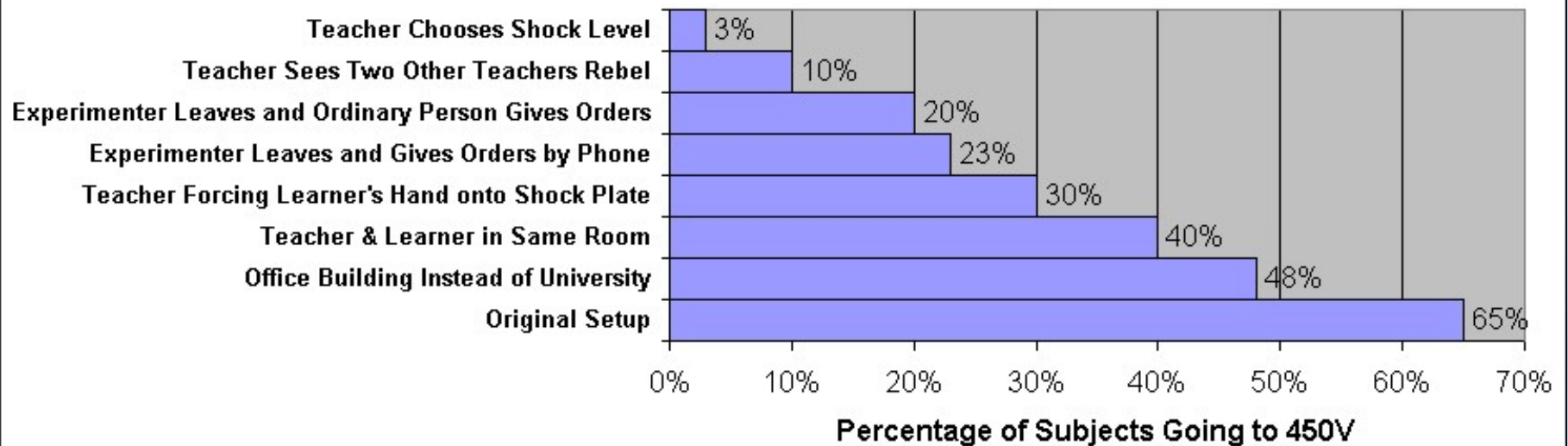
# The Milgram Experiment





# The Milgram Experiment

Variations on Milgram's Experiment





# I Believe Religion is the Answer

**Not a perfect answer – but the best answer.**

- **Reminds me of Churchill's quote:** "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others."

**But what about the assertion that most wars and evil is conducted in the name of religion?**

- **It's simply not true.**
- **Let's take a closer look.**



# What About Religious Wars?

- **We often hear the claim that the worst horrors, the worst wars, were fought in the name of religion.**
- **This is simply not true.**
  - **World War II - death of some 66 million**
  - **Communism some 100 million**
    - **Stalin alone 20 million**
    - **Communist China 65 million**
- **By contrast, in the 400 years of the Inquisition, “only” 5,000 killed (= 1/2 day at Auschwitz)**

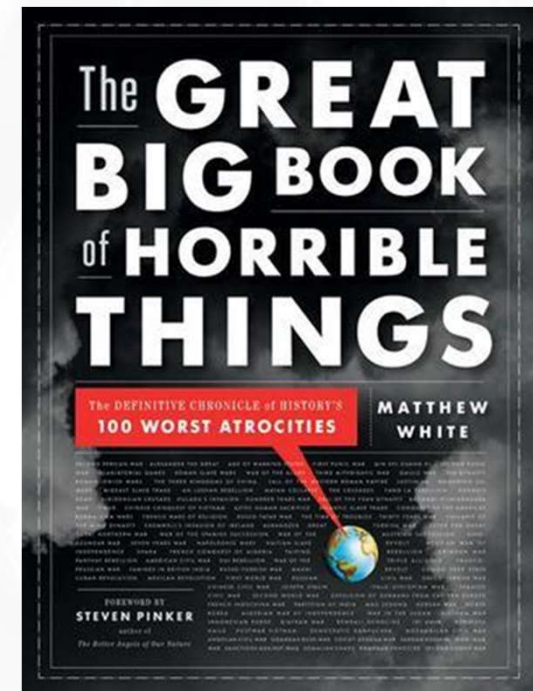


- **What About Religious Wars?**

In this fascinating book about the 100 worst atrocities in history:

