

Dealing with Difficulty: Troubling Passages in the Bible

There are so many... and many different kinds

- **The conflict with scientific and archaeological evidence:** (1) The creation story and (2) King Solomon's glorious kingdom
- **Gruesome stories:** (1) the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter and (2) eating your own children in the midst of a siege
- **Disproportionate revenge:** (1) the death of children mocking Elisha and (2) blessing the murderers of the children of our enemies (this last one is in the daily birkhat hamazon, as well as Psalms).
- **Unrealistic reward:** (1) long life for honoring your parents and (2) the righteous will never lack for bread (this last one is also in the birkhat hamazon as well as Psalms).

And what is perhaps the most troubling notion of all:

- **Bad events in the history of the Jewish people are the consequence of sin.** That is the central theme of the whole Deuteronomic history (Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel I & II, Kings I & II).

Finding ways to discuss what is troubling without losing our focus on what is good and beautiful is one of our central challenges and opportunities as Jews.

Cannibalism in the Bible...

(Kings 2: 24–30, Chabad.org)

24. And it was after this, that Ben-Hadad the king of Aram, mustered all his camp; and he went up and besieged Samaria.

25. Now there was a severe famine in Samaria, and behold they were besieging it, until a donkey's head sold for eighty silver pieces and a quarter of a kab of doves' dung sold for five silver pieces.

26. And the king of Israel was passing on the wall, when a woman cried out to him, saying, "Save [me] my lord the king!"

27. And he said, "If the Lord will not save you, whence shall I save you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress?"

28. And the king said to her, "What troubles you?" And she said, "This woman said to me, 'Give your son and let us eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.'

29. And we cooked my son and ate him. And I said to her the next day 'Give up your son and let us eat him.' But she hid her son."

30. And it was when the king heard the woman's words that he rent his garments while he was passing on the wall, and the people saw, and behold there was sackcloth on his flesh underneath.

And the threat that it will occur as the consequence of sin...

(Deuteronomy 28: 14–15, 52–57, Chabad.org)

14. And you shall not turn right or left from all of the words I am commanding you this day, to follow other deities to worship them.

15. And it will be, if you do not obey the Lord, your God, to observe to fulfill all His commandments and statutes which I am commanding you this day, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.

...

52. And they will besiege you in all your cities, until your high and fortified walls in which you trust comedown, throughout all your land. And they will besiege you in all your cities throughout all your land, which the Lord, your God, has given you.

53. And during the siege and the desperation which your enemies will bring upon you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord, your God, gave you.

54. The most tender and delicate man among you, will begrudge his own brother and the wife of his embrace and the rest of his children, whom he will leave over,

55. of giving any one of them of the flesh of his children that he is eating, because not a thing will remain for him in the siege and in the desperation which your enemies will bring upon you, in all your cities.

56. The most tender and delicate woman among you, who would not venture to set her foot upon the ground, because of delicateness and tenderness, will begrudge the husband of her embrace and her own son and daughter,

57. and the infants who emerge from between her legs, and her own children whom she will bear, for she will eat them in secret, in destitution, in the siege and the desperation which your enemies will inflict upon you, in your cities.

A Feminist Commentary

[G. Hens-Piazza, "Forms of Violence and Violence of Forms: Two Cannibal Mothers Before a King," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Fall 1998, vol. 14, pp. 91–104]

"This study of the story of two cannibal mothers before a king levels a challenge to the received wisdom about this tale, a wisdom that honors a prophet (Elisha, my note) and assesses a king while ignoring or condemning the desperate situation of two women and their children. At the same time, it is hoped that this study provokes dialogue about violence—violence that results from the privileging of the powerful and the empowering of the privileged. Such exchanges and their consequences are not confined to any time period or context but crisscross and rebound between individuals and whole populations and between ancient and contemporary culture. Kinds of violence erupting from this circulation of power and privilege corroborate and exacerbate further violence, a violence of forms—in this instance, the form of a biblical story about two cannibal mothers and the form of its interpretations."

...

