

**Jerry Falwell and Judd Hirsch:
Things *Happened* for a Reason
Rosh Hashanah Morning 2001/5762
September 18, 2001**

Think of the irony. We've been getting calls, emails, inquiries from Israel. They want to know... if we're ok.

Are we ok? I am not sure. On this morning of Rosh Hashanah, we remain in the midst of shock and sadness, of terror and tragedy. But in one small, sardonic way, in trying to find the right words to respond to the world around us, I am grateful. I want to express my appreciation, my thanks, my gratitude to Jerry Falwell. And Pat Robertson. For opening their mouths. And saving my sermon.

You know, I had written this... theological reflection about the way the universe works. In it I tried -- I will try -- to share with you that I don't think things happen for a reason. It's a common claim, you've heard it -- maybe you've even used it. "Oh, everything happens for a reason." But I don't believe it. And I wanted to tell you why.

But after last Tuesday... I don't know. For a moment the words sounded hollow. Because Tuesday... it's not like it was some earthquake or something. It wasn't a natural occurrence. It *did* happen for a reason. And the reason was evil.

So into the recycle bin went the sermon. But onto the talk shows went Falwell. And here it is, back from the abyss, a message I believe is actually

important. In order to disagree with every breath in my body... with the Reverends Falwell and Robertson.

Did you hear what they said? It was...horrendous. Some of you told me about it. I... it was so bad that I have to confess I just didn't believe you, until I saw the words themselves.

Listen to this... this theological *chutzpah!*

"The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this," Falwell said. He continued: "Throwing God out...of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this, because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say 'You helped this happen.'"

Isn't it nice, to be so sure of yourself? I mean, here's a man who knows what God wants. He's certain. I like people who are *absolutely certain* they have a direct line to God. They're the healthiest people around, aren't they? I mean, they're sure of themselves, they *know* they're right, they don't have to waste money in therapy. They don't have *any* room for doubt, when they blow up buildings and topple towers and slaughter innocent civilians in the name of their certitude.

Sometimes I think that this is the reason we read the *Akedah* on Rosh Hashanah morning. It is a warning against certainty, against acting on what you think you are so sure God wants you to do.

Maybe the worst thing about what Falwell said -- and Roberston agreed with -- was its terrible timing. At a time of national unity, what has he done, but tear us apart? We face a cunning and deadly enemy abroad; now we know we have an enemy within as well.

But the biggest problem *I* have with Falwell's remarks are the assumptions he makes about God. The *very* biggest problem I have... is that I just don't agree that God micromanages the universe the way that Falwell thinks happens.

The Reverends wants to talk about babies? Fine. So let's start there.

In the middle of Julie's pregnancy with our oldest child, Benjamin, someone did something so kind for us that I will never forget it. Some of you may see our three young children and never know, or never guess, but it was a long and difficult road to get there. It took us over five years to have Benjamin. Learning of our impending arrival, a colleague wrote that she was about to go on a trip to Israel, and that she would write a *petek* at the *Kotel*, a petitionary note placed in the crevices of the Wailing Wall, wishing for us a safe birth and a healthy child.

You know, I had been having a hectic day. My mind was far away. But as I read those words wishing us well, this gesture from halfway across the world, as I read those words my world stood still. And I cried.

I cried. What a wonderful thing, this unexpected gesture of love and support. It was so touching. But I remember wondering: what are those words on a scrap of paper going to do for us? What will they actually accomplish? What good could it do? I cried at the kindness and love. But I also wondered why I was crying.

Cosmic questions, the kind we ask about the big things, the meaning of life, the reality of love, the reason for evil, the reach of God... these kinds of questions can flame up from any spark, arise at the most unexpected moments. Tuesday dawned an ordinary day, a week ago. Who knew the crying we would do, and the questions we would have, just hours later.

This morning I would like to begin to approach a difficult question about why things happen, in the wake of a very real tragedy, with an insight I had in the middle of a pretty bad movie, about a fictional tragedy.

I remember actually enjoying the film *Independence Day*. Our people are in panic, our arsenals are impotent, our world is about to be blown to bits. But, you know, that raises some really interesting questions.

I am thinking, for the moment, of the character played by the ever-lovable Judd Hirsch. Judd Hirsch's wife had died twenty years before the action began. And he was angry, angry with himself, angry with the world, angry with God. A once religious man, he had not set foot in a synagogue in twenty years.