- The Crusades ranked #30 with about 0.7% of the number of deaths (3 million) than the preceding 29.
- The total deaths attributed to religious conflicts were about 19.1% of the total.


The *Encyclopedia of Wars* (Phillips & Axelrod, 2004, surveyed 1,180 conflicts and found that less than 10% involved religion at all.





# Positive Elements of Religion

- **Religion goes beyond prohibiting the bad and demands the good.**
  - **Don't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.**
  - **Everyone created in the image of God.**
- **On average, religiously affiliated households donate \$1,590 to charity annually, while households with no religious affiliation contribute \$695.**
- **Some studies, using a more expansive definition of "religious giving," have estimated that faith motivates as much as 75 percent of all charity in the United States.**



# Brilliant Insights From Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

"This sobering yet soul-stirring book [offers] an ingenious rereading of Genesis. Sacks's brilliance as a theologian radiates."  
—Irshad Manji, *The New York Times Book Review*


## NOT IN GOD'S NAME

*Confronting  
Religious  
Violence*

RABBI  
JONATHAN SACKS

WINNER OF THE TEMPLETON PRIZE






# Brilliant Insights From Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

“Within groups we practice altruism. Between them we practice aggression. Religion enters the equation only because it is the most powerful force ever devised for the creation and maintenance of large-scale groups by solving the problem of trust between strangers.” pg. 39.

“Will Durant once estimated that there have been only 29 years since history began in which there were no wars.” pg. 178

*“A chosen people is the opposite of a master race, first because it is not a race but a covenant; second, because it exists to serve God, not to master others. A master race worships itself; a chosen people worships something beyond itself. A master race values power; a chosen people cares for the powerless. A master race believes it has rights; a chosen people knows only that it has responsibilities. The key virtues of a master race are pride, honor and fame. The key virtue of a chosen people is humility. A master race produces monumental buildings, triumphal inscriptions and a literature of self-congratulation. Israel, to a degree unique in history, produces a literature of almost uninterrupted self-criticism.”* pgs. 198-9



# Brilliant Insights From Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

“Never say, I hate, I kill, because my religion says so. Every text needs interpretation. Every interpretation needs wisdom. Every wisdom need careful negotiation between the timeless and time. Fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as we are. This is unlikely to be true.” pg. 207

“Every text-based religion develops its own traditions of interpretation... The rabbis said: ‘One who translates a verse literally is a liar (BT Kiddushin 49A)’” pg. 208

“We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanizing force it has been at its best: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperative of justice and compassion, the moral responsibility of the rich for the poor, the commands to love the neighbor and stranger, the insistence on peaceful modes of conflict resolution and respectful listening to the other side of a case, forgiving the injuries of the past and focusing instead on building a future in which the children of the world, of all colors, faith and races, can life together in grace and peace.” pg. 263



# Human Evil: My Bottom Lines

- **Human evil is the result of our inherent nature**
  - **To want things**
  - **Our free will**
- **Religion is not perfect but is the best hope**
  - **Nothing else seems to work**
  - **Humans, by our nature, can and often do misuse religion.**
  - **The case of walking down the dark alley.**
- **So which religions are OK**
  - **I would say which religions are kosher?**
- **I'M SO GLAD YOU ASKED!**



## Part 2: Tragedy

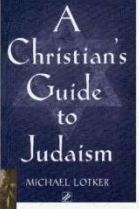

- **Last week, we looked at human evil**
  - The key theological insight is that God has given humanity free will.
- Tonight, we will look at tragedy.
  - Awful things that cannot be attributed to human actions or choice.
  - What insurance companies like to call “Acts of God”
    - Some of these can be grey areas
    - Did the cancer come from a random mutation or smoking, air pollution, etc.
    - Was the hurricane so deadly because we built a city in the wrong place.
  - So think of earthquakes, tsunamis, Huntington’s Disease, etc.

