

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL:

PART THREE:

Talmudic Models

Educator's Guide and Sources

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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL:

RABBINIC RESPONSES, TALMUDIC MODELS

We now turn away from the sources in the Tanakh and move into the world of the Rabbis. We will examine a number of Rabbinic texts in order to try and understand their readings of the problem of evil in the world. We will see how they – as heirs to the Biblical texts – dealt with the models that we have already examined. Which of those ideas were more important to them? Which did they ignore? Which did they use to make sense of the world in which they lived? We will compare and contrast several new paradigms that emerge in the Rabbinic-Talmudic period

I. INTRODUCTION: THE RABBINIC PERIOD

The classical Rabbinic-Talmudic period lasted roughly for the first five centuries after the destruction of the second Temple. This period was a very different era for Jewish existence. It was a time when the Jews had no sovereignty but were rather at the mercy of other more powerful forces (pagan Romans, Christian Byzantines, Zoroastrian Babylonians) who ruled in Palestine and Babylonia.

In Eretz Yisrael of the Mishnah the Jewish community would remain large for at least a century and a half after the destruction (70 CE). It would be a period of continued suffering with new historical catastrophes such as the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE) and increasing economic oppression and impoverishment. Nevertheless, in those generations a series of centres of Torah would develop in small and peripheral towns such as Yavneh on the coast and, later, Tzipori and Tiberias in the Galilee. These would be the centres of Rabbinic learning in which the discussions finally encoded in the Mishnah would develop. Pressures on the Jews were building up and large numbers would again leave the country, but the centres of Torah would continue and they indeed would provide the frameworks in which the discussions found in the Gemara of the Jerusalem Talmud would take place. After the closing of the Mishnah in the early third century, however, Eretz Israel was on the decline as a centre of Jewish life and the rise of Christian Byzantine Empire curtailed Jewish learning even more. Already by the early third century, primacy of place was passing to a new diaspora centre in Babylon.

The Babylonian centre had begun with the destruction of the first Temple (586 BCE). This centre had lain dormant for centuries producing little intellectual activity of note, but the situation would change there after the closing of the Mishnah. With the decline of the centre in Eretz Israel, many emigrated to Babylon. They included scholars who brought with them the new Mishnah recently edited into its final version in the first years of the third century. It was these scholars and their precious summary of Rabbinic Oral Torah, the Mishnah, that would serve as the basis for the intellectual flowering in Babylon that would make of Babylon the centre of the Jewish world until close to the end of the first millenium. It was the new academies in Babylon, at Sura, Pumbeditha and Nehardea, that would house the discussions ultimately edited into the final version of the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud.

THE RABBINIC CRISIS OF FAITH

The Rabbis of these generations – both in Babylon and Eretz Israel – lived in a world where God's providence in history appeared to have departed from the Jewish People in particular and from world history in general. It was a world of Exile – of Galut – both in the political, physical sense and the metaphysical sense. There was a belief among many that the spirit of God itself was in exile: that a terrible tragedy of cosmic proportions had occurred. Certainly the Jewish People were living a tragic reality. Deprived of all sovereignty in their native land, with their Temple destroyed and with the necessity of trying to define their way of approaching God and of living as Jews in new ways, this was to them a world where Jobian questions were unavoidable. As people living their lives in a world which was clearly “wrong” for them, the problem of explaining evil and tragedy had to preoccupy them.

This was not just an academic exercise for them. It was necessary for them to explain to themselves the existence of evil because only by so doing could they explain to themselves their own predicament and justify their renewed emphasis on living a life of mitzvot. To fail to do so would be to let go of their idea of God, of Torah and of commandments, so they had to find explanations for their plight in theological and existential terms. One might have expected them to use the Jobian answers; however, it is interesting that for the most part they search for different paradigms and ideas. They felt the need to re-interpret the ideas contained in the Tanach because otherwise what we will term here the “Noachide” expectations of a this-worldly reward and punishment would only lead them into greater disappointment and even disillusionment. (Throughout the booklet we will term the idea of a this worldly reward and punishment, the “Noachide model” for reasons that should be clear from our treatment of the Flood story earlier on: if you prefer an alternative nomenclature, please feel free to use it!) It is to these new ideas worked out between the Rabbinic reading of Biblical texts and the Rabbis reading of their own daily experience that we now turn.

