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The following is a transcription of a teaching given by Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D., as part of Reconstructing Judaism's Chesapeake Annual Celebration, held virtually on April 19, 2020.

For my teaching, I want to talk to you about theology. I want to take on the very meaty topic and talk about where we find God in the face of suffering. Thank God most of us convened here today are okay in a very fundamental way. I am here in my home outside of Philadelphia with my wife and we are okay and I presume that's the case for all of us convening today. But even as at this moment we're okay, we know people who aren't and we're all living with a keen awareness of intense suffering at all times.

At this moment we are aware that there exists a virus that preys on people, especially who are already vulnerable. And that there exist structural inequities that are aggravating the widespread economic dislocation and that contribute to an increased likelihood of infection for some people. I know, I presume you do as well, folks who struggle with mental illness and experiences of trauma, whose struggles are much greater at this moment. And we're all living with a lot of anxiety about what is coming next. So, I want to offer up some reflections from a Reconstructionist perspective on divine justice and on what we might do in the face of suffering. How do we explain it to ourselves? How do we explain this kind of suffering to others? And to point to some of the deepest reservoirs from which we can draw at these challenging moments.

One reason why we are in the kind of conundrum that some of us find ourselves in about struggling at this moment of existential drama has to do with some of the challenges that modernity has given to us. With the onset of the Enlightenment came this myth of control. Prior to the modern era, religion was the explanation for all things and when we tried to understand our own experience, the wider world, the natural world, there was a religious explanation for it all. And with the Enlightenment, religion receded, secularism emerged, and science and rationalism prevailed. With this new paradigm came the belief that through scientific investigation, through rationalism, we can explain everything. For many of us, we believe that with that explanation also came control.

The Reconstructionist movement emerged in this period in the early 20th century, trying to kind of split the difference between religion and rationalism. The early Reconstructionists, led by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, embraced rationalism for sure, at the same time trying to harmonize rationalism with religion. They set aside the idea that you had to choose one or the other. You could either be a modern Rationalist or you could be an old-world religious type personality. One of the things that in my



research I encountered very often were people who were drawn to a Reconstructionist approach because they felt like, they would say, that they, “didn’t have to leave my brain at the door.”

Kaplan and the circle gathered around him had a huge preoccupation with making the case for how religious people could embrace rationalism. One of the outcomes of that was that they battled against what they considered irrationalism. They saw much evidence of that in certain expressions of religion. Most significantly, a deep concern around supernaturalism. Around the idea that the laws of nature could be suspended and God would intervene in history. I mean, to put it very, very succinctly, in the holiday that we just completed celebrating during Passover, the idea that the miracles would be literal and that, furthermore, that we in our day should be looking for that kind of suspension of the laws of nature for rescue, for relief, for redemption. So, they spent a lot of time making the case for a religious approach that could embrace rationalism and for them, it meant setting aside supernaturalism, what they called irrationalism.

But what I would put to you is one of the things of this moment is that, as much as I resonate so deeply with the analysis and with some of the prescriptions of the, some of the solutions that the early Reconstructionists put forward, I resist that binary they put forward. That it was only about rationalism and irrationalism. Because we know so powerfully, as did they, we know that chaos exists. We know that tremendous suffering exists. Some caused by humans, some, like this pandemic, caused by nature. And it's exacerbated by structural inequities and political responses. Since the Enlightenment, we have lived in a world dominated by rationalism that would like to insist otherwise. But for those of us born in the 20th century, and living in the 21st, it seems impossible not to concede the existence of evil in the world. And the hardest part, I think, is acknowledging that evil is not some other figure, not a Satan ultimately answering to God. Evil is a domain that can dwell within us all. In the words of Rabbi Edward Feld:

The world contains a primal chaos whose destructive power rises up again and again in history and in the life of each person; it is a realm that cannot be subsumed under the Divine.

So, I want to offer a post-modern correction to the classical Reconstructionist binary of rationalism and irrationalism. And I want to add in a third category that's very important, I think, of non-rationalism, of a-rationalism, of that which goes beyond whatever we can investigate and even understand.