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**Why/When Bad Things Happen to Me!** How many of us believe that life is fair? Why? Do we have it better or worse than would be "fair?" The most difficult issue religion need to face is how we reconcile a good, just, loving, powerful, all knowing, all seeing God with Evil and Tragedy.

- o [The Problem of Human Evil – 6/3/20 - click here to see recording](#)
- o [The Problem of Random Tragedy – 6/10/20](#)





# Theodicy & Tragedy

**According to logic, at least one of these statements must be false:**

1. God is all good and all just.
2. God is all powerful.
3. Bad things happen to good people.

***Let's look at them separately.***

With thanks to Rabbis Harold Kushner and Ed Feinstein for this analysis.



# Theodicy

**Assume #1 “God is all good and all just” is false:**

- This is the God of the philosophers.
- This is God as laws of physics
- This is Job’s conclusion.

With thanks to Rabbis Harold Kushner and Ed Feinstein for this analysis.



# Theodicy

**Assume #3 “Bad things happen to good people” is false:**

- Maybe the thing isn't really bad.
- Maybe no one is really good.
  - > Original sin
  - > Sins in a prior incarnation

With thanks to Rabbis Harold Kushner and Ed Feinstein for this analysis.




# Theodicy

**Assume #2 “God is all powerful” is false:**

- Lessons from the Talmud
- Nature operates under its own laws  
[BT *Avodah Zara* 54B]
- God cannot intervene in nature.
- God’s role is as a teacher, inspirer, commander, friend and companion.


**This answer makes the most sense to me.**



# God-Where Have You Been Lately?

## Analogy of Parent to a Growing Child


- In infancy, parents work miracles
- Toddlers hear: “If ....., then .....”
- Adolescents hear: “Because I’m your father, that’s why”
- Adult children still in relationship with their parents.



# God-Where Have You Been Lately?

## **Analogy of Parent to a Growing Child**

- In our spiritual infancy, God worked miracles.
- Toddlers: Book of Deut. “If ..., then ...!”
- Adolescents: Book of Job: “I’m God, you’re not!”
- Adult: Today the relationship, the shared wisdom, the love and the caring is central.



# But Really God, Why is the World Such a Mess?

## Insights from the kaddish

- Let's take a look at the text



# Mourners' Kaddish

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא. בְּעֵלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְרַעוּתָהּ,  
וְיַמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ בְּחַיִּיכוֹן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוֹן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית  
יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּעַגְלָא וּבְזַמַּן קָרִיב, וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעַלְמֵי עֵלְמַיָּא.

וְתִבְרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמַם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא וְיִתְהַדָּר  
וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלָּל שְׁמֵהּ דְקֻדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא, לְעַלְמָא מִן כָּל  
בְּרַכְתָּא וְשִׁירְתָּא תְּשֻׁבְחָתָא וְנַחֲמָתָא, דְאִמְרִין בְּעַלְמָא,  
וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא, וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל,  
וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל  
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Exalted and hallowed be God's great name  
in the world which God created, according to plan.  
May God's majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime  
and the life of all Israel – speedily, imminently, to which we say Amen.

Blessed be God's great name to all eternity.

Blessed, praised, honored, exalted, extolled, glorified, adored, and lauded  
be the name of the Holy Blessed One, beyond all earthly words and songs of blessing,  
praise, and comfort. To which we say Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and all Israel,  
to which we say Amen.

May the One who creates harmony on high, bring peace to us and to all Israel.  
To which we say Amen.

