

I Miss God

By Shalom Auslander

Recently, a horrendous earthquake struck the tiny Caribbean nation of Haiti. Hundreds of thousands of people died, millions were left homeless, and untold numbers more were injured or missing. Families sitting together one moment were gone the next. Fathers and mothers disappeared beneath their homes, sons and daughters were crushed beneath their schools. The lucky died right away; the unlucky died slow agonizing deaths over long periods of time; the unluckiest, perhaps, survived, only to face hunger and homelessness, to pile up corpses, to bury their dead.

It was incomprehensible.

It was inconceivable.

It was inexplicable.

And so, here in America, before the dust even had a chance to settle upon the broken, mangled innocents, a man named Pat went on television and blamed the Haitians.

Pat is a reverend. He is also the founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, and host of its flagship talk show, "The 700 Club." Why 700, you ask? Perhaps that is a mystical number? Is it a mystical number from the Bible? Does it refer to a special date in the life of Jesus Christ? Does it

cryptically point to an ancient verse of some moral relevance? No. It refers to the first 700 people who gave Pat \$10 a month to support the Christian Broadcasting Network. And so, soon after the news of the Haitian tragedy appeared on the American news channels, Pat went on his show which is on his Christian Broadcasting Station, and declared that the Haitians had brought the earthquake upon themselves, because some years ago, they had made a deal with the Devil. "They got together and swore a pact to the devil," said Pat. "Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after another." When you look at it that way, you can't blame God for murdering hundred of thousands of them in cold blood.

Some people were upset with Pat.

Some people said Pat should be ashamed.

Some people said Pat should apologize.

Not a man named Yehuda, though.

Yehuda is a rabbi. He is the spokesman for the Rabbinical Alliance of America, an organization of over 800 rabbis. Yehuda, speaking on behalf of over 800 rabbis, had a different explanation for the terrible earthquake in Haiti. Yehuda's explanation for the terrible earthquake in Haiti was this: men and women who express love towards members of their own gender. Yehuda, speaking on behalf of over 800 rabbis, said that homosexuals cause earthquakes. He also said homosexuals caused Katrina, which happened to have been a hurricane and not an earthquake, so either a) Yehuda believes homosexuals cause hurricanes as well as earthquakes, or b) Yehuda believes hurricanes are caused by earthquakes, which everyone knows are caused by homosexuals.

Some people were upset with Yehuda.

Some people said Yehuda should be ashamed.

Some people said Yehuda should apologize.

Not a man named Jerry, though. Partially that's because Jerry is dead, but if he had been alive, he probably would have agreed with Pat and Yehuda.

Jerry was an American Baptist televangelist who co-founded a group

called the Moral Majority, which was neither moral nor a majority. After the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City, Jerry went on Pat's TV show and blamed the attack on abortionists, pagans, feminists, gays and lesbians. "I point the finger in their face," said Jerry, "and say, "You helped this happen."” The rest of the world inexplicably blamed the nineteen Islamist hijackers who actually flew the planes into the World Trade Center.

Some people were upset with Jerry.

Some people said Jerry should be ashamed.

But Jerry wasn't ashamed.

Neither was Yehuda.

Neither was Pat.

I know how they feel.

This is how they feel: they feel terrified. They feel hands-trembling, brow-sweating, bed-wetting terrified. Not of homosexuals, not of the Devil, not even of God. They are terrified - hands-trembling, brow-sweating, bed-wetting terrified – of life. Of mankind. Of death. Of chance.

I know how they feel.

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A short while ago, after being together for almost 35 years, God and I went our separate ways. It wasn't working out. Frankly, He was a bit of a control freak, and I think He has some deep-seated emotional problems He continues to refuse to address. He flies off the handle, He kills with reckless abandon, and He has a tendency to disappear for long periods of time without so much as a phone call.

