

Appendix D: Tuvya ben Shlomo's "Aaron and the Wrath of God"

A dark night. A peaceful night. I made the rounds of my house, locked the doors and windows, turned off the lights. In the living room, the television murmured softly as my wife sat prettily in front of it, watching and munching grapes. There was only one last duty to perform before I could join her—it was my turn to put our son, Aaron, to bed.

I love doing this. We sing a song, we read a book and the last thing we do before saying good night is to sing the first line of the "Sh'ma," which is something I remember my parents doing with me and which seemed very natural to do with my son.

Only on this particular night I was seized by a flash of zeal, and, on the spur of the moment, I decided to toss my six-and-a-half-year-old boy a juicy tidbit of religious instruction. "Did you know," I said, "That in the 'Sh'ma' there are actually three, three. . .," I cast about trying to figure out how to say "paragraphs" so he would understand, ". . .three, uh, parts, long parts."

"Three stories?" he volunteered routinely.

"Yes! Exactly! That was just the word I was looking for." He beamed. "There are three stories in the"

"Tell them." He settled back.

"All right, The first story says that we should learn what's written in the Torah and then teach what we've learned to other people—like to your children when you grow up and become a daddy."

"My children?" he smiled.

"Yes, And the second story is where God tells us that if we do all the things written in the Torah we will be rewarded, but if we don't do them, we will be punished." He was silent, so I continued, "And the third story is where God tells us to wear a tallit, like I do when we go to synagogue, to remind ourselves to do the things that are written in the Torah." He remained silent. In fact, I could see by the look in his eye that he was miles away. "Aaron? Are you thinking about the 'Sh'ma'?"

"Who's gonna punish us?" he asked, his voice and gaze still far away.

"What?"

"You said if you're bad you get punished. Who?" He seemed a little annoyed by my apparent dullness.

"Now let me see if I understand your question. You mean. . . ."

"Daddy!" Very urgent. "Who punishes us? The police?"

"No, son, take it easy. God says that. . . ."

"God?" His voice was small and trembly. "Not God!"

"If we don't follow the laws. . . ."

"God punishes us? God does it? God?" He was actually huddled up in a ball and his eyes were welling up with tears.

I realized my mistake. I'd never talked to him before about this kind of God. Whenever we'd spoken about God I'd made it a point of telling him that God was Love, God was Good, God was Gentle, God was Kind. It's what I believe, after all. And now I'd inadvertently let it slip out that God was also Something Else.

I sat down beside him. I hugged him. "Well, that's what it says." The problem was that I myself wasn't too clear on this point. Up until then I'd always successfully avoided having to reconcile my belief in God as Love and the God of Punishment Who Metes Out Justice described in great detail in Jewish literature. And now, Aaron, six-and-a-half-year-old High Priest, was serving the whole issue up to me on a platter. I thought kids were supposed to do cute things. This was not cute.

"Daddy," he said, "I'm scared." No kidding. And frankly, I didn't blame him one bit. It's one thing to think that the bully down the block wants to punch your lights out. It's another thing entirely to believe that the All Powerful could be out to get you. It scared me, too.

I said, "You know, it seems to me that being scared of being punished by God is a pretty intelligent thing. After all, God's pretty strong. But you really don't have to worry."

"Is God gonna kill me?" He sobbed. This was beginning to get to me.

"No." I said.

"How do you know?"

What do you mean how do I know? I know, that's all! Take my word for it. Now stop being silly and go to sleep. Well, that's what I felt like saying, anyway. What I said was, "Because God doesn't punish children."

"Is that what it says in the 'Sh'ma'?"

"That's what it says in the Torah, yes. You're perfectly safe. Now stop worrying and go to sleep." I got up and went to the door.

"I think God's gonna kill me," he moaned.

"God is not going to kill you." I said emphatically. "You have nothing to worry about. Good night." I blew him a kiss and left.

Downstairs my wife said, "You were up there a long time tonight."

"I was telling Aaron about. . . ."

"Daaaaaaaaddy!" came the wail from above.

I sighed. "I'll explain later," I said to my wife and headed for the stairs. "Coming Aaron." I trudged up the steps.

He was calm now, intently staring at the wall. There were no preliminaries. "What does God do when He punishes?"

"Aaron, really now, there's absolutely nothing for you to worry about."

"So what does He do?"

