

Theodicy in Jewish Thought

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 55a

Rabbi Ammi said: **There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity...** An objection is raised: The ministering angels asked the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why did You impose the penalty of death upon Adam?' He said to them, I gave him an easy command, yet he violated it. **'But Moses and Aaron fulfilled the whole Torah,' they argued — 'yet they died'. He said to them, 'There is one outcome for the righteous and to the wicked etc.'** (Ecclesiastes 9:2) **He (Rabbi Ami) maintains as the following rabbi: R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: Moses and Aaron too died through their sin, for it is said, "Because you didn't believe in me[...therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them]" (Numbers 20:12) hence, had you believed in Me, your time to die would not yet have come.**

Talmud Bavli Berachot 7a

Rabbi Yohanan further said in the name of Rabbi Yose... Moses said before God: Lord of the Universe, why is it that some righteous men prosper and others suffer, some wicked men prosper and others suffer? He replied to him: Moses, the righteous man who prospers is the righteous man the son of a righteous man; the righteous man who is suffers is a righteous man the son of a wicked man. The wicked man who prospers is a wicked man son of a righteous man; the wicked man who suffers is a wicked man son of a wicked man.

The Master said above: 'The righteous man who prospers is a righteous man son of a righteous man; the righteous man who suffers is a righteous man son of a wicked man'. But this is not so! For, lo, one verse says: "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children," and another verse says: "Children shall not be put to death for the fathers'(sins)." And a contradiction was pointed out between these two verses, and the answer was given that there is no contradiction. The one verse deals with children who continue in the same course as their fathers, and the other verse with children who do not continue in the course of their fathers!

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari p 135

Most people claim that their social hierarchy is natural and just, while those of other societies are based on false and ridiculous criteria. **Modern Westerners are taught to scoff at the idea of racial hierarchy. They are shocked by laws prohibiting blacks to live in white neighbourhoods, or to study in white schools, or to be treated in white hospitals. But the hierarchy of rich and poor – which mandates that rich people live in separate and more luxurious neighbourhoods, study in separate and more prestigious schools, and receive medical treatment in separate and better-equipped facilities – seems perfectly sensible to many Americans and Europeans. Yet it's a proven fact that most rich people are rich for the simple reason that they were born into a rich family, while most poor people will remain poor throughout their lives simply because they were born into a poor family.**

Talmud Bavli Berachot 7a

[You must] therefore [say that] the Lord said thus to Moses: A righteous man who prospers is a perfectly righteous man; the righteous man who suffers is not a perfectly righteous man. The wicked man who prospers is not a perfectly wicked man; the wicked man who suffers is a perfectly wicked man.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף נה עמוד א

אמר רב אמר: אין מיתה בלא חטא ואין יסורים בלא עון... מיתבי; אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, מפני מה קנסת מיתה על אדם הראשון? אמר להם: מצוה קלה צויתיו ועבר עליה. אמרו לו: והלא משה ואהרן שקיימו כל התורה כולה ומתו! אמר להם: מקרה אחד לצדיק ולרשע לטוב וגו'! - הוא דאמר - כי האי תנא, דתנאי, רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: אף משה ואהרן בהטאם מתו, שנאמר ביען לא האמנתם בי הא האמנתם בי - עדיין לא הגיע זמנכם ליפטר מן העולם.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ז עמוד א

ואמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יוסי: שלשה דברים בקש משה מלפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ונתן לו...בקש להודיעו דרכיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ונתן לו, שנאמר: טוהודיעני נא את דרכיך; אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם! מפני מה יש צדיק וטוב לו ויש צדיק ורע לו, יש רשע וטוב לו ויש רשע ורע לו? אמר לו: משה, צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק בן צדיק, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק בן רשע, רשע וטוב לו - רשע בן צדיק, רשע ורע לו - רשע בן רשע.

אמר מר: צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק בן צדיק, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק בן רשע. אינני? והא כתיב: פקד עון אבות על בנים, וכתיב: ובנים לא יומתו על אבות ורמינן קראי אהדדי ומשנינן: לא קשיא, הא - כשאוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם, הא - כשאין אוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם!

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ז עמוד א

אלא, הכי קאמר ליה: צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק גמור, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק שאינו גמור, רשע וטוב לו - רשע שאינו גמור, רשע ורע לו - רשע גמור.

Talmud Bavli Yevamot 121b

Rabbi Abba said: Even so, the son of Nehunya the well digger died of thirst, and the merit of his father, who attended to the water supply, did not protect him, as is stated: “And around Him it storms [nisara] mightily” (Psalms 50:3), which teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is exacting with His surroundings, i.e., the righteous who are close to Him, up to a hairsbreadth [sa'ara], so that even slight deviations can elicit severe punishment.