Now we begin our explorations among different Rabbinic texts, each of which provides fresh – and contrasting – responses to the problem of evil. The texts will express the opinions of the Tannaim (the Rabbis of the Mishnaic generations) and the Amoraim (the Rabbis of the generations of the Gemara) regarding the world in which they lived. Sometimes their personal biographies and the historical events of their lives will provide important background. It will be important to take note of the way that the Rabbis confront traditional Biblical texts which they had inherited or, to see how the Amoraim reinterpreted Tannaitic sources. **Judaism is a culture that cherishes the texts of the past but also wrestles with them mightily and reinterprets them in the light of changing experience and values.** In certain ways, the world in which they lived is not so different from the world in which we ourselves live. Examining their opinions, we will be forced to confront our own ideas and the ways we struggle with traditional texts and the problem of suffering around us. In each case, we will do a close reading of the Rabbinic text, suggesting a way of approaching it with the students, adding in guided questions, and including a number of pedagogic exercises and supplementary texts that you, the educator, might wish to use.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE:

CAN WE RECITE THE LAST PARAGRAPH OF THE *BIRKAT HAMAZON* - WITH SINCERITY?

We suggest the following exercise as a possible trigger to open up the subject that will be developed here.

Here is the final paragraph of the *Birkat HaMazon*.

יראו את ה' קדושיו, כי אין מחסור ליראיו. כפירים רשו ורעבו ודורשי ה' לא יחסרו כל טוב. הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו. פותח את ידך ומשביע לכל חי רצון. ברוך הגבר אשר יבטח בה'. והיה ה' מבטחו. נער הייתי וגם זקנתי ולא ראיתי צדיק נעזב וזרעו מבקש לחם. ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום.

Revere the Lord, you God's Holy ones, for those who revere God know no want. Those who do not accept God may suffer poverty and starvation, but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing. Praise the Lord, for God is good. God's love endures forever. God's hand is open and it satisfies every living creature with favor. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, and God will be their security. I was young and now I'm old, yet I have not seen the righteous person forsaken or the children of the righteous begging for bread. May the God grant the People of Israel strength, May God bless the People with peace.

1. How does this traditional text relate to our contemporary beliefs and experiences?
2. Do you agree with the ideas in this part of the *Birkat HaMazon*?
3. Does this reflect your empirical experience of the way that the world actually works? Give an example from the world of school and one from the larger world.

OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL EXERCISE: A Debate – Pros and Cons

Can the traditional words still be recited? Organise a debate on the motion:

THIS CLASS BELIEVES THAT IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAINTAIN THE TEXT OF THE LAST PARAGRAPH OF *BIRKAT HAMAZON* WITHOUT ANY CHANGES.

There should be proposers and opposers to the motion. At the end a vote should be taken.

After the debate (at home?) every person should write their conclusion about the desirability of changing the text: should the text be changed or not?

The results should be brought to class and shared as a prelude to a summing up of the issue.

OPTIONAL ADDITION: A SILENT PRAYER: – *Lo Raiti Tzadik Neezav*/“I have never seen a righteous person abandoned.”

In the last part of the *Birkat Hamazon* (after *Migdol*), there is a small add-on of collected verses beginning with the words “*Yiru et Adonai*”, which we quoted in the above exercise. Some families traditionally say the whole paragraph in a whisper. Others just whisper the line “I have been a child and now I am old, but I have never seen a righteous person abandoned or his descendants begging for bread.” (Psalm 37: 25). There are two traditional explanations for this special custom. One explains that since this is an add-on it is done in whisper so no one will think it is an official part of *Birkat Hamazon*. The other says that we should not embarrass any poor people by suggesting that their poverty is a result of their own or their ancestors’ lack of virtue (Aruch HaShulchan O.H. 190). Some contemporaries have explained that the statement is patently false since we have all seen cases of economic injustice where good people have suffered lack of resources due to Divine or human callousness. By saying it in a whisper, perhaps with one’s eyes covered, it becomes a pious wish, a prayer for future justice, rather than a bland and blind dogma.

