

This spring marks the seventieth anniversary of the passing of one of my distinguished predecessors at Park Avenue Synagogue: Rabbi Milton Steinberg, z"l. Rabbi Steinberg, who tragically died of a heart attack at the age of 46 in March 1950, served Park Avenue from 1933 to 1950 and was the founding rabbi of Park Avenue in its "modern era." Under his dynamic leadership the synagogue experienced tremendous growth, transforming into a leading congregation in North America. In addition to his congregational profile, Rabbi Steinberg was one of the chief ideologues of Reconstructionist Judaism and the righthand man to its founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Rabbi Steinberg was also a prolific author and theologian in his own right. To this day, his books *As A Driven Leaf* and *Basic Judaism* among others have place on countless Jewish bookshelves.

Given the impossibility of summarizing Rabbi Steinberg's rabbinate – his pastoral presence, his felicitous pen, his leadership qualities – today I would like to examine his legacy by way of one sermon, a Passover sermon he delivered sometime in the early 1940s, which has been preserved in the notes made by Bernard Mandelbaum.

The sermon is ostensibly about the fourth child of the Passover Haggadah, a child whom we have read about these past two evenings, the *she'eino yodea lish'ol*, the one who, unlike his siblings, does not even know how to ask a question. The beginning of the sermon is straightforward enough, but in exploring the meaning of this enigmatic fourth child, Steinberg goes on to cite another sermon, this one delivered by Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (1740–1810), the saintly figure of 18th-century Hasidism, a man who knew personal suffering – the loss of a child – as well as the travails experienced by his people. For all of his many qualities, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak is remembered as one of the great defenders of the Jewish people, willing to bring God to account for the suffering of God's people.

"The Haggadah speaks of four sons," Rabbi Levi Yitzhak explains, "one wise, one wicked, one simple, and one who does not know how to ask. Lord of the world, I, Levi Yitzhak, am the one who does not know how to ask. Lord of the universe, even if I did know, I would not dare to [ask]. How could I venture to ask You [God] why everything happens as it does, why we suffer, why we are driven from one exile to another, why our foes are allowed to torment us?" Rabbi Levi Yitzhak continued in his cry to God, "But the Haggadah explains to the father of this fourth child: The father must take the initiative. Lord of the world, are You not my Father? Am I not Your son? I do not even know what questions to ask. I do not beg You to reveal to me the secret of your ways – I couldn't comprehend it! But please show me one thing. Show me the meaning of what is happening to me at this moment. Show me what it demands of me. Show me what You, Lord of the universe, are telling me through it. I do not ask why I suffer. I ask only to know that I suffer for your sake."

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It is a terse pain-filled homily, a message preached by Rabbi Levi Yitzhak in Berdichev some two and a half centuries ago in the midst of exile and torment, and delivered again by Rabbi Steinberg on the Upper East Side in the 1940s. The question of the fourth child is notable both for its

remarkable concession and its insistent demand on God. On the one hand, “I do not ask why I suffer.” On the other hand, “I ask to know only that I suffer for your sake.” Levi Yitzhak knows the inevitability of pain; he knows the life of quiet desperation that most people lead; he accepts pain as an unwelcome but necessary part of the human experience. Levi Yitzhak is theologically modest enough not to ask why suffering exists. But nevertheless he makes a demand of God. He wants to know is if there is a bigger purpose to his suffering. In secular terms: “Is there something good to come of it?”

And I think it is perhaps this same question that motivated Steinberg that Passover morning. Steinberg’s intellectual interests touched on the full range of Jewish study and concern, but when this sermon was written, in his final few years, at the peak of his intellectual prowess, as he led our community through the shadows of the Shoah, not to mention his own failing health, Steinberg stood face-to-face with what his student (and product of this congregation) Arthur Cohen called “the Tremendum,” the unspeakable theological questions raised by the Shoah. Steinberg had to contend with the overwhelming thought of a God under whose watch the Holocaust took place. Given his national profile, Steinberg was on the front lines of the American Jewish speaking circuit, mobilizing American Jewry to provide relief to refugees, raising funds on their behalf, building up the fledgling state of Israel, and most difficult of all, trying to make sense of the Shoah to a Jewry in search of meaning.