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 27b

Is it not written, And they shall stumble one upon another, meaning, One [will stumble] through the sin of the other, which teaches that all are held responsible for one another? — There, the reference is to one who had the power to restrain [their fellowmen from evil] but did not.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Fate and Destiny pp 12-15

"Job! When My lovingkindness overflowed toward you... and when you were a prominent and influential person ... you did not fulfill the task that my abundant lovingkindness imposed upon you. True you were a wholehearted and upright man, you feared God and shunned evil; you did not use your power or wealth for evil; you dispensed a great deal of tzedakah nor were ever loath to extend your help and support to the needy, but came to their aid in times of distress - For I delivered the poor that cried, the fatherless also that had none to help him (Job 29:12). **However, in two respects you were lacking in that great attribute of hesed, of lovingkindness:**

- (1) you never assumed your proper share of the burdens of communal responsibility and never joined in the community's pain and anguish;**
- (2) nor did you ever properly empathize with the agonies of the individual sufferer. "As a kind, good-hearted person, you took momentary pity on the orphan; you were very wealthy and could afford to give substantial tzedakah without straining your financial resources. However, hesed means more than a passing sentiment, than a superficial feeling; hesed demands more than a momentary tear, than a cold coin. Hesed means to merge with the other person, to identify with his pain, to feel responsible for his fate. And this attribute of hesed you lacked in both your relationships with the community and with the individual. ...**

"Job, if you but wish to learn the teaching of the mending of one's afflictions you must first apprehend the secret of prayer which brings the 'I' closer to his fellow....and you must first understand the idea of hesed, as that idea is embodied by the prayerful person who rises above his individual uniqueness to achieve a sense of communal unity. You cannot discharge your obligation by merely dispensing a few clattering coins from amidst the abundant wealth with which you have been blessed.

Talmud Bavli Bava Kamma 60a

R. Samuel b. Nahmani stated that R. Johanan said: Calamity comes upon the world only when there are wicked persons in the world, and it always begins with the righteous...

R. Joseph learnt: ...Once permission has been granted to the Destroyer, he does not distinguish between righteous and wicked. Moreover, he even begins with the righteous at the very outset, as it says: And I will cut off from thee the righteous and the wicked. R. Joseph wept at this...But Abaye [consoling him,] said: This is for their advantage, as it is written, That the righteous is taken away from the evil to come.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות דף קכא עמוד ב

אמר רבי אבא: אע"פ כן מת בנו בצמא, שנאמר: בוסביביו נשערה מאד, מלמד, שהקדוש ברוך הוא מדקדק עם סביביו כחוט השערה.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף כז עמוד ב

והכתיב: הוכשלו איש באחיו - איש בעון אחיו, מלמד שכולן ערבים זה בזה! - התם שהיה בידם למחות ולא מיהו.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא קמא דף ס עמוד א

אר"ש בר נהמני א"ר יונתן: אין פורענות באה לעולם אלא בזמן שהרשעים בעולם, ואינה מתחלת אלא מן הצדיקים תחלה,....תאני רב יוסף...כיון שניתן רשות למשחית אינו מבחין בין צדיקים לרשעים; ולא עוד, אלא שמתחיל מן הצדיקים תחלה, שנאמר: הכרתי ממך צדיק ורשע. כפי רב יוסף, כולי האי נמי לאין דומין! א"ל אביי: טיבותא הוא לגבייהו, דכתיב: וכי מפני הרעה נאסף הצדיק.

Jeffrey Goldberg's Commentary on the Ten Plagues in *The New American Haggadah*

Our impulse is to run from this moment, to pretend that our merciful God has not transformed Himself into a God who snuffs out the lives of children. But this story exists for a reason, and perhaps not the one often assumed. The plagues suffered by the Egyptians are meant not merely to serve as expedient metaphors. This is a political story, yes, but one with a harsh and morally problematical lesson about the price of freedom.

There is no such thing as an immaculate liberation. It is naïve to think that the defeat of evil comes without cost. Today, we retreat in disgust at the thought of collective punishment: Justice punishes the guilty and spares the innocent. And yet how else could we describe the plagues?

