

"WHEN GOD PLAYS GAMES"

Does God play games?

The question sounds anthropomorphic and primitive, but it isn't. If it appears frivolous, it is not meant to be.

At a key point in the Exodus drama, as we read this morning, God says to Moses בא אל פרעה, "Come unto Pharaoh," ולמען תספר באזני בן ובן בן את אושרי  
התעללתי במצרים.

"In order that you shall tell your son and your son's son all that I have wrought in Egypt." That is the Kings James translation. But it is quite inadequate.

Rashi interprets התעללתי as שהקתי, not "wrought," but "played." In other words, God played games with Egypt! A more accurate translation, therefore, would be, "made sport of," or "made mockery of Egypt." So, indeed, God does play games!

He plays games -- but not in order to entertain Himself. You can while away time in order to ward off boredom, but you cannot while away eternity. When I speak of God playing games, I do not mean it in the sense that Prof. Albert Einstein did, when he made his famous statement (In opposition to the Indeterminists) that, "I do not believe that God plays dice with the universe," in other words, that God is arbitrary. Of course he is right; God is not whimsical. I agree with Dr. Einstein that God does not play dice -- but He does play games. Not games of chance, but games where effort and decency are rewarded, and where offenses against righteousness are punished.

David said (Psalm 2) יושב בשמים ישתח' ה' יצחק 57  
though the kings of the nations plot and conspire, "He who dwells in the heavens shall laugh (or 'play'); the Lord will mock them."

The laughter of God is no laughing matter. It entails the most serious theological issues and demands spiritual insight.

The game element comes in the developing and emerging realization when a pattern of justice begins to crystallize into a coherent structure from within the chaos of practical events. This awareness of a divine-moral pattern that over-lays our daily, petty, devious strategies, means that history is not completely caught up in causality; that economics and politics

do not mean everything; that there is freedom and novelty and surprise and openness in life; that Marx was wrong, and Moses was right.

Divine laughter, by which we mean the triumph of God's purposes, and the awareness by man of the real nature of history as the unfolding of God's will, comes especially in those exquisite moments when flashes of insight into the games God plays, the ultimate invincibility of His moral rules, illuminate the jungle of society. As Hannah put it in her famous prayer, God's game is revealed in two extremes:

ה' מוריש ומעשיר משפיל אף מרומם

when He makes the rich poor, and the poor rich; when he makes the lowly high, and the high lowly.

A game has rules. There is a goal. There is a sense of excitement and anticipation of the unexpected for both winner or loser. The winner is surprised when his sacrifice and hardship prove worthwhile, despite the initial setbacks and the disdain of his opponents, all of which had pushed him to the brink of despair. The loser is shocked and dismayed upon learning that when you make up your own rules, you may temporarily gain, but in the end -- after you had thought that victory was secure -- you suffer defeat when the past catches up with you.

So it was with Pharoah and the Hebrews. Pharoah played his game -- in all its diplomatic and social and economic aspects -- according to his own rules: that might makes right, that slaves are chattel and non-persons; that Egyptians are supermen; that Pharoah is a god. He seemed to have won his game hands down: the Hebrew victims were cornered, genocide was at hand. No sensible gambler would have accepted odds in a bet on Israel's survival.

But God has a different set of rules. The Pharoahs move deviously across the checkerboards of life, concentrating only on power and influence and shrewdness and wealth. But God's strategy is a moral-spiritual one. It seems so weak, so ineffectual, a sure loser. How trying it is to our patience, how wearying. But that is where faith comes in -- confidence that in the long run, "the race is not to the swift"; that the real winner is not the one who knows all the angles, discovers all the loopholes, and can seize all the channels of power; that ultimately God's purposes will prevail, that there is reward for virtue and punishment for malice.

Israel seemed a sure loser. But in ten swift moves (the Ten Plagues), Pharaoh was to be checkmated. The game was moving to a conclusion. The moral order was about to succeed over power politics and economic exploitation.

And so, between the seventh and eighth "moves" of these Ten Plagues, God said to Moses: let your children and your children's children know **את אשר התעללתי במצרים**, how I "played around" with Pharaoh!

The essential element in this God-game is the principle of **מדה כנגד מדה**, that the punishment fits the crime. This theme lends irony, drama, poignancy, rational tension, symmetry, and rational structure to the chaos of existence. It makes new sense out of life. It is a warning to the violent, and a promise to the meek.

Indeed, **את אשר התעללתי במצרים** is the divine game which suggests the moral pleasure that comes from witnessing justice done and ethical accounts straightened out. In Yiddish we say: **מענטש טראכט און גאט לאכט** (man thinks and God laughs). It is so much more earthy and expressive than its English equivalent, "Man proposes and God disposes." But the idea is the same.

The whole Exodus story -- indeed, all of Scripture, and all of Jewish history -- reveal how God plays His game, and how that game is successfully superimposed on the unfair, unjust, exploitative, and manipulative games that men play and by which they convert their society into a jungle.

An example: Pharaoh decided upon his genocide policy by saying **פן ירבה**, "lest he (Israel) increase." But in a significant play on one small word, God said: **כן ירבה** "so will he increase." Pharaoh's **פן** evoked God's **כן**.