I did my best, but my best wasn't good enough. Nobody's best is with that Guy, trust me. According to the Orthodox Judaism with which I was raised, He has over 600 rules, and that's just to keep Him from killing you. My rabbis taught me that there was a direct cause-and-effect between my actions and my fate: Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, so he was kicked out of Eden; the people were violent, so God flooded the Earth; Sodomites

raped strangers, so God destroyed their city; Lot's wife looked back to see the city fall, and God turned her into a pillar of salt. In the third-grade, when a classmate's father died of a sudden heart attack, my rabbi suggested he must have done something to deserve it. When my older sister developed a severe thyroid condition, I was told to pray for forgiveness.

"Forgiveness for what?" I asked.

"For whatever you did," said my rabbi. "God only punishes the wicked."

I began to wonder, even then, if the Old Testament might better have been called "The Big Book of Or Else." Obey the Sabbath or else. Keep meat and dairy separate or else. Honor my Name or else. Put on a yarmulka, motherfucker, and nobody gets hurt.

I was thirty-five.

I needed a change.

I needed to be free.

I needed to start over.

The United States Department of Justice defines domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner (check) to gain or maintain power (check) and control (check) over another intimate partner (check). The definition adds that domestic violence can take many forms, including physical abuse (check), emotional abuse (check), psychological abuse (check) and sexual abuse (if you count crippling shame and guilt - check). It was time to leave Him.

To be fair, some of the credit for this break-up must go to Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and the popular word-processing program Microsoft Word. Microsoft Word has an interesting feature called "Find/Change," whereby you can find any word and instantly change it to another. I'd been having a bad day – a late morning, a parking ticket and, as a result, a missed psychiatric appointment. God was clearly angry with me, and I was angry with him, and that afternoon, as I sat down at my computer to write, I wondered: what if I were to take some random passages from the Good Book,

type them into a Word document, and do a simple Find/Change? What if I were to change “God” or “Lord” or “God your Lord” or “Lord your God” to, say, Frank?

Frank was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So Frank said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth..." (Genesis 6:5-6)

This is what Frank says: About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die... (Exodus 10:4)

Frank has some problems.

Peaceful meadows will be turned into a wasteland by the Frank's fierce anger. Frank has left his den like a lion seeking its prey, and their land will be made desolate by the sword of the enemy and Frank's fierce anger. (Jeremiah 25:35-38)

Frank needs to talk to someone.

Frank said to Moses, "This man shall be put to death; let the whole community stone him outside the camp." So the whole community led him outside the camp and stoned him to death as Frank had commanded Moses. (Numbers 15:33-36)

Clearly, Frank is a bit of a dick.

I, Frank, am a jealous Frank, inflicting punishment for their father's wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation. (Exodus 20:4-5)

Transcribe the entire Old Testament into Microsoft Word, change “God” to “Frank,” print it out and show The Book of Frank to a five-year old. Ask him to pick out the bad guy.

It's not the Israelites.

It's Frank.

The whole relationship made me something of a nervous character. Even after I gave up trying to appease Him, I continued to live in fear of His wrath. Every misfortune – every flat tire, every flu, every tax increase – was

His handiwork. There were no accidents, no simple misfortunes, no bad days. There was only punishment, retribution, payback.

And so I left Him.

I walked out.

Everything, I said to myself, was going to be all right.

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Dr. Green, my son's pediatrician, has two regrettable mannerisms that would be funny if my son hadn't been near death at the time I first encountered them. His first regrettable mannerism is to detail, in explicit, gruesome detail, the absolute worst-case scenario -- without explaining that what he is describing is the absolute worst-case scenario.

My son, just a few weeks past his fifth birthday, was lying on the a gurney in the Emergency Room of Benedictine Hospital in Kingston, New York, an oxygen mask over his face, an IV in his left arm. The chest x-ray showed his entire left lung was blocked, and his right lung was only half clear. His blood oxygen level was barely above 50%. A machine behind him beeped alarmingly. I was trying to hold him still as the nurses tried to draw blood from his right arm. He was screaming, begging to go home.