But, things are about to change. For the world has been invaded by aliens. *Ugly* aliens, who drip green slime and take over minds and threaten humanity with wholesale destruction. So, what are you going to do? Who you gonna call? No atheists in a foxhole, they say. And here, the foxhole is the whole world.

So Hirsch's son Jeff Goldblum conveniently produces two dusty items from his father's past. As Goldblum and the President of the United States go off on a last, desperate attempt to save the world, Goldblum hands his father a very old *siddur*, and a yellowed, stained *tallit*. When the fighting heroes leave the scene, Hirsch gathers everyone who has stayed behind around him. In one of the movie's funniest scenes, which I was told brought howls of laughter in Washington, but was greeted with uncomprehending silence in Erie, Pennsylvania where I saw the movie, one character resists the prayer circle on the grounds that he isn't Jewish, to which Hirsch responds, "Well, no one's perfect." And so, with the hopes of humanity gathered around him, Judd Hirsch opens his *siddur*, and intones the words... of *Sh'ma Koleinu*.

"*Sh'ma Koleinu, Adonai Eloheinu, Chus V'racheim Aleinu*; Hear our voice, O Lord our God; have compassion upon us, and with that compassion accept our prayer." It is part of the *Amidah*, the daily service. And it is one of the most powerful prayers of the entire High Holy Days.

The implication of the words is clear: May God hear our prayer, and respond. May God hear our prayer, and answer. May God hear our prayer, and grant us our wish.

My question is: does God really do this? Can God really do this? Every time I say these words, but, more so, with more intensity, during the Days of Awe, with their searing imagery of life and death, and more then ever now, *this* year, at this terrible time, every time I hear these words I wonder how literally to take them.

Last night I mentioned the chance involved, in missing a plane. Someone accidentally missed one of the flights that was hijacked last week. There was a traffic jam, and their life is saved! The first words out of most of our mouths would be: AThank God.@ But then I think: where was God, for everyone else?

I believe that God does *not* intervene in the outcome of events, that God does not cause bad or good things to happen to us but that prayer matters in our lives nonetheless. There remain reasons to pray, even if it won=t get us what we want.

I believe that God answers our prayers by helping us make sense out of events. I simply don=t believe that things happen for a reason. But I do believe... that they *happened* for a reason.

I believe that God does not cause bad or good things to happen to us, a small child to contract a horrible disease, or an upstanding citizen to win the lottery, either the smokestacks of Europe or a new dawn on the distant shores of a Mediterranean Sea.

And I certainly don't believe that God had anything to do with last week's events, except... in the way we respond to them afterwards.

Now, many people like the Reverends Falwell and Robertson think of religion in its earliest terms, promises of bumper crops and material prosperity, right good wealth and good living as a reward for good behavior, punishment and exile and terror and explosions as the just deserts of sin. Indeed, much of the Torah, especially Deuteronomy, is meant to persuade people of just this theory of divine providence, of reward and punishment meted out measure for measure from an Almighty, all powerful God. And the imagery of these Days of Awe invokes a God who controls our fate.

But there are hints in our tradition of another voice, of a faith-filled questioning of this puppet-pulling view of the Holy One. The same Bible that gave us Deuteronomy also gave us Job, a biting rebuttal, a stirring refutation of the notion that only good things happen to good people, a denial of the idea that, as one writer puts it "poverty is the *consequence* of immorality rather than its cause."

And there are other ways in which the idea comes through that maybe the cry to God to hear our voice is not only about the *outcome* of events. The Talmud teaches that there are some things we are *not* to pray for: the gender of a child *in utero*, since the fact is already determined. Or: if you are going home, and you see a house in the distance on fire, but can not tell which one it is... you are *not* to pray that it is not *your* home. For you would not wish the ill on someone else. And God is not going to change what already is, just because you wish it so.

Sometimes, you know, bad things happen. Planes get seized. Debris from a shattered sky falls out of the air. And hoping and wishing and wanting won't change them. They did not happen because you deserved them. And they won't go away with even the most heart-felt prayer.

Now, this may not be a very satisfying explanation for suffering caused by other people. For human beings who hurt and do harm. That has to do with free will, and bad choices. With the question of good and evil. But at least in regard to natural suffering, I believe that bad things happen because death is part of the universe, that in order to have growth we must inevitably have decay, that to have new things come to be you must also have old things transform, change form, make room, take root, to return anew as something else. Over time we cannot have the growth of the new without the moving aside of the old.