To give you one of many examples, I share with you a passage from what I believe to be one of Rabbi Steinberg’s most heart-searing addresses, “When I Think of Seraye.” Speaking in 1944 to the Women’s Division of the United Jewish Appeal at the Waldorf Astoria, Steinberg describes Seraye, “a village situated in the Lithuanian County of Suwalki, just to the east of the old German frontier.” A village, in Steinberg’s words “whence my family stems, where my father was born.” “I say,” writes Steinberg, “that I have been thinking about Seraye a great deal of late [because] I cannot think about all of Europe’s Jews, the six million dead, the one and a half million walking skeletons. Such numbers are too large for me to embrace, the anguish they represent is too vast for my comprehension. And so, I think of Seraye instead.” Steinberg recounts imagined people and scenes of this village that is no longer, and by extension, the countless Serayes destroyed by the Nazis. He is filled with anguish and anger. “Sometimes,” he writes, “when I think of Seraye, I want to hurl hard words at God, that terrible saying of Abraham; ‘Shall the Judge of the whole earth not do Justice?!’”

Again and again, in speech after speech, Steinberg would seek to formulate a response to the sufferings of humanity. Again, in his own words: “The hard tragic fact is that of the universality of suffering, the truth that to live is to suffer. . . . All life is a great fellowship of anguish in which each of us participates in some fashion or other.” Steinberg’s questions were the same questions as those of Levi Yitzhak, the unspoken theological question of the fourth child, “Not why is there suffering, but for what purpose is this suffering?”

And on that Passover morning in the 1940s, Steinberg continued to explain his view: There is all the difference in the world between pain that leads to something and pain that leads to nowhere . . . the former is more bearable, may even be welcomed. The pain experienced by a woman giving birth. The compromises in health one endures in order to battle cancer or the sacrifices, anxieties, strains, and tensions one accepts if serving a greater good. It is not pain that is intolerable, but pain that is senseless. If one could be sure that their suffering is for God's sake, what a difference that would make not only in the midst of a particular ordeal – but in all of life – since life and pain are interwoven.

What Steinberg is saying, what Levi Yitzhak is saying is that if a person is able to determine that their ordeal will have meaning, that is what makes all the difference. Here we are today, a suffering humanity, the terms of our suffering different than that of Levi Yitzhak's time, different than that of Steinberg's time, but suffering all the same. And here we are – again the fourth child – wondering if there is meaning to our suffering.

And the truth is that I don't know. There are people fighting for their lives, there are people dying. There are people without work, without family, without the means to feed themselves. In thinking of the lives upended at this moment, I can only adopt the language of Steinberg: The numbers are too large for me to embrace; the anguish they represent is too vast for my comprehension. Is there meaning to present suffering? It strikes me as premature and untoward and unseemly to have the audacity to assign meaning to the sufferings of our hour as we stand in the eye of the storm of this terrible plague.

Lacking an answer, I will instead offer Steinberg's words that day in the midst of the darkness of the 1940s. Steinberg explains that in life, every person always has an audience of at least two. For the theologically minded, the two are God and the person him- or herself. Those without a belief in God still have the audience of themselves. Every person, when faced with suffering, has a choice of how to respond.

If, Steinberg writes, suffering turns a person cruel, selfish, and bitter – then that response is a reflection not only of themselves, not only of humanity, but also of God. If, on the other hand, a person's suffering turns them merciful, kind, and compassionate – if a person carries their suffering with dignity – then that response is also a demonstration not only of the individual's spirit, not only of humanity's essential nobility, but also, ultimately, of God's glory.

Suffer you will, concludes Steinberg, that is your lot. Fret not to understand why – there is no answer to the question, nor would you understand it if it were disclosed to you. Concern yourself, rather, only with this: That your sufferings shall be for God's sake – a task accomplished by enhancing the dignity of humanity, by extending patience, compassion, care, empathy, benevolence, to your loved ones, to yourself and to the masses of humanity in desperate need of compassion and kindness.

When you do so, humanity will be elevated in the eyes of all who look upon you – in God's eyes, if you believe in God, but at the very least, in your own.

Friends, I have no idea why humanity suffers. Neither did Rabbi Steinberg, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, or anyone else. I only know, as did they, that whether there is purpose to our suffering is a question that is ultimately not up to God, but to each one of us.

May the memory of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, *HaRav Micha'el ben Shmuel HaLevi*, be for a blessing, and may we all respond to our present tribulations by making every effort to enoble our lives and the lives of others, thus granting meaning to our suffering.