I'm sure you've all noticed that there's a very strong religious nature to how people are reacting to the current moment. We hear from congregational leaders that folks like you, who are already always active in your communities, are especially active now. And that rabbis and cantors are very deeply involved in supporting and in helping to make meaning at this time. We've heard, in some instances, reports of folks who had drifted away rejoining synagogues. I hope you all know about our wonderful website ritualwell.org, which tends to serve our folks but also it's representative of a Reconstructionist perspective in the wider world. And it's always had good traffic, we get between 20,000 and 25,000 unique visitors a month. And it's up to, you know, over 30,000 to 35,000 these months. And hopefully, you're experiencing the results of how we're working very hard in Philadelphia to show up as a strong resource for you, as a religious organization, to make sense of this crisis that has a serious existential nature to it.

And the way I understand this turn to the religious is that folks are really experiencing a desire to connect and to locate themselves within a framework that will give, offer up wisdom and ethical underpinnings. My experience, my honor as the head of the movement, is that I am at all times making the case for why be Jewish, for what liberal, progressive religion can do for people. And one of the things that I say - and that people are very receptive to at this particular moment - is that we do not have to make sense of the world and all of its suffering and all of its beauty on our own. We can draw on the deep wisdom that our ancestors formulated for us and worked through for us to cultivate our own resilience and to chart a path toward surviving, and even thriving, in the hardest times.

One of the questions within non-rationalism is always, what is the role of God within this and what is our relationship to the Divine? And there is always the Reconstructionist challenge, if, for many of us, we are desiring a personal relationship - it is a personal relationship, but not necessarily with a personal God the way my mother always says, you know, that she still to this day feels like God is an old man with a long, white beard sitting on a throne judging us. But for those of us who would have a relationship with a different kind of God, sometimes the language is an impersonal God, that we can nonetheless have a deeply personal relationship.

So, Kaplan and the circle gathered around him, who embraced religious humanism, suggested that the path toward this was through process theology. That's an understanding of God as the ground of being of the universe. God as the source of goodness and creativity and interconnection. Kaplan would frequently say God is "the power that makes for salvation." But that formulation would work in many other



settings, so it was often just always about the power, the animating power. At Passover, it was about the power that makes for freedom. And this is an approach to the Divine that is deeply resonant for me, for sure. And those metaphors of well spring and source of life sustain me in very powerful ways.

And I'm also really deeply moved by what's called predicate theology. This is an approach that was strongly implied by Kaplan in his earliest works but was most powerfully articulated, I think, by one of his disciples, Harold Schulweis. And Schulweis was deeply challenged, especially by the topic of suffering and divine justice. Harold Schulweis, a rabbi out in California, pointed out that if we focus on God as the Subject, with a capital S, on God as a Who, this leads to questions around Divine justice which are hard to answer, and these questions frequently lead to rejection. Because of all the suffering in the world, many modern and postmodern people cannot accept what most Western religions traditionally teach—that God is Just, Merciful, the Healer. Schulweis proposed that we shift our focus from the subject of God to those predicates. Instead of proposing that God (Subject) is Merciful (predicate), he taught that when we see mercy—or justice or healing, all those predicates attributed to the Divine—when we see these qualities, then we can know that godliness, the quality of the Divine, is present. And Schulweis, in addition to being deeply influenced by Mordecai Kaplan, was also influenced by Martin Buber. So, he put relationship at the center of this understanding of godliness. Schulweis encouraged us to ask not, “Where is God?” but rather, “When is God?” And he suggested that the answer was almost always in our interactions with each other, most especially when those interactions contribute to the collective good.

I think the most concise way to understand what he was talking about is to quote “Rabbi” Fred Rogers. You might have seen this pop up on Facebook whenever there's a challenging time that Mr. Rogers used to say, “Look for the helpers.” “Look for the helpers.” And I think what he was saying there is, look for the helpers, there you will see godliness. And I think what he was saying, what is at the heart of predicate theology, is we too can enact those qualities and in that way, cultivate godliness, cultivate goodness.

The truth of reality is that good and evil are not separate realms, but are intertwined. Writing about faith after the Holocaust, Rabbi Richard Rubenstein observes that we all have the potential to let evil gain dominion in our hearts and in our social order. And equally true is that we all have the potential to be seekers of the sacred and to be bearers of a larger vision—one of humanity and holiness and hopefulness. Such a quest we know is a struggle because we have to actively work to make room for the holy, for



this connection to the Divine. And we have learned, in the hardest possible ways, that holiness does not happen on its own, we have to cultivate it.

