

## Putting an Official, Permanent End to the Idea that “God Never Gives You More Than You Can Handle”

Posted October 25, 2012 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Copyright © 2012 Judith Z. Abrams

BH

I'm pretty sure you've heard the phrase, in our study passage's title occasionally...usually uttered at some horrible moment such as death or a terrible diagnosis.

Where did this idea come from? Is it a Jewish idea? Let's take a look:

The midrash on Genesis, Genesis Rabbah, is all about dealing with unfairness and adversity. So it's not surprising to find it dealing with Psalm 11:5 which says that God loves the righteous and hates the wicked. So why, our sages ask, are the righteous having such a tough time in this world? And why do the wicked (i.e., the Romans) appear to be winning? The suggestion, below, is that if you are being tested, it is only because God knows you are good; i.e., knows you can take it:

“The Lord tries the righteous; but the wicked and him that loves violence His soul hates (Psalm 11:5).” Rabbi Jonathan said: A potter does not test defective vessels, because he cannot give them a single blow without breaking them. Similarly the Holy One, blessed be He, does not test the wicked but only the righteous: thus, “The Lord tries the righteous.”

Rabbi Jose ben Rabbi Hanina said: When a flax worker knows that his flax is of good quality, the more he beats it the more it improves and the more it glistens; but if it is of inferior quality, he cannot give it one knock without its splitting. Similarly, the Lord does not test the wicked but only the righteous, as it says, “The Lord tries the righteous.”

Rabbi Eleazar said: When a man possesses two cows, one strong and the other feeble, upon which does he put the yoke? Surely upon the strong one. Similarly, the Lord tests none but the righteous: hence, “The Lord tries the righteous.”(Genesis Rabbah 34:3)

You can see what the midrash meant to Jews in the land of Israel around 350 C.E., living under oppressive Roman rule. It meant, “Yes, you are having a hard time now, but this is only a sign of God's high opinion of you!” This is a statement designed for a specific time and place in history. Yet it has been taken over and made to apply to all cases of suffering everywhere.

I guess what I find so awful about the statement is that it implies the following:

- A) You should be happy that God is testing you.
- B) If you feel despair and sadness there's something wrong with you since you clearly can handle it if it has befallen you.
- C) You should find something great about an appalling situation.
- D) That I am let off the hook for caring about you because if God thinks you can handle it, why should I worry about your heartache?

When we say this phrase we risk sounding appallingly like Job's three heartless friends who figure that if their friend is suffering, he must have brought it on himself.

So let us now, forever and officially, erase this idea from our vocabulary because:

- A) Suffering is awful and there's really not much reason to love it...although you may give it meaning over time.
- B) There is NOTHING wrong with feeling sadness...although sinking into permanent despair is not Jewish.
- C) You are under no obligation to find something great in an appalling situation...although you may, in time, come to find something redeeming in it.

- D) Judaism demands that we care for those who are hurting. (This is one reason why Jewish rituals of mourning are so effective. We demand that you take that bucket of tears and cry them out right away instead of carrying them around for the rest of your life. And we demand that others show up and feed you for that first week. Judaism is all about facing the mourning square in the face.)

### **Discussion Questions**

So, let me hear your thoughts:

1. Has anyone ever said this to you? Did it comfort you or enrage you? Why?
2. Have you ever said this to anyone? Did it help them? Did it help you?
3. What are people really saying when they say this phrase?
4. Does our midrash actually say that, "God never gives you more than you can handle?" Or does it say something more nuanced?
5. Have you ever found something redeeming in suffering? If so, did you look back and feel grateful for the suffering or were you grateful for the insight but glad that the suffering was over?
6. Even if we erase it from our Jewish vocabulary as a response to adversity, it is doubtful that it will disappear from the rest of the culture. How might we respond (politely and constructively) when confronted with this notion?

As ever, I look forward to your insights!