And don't we sometimes behave today as the God of Exodus behaved? Don't we impose sanctions on dictatorships and by doing so cause hardship for the guiltless? Haven't we made heroes of men who have deliberately taken the lives of thousands of innocents? Three of the most revered presidents in American history—Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Harry Truman—inflicted merciless punishment on civilians. The causes they stood for were just, but did the innocent sufferers deserve their fate? Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart against the Jews, even after it seemed Pharaoh was ready to let them go? Did God want to make a point—'Don't even think of challenging me'? Why did America shower death on Nagasaki, when it seemed that the Japanese were readying themselves to surrender? Was the firebombing of German cities so necessary as to neutralize all moral qualms? The Exodus story ends in freedom for Jews; the Civil War ended with freedom for African-Americans; World War II ended with fascism utterly vanquished, and the death camps liberated. Can we say that the ends didn't justify the means?"

Talmud Bavli Berachot 60b

Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rav citing Rabbi Meir, and so it was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiba: **A man should always accustom himself to say 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good', [as exemplified in] the following incident. Rabbi Akiba was once going along the road and he came to a certain town and looked for lodgings but was everywhere refused. He said 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good', and he went and spent the night in the open field. He had with him a rooster, an ass and a lamp. A gust of wind came and blew out the lamp, a weasel came and ate the rooster, a lion came and ate the ass. He said: 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good'. The same night some brigands came and carried off the inhabitants of the town. He said to them: Did I not say to you, 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is all for good?**

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ס עמוד ב

אמר רב הונא אמר רב משום רבי מאיר, וכן תנא משמיה דרבי עקיבא: לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד. כי הא, דרבי עקיבא דהוה קאזיל באורחא, מטא לההיא מתא, בעא אושפיזא לא יהבי ליה. אמר: כל דעביד רחמנא לטב. אזל ובת בדברא, והוה בהדיה תרנגולא וחמרא ושרגא. אתא זיקא כבייה לשרגא, אתא שונרא אכליה לתרנגולא, אתא אריה אכלא לחמרא. אמר: כל דעביד רחמנא לטב. ביה בליליא אתא גייסא, שבייה למתא. אמר להו: לאו אמרי לכו כל מה שעושה הקדוש ברוך הוא הכל לטובה.

"Jewish Traveler Cheats Death by Skipping Malaysia Flight on Shabbat" By Hody Nemes *The Forward* March 11, 2014

The owner of a travel site claims a Jewish air traveler cheated death when he decided not to fly on Shabbat — and avoided being on board doomed Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.

The lucky globetrotter changed his mind about booking the flight last Saturday after an observant travel agent refused to book the flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, according to Daniel Eleff, a friend of the travel agent and CEO of the Cleveland-based travel site Dansdeals.com. ...

The flight-switch drama unfolded when Andy asked his travel agent to book a flight on March 8. But the agent, who is an Orthodox Jew, said he did not want another Jew traveling on Shabbat.

“I wish I can give you a day later, but you know I just don’t like flying Jews on Shabbat,” he wrote in a January 14 email to Andy, one of several emails between the two men which were posted on a blog on Dansdeals.com.

Andy told the agent not to hold the Friday morning flight – he decided to book a flight on Shabbat independently.

“I guess I’ll just book [the Saturday flight] myself,” Andy told the agent, but asked him to book the rest of his itinerary, which included flights to Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Melbourne, Australia.

Later that evening, Andy changed his mind and decided not to fly on Shabbat after all. He thanked the agent for prompting him to consider the obligation not to travel on the holy day.

“I reconsidered, you are right and I should be more observant,” Andy wrote the agent. “I’ll manage without that day in Kuala [Lumpur].”

The travel agent booked the Friday flight, and both men put the matter aside. On March 7, Andy successfully flew on Malaysia Airlines flight 370 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Exactly 24 hours later, the same flight ended in tragedy, resulting in the presumed deaths of the 239 people onboard.

After Shabbat ended on March 8, the travel agent turned on his computer and read the grateful email.

Primo Levi *If This Is a Man* (2015), pp 123-124

Now each of us is busy scraping the bottom of his bowl with his spoon so as to pick up the last drops of soup, a confused, metallic clatter, signifying the end of the day. Silence slowly prevails, and then, from my bunk, on the top level, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his cap on his head, his torso swaying violently. Kuhn is thanking God that he was not chosen.

Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see, in the bunk next to him, Beppo the Greek, who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow, and knows it, and lies there staring at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Does Kuhn not know that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty—nothing at all in the power of man to do—can ever heal?

If I were God, I would spit Kuhn’s prayer out upon the ground

Talmud Bavli Berachot 5a-b

Raba (some say, R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord. If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said: Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest out of Thy law. If he did attribute it [thus], and still did not find [this to be the cause], let him be sure that these are chastenings of love. For it is said: For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth....