"Now of course," Dr. Green was saying, "not all antibiotics work for all patients. Sometimes they make things worse."

"Worse?" I asked.

"Even when they do work," said Dr. Green, "there can be fluid in the chest cavity once the swelling goes down."

"Swelling?"

"Of the lungs. Of course that can cause other infections worse than the original infection. If the respiratory system shuts down, we're in real trouble. And if his blood oxygen level gets too low, that's when we get into brain issues."

I straightened up, and turned to him. The room began to spin.

“What are you saying?” I said. “What are you telling me, are you telling me my son is going to have brain damage? What the hell are you saying?”

“No, no, no,” said Dr. Green. “That’s the worst-case scenario. Most kids with pneumonia are better in a couple of days.”

“Pneumonia?” I asked. “How did you get to brain damage from pneumonia?”

Dr. Green’s second unfortunate mannerism that would be funny if my son hadn’t been near death at the time I first encountered it is a decidedly second-rate Borscht-Belt sense of humor that presents itself at the worst possible time.

“That’s better than old monia,” said Dr. Green.

“Old monia?”

“Old monia, pneumonia,” sang Dr. Green, “let’s call the whole thing off.”

“What?”

“Louis Armstrong.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“We should really get him to the Pediatric Care Unit,” said Dr. Green.

The Pediatric Care Unit was in the Albany Medical Center, a ninety-minute drive away. The orderlies put my son into an ambulance, my wife climbed in beside him, and I followed behind in my car. On the way, I phoned my friend Jason to see if he could take care of my dogs while we were away.

“No problem,” said Jason.

“Thanks,” I said. “How’s Lisa?”

“Not so good,” he said.

Lisa, Jason’s wife, had Stage 4 metastatic cancer. The doctors had given her six months to live. That was three months ago. Now she had fluid in her stomach. They didn’t know why.

“Jesus,” I said.

“Jesus,” said Jason.

“Fucking life, man.”

“Fucking everything,” said Jason.

My son was put into an isolation room; there was some concern that his pneumonia had been a complication of Swine Flu. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning before they had stabilized him. My wife was now coughing, too, and they sent her down to the Emergency Room for a Swine Flu test. Everyone I loved was sick. Their lungs were filling with fluid. Their stomachs were filling with fluid. Nobody knew why.

I went outside, sat down on the front steps of the Albany Medical Center, lit a cigarette and tried, desperately, to blame God.

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The problem, of course, is this goddamned frontal lobe.

It seems to have radically over-developed some time ago in us humans, a treacherous pothole on the road of evolution the lesser primates were lucky enough to avoid. It's been nothing but trouble ever since. Among other things, it gives us our awareness of the future, and thus the knowledge of our own mortality. Perhaps this explains the appeal of the frontal lobotomy, which severs the frontal lobe. It was a controversial technique, and neuroscientists are still researching this part of our brain, but one thing is pretty certain: you rarely see a depressed lobotomy patient. Hammer an ice pick into the top of your eye socket, use a mallet to drive it through the skull and into the brain, sever the nerve fibers connecting the frontal lobes to the thalamus, and you probably won't need that Prozac prescription. You probably won't feel compelled to write, for instance. You won't need philosophy. And you sure as hell won't need God. The resultant seizures, by contrast, seem relatively benign. To steal an old slogan from Coca-Cola, have a lobotomy and a smile.

At his trial for heresy, Socrates declared that the unexamined life is not worth living; it doesn't necessarily follow from that, however, that the examined life *is* worth living; examine life frequently enough, honestly enough, and you may just wish you never had. You may just want to have an

ice pick rammed into your brain. You might just want to believe in an invisible being who made this examined life as shitty as it is. You might just want to believe that if you eat the right foods, say the right words and wear the right clothing, that being will make all the bad parts go away, and that the bad parts are only there because you ate the wrong thing, said the wrong words or wore the wrong clothes.