Indeed, any time we change, any time we grow, there is that instant, that paradoxical transformative moment: before we can be what we are to become, we must surrender what we have been. The yet-to-be cannot overlap the once-was.

The Hasidic rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch noticed that the Hebrew letters in the word “*ani*”, meaning “I,” “myself,” are the very same letters as in the word “*ain*,” meaning “nothingness.” It is only when we pass through the nothingness that the once was can become the yet-to-be. Death, then, is the ultimate nothingness through which we pass. It is thus a part of life, a requirement for life.

But once it is here, no one and no thing, not you, not me, not the best doctors in the world, not the Doctor *of* the World can fully control it. We try. We strive. We make progress. But we cannot control it all, not fully. Even God cannot. Death and disease need to be part of the picture of life. But once in the frame, they function, in nature, at least partly at random.

At random. But. Even so. I believe that God *does* hear our voice. God does answer prayers.

I think about the spontaneous services that we held last week, on Wednesday and Thursday nights, in the aftermath of the attack. I think of how we concluded last Thursday night, with the words of “America the Beautiful,” of the tears in the eyes of the people who were there, of the heartfelt amen as

response to our request for a blessing. I think of the strength with which we sung the *Mishebeirach*, the prayer for healing. “*Baruch Attah Adonai... Rofeih HaCholim*, Blessed are You, who heals the sick.”

What is the power of prayer? It is more, I think, than a hope for cures. Although I do not believe that God intervenes directly to get one person out of a burning building, and cause another to be trapped, I believe our coming together in prayer is more than delusional wish-fulfillment. Something happens to a community when we announce our own needs. Something happens to us when we are aware of the pain in our midst. Something happens to a patient when we promptly call and cards and visits from the mentioning of a name. It’s not a miracle: that’s false advertising. But to turn the AA phrase on its head: healing happens.

I don’t believe that things happen for a reason. But I do believe... that they *happened* for a reason.

Karma. Kismet. B’shert. Every culture has a word, every folk a phrase for fate, a sense that things are part of a larger plan, that every little detail, every meeting and moment of our lives unfolds in accordance with some scheme we just can’t grasp at the time, for some purpose which we will, if we are lucky, someday, glimpse in passing.

I don't buy it. My friend dying of breast cancer, my infant nephew's diabetes, last Tuesday, the Holocaust... I'm sorry, I just can't accept that there was some single, pre-planned, *inherent* meaning in these things. They didn't *happen* for a reason. At the time.

But. That does not mean that these things have no meaning. The true core of *my* religious understanding, my spirituality comes from the belief that God works *with* us to construct our memories and construe our fate. We work to *make our moments mean* what they come to mean. We are the meaning-makers, and God our partner in process, the Ever-Present One who enables our efforts, who allows meaning to happen.

I do not believe that God *caused* anyone's cancer, or anyone's miscarriage, or even the hurricanes, earthquakes and bolts of lightning referred to in insurance terms as, well, "acts of God." And I don't think God brought down the World Trade Center. I think the terrorists did that all by themselves.

But God is there as we pick up the pieces, Hand and Shoulder, a Push in the Back to make us make whatever sense of our lives we can, and move on.

Two days ago I heard a report on the radio, from an architect in New York. He kept standing on his balcony, staring at the skyline in disbelief. All he could see was what was not there. But his nine-year old daughter saw something else. She stood, and she held her father's hand. And then she said: "Dad. I think I can start to see the new view."

When we ask God for something, we might not get it. But something happens to us in the asking, some connections are made, some emotion expressed, some cry of the soul given a voice and a role in an ongoing play on the eternal stage of Jewish life.

What are we really asking for? That our prayer be accepted, not a wish fulfilled. That we return to God, that we sense the potential for holiness in the midst of the mundane *and* the momentous, in triumph... *and* in tragedy. That we can start to see, in the skyline of the soul, the new view, of the next stage of our lives.

Somewhere, in an ancient wall half a world away, there are scribbled words on a scrap of paper. Somehow, in a mystery beyond mind I am one with those words, at home with hope.

I look at my beautiful children with joy in my heart. I wonder what will happen *to* them, what will happen *in* them, with all the same fears and questions and doubts and inability to predict the future which I felt before they were born.

But there is *something* that is calm, at the core of my being. **I don't really think God is going to get mad at them for what they do or don't do. But I think God will be there for them, in the reality of love, and to help them make sense of the world.**

For them. And for us.

L'shanah Tovah.