What to tell him? The Flood? Oh brother, I could just see him huddling under the covers, crying, "The whole world? God killed the whole world?" Scratch that. Lot's wife? The Ten Plagues? Korah being swallowed by the earth after challenging Moses' leadership? Too gruesome, all. Then in a flash of what I prayed was genius, I decided to tell him the story of Jonah, since God punishes Jonah but only enough to get him to do what is required. God doesn't kill Jonah or harm him greatly, and I hoped Aaron would extract the lesson that God does not punish to excess, only as needed. Would that quiet the dread in him?

When I finished, Aaron turned over and said, "I see." But I could tell that he was not truly at peace with the matter.

"Good night," I said, and I edged out of the room. His silence accompanied my retreat.

For the remainder of the evening we heard nothing from Aaron, so I assumed that he had decided to sleep on the question. No such luck. At 12:25 there was a tug on my arm, just as I was getting into a good, sound sleep. "What is it, Aaron? Good heavens, what time is it?" I fumbled around the night stand for my watch.

Aaron was quite self-possessed. "Daddy," he asked seriously, calmly, "do you talk to God?"

"Not usually at this hour of the night. Go to bed!"

He ignored me. "How do you make it work to do it? Do you use the telephone?" He was in dead earnest. Neither his eyes nor his face betrayed even the slightest hint of irony.

I scratched my head, "Aaron, go to sleep now. We can talk about this in the morning."

"Daddy?" he said with a small stamp of the foot. "How?"

"Okay, okay. Ummm, how do I talk to God? You should be a teacher when you grow up, Aaron, you give great surprise quizzes. Never mind, never mind. So, how do I talk to God? Well, I get to a very quiet place, and I think what I want to say very hard inside my head. Does that help?"

"Like in bed?"

"Yes, bed's a good" But he was already out the door.

My decision not to go back to sleep was rewarded ten minutes later when Aaron came trundling once again through my bedroom door. With no sense of surprise whatsoever at seeing me sitting up to greet him, he said, "So what if He says no?"

"What if He says no to what?"

"So what if there is what you think hard about and it's no when you're in your quiet place? When you're talking to God? What then?"

"A minute to clear my head," I said. "Now, did you ask God for something and God said no?"

"No! No! 'What if,' I said. Do you know what 'if' means?"

"Calm down, son. I'm just not sure what you're talking about. I'll answer you when I understand. Repeat your question, please."

He gave an exasperated sigh. Then he asked, "Do you get to argue?"

"With God?"

"If it's 'no' when you think hard in the quiet place do you get to argue? Do people argue with God?"

"Yes." I said with hesitation. "Absolutely."

"How do you know?"

So what could I do? I told him—briefly—the story of Abraham arguing for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. I've never seen such an enraptured audience for that tale, either before or since. "Now it's almost one o'clock in the morning," I said as I finished. "Time for you and me to be asleep. Can you sleep now?"

"No."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I'm going to argue with God."

My first impulse was to laugh out loud. That's the kind of thing you expect to hear from some drunken philosophy student in a campus bar as he staggers out into the night bellowing challenges at the Universal Consciousness. But this was no such person. This was my six-and-a-half-year-old son with his somber face, and his eyes blazing.

"What are you going to argue about with God, Aaron?" I asked seriously.

"About this business of punishments. I'm going to tell him to stop it."

"Why don't you ask him to stop it. That seems a lot more polite."

"Okay. But if He says 'no,' I'm going to argue."

"Aaron?"

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Why shouldn't God punish?" I wanted to hear what the Lord would be up against.

"Because it's just not fair. God is too big to be punishing people. People get too afraid of God for that. It's not good. God is too smart for that. He can think of something else to do instead. I'm going to tell him that."

I listened and I knew. God had no chance in this argument. He was clearly out-matched. "You'll let me know what the answer is?"

"I'll tell you in the morning. Good night, Daddy." And he left.

"Good night, little prophet." I called after him.

The next morning Aaron came downstairs a little draggy, but clearly happy. "Well?" I asked.

"God said yes!" he told me brightly.

"God won't punish anymore?"

"He promised me."

I sat beholding him over the corn flakes. My small giant, ready, in the name of justice and mercy, to take on anyone, including the Almighty Himself. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Aaron," I said, "you are the best I know." I kissed him. I watched him as he walked off to school.

And despite my will to disbelieve, despite my wish to laugh at this childish nonsense, despite my strong desire to attribute it all to an overactive six-year-old imagining voices in his head—despite all this, I found myself feeling incredibly good and very much at ease knowing that, at least in one small part of the universe, such a promise had been returned to such a request.

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