Embracing this kind of nonpersonal theology, I think, liberates us from vexing questions. This approach frees us from classical theological assertions that God must be omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, God must be all present, all knowing, all powerful. By giving up on these qualities—by making space for laws of nature that are binding and for the randomness of the universe— we can make a renewed case for God and for religion. We can set aside the heavy task of justifying God and can instead tap into well springs of mercy and creativity that emerge from and point back to God. Understanding God as the source of the universe is not simply a philosophical claim. It's a truth that is affirmed with the birth of every child; it's renewed with each encounter with beauty, be it natural or created; it's awakened every time we benefit from the inspirations of inventors and the extraordinary acts of heroism by caregivers that we're seeing every day. In the face of suffering, we can find comfort and begin to make meaning. In his best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes:

"Science can describe what has happened to a person; only religion can call it a tragedy. Only the voice of religion, when it frees itself from the need to defend and justify God for all that happens, can say to the afflicted person, 'You are a good person, and you deserve better. Let me come and sit with you so that you will know that you are not alone.'"

And that's one of our biggest challenges right now, for us to figure out how it is that we sit together and also observe the social distancing. And this virtual way of connecting is such a critical way for us to come together, to sit together, to affirm that which we think is most important. We've just completed Passover, the celebration of the liberation of our ancestors. We're now in the Omer period, newly liberated, moving through the desert, heading toward Sinai. We know that our ancestors were not freed to do anything they wanted to do. They were freed to enter into covenant with the Divine and with each other to create a just and caring society, bound up in the liberation of others, along with themselves.

We Reconstructionists ask, "How can we set aside supernaturalism and retain the power and inspiration of God the Redeemer?" Throughout the year, we constantly ask, "How do we stay in conversation with our ancestors in ways that can be meaningful and full of integrity for us and compelling to our children?" We ask again and again because we presume that the answers will change, that they are always changing. We



understand that we are empowered to make certain these changing answers are substantive and relevant. We insist that it is possible to reach for redemption in the modern era. We can draw strength from the power of our story and use that strength to work, as co-creators with the Divine, to bring about a redeemed world.

This isn't easy. It takes work to embrace the rigorous questioning that a rational approach requires and to presume that we can end with a stance of belief. But we choose to believe—in some version of the Divine, in some vision of the Jewish people—because belief affirms a beneficent universe, even when we witness terrible sufferings. Belief fuels optimism, even as we struggle in the trenches. We believe our ancestors marched from Egypt to encounter the Divine at Sinai and recorded what they experienced in the Torah. That recording was tempered by their human limitations, heavily shaped by their social context. And we also believe that revelation is continuous. We are marching toward Sinai right now, on the 10th day of the Omer. It is our work, as Reconstructionist Jews, to discern revelation and enact the covenant between God and the Jewish people in ways that are meaningful for today's world. We do this work always remembering our own personal and social limitations, always seeking to recapture that redeeming moment at the sea.

So, here's my take on redemption in the modern era—what we're supposed to do while we're on this planet at all times, and especially now, at a moment of extremity. We acknowledge our creatureliness, that we are limited and imperfect. And at the same time, we acknowledge the immense intelligence and agency that we human beings possess. I take to heart the teaching of Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa. He taught that we should carry in our pockets two notes. One should have the words, "I am but dust and ashes" and the other should say, "For my sake, the world was created." We are co-creators with the Divine; we once were slaves and now are free; we willingly assume the obligation to work for the liberation of others.

I'll close with the words of Seamus Heaney, the Irish Nobel Laureate. The poet of another people's oppression. He wrote:

*History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.*



We progressive religious people walk a fine and even poetic line between rationalism and belief. We believe that God is in the rhyming. These are intense times, full of suffering, and also full of opportunities for us to rise up and act out godliness. How we do this will look different for each of us. But for all of us, as Seamus Heaney says, we can and must make hope and history rhyme.

Be safe, take good care of yourselves, stay connected with each other and with us. And I look forward to the next time when we're all together, in person.