

WHERE IS GOD WHEN SHOTS RING OUT?

By Don Feder

When seemingly senseless tragedies occur – like shooting on high-school and college campuses – the question inevitably arises: How can God let this happen?

While appreciating the real pain which prompts such queries, the question logically could be phrased another way: Why does God allow us to exercise our God-given free will? (no pun intended).

That is to say: Why didn't God fashion a race of robots who were incapable of creating Auschwitz, the Cambodian Killing Fields, the World Trade Center slaughter and school shootings?

The Virginia Tech slayings were alternately attributed to guns, video games, violent movies and anti-psychotic medication. Why not God -- the ultimate fall-guy?

Still, that nagging question has been asked from ancient times to today, as humans try to understand the world around them. An entire book of the Bible, the Book of Job, tried to answer it.

After each awful example of the depths of human depravity comes the plaintive cry: Why did God allow this to happen? – implying that He should have intervened to stop it.

Is God to prevent every loss of human life at the hands of monsters or only the more horrific crimes – the Holocaust, 9/11, Columbine and the Virginia Tech massacre?

What should be the numerical threshold for Divine intervention – 6 million victims, 3 million, 3,000, 32 or 1? Is it

logical to demand that God stop the murders of 32 students and teachers at Virginia Tech, but not the killing of one child – the most innocent of his creatures? If so, morality becomes a numbers game.

And how is this intervention to be effected? Should God have killed Pol Pot, Hitler or the 9/11 hijackers with a lightning bolt? At what point? When they formulated their homicidal plans, as they prepared to carry them out, or -- in the case of the Holocaust - - when the first gas pellet dropped?

Doubtless, God could have created humans without the ability to do evil.

But, then, we would be puppets tethered to Heavenly strings – incapable of murder, torture, rape and other cruelties; but equally incapable of acts of compassion and self-sacrifice. Auschwitz would never have been built, but neither would hospitals, schools, hospices, homeless shelters and rehab centers.

Believers would answer the eternal question by observing that God endowed man with free will to give him moral choices – to allow him to freely choose good, or to knowingly embrace evil.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, a professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University, explains: “God created us in His image. What does that mean? He intended us to be like Him—masters of our own fate, deciders of our destiny. God gave us the ability to choose between doing good and evil.”

God wants man to choose the good -- to come to Him of our own volition, and so to earn eternal reward. “I call Heaven and earth to bear witness this day, for I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse (*good and evil*). Therefore, choose life (*by exercising the ability to make moral choices, an*

attribute with which I have endowed you) so that you and your children may live.” Deuteronomy 30:19.

And yet, like angry children, we blame God for making us human. “Evil and good come not from the mouth of the Most High. Why then should a living man complain, a strong man, because of his sins?” (Lamentations 3:39)

Darrell Scott, whose daughter Rachel was one of 11 victims of the 1999 Columbine massacre, put the matter succinctly in testimony before a Congressional committee: “The first recorded act of violence was when Cain slew Abel out in the field. ... The true killer was Cain, and the reason for the murder could only be found in his heart.”

Scott then goes a step further, by assigning such tragedies in part on our alienation from God.

“I am here today to declare that Columbine was not just a tragedy – it was a spiritual event that should be forcing us to look at where the real blame lies. ... We have refused to honor God, and in so doing, we open the doors to hatred and violence.”

Please note, Scott is not saying that because we refused to honor Him, God let this happen, or brought it upon us. Rather, Scott contends that by not relating to the Creator and His wisdom, we allowed such evil to flourish.

We can give in to the anger, envy and resentment which lead to rage (as Cho Seung Hui, who took 32 innocent lives at Virginia Tech, manifestly did – witness his video rants against the rich and other imaginary persecutors), or we can rise above our baser natures and show kindness to strangers, comfort the widow and orphan or block a classroom door with our body, to allow others to escape a killer.

In “The Problem of Pain,” C.S. Lewis wrote that pain was God’s “megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Evil serves a similar purpose.

Just as suffering should arouse our sympathy, evil should shock and repulse us – as well as reminding us of its seductive appeal for flawed humans.

In so doing, it should cause us to evaluate our own feelings and actions (to judge ourselves), by showing us where anger, envy and resentment can take us, if given free reign over our spirits. In the words of Job (28:28), “Behold, the fear of God, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is understanding.”

By endowing man with free will, God didn’t create evil, but the possibility of evil. But He also created the possibility of good. He created the conditions for a Muhammad Atta or a Mother Theresa – a Cho Seung Hui or a Liviu Librescu.

A 76-year-old aeronautics engineer and Holocaust survivor, Librescu used his body to block the door of Room 204 in the Norris Hall Engineering Building on the day of the Virginia Tech shootings. Cho shot him through the door; but Librescu’s heroic act of self-sacrifice allowed a number of students to live, by giving them time to jump out of windows.

Caroline Merrey, one of Librescu’s students, told the Roanoke Times that before she escaped through a window, “I just remember looking back and seeing him at the door. I don’t think I would be here if it wasn’t for him.”

Cho chose to take innocent lives. Librescu choose to save them, at the cost of his own life. Neither was compelled. Both acted as free agents.

Surely, God weeps when, like Cain, one of his children wantonly destroys human life – one or many . But God loves us too much to override our judgment. He grants us the ultimate gift – to choose the good, to choose life, to come to Him voluntarily.