*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba.  
B'alma di v'ra chirutei,  
v'yamlich malchutei,  
b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon  
uv'chayei d'chol beit Yisrael,  
baagala uviz'man kariv. V'im'ru: Amen.*

*Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach  
l'alam ul'almei almaya.*

*Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpaar  
v'yitromam v'yitnasei,  
v'yit'hadar v'yitaleh v'yit'halal  
sh'mei d'kud'sha b'rich hu,  
l'eila min kol birchata v'shirata,  
tushb'chata v'nechemata,  
daamiran b'alma. V'imru: Amen.*

*Y'hei sh'lama raba min sh'maya,  
v'chayim aleinu v'al kol Yisrael.  
V'imru: Amen.*

*Oseh shalom bimromav,  
Hu yaaseh shalom aleinu,  
v'al kol Yisrael. V'imru: Amen.*



# Mourners' Kaddish


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To which we say Amen.



# But Really God, Why is the World Such a Mess?

## Insights from the kaddish

- **The Mourner's Kaddish (*Kaddish Yatom* – literally the “Orphan's Kaddish”)**
  - Is in Aramaic
  - Does not speak of death or dying or sadness
  - Is a poem/prayer of praises and consolations for God.
- **Why are we praising God at these most difficult times?**



# Why Praise God at Difficult Times

## Here's my take:

1. Strengthening our spiritual backbones
2. Getting us together with community
3. Mystical insights – journey of the soul from this world to the next, and to higher levels in the heavens, is assisted by people praising God in the name of our loved one.
4. And one more thing...



# The Kaddish – Theodicy and the Central Teaching of Judaism

## **God could have made the world perfect:**

- No war, disease, poverty, hatred, earthquakes, etc. - A true Garden of Eden
- But if this were the case, what would be our job. We would have no moral value, no real work to do; we would be decorations in God's garden.
- But, the Torah teaches, we are created *B'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God – so we must have some real work to do – some problems to solve.
- So God only took creation so far and turned to us as God's partners in creation.





## This is A Jewish Perspective Not The Jewish Perspective

I understand the theology that says God is really in charge and everything is going according to God's plan.