R. Hiyya b. Abba fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

R. Johanan once fell ill and R. Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could not R. Johanan raise himself? — They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

Talmud Bavli Chagiga 15a

Said [Aher] to him: R. Akiba, thy master, did not explain it thus, but [as follows]: He created righteous, and created wicked; He created the Garden of Eden, and created Gehinnom. Everyone has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehinnom. The righteous man, being meritorious, takes his own portions and his fellow's portion in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, being guilty, takes his own portion and his fellow's portion in Gehinnom.

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 55a

There is death without sin and suffering without iniquity. Thus the refutation of R. Ammi is [indeed] a refutation.

Talmud Bavli Berachot 7a

Now this [saying of Rabbi Johanan that all three of Moses' requests were granted] is in opposition to the saying of Rabbi Meir. For Rabbi Meir said: only two [requests] were granted to him, and one was not granted to him. For it is said: "And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," although he may not deserve it, "And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy," although he may not deserve it. And He said, "Thou cannot see My face."

Robert Gordis *A Faith for Moderns* P 182

It is a highly dubious proposition that suffering makes men better; what it does is reveal them as they really are, stripped of the layers of pretense, convention, and position which ordinarily swathe their lives. Hence, trials often disclose unsuspected sources of greatness in ordinary men and unplumbed depths of weakness in the great and mighty. ... suffering often acts as a discipline, helping to overcome the fatal human tendency to complacency and arrogance.

Rabbi David Hartman, *A Living Covenant*. Chapter 8: Rabbinic Responses to Suffering p 257

From the anthropological perspective on the problem of evil, therefore, the prime concern is not so much to defend the notions of divine justice and power. It is rather, as in other personal relationships, to determine what measure of continuity, stability, and predictability can enable the relationship with God to survive all shocks. It is to identify the cluster of beliefs that supports a person's will to persist in the face of tragedy and suffering.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ה עמוד א-ב

אמר רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא: אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו - יפשפש במעשיו, שנאמר יבנחפשה דרכינו ונחקורה ונשובה עד ה'; פשפש ולא מצא - יתלה בבטול תורה, שנאמר: אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו י-ה ומתורתך תלמדנו. ואם תלה ולא מצא - בידוע שיסורין של אהבה הם, שנאמר: כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח. ...

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך! יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. רבי יוחנן חלש, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך! יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה! - אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו עמוד א

אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: ברא צדיקים - ברא רשעים, ברא גן עדן - ברא גיהנם. כל אחד ואחד יש לו שני חלקים, אחד בגן עדן ואחד בגיהנם, זכה צדיק - נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגן עדן, נתחייב רשע - נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגיהנם.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף נה עמוד א

יש מיתה בלא חטא, ויש יסורין בלא עון, ותיובתא דרב אמי - תיובתא.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ז עמוד א

ופליגא דרבי מאיר, דאמר רבי מאיר: שתיים נתנו לו ואחת לא נתנו לו, שנאמר: והחנתי את אשר אחן - אף על פי שאינו הגון, - ורחמתי את אשר ארחם - אף על פי שאינו הגון ויאמר לא תוכל לראות את פני

Within human relationships, there are moments of happiness, love, tenderness, and intimacy; there are feelings of mutual appreciation, respect, dignity, and creativity. There are also, however, moments of pain, fear, rejection, loneliness, estrangement, terror, anger, and intimidation. Mature human relationships have ways of incorporating the whole range of these feelings and attitudes. Similarly, one cannot expect that worship within a theistic framework could be understood and contained within one model or posture, especially if one seeks to make all of life an occasion for worship. The alternate rhythms of reality, the pains and joys, sufferings, loneliness, ecstasy, terror—all these complex feelings will have to find some way of being absorbed in one's personal relationship with God. One must seek ways of dealing with moments when it appears that God is distant, strange, and alien, but also ways of dealing with moments when He appears to speak as a loving Father, a concerned Teacher, or a commanding judge. There are moments of intimacy and moments of distance, moments of God's unconditional authority and moments when God invites one to understand and to participate in a spirit of mutuality.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira Aish Kodesh Mishpatim (Parshat Sh'kalim)— February 14, 1942
“And these are the Judgments that you must set before them.” (Exodus 21:1)

A Jew, tortured in his suffering, may think he is the only one in pain, as though his individual, personal pain, and the pain of all other Jews, has no affect Above, God forbid. But, as the verse (Isaiah 63:9) says, “In all their pain is His pain,” and as we learn in the Talmud (Hagigah 15b) in the name of R. Meir, “When a person suffers, to what expression does the Shechinah (Divine) give utterance? ‘O woe! My head, O woe! My arms.’” In sacred literature we learn that God, as it were, suffers the pain of a Jew much more than that person himself feels it.