

GOD'S OBITUARY?

A few weeks ago, the New York Times marked the horrible milestone of 100,000 Americans' deaths from COVID by printing the identities of 1,000 of the dead. It began by filling every inch of the front page with nothing but their names, then continued over a few pages more. Each name was accompanied by the person's age and what I call a "microbituary": a tiny one-sentence obituarial tribute to each individual which reminds the reader, in the Times' own words, that "They were not simply names on a list. They were us." Reading the paper that morning, I was shocked by the radical reversal of its journalistic mission to deliver, at times in mind-numbing detail, the often-abstract facts of life and death in the world's daily events. It was as if the Times had forced the journey of history to an abrupt, paralytic halt, in respectful deference to the precious singularity of each person felled by COVID.

This past Sunday, carefully masked and distanced, my wife and I joined 11,000 of our fellow citizens of all backgrounds at the protest in Troy. We remembered George Floyd and others who were murdered by police officers; we protested the endemic, systematic racism, long entrenched in American society since slavery, that allowed this injustice to fester. Looking around me at the

posters bearing images of the victims and listening to the call-and-response chants of “Say his name!” and “Say her name!,” I felt once again as if I were swimming in a sea of microbituaries: tiny shrieks of outrage, auditory grave markers for the deceased – their names, their dates of birth and death, - refusing to let us be deaf to the precious singularity of each person felled by the bullets or choked under the knees of blind hatred and its practitioners.

Though I coined the word, “microbituary,” eulogies, obituaries, death assemblages and grave markers have been a common part of culture for thousands of years. They highlight the anguished human struggle to keep the deceased alive through diverse strategies of the soul, the word, the arts, and faith. We mourn those who have died, and we vow to resurrect them, if only in our own minds, so that we can place our grief somewhere meaningful in the aftermath of our losses.

Judaism teaches us that these losses belong not only to us. When one person ends another person’s life, it is not only the victim who dies. God, as it were, feels the loss keenly and a part of God symbolically also dies, or at least is deeply diminished. So too, when any person, especially someone who is innocent, departs the world, the Jewish sages imagine God weeping in pain, wailing

graphically, “My head is so heavy, My arm is so heavy!” euphemisms for God’s suffering. These are startling, unsettling claims, but they are deeply rooted in the Bible. Jewish scripture has always taught that every human being – even the ones you might hate – is created in God’s image. The sages of ancient Judaism understood this to mean that each of us, with our uniqueness *and* our commonalities, is a reflection of God. This idea is often lost on the modern reader of religious texts. Could the Bible possibly be claiming that the Creator would resemble His creations? What happened to the biblical prohibition against making a graven image of the God who is entirely unlike us? Rather than be paralyzed by literalism, think of us being God’s reflection as a metaphor: a mirror reflects your image back to you, but that image is not actually you. So too, each of us “reflects” back into the world God’s powerful, creative presence, even though we are not, and never actually can be, God. Thus, if you diminish a human life, you diminish God’s mirrored presence, and you diminish God as well.

Death by pandemic and death by racist violence are entirely different kinds of catastrophes. Yet however our fellow human beings are robbed of life, each of their deaths is an incomparable tragedy for God, Whose love makes no distinction among His human creations. Corona virus robs its victims of their breath. In the last two minutes of his life, George Floyd begged his tormentor to relent from

asphyxiating him. If the ancient Jewish sages were here now, and they taught about God witnessing all of this, I wonder if they would imagine God on a ventilator or down on the street under someone's knees, moaning, "I, too, can't breathe."

This old/new theology of outrage is more than a sermonic device or metaphoric window dressing for religious people's social justice platforms. It is the basis of our command to dream in empathy with God of a world free of suffering, tragedy and hatred; of our command to call out rampant, systemic injustice in matters of race; of our command to eradicate rampant systemic inequality in matters as diverse as health, housing, and hope. Each microbituary I read and hear compels me to remember my fellow human beings, to prevent them from becoming abstract statistics. Each microbituary I read and hear compels me to remember that when one of us perishes, as it were, a small part of God dies as well, such is the degree of empathic fierceness of God's love for us. Each one I read and hear calls me to a life of action and intention, to answer those greatest of all questions: what can, will, must I do to preserve God's presence in the world, the foundation of human decency and morality? What can, will, must I do to ensure that God's obituary never gets written?