Lawrence Hoffman, the great scholar of liturgy, explains his own research into this problematic verse:

For good reason Jews throughout history have had trouble saying this line. Some prayerbooks [including the one attributed to Rabbi Elijah HaGaon of Vilna. 18th century] ...include it in tiny type alone to remind worshippers that even though it is passed down as tradition, they may skip it – or at least, if they do say it, they should do so silently rather than embarrassingly out loud. I confess that for years, the only way I could read it was to supply my own punctuation. Since classical Hebrew texts come unpunctuated, and supplying them with printed periods and commas is a modern innovation... I decided to read it as, “I have been young, and have grown older, but have I not seen?! There are righteous people abandoned by God, with their children seeking bread.”

*It turns out, however, that there is also a traditional understanding of our troublesome line, perfectly in keeping with the utopian claim that God feeds everyone, and with the recognition that **the blessing over bread refers to the ultimate messianic future rather than to our own world and time.** The entire meal liturgy is eschatological and ...should be said as an extended statement of what we hope for, not what we already see in existence. Indeed, David Abudraham, a Spanish commentator from the 14th century, adds that in Spain, when the difficult conclusion is recited, “Some people say, ‘I lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of God’ (Psalm 116:13), as a hint of the banquet that God will make in the world to come for the righteous. King David himself will bless the meal, by saying, ‘I lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of God’ (Psalm 116:13). Neither Abudraham nor we need literally anticipate such a meal. But Judaism does insist on a better day when no one will go hungry. When we eat, we are obliged to remember the plight of those who do not have food, and dedicate ourselves to a better time when they will.*

Lawrence Hoffman, *The Way into Jewish Prayer*, p. 140, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000.

II. GOD THE ACCOUNTANT: PROBLEMS WITH CALCULATING REWARD AND PUNISHMENT or THE “RICKETY LADDER” SYNDROME (TB Kiddushin 39b)

In this unit we will explore several paradigms for interpreting the bad things that happen including: God the Accountant; how to store up merit for *Olam HaBa*; Rabbi Yaacov's Pessimism in *Olam Hazei* - no illusions, no expectations! And the “Rickety Ladder” Syndrome. The central text is a Mishnah and its attendant Gemara in TB Kiddushin 39b. The discussion will introduce a number of new concepts including the Rabbinic ideas of *Olam Haba* (עולם הבא) and the limits of God's intervention in the world.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

This is a long piece with a relatively large cast of characters. Let us here distinguish between the four characters of the main part of the discussion and the others. One of them, R. Yaacov, was a 2nd century Tanna (in Palestine). The three other major figures were all Amoraim. Rava and Abaye were contemporaries and colleagues from the 3rd to the 4th century in Babylon. Abaye was the head of the Yeshiva at Pumbeditha (where he succeeded R. Joseph, a minor character in this same text). Rava was actually a contender for the same post but when it was given to Abaye, Rava founded his own Yeshiva at Mehuza. R. Elazar, who died at around the time that Abaye and Rava were born, was himself born in Babylon but came to Palestine to study under the famous R. Yohanan in his Yeshiva in Tiberias. At the death of R. Yohanan, R. Elazar succeeded him in his post.

Of the other characters R. Judah refers to the great leader and compiler of the Mishnah, R. Judah HaNassi, while Elisha ben Abuya and Huzpit the translator were both Tannaim of the generation prior to Bar Kochba. Significant details of their lives are mentioned in the body of our text below. Finally R. Shemaiah appears to be a very early Tanna from before the destruction of the Second Temple.

MISHNAH: THE SINGLE MITZVAH THEORY

**ONE WHO PERFORMS ONE MITZVAH IS WELL REWARDED,
HIS/HER DAYS ARE PROLONGED AND S/HE INHERITS THE LAND.
BUT ONE WHO DOES NOT PERFORM ONE MITZVAH, GOOD IS NOT DONE TO
HIM, HIS/HER DAYS ARE NOT PROLONGED AND S/HE DOES NOT INHERIT
THE LAND.**

