

Coping with Anxiety

By Gershon the Winkler



In times of anxiety around the foreboding unknown Yikes! -- we often find ourselves wondering, like, "Where is God when things are really bad?" – as if God and "Really Bad" don't go together, as if God were some kind of decoration that only goes with certain colors or designs. This was the problem that plagued the biblical character Jo'b [Ee'yo'v in the original Hebrew]. He couldn't for the life of him square the experience of his suffering with the idea of God, and he spends 37 chapters trying to wrap his mind around it, around "How can God be

with me when things are this bad?" He grows increasingly anxious and begins to question himself, like maybe he is at fault, maybe God is upset with him, maybe he's not living right, maybe this and maybe that and maybe even the other.

In the end, God finally finds a teeny-tiny space in Jo'b and his friends' seemingly endless stream of theological tirades and philosophical rhetoric and gets a word in edgewise. Does God address Jo'b's 37-chapter question? Does God heal Jo'b of his resulting illness? Does God remove Jo'b's suffering? Not at all. Instead, God invites Jo'b on a safari. She takes him on a nature walk. She seizes the remote, turns off CNN and ushers Jo'b outside of Jo'b's confinement in his home-brewn assumptions and definitions – outside of the noise that confounds him with images of long lines at supermarkets and drive-through Covid screenings. Jo'b is restored by default. He is reverted to Manufacturer's Setting. He is not restored by intervention but by invitation. He no longer needs answers because the questions have gone with the wind. Poof! Jo'b learns that God is God whether things are good or bad, and whether we sense it or not, know it or not, believe it or not. And that She is as much the originator of what we experience as bad as She is of what we experience as good (Isaiah 45:7). And that She promises you that no matter how hopeless things appear –

כִּי תֵעָבֵר בַּמַּיִם אֶתִּיאֲנִי וּבַנְּהָרוֹת לֹא יִשְׁטָפוּךָ כִּי תֵלֵךְ בְּמוֹאֵשׁ לֹא תִכְזֶה וְלֹהָבָה לֹא תִבְעַר־בָּךְ :

*When you pass through water,
I will be with you;
Through streams,
They shall not overwhelm you.
When you walk through fire,*

*You shall not be scorched;
Through flame,
It shall not burn you*
(Isaiah 43:2).

This is how you might want to think of all those disturbing thoughts like what if this and what if that. We all live in the shadows of the ominous *Whatif*. You'd never have gotten to where you are today, never have achieved what you've achieved, been where you've been, enjoyed what you'd enjoyed, if you'd have worried all the time about the great cosmic Whatif. Whatif is a question we cannot afford to linger in, or else we become frozen in our tracks, immobilized, petrified. We'd never venture outside, maybe not even get out of bed, because what if.... No, you cannot allow yourself to be straightjacketed by the *Whatif*.

This was one of Jo'b's problems. He is described as having been anxiety-ridden and living in daily terror because of the looming shadow of the *Whatif*: "And Jo'b would bring offerings to God," the Book of Jo'b tells us in its opening chapter, "for he would say 'What if my children did meth during their wild bashes?'" (Jo'b 1:5). It was like sending money to the credit card company even though you haven't used the card yet – just in case of what if....

Basically, we know nothing. The only guarantee in life is that there are no guarantees. Yet, this doesn't stop us from living, from taking chances, from reveling in the Yum in the face of the Yikes virtually daily! We glibly make plans and write them into our calendars in advance of months, even years even though we don't know what if or what if not. So, when we feel paralyzed by the Whatifs, we need to remember this -- that we make life decisions daily, sometimes twice or thrice daily without giving a second thought, let alone a first, to the question of what if, or what if not. This is what we need to tap into, into that boldness, that Chutzpah. Because the only thing we know for sure is that we don't know anything for sure, and we ought to therefore tackle each precious independent moment at a time without making one moment dependent upon the outcome of the next. In the words of Sir Winston Churchill: "You will never reach your destination if you stop to throw stones at every dog that barks."

(No dogs were harmed in the sharing of this teaching.)