

Job's Children

F firstthings.com/article/2018/04/jobs-children

1. by *Shalom Carmy* April 2018



In S. Y. Agnon's 1939 novel *A Guest for the Night*, one of the protagonists, Daniel Bach, recounts his loss of faith. Throughout World War I, as a soldier in the trenches, he had been meticulous about donning his *tefillin* to recite his daily prayers. Until one morning, the tefillin he reached out for in the dark turned out to be attached to the rotting corpse of another Jewish soldier, struck down in the act of worship. In response to this gruesome story, the "Guest," who had left Galicia before the war, offers a literary anecdote about one of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. He persisted in his faith after burying his family, who had died of starvation. The Guest adds that we know nothing of what happened next. Perhaps he found a Jewish settlement, remarried, and raised new children. Even so, he muses, this could never have provided genuine compensation for his suffering. The biblical Job was comforted for the loss of his wife and children when he was doubly blessed at the end of the book, the Guest allows, "but I doubt whether a living man would accept such consolation."

The Guest who narrates the novel shares Agnon's biography. Nonetheless, Agnon portrays him ironically and critically, as is his wont. The Guest concedes, in this conversation, that his pious erudition is an inadequate response to the horrors of the battlefield. Agnon, in effect, is intimating that art and anecdote are inadequate to reality, at least with respect to the depiction of evil. By distinguishing between Job and "a living man," the Guest alludes to one Talmudic view that regards the Book of Job as a parable. By this reading, the death and subsequent replacement of Job's children, along with his reactions, may be no more than an artificial fairy tale ending and need not (and perhaps should not) be treated as realistic depictions of human responses and emotions.

Yet real characters can inhabit imaginary landscapes. Job, in my understanding, is more than a philosophical drama in which everyone, including Job, is a bloodless prop in the service of the argument. Job is a robust character in his relationship with God and with his friends. He displays a discernible attitude toward his children. In other words, he is not just a universal allegorical figure of undeserved suffering and protest. He is a particular kind of father, for better or for worse.

The biblical Job, impeccably righteous though he may be, does not come across as a man of familial warmth. In the prose prologue, he is meticulous in sacrificing on his children's behalf, fearing that they may have cursed God in their thoughts during one of their parties. When they are lost, along with his other possessions, Job utters his famous line: "God gave and God took away, may God's name be blessed." By chapter 2, when he has lost his health, this becomes more tentative: "Shall we accept the good from God and not accept the bad?" Perhaps Satan was right when he insinuated that Job would be more sensitive about assaults against his own body than to harm affecting others. His concern for his children seems subservient to his ideal of himself.

This coldness or estrangement to his flesh and blood recurs throughout the book. Take the images of parenthood in his speeches. In chapter 3, Job curses the day he was conceived. Nowhere in that chapter does he say that he was born to a father and a mother. The knees that greeted him at birth and the breasts at which he was nourished are not linked to any particular human being; they could well belong to a midwife or a wet nurse. Neither in his poetic outcries nor in the long biographical apology that constitutes Job's last speech (chapters 29–31) does he reflect on his parents. When he alludes to parents at all, he figuratively calls the pit father and the worm his mother and sister (17:14). Death and dissolution are his parents.

Job seems distanced from his offspring as well. When his interlocutor, Bildad, in his first speech (chapter 8) casually refers to Job's children as sinners who died for their transgressions, Job does not contest him. At the end of the first cycle of speeches, Job depicts the dead as utterly indifferent to the fate of their children. And in chapter 19, he complains that his sons are repelled by him. (Many interpret the "sons" as standing for his entire family.) Job seems to have been an aloof father before his calamity, and when, in his abandonment, he harks back to prosperous days, he does not remember his familial relations joyfully.

God's answer to Job (chapters 38–41) contains little or nothing that would count as an argument on theodicy, nor does God divulge to Job the strange colloquy with Satan that set the story of suffering in motion. Robert Alter, among others, has observed that God's speech instead celebrates the sheer fecundity of the world. Even the descriptions of inorganic processes employ the imagery of parenthood: "Does the rain have a father? Who begat the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? The frost of the heavens, who gave birth to it?" (38:28–29). God does not argue with Job, who by this stage has given up

argument in any case. God confronts him not with the picture of a rosy and harmonious world, but with a vision shot through with grandeur and profligate fertility that contrasts with the lifeless, parentless, childless world from which Job has turned away.

Agnon's protagonist, Daniel Bach, has a father, Shlomo Bach. He is a pious father, who inspires devotion in his son. In the colloquy with the Guest, Shlomo tries to change the subject. He interposes a brief remark about a father who, facing disappointment and loss, must redouble his love for his wayward son. Daniel asks why God does not follow that advice. His father responds that it is not for him to judge which acts of God are good and which are not.

Shlomo Bach, the reader knows, grieves not only for his irreligious son, Daniel, whose wartime trauma has broken his faith. Another son, whom he had hoped to join in Palestine, was killed by Arabs. As the story unfolds, however, the boy's kibbutz comrades "adopt" Shlomo as if he were their own father. By the end of the novel, he is living out his Zionist dream in their company, accompanied by his grandson. In the economy of the novel, Agnon's Zionism enables him to offer the wary possibility of a happy ending. Shlomo Bach, despite his grievous losses, is sustained by the love of many substitute sons and the land of Israel. Apparently, there is comfort for him in this. He is a "living man" of Agnon's imagination who embraces such consolation as he receives, contrary to the Guest's pessimistic dictum.

A Guest for the Night is a Hebrew masterpiece. We read it knowing—as Agnon, writing in the 1930s, could not—that the remaining Jews of his hometown in Galicia would soon be slaughtered. But others survived. Having lost everything, they built new lives, and often started new families. We are tempted to think of all these men and women as if their later lives exemplify one uniform model of "survival." But individuals differ in ordinary life, and their response to extreme suffering is also varied. Some, like Job, may have been more self-focused. But some resembled Shlomo Bach, a man of warmth and alive to the consolations of the young who would carry Jewish life forward. Did either type find comfort in these rebirths? We cannot speculate secondhand. But we should not allow ourselves to imagine it to be impossible.

Shalom Carmy teaches Jewish studies and philosophy at Yeshiva College and is editor of Tradition, the theological journal of the Rabbinical Council of America.

Prev Article

Next Article

Articles by Shalom Carmy