Or: Pharaoh drowned Jewish babies in the Nile; and who should emerge from that same Nile? -- Moses, who will drown Pharaoh and his army in another river, the Red Sea!

In our own days, Western Europe was the first to submit shamelessly to individual Arab terrorists and hijackers. And now they are the chief victims of organized terrorism and blackmail of all the Arab countries! The African nations, which were friendly to Israel as long as Israel helped them, quickly abandoned Israel when Libya offered them bribes. And now that the Arabs have outrageously withheld their oil and raised them to scandalous prices, we are informed that



fertilizer had become prohibitively expensive, and as a result, drought and disaster threaten large parts of Africa, where famine has already begun.

I do not mean to sound sacrilegious when I say that there is a certain amount of "fun" in the downfall of a Pharaoh. Not in the sense of revenge, not as if it were a circus, not as a form of entertainment. There was too much human tragedy for that. But "fun" in the sense of the tension of a game building to its climax, in the sense of the combination of irony and the deflation of pomposity and the sudden exposure of impotence and psychological nakedness that so often underly pretentiousness.

Consider this: Pharaoh the god -- is itchy with boils! The Lord of the Nile -- goes thirsty. The arrogant Emperor -- begs Moses to pray for him. The infallible King of Egypt -- confesses: *אֲנִי וְעַמִּי רָשָׁעִים*, both I and my people are wicked. The immortal Pharaoh -- who had his soul-boat all ready to whisk him away to eternal life -- shivers in fear that he will succumb to an unknown and mysterious death which conveniently hops, skips, jumps and passes over the Israelite homes, knocks on the doors of Egyptians only, and strikes the first-born -- the first-born, just like Pharaoh!

Yes, the tragedy clearly has its comical aspects. *הַמִּצְרִי הָאֵלֹהִים הַמִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה* is a comedy of cosmic proportions, a comedy of infinite moral instruction. Hence, *לִמְעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאוֹנֵי בִּנְךָ וּבִן בִּנְךָ*, you must repeat it in the ears of your sons and his sons after him.

Certainly it is worth teaching that idea to our children and their children after them. God sets the rules. You can ignore them -- but at your own risk. You can step on people, "bury" competitors, abandon principles, forget you are a Jew, let your religion atrophy, be lulled into false confidence by quick victories and the easy successes that bring you money and status and luxury and the fawning adulation of sycophants. But if that is your game, remember: God may be playing games with you! Remember: things are not always what they seem to be! There is another score-card up above, and you may be rated by other criteria than the one you think. The moral order is not always obvious, and it is often mysterious. Pharaoh's life may seem to be a victorious one. But at the end he discovers that he is not even a player, he is only a pawn. It is a painful discovery made by all who play his game.

This knowledge is an antedote to despair. You and your descendants after you, must know that on the invisible score card they may be far ahead of what the worldly tally-sheets show. If they realize וידעתם כי אני ה', if they strive to know the Lord, they need never fall into hopelessness. All they need is -- patience and a sense of humor.

The Talmud tells us (at the end of Makkot) that Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria and Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Akiva were travelling one day (presumably as a delegation to Rome, which then controlled Palestine), and on the way they heard the noise of the great population of Rome although they were some forty miles away.

התחילו בוכים ור' עקיבא מצחק

The other rabbis began to weep, and Rabbi Akiva began to laugh. They asked him: why are you laughing? Said he to them, and why do you cry? And they answered:

הללו כושים ושמשותחוים לעצבים ומקטרים לעבודה  
זרה יושבים בטח והשקט ואנו בית ה' חדום רגלי  
אליקינו שרוף ולא נבלה?

Behold these pagans who bow to fetishes and burn incense to idols; they dwell in tranquility and security, and we witness that the House of the Lord of Israel is consumed in flames-- shall we not cry? He answered them: that is precisely the reason why I am laughing!

ומה לעוברי רצונך בך, לעושי רצונך על אחת כמה וכמה

if such good fortune befalls those who violate the will of God, imagine how much greater will be the reward for those who obey His will! And they answered: עקיבא נחמתנו, עקיבא נחמתנו! Akiva, you have consoled us!

Rabbi Akiva was able to see beyond the imperial game that Rome was playing. He knew that God was playing another game. That is why he was tranquil and unperturbed. The disproportion between the two moved him to laughter. How comical pretentious man appears! That divine game, perceived by Rabbi Akiva, is what consoled his colleagues.

Rabbi Akiva's confidence -- his smile, his chuckle -- is what buoys me up in times of crisis.

Thus, it is possible to interpret Israel's retreat from the Suez this week as a defeat. Many Israelis do just that. But I am not so sure. Perhaps, according to military criteria, it is a negative element. But I am confident. I have faith

in the justice and viability of God's game. I trust His "game plan." I appreciate His sense of humor.

מענטש טראכט און גאט לאכט. And if our טראכטען (thinking) is in consonance with His; if וידעם כי אני ה' , we shall know that He is the Lord; then when He laughs, we shall all laugh with Him.