

The ending of the book of Job has been felt to be unsatisfactory by generations of Jewish commentators.

Job suffers his losses, and his friends come to comfort him, though actually speaking harsh words of judgement. Finally God appears in a whirlwind, challenging Job, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?" God shows Job all the wonders of creation, the stars, the seas, the earth and the entire animal kingdom. God challenges Job, "Would you impugn my justice?" This goes on for four lengthy chapters until Job recants and relents proclaiming that he is "but dust and ashes". The book concludes with a short narrative, written in a Hebrew that is like the opening section but unlike the long diatribe. In this short narrative, God criticizes Job's friends for their harsh words and restores Job's fortunes.

What is God saying to Job through that whirlwind? Is it just that God is God and Job, you are not? Is it saying, it's not so easy, could you do better? Is God showing the vastness and complexity of the world to give Job more perspective?

On the one hand that sort of perspective can be helpful. In the midst of the sufferings of those hit by hurricanes, earthquakes and fires, my tribulations with the loss of office staff should be seen in context.

It's kind of like the ending of the movie Casablanca, in the famous scene where Rick sends the woman he loves off on the plane, saying to her: "I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that."

That's helpful in some circumstances, but not in all. It's not something to say to a woman with children, whose cancer has recurred, or to those children themselves as they question their lot in life. It may not help us in the really wrenching losses in our lives.

The midrash provides a different ending to the book of Job. In this version, God shows Job, not all the vastness of the universe, but merely a Succah with three walls.

What is Job to learn from this? First, that we want to have a Succah with four walls, but we don't. That is a part of being human. Our missing wall may be a person who is gone, a misfortune that came upon us, a gift that we do not have. But if we look around we will notice that our neighbors also have a missing wall: our suffering is particular to us, but it is not unique.

But there is another aspect to the three walled Succah. It is still kosher. You can sit in a Succah that only has three walls and fulfill the mitzvah of "leishev basuccah". That Succah is still standing.

For the rabbis this was an important message for Jewish life. They are writing in a time when they were acutely aware of what had been lost, the Temple, the priestly service, Jerusalem and Jewish national independence. Yet they took the stance that Jewish life could move forward. They wept for what was missing and yet they created structures for a Jewish future. Their example was critical to Jewish life from Roman times and through modernity.

Finally, there was one more aspect to this midrash. On the three pilgrimage festivals we add a mention of the Succah to the Bircat HaMazaon. That makes sense on Succot, but why do we do that also on Pesach and Shavuot ? The exact words are, "May God lift up the fallen Succah of David." Clearly, this is a prayer with national historic meaning. The pilgrimage festivals were a time when we used to go up to the City of David. The restoration of Succat David, is a national restoration. But in that the rabbis saw it as a response to Job and his personal issues, I think they saw the restoration of the Succah, as something more human as well.

It is part of our prayers for an age of peace and harmony, of sufficiency and wellbeing. It is part of our prayers for healing from the losses that we endure.

So may we pray tonight. Conscious of the sadness we bring to this yizkor service, but with confidence in future healing.