When I was eighteen, I spent two years at an Orthodox reform school in Jerusalem. The school's foundational purpose was to bring wayward teenagers like myself back into the fold of Orthodox Judaism, and to that end, every so often, our rabbis took us on field trips – sometimes to visit very holy burial sites, sometimes to visit very holy birth sites, and sometimes to visit very holy people: *Gedolim*, “Great Ones,” the most respected, learned rabbis in the world. They were often the heads of enormous religious schools, where they sat at the front of enormous fluorescent-lit study halls, behind wide wooden desks piled high with crumbling holy books. I averred as best I could from these spiritual field trips; the standard procedure was to line up at the rabbi's table, shake his hand and get a blessing, but knowing what I had been doing with my hand the night before, I was concerned I might explode into flames just from shaking his hand. But the rabbis wouldn't take no for an answer – or masturbation for an excuse – and soon I found myself visiting these *Gedolim* on a monthly basis. They were a varied, eclectic crew: there was the rabbi who gave out dollar bills as blessings, the rabbi who wore seventy extra pairs of tzitzit (the biblically-ordained fringes on the end of the biblically-ordained four-corner garments worn by the observant Jews) to make up for all the Jews in the world who weren't wearing tzitzit, the rabbi whose prayers, it was told, healed the sick, deaf and blind. What they had in common, though, was a certain serenity, a placidity of spirit that registered itself upon their faces, which were bathed with a preternatural tranquility and calm.

Not to be too blunt about this, but: no fucking shit.

I've been there. I've believed in God. And while I was neurotic trying to appease Him, what else but an all-encompassing excuse for all the troubles of existence (and the concomitant all-encompassing solution to all the troubles of existence) could ever lead to such peace, such quietude, such sublime sangfroid?

God alone.

Or a frontal lobotomy.

For the rest of us, the trouble's just beginning.

The thing is, you see, we die. We croak. We plotz. We drop dead. We end, and rather poorly. Naturally, unnaturally, in wars, in earthquakes, in plagues. We perish. We succumb. We kick the bucket. No matter how far we jog each day, no matter how much we sleep at night, no matter how nice we were when we were awake. Did you love? Wonderful. You are going to die. Did you care for others as you cared for yourself? That's terrific. But caring people die every day, and so will you, and so will I. Quickly, if I'm lucky. In my sleep if I'm blessed. Probably, though, slowly. "Never again," my ass.

A few years ago, when my relationship with God was just beginning to falter, my mother tried to help us work things out. She knew I had begun eating cheeseburgers against God's will, she knew I was driving on the Sabbath, which God had declared a day of martially-imposed rest. She was desperate to make my relationship with God work, and so my loving mother took me aside, put her loving arm around me, looked with her loving eyes into mine and said, "You're finishing what Hitler started."

Perhaps the math of that particular equation needs some explaining:

A: Hitler tried to kill the Jews.

And:

B: Jews obey God's rules.

And:

C: I was not keeping God's rules.

Thus:

D: I was killing a Jew (myself), and possibly other Jews (my yet-to-come children and grandchildren).

Therefore:

E: I was finishing what Hitler started.

I think it's safe to say that Mom's not winning the Mother of the Year Award anytime soon, but to make matters worse, she was lying. She believed in God, and so she knew what my rabbis knew: Hitler didn't kill anyone.

God did.

Hitler, my rabbis said, was a punishment for the Jews of Germany who had assimilated.

The Inquisition, my rabbis said, was a punishment for the Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity.

Floods, famine, genocide, droughts, floods, war, disease. There's a reason for all of it.

God.

Frank.

Unless, suddenly, after 35 years, there isn't.

I thought that once I broke up with my abusive God, things would be more simple. I thought I wouldn't have to live in fear, I thought I wouldn't have to worry so much. I was wrong. What does someone who spent their whole life believing that all the bad that happens in the world is the result of a malevolent God say when he wakes up in the morning, and he looks out the window, and the world is as shitty as it ever was? What does he say when his son's lungs are filling with fluid, when his best friend is given six months to live, when he looks at the news and people are murdering each other all over the Earth (when they aren't busy murdering the Earth itself), when bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people and for most people, nothing much happens at all until something awful happens and the whole show comes to a screeching, bloody halt?