RECONCILING THE BIBLICAL MODEL WITH RABBINIC EXPERIENCE

The Rabbis knew the Tanakh by heart so many of its phrases resonate in their writings. The phrase “DAYS ARE NOT PROLONGED” (Deuteronomy 5:16 – “honor your father and mother”) as a reward for observing mitzvot echoes the Dvarim model of this worldly rewards – primarily, the inheritance of the land of Israel if we observe the covenant with God. That is the essence of *V'Haya Im Shamoah* – the second paragraph of the *Shma* from Deuteronomy 11:13-21. Even without looking at the specifics of the Mishnah, then, the first thing to note concerning the text is the basic model that it uses: the Noachide or the Dvarim model of individual reward and punishment. It does not so much as hint at the Jobian idea (Job 38) of the unanswerable mystery of suffering. This is extremely strange when we consider that the world in which the Rabbis of the Mishnah lived was a Jobian world in which Rome was triumphant and the Jewish people were victims of evil and of violence. The perseverance of the Torah model of individual reward and punishment was very out of place in the world in which the Rabbis lived. This is a Noachide model in a Jobian universe.

It forces us to consider the “meta-question”: how could the Rabbis respond to the world in which they lived, a world of tremendous suffering for the Jewish People with a statement like this which must have contradicted their entire life experience? The Mishnah says in the simplest and most direct way that the reward for a single mitzvah is a good and long life. At the same time, the Rabbis were performing mitzvot all the time and still living in a world of arbitrary violence, in which each day could bring unjustified suffering and even death.

How can we explain the insistence of these Rabbis in hanging on to a Noachide concept of reward and punishment that clearly contradicted their everyday experience? The suggestion is that they hung onto this concept because they needed it in order to continue to live with their belief in God and to find rational meaning in their lives and in their actions. To abandon the idea of rationality in reward and punishment might indeed explain their world in clearer terms but the price for them would be extremely high. It would mean abandoning the idea that there was any purpose and rational logic in the entire way of life in which they believed, a world of mitzvot and acts which they saw as divinely sanctioned. To believe that God sanctioned these actions with no purpose or reason would be to abandon the basis on which they lived their entire lives. This, it seems, was a price that they were not prepared – that they could not be prepared – to pay. And that left them to articulate a basically Noachide approach to the world, an approach that perhaps did not adequately explain their world, but which enabled them to continue to live the lives they had chosen as Jews.

THE MISHNAH'S SINGLE MITZVAH THEORY

If we now turn to the wording of the Mishnah itself, we encounter another problem. . What does the Mishnah mean when it says that we can earn long life on the land just by performing “one mitzvah”? A single mitzvah? Any mitzvah, even the smallest and least significant?

The Rabbis of the Gemara, the Amoraim, will also have a problem with this idea that any mitzvah – even the most insignificant - has such tremendous power. They will reinterpret the meaning of “one mitzvah” in light of other Tannaitic sources (Braitot). Perhaps it refers to some specific mitzvah or one of a number of privileged mitzvot - a number of special “super-mitzvot” of such power that they have the ability to tilt the balance?

But there is another possibility. Maybe the Mishnah is not to be taken in a literal sense. A single mitzvah can tilt the scales in one direction or another after a lifetime of effort? Perhaps this is the Rabbis’ way of emphasizing how crucial the responsibility of the individual is for each and every act. Every action in a person’s life can make a difference? If this is the intention, we are perhaps encountering a similar idea to that of the Rambam. After exhorting the individual to examine his or her own deeds and to follow the right path leaving wrongdoing behind, Maimonides says:-

Accordingly, each person should see themselves during the whole year as if they are half innocent and half guilty. And they should see the whole world in the same way – as if it is half innocent and half guilty. If a person commits one sin, then they have brought themselves and the entire world to the judgement [literally scale] of guilt and has caused them destruction. If a person performs a single mitzvah, then they have brought themselves and the entire world to the judgement of innocence and caused them redemption and salvation. (Hilchot Teshuva III)

Thus we see that this Mishnah raises a number of different questions. Apart from the “meta-question” of the ability of the Rabbis to think in these Noachide categories in the world in which they were living, there is a problem with the meaning of the Mishnaic text itself. Let us suggest now a number of questions that could guide the students to the questions that the text opens up.