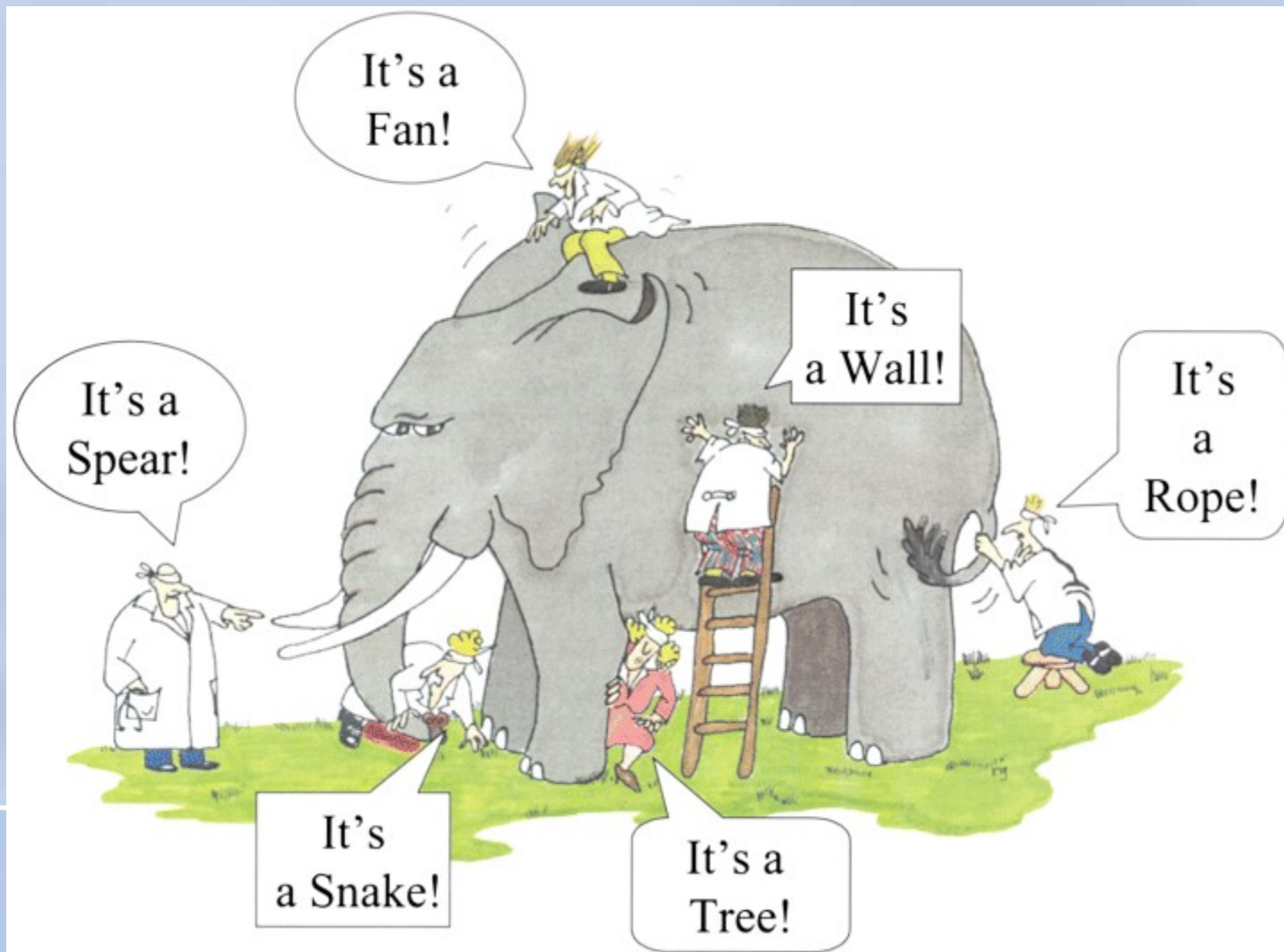
- It's comforting to believe that Someone's driving the bus.
- That if bad things happen to us, it must have been something we've done.

But I am more comfortable with the idea the God has made us a full partner in making the world the kind of place that we and God would want.

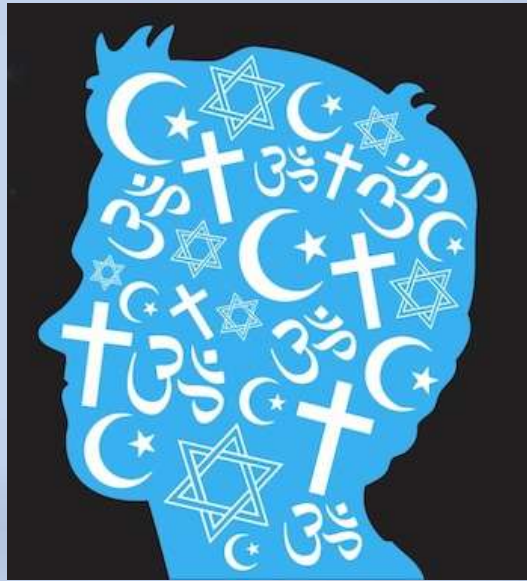
***That's my bottom line.***



# The Blind & the Elephant



Perhaps we each can see/understand  
only a portion of God's totality.



Our error is in our certainty that our  
view is the only truth.



The blind people all hear the creature speak .... and they all hear the Golden Rule, this rabbi's test for a *Kosher* religion.



## Next Subject: Jewish Ethics

**Jewish Ethics:** Judaism has a lot to say about how we should treat one another under a wide variety of situations. Reform Judaism especially stresses Ethics over Ritual.

- **Medical Ethics – 6/17/20**
- **Business Ethics – 6/24/20**