He says, "Fuck."

That's what I said, anyway.

I sat on the front steps of Albany Medical Center, trying to blame God, missing Him, wishing I could blame Him, wishing there was a reason for it all, and a solution, to my son's lungs and my friend's cancer, and finding none, I said, "Fuck."

I missed God.

I missed having an Answer.

It's one thing to live in a universe controlled by a brutal dictator whose will can be manipulated, whose anger can be quelled, whose verdicts can be appealed. But without the dictator, what have you got? All you're left with is a crappy world, where things happen for no good reason, where six million people are killed in death camps, and three-thousand people die in World Trade Centers and two-thousand die in a hurricane in New Orleans and a quarter of a million people die in a hurricane in Haiti. Just 'cuz. You've got no one to blame but the universe, no one to fear but human beings operating out of a free and often cruel will. Hitler didn't kill because Jews assimilated. Hitler killed because Hitler was a killer. The earthquake in Haiti wasn't caused by a pact with the Devil; it was caused by the Caribbean tectonic plates shifting. The Caribbean tectonic plates didn't shift because of homosexuals; they shifted because of a rupture in the Enriquillo-Plaintain Garden fault, 16 miles WSW from Port-au-Prince.

Which brings me back to the Reverend named Pat, and the rabbi named Yehuda and the pastor named Jerry, and the fear they and I share. It's the fear of a world we can't control. It is the fear of a brutal world. It is the fear of a world where anything can happen, where it probably will, and where it will probably involve body bags or mass graves.

This is a tough planet to get a good night's sleep on.

After the Pastor named Jerry died in 2007, Christopher Hitchens called him a fraud. He called him some other things, too, but I think he was mistaken about the fraud part. I don't think Jerry was a fraud. I don't think Yehuda is a fraud, nor is Pat. I think they're afraid. And I think they're cowards.

Listen, we're all afraid. I'm fucking terrified. I have two young sons, and if they live eighty or so years on the planet without seeing the inside of a concentration camp, I'll be pleasantly surprised. If they don't die in a natural disaster, I'm pretty sure they'll die in a manmade disaster. Any human being who makes it through a day on Earth without running half-naked down the street screaming, "We're all going to die!" ought to get a goddamned medal.

It's a tough planet to get a good night's sleep on.

But the deal we make is this: tough. Deal with it. If you want to pray, pray. If you want to get drunk, get drunk. I like marijuana. But only cowards look at the world in all its ugliness and try to calm their fears by pointing their finger at someone else. Pat is a coward because he blames Haitians. Yehuda is a coward because he blames homosexuals. Jerry was a coward because he blamed pretty much everybody. Some people blame Jews. Some people blame blacks. I used to blame God. Now I've got nothing to do but admit that we live in a shitty, cruel universe and the only one to blame for most of the worst things that happen is ourselves. Or nobody.

I miss God.

I miss the threats, the punishments. I miss the beseeching and the praying and the control of the uncontrollable. I miss having a cause for the random horribleness of life.

I miss the Wailing Wall.

I miss stuffing prayers into the cracks between its ancient stones and being certain they would be answered. I miss having a place I could go with a pen and a small piece of paper to request world peace, a safe birth, or a new job, or a cure for my friend's cancer, or for God to reach down in His mercy and clear your son's lungs of fluid if I just promise to never, ever again do whatever it is He doesn't want me to do.

I miss Frank.

Frank felt good. My days were anxious, but I slept better.

And so, as I sat there on the steps of the Albany Medical Center, trying to blame God but finding myself past Him, finding myself unable to conjure

Him up once again, my first thought, after such a long and painful separation, was this: "I'm finally free."

My second thought was this: "Fuck."