"Throughout history, hostilities, wars, famines, and threats of annihilation are the requisite forms of violence exchanged by those jockeying for sovereignty and visited upon those subjugated by these antics. In turn, the maintenance of these conditions requires a violence of forms—stories that mask responsibility for these atrocities, stories that polarize and indict those who might collectively protest, and an interpretive tradition that corroborates rather than challenges this life-threatening cycle. Women willing to acknowledge their differences, willing to work across lines that divide them, willing to resist polarization among themselves—whether in Beijing, Bosnia, Hebron, or the biblical guild—create an affront to this chain of violence. Moreover, women's

determination to work together serves as a countertext, ensuring that the violence narrated in the biblical tales and the societal violence reinforced by a heritage of such traditions and their interpretation will not have the last word.”

In fact, the traditional commentaries are not very helpful...

[Kings, Soncino Press, commentary by Rev. Dr. I. W. Slotki and Rabbi E. Oratz]

“**30. Rent his clothes.** In shocked dismay. ... sackcloth within. Under his upper garment which was exposed by the tearing (Rashi). Sackcloth was a mark of mourning or distress; it evidenced the king’s intense sympathy with the sufferings of his subjects.”

The focus is on the king’s distress and his interaction with Elisha in this chapter.

In the next chapter, Elisha “saves the day,” but where was G-d...

Perhaps we need a Jewish Lysistrata...

From the Birkat Ha'mazon...

Disproportionate revenge:

[Psalm 137 on weekdays; Chabad.org]

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, we also wept when we remembered Zion.
- 2 On willows in its midst we hung our harps.
- 3 For there our captors asked us for words of song and our tormentors [asked of us] mirth, "Sing for us of the song of Zion."
- 4 "How shall we sing the song of the Lord on foreign soil?"
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its skill].
- 6 May my tongue cling to my palate, if I do not remember you, if I do not bring up Jerusalem at the beginning of my joy.
- 7 Remember, O Lord, for the sons of Edom, the day of Jerusalem, those who say, "Raze it, raze it, down to its foundation!"
- 8 O Daughter of Babylon, who is destined to be plundered, praiseworthy is he who repays you your recompense that you have done to us.
- 9 **Praiseworthy is he who will take and dash your infants against the rock.**

Artscroll siddur commentary: “**Praiseworthy.** Babylon’s conqueror will hate and torment her cruelly exactly as she hated and tormented Israel (*Malbim*).”

Hirsch and Rashi say nothing about this verse.

R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (Norton, 2007): “9. *Happy who seizes and smashes / your infants against the rock.* No moral justification can be offered for this concluding line. All one can do is recall the outraged feeling that triggers the conclusion. The Babylonians have laid waste to Jerusalem, exiled much of its population, looted and massacred, the powerless captives, ordered—perhaps mockingly—to sing their Zion songs, respond instead with a lament that is not really a song and that ends with bloodcurdling curse pronounced on their captors, who, fortunately, do not understand the Hebrew in which it is pronounced.”

Unrealistic reward:

[Psalm 37:25, Artscroll Siddur]

“I was a youth and also have aged, and I have not seen a righteous man forsaken, with his children begging for bread.”

Artscroll siddur commentary ; “*A righteous man forsaken, with his children begging for bread.* A righteous man may suffer misfortune, by G-d will surely have mercy on his children (*Radak, Malbim*). I have never seen a righteous man forsaken even if his children must beg for bread. Whatever his lot in life, he trusts that G-d brings it upon him for a constructive and merciful purpose (*Anaf Yosef*). The verse does not say that no righteous man would ever be reduced to poverty; were that the case, it would equate poverty with wickedness—a patent falsehood. Rather the verse says that no righteous person will be completely forsaken even if he must beg almost for his sustenance. Since Jews are obligated to help one another, it is no disgrace for one to require the help of another (*R’ Hirsch*).”

R. Alter, *loc. cit.* : “*A lad I was, and now I am old, / and I never have seen a just man forsaken.* The beauty of this line in part explains its presence in Jewish liturgy at the end of the grace after meals, but the questionable moral calculus behind it is precisely what Job argues against so trenchantly. The only way to sustain the idea that no just person is ever in want is to assume that a needy person must somehow be unjust, whatever the appearances to the contrary. This is the very conclusion that Job’s friends draw about him. If he is sorely afflicted, he must have done something terribly wrong to deserve it. The Job poet challenges this received wisdom and proposes a more complicated, indeed paradoxical, moral vision.”