MISHNAH: THE SINGLE MITZVAH THEORY

**ONE WHO PERFORMS ONE MITZVAH IS WELL REWARDED,
HIS/HER DAYS ARE PROLONGED AND S/HE INHERITS THE LAND.**

**BUT ONE WHO DOES NOT PERFORM ONE MITZVAH, GOOD IS NOT DONE TO
HIM/HER, HIS/HER DAYS ARE NOT PROLONGED AND S/HE DOES NOT
INHERIT THE LAND.**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

1. The phrase “DAYS ARE NOT PROLONGED” echoes Devarim 5:16 (honor your father and mother), Devarim 22:7 (the sending away of the bird), Devarim 25:15 (weights and measures) and the general comment in Devarim 6:1–2. The idea of “INHERITS THE LAND” recalls *V’Haya Im Shamoah* – the second paragraph of the *Shma* from Deuteronomy 11:13–21. Look at these Biblical sources. What is the idea in common between them and the Mishnah? What is the difference between the Rabbinic source and the Torah texts?
2. It seems strange to say that “one mitzvah” can make all the difference between lifelong reward and exile and punishment. What is so strange about this idea? What could the Mishnah mean by “one mitzvah”?
3. The Rabbis have a saying: “There are people who earn their world in one moment [with a momentous act] and others that take a life time to earn their world”. (TB Avodah Zarah 17). The point of this is to say that in one moment a person can make their life intrinsically and ultimately valuable. If there were one particular “single mitzvah” that could earn you the ultimate reward, what would you like it to be?
4. Look at the following quote from Maimonides.

Each person should see themselves during the whole year as if they are half innocent and half guilty. And they should see the whole world in the same way – as if it is half innocent and half guilty. If a person commits one sin, then they have brought themselves and the entire world to the judgement [literally scale] of guilt and has caused them destruction. If a person performs a single mitzvah, then they have brought themselves and the entire world to the judgement of innocence and caused them redemption and salvation.

What is he saying here? Do you think that this is what the authors of the Mishnah were trying to say? Why? Why not?

5. Is there anything strange about the Rabbis using this model to describe their world of war and exile?

OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Get the students to explore the world of the Rabbis through art. We have suggested that the Rabbis lived in a world which, objectively, was very difficult for them to make sense of. It was a world of suffering and punishment for the Jews, a world in which they had been condemned to theological exile – in short, a world of crisis. And the Rabbis tried to make the most of it, living lives designed to try and restore order and sense into the world.

Create pictures or sculpted forms in a non-verbal medium to try and convey the students' understanding of the world in which the Rabbis lived. What is their perception of a world of crisis and uncertainty?

THE GEMARA: PRIVILEGED MITZVOT AS AN INVESTMENT IN *OLAM HABA* (Mishnah Peah 1:1)

The Talmud now begins to seek reconcile contradictions between various sources as well as their experience of reality. The students are welcome to use a similar method to clarify their experience with the classical texts of Judaism. Having examined the Mishnah, let us now turn to the Gemara to see what the Rabbis did with this problematic text. We will slice the Gemara up into smaller units and discuss each one in turn and from each derive a paradigm for understanding the problem of evil.

THE ALTERNATIVE MISHNAH: PRIVILEGED MITZVOT AS AN INVESTMENT IN *OLAM HABA* (Mishnah Peah1:1)

BUT THERE IS A CONTRADICTION [between the Mishnah and a different Tannaitic source, which is now brought]: THESE ARE THE THINGS THE FRUIT [the interest on the investment – an economic metaphor] OF WHICH ONE EATS IN THIS WORLD [בעולם הזה] WHILE THE PRINCIPAL [the invested sum itself] REMAINS FOR HIM/HER IN THE WORLD-TO-COME [בעולם הבא]:

**HONOURING ONE’S PARENTS, THE PRACTICE OF LOVING DEEDS,
[גמילות חסדים], HOSPITALITY TO WAYFARERS AND MAKING PEACE BETWEEN
A PERSON AND THEIR NEIGHBOUR AND THE STUDY OF TORAH SURPASSES
THEM ALL. (Mishnah Peah1:1)**

The first thing that the Gemara does to explain the Mishnah is to bring an alternative Mishnah from Peah, which seems to contradict the plain meaning of our Mishnaic text. This other Mishnah (Mishnah Peah1:1) states that there are five *specific* mitzvot which bring the reward both of *Olam Haze* and *Olam Haba* for those who perform them. It thus questions the idea that *every* single mitzvah has the same power. What it does in effect is to indicate that an initial reading of the Mishnah as promoting a single mitzvah theory of reward and punishment, contradicts another Tannaitic teaching about privileged mitzvot. If we wish to harmonize these texts then, it is necessary to understand the Mishnah in another way.

Another thing that it does is to introduce a new concept into the discussion with the words עולם הבא – the world-to-come – which is juxtaposed to this world – העולם הזה. Now Rashi, for instance, has already introduced this concept into his understanding of the Mishnah but the plain meaning of the Mishnah has not involved the concept and thus we meet it here for the first time, through its introduction in the Mishnah Peah 1:1. It is worth mentioning here that it is not necessary to understand the Rabbinic conception of the world-to-come in a literal sense. There are those who understand it in symbolic terms referring to the fact that a person gets their reward after death through the way that they are remembered, through the name that they leave after them etc.

The Rabbis do not discuss the meaning of the phrase here but simply use a familiar economic concept in relation to the terms “this world” and “the world-to-come”. In this world, as a reward for these deeds, you receive the “fruits” of your investment– i.e. the interest that accrues to your investment (principal).

**SAID R. JUDAH: THIS IS THE [real, correct] MEANING [of our Mishnah]:
“ONE WHO PERFORMS ONE MITZVAH” IN ADDITION TO HIS/HER
[equally balanced] MERITS IS “WELL REWARDED” AND S/HE IS AS
THOUGH S/HE HAD FULFILLED THE WHOLE TORAH.**

[The Gemara challenges Rabbi Yehuda:] **COULD THIS IMPLY THAT FOR THESE OTHERS** [the privileged mitzvot mentioned in the Mishnah Peah1:1] **ONE IS REWARDED EVEN FOR A SINGLE ONE** [of those mitzvot, even though the majority of one's actions were sinful]?!

R. SHEMAIAH SAID: THAT [Mishnah Peah1:1] **TEACHES US THAT ONLY IF THERE IS AN EQUAL BALANCE, CAN ONE OF THESE** [privileged mitzvot] **TIP THE SCALE.**

It sounded like the Mishnah was in trouble. It has been contradicted by the Braita. But we now have a different reading of the Mishnaic text with R. Judah suggesting that what it is really saying is different from what it appears to say. This will “save” the Mishnah by showing that there is no contradiction because the Mishnah meant something entirely different. For R. Judah, the meaning of the Mishnah is as follows. The Mishnah refers to a situation when a person's many good deeds and many bad deeds are in exactly equal balance. The idea is that in such a situation an extra mitzvah will tip the balance to a person's benefit and the person will be rewarded in this world. The question is then asked regarding the significance of those five mitzvot that we have been told, possess “super” powers. Where do they fit into the equation? And we close with the response of R. Shemaiah who says that even the so called privileged mitzvot only count so significantly in a situation where the number of mitzvot are equally balanced. Their superior power has the ability to tip the scale in such a situation.

Thus, although perhaps there has been no final decision and the precise meaning is still not exactly clear, the general problem of **textual consistency** of the Mishnah has been cleared up to the satisfaction of the Rabbis. A rereading of the text has “saved” the Mishnah and has averted the danger of contradiction with other tannaitic sources.

GOD THE ACCOUNTANT: HOW TO STORE UP MERIT FOR *OLAM HABA*

Throughout the text, it is important to note that the Rabbinic reasoning, both in the Mishnah and in the discussion in the Gemara, is based on the Noachide supposition that there is indeed benefit that accrues to the individual through the doing of good deeds. There is a difference of opinion regarding the mechanics of the process: how many good deeds does a person have to do to benefit in this world and which ones can they be? But there is an assumption that the basic concept of reward for good deeds in this world is correct.

More than that: there is a basic assumption underneath this whole discussion up to now, that the Rabbis understand how God does the adding-up for each individual and arrives at the final account. The discussion is essentially an argument over what has been called “God as an accountant.” On all sides of the discussion, there is a clear belief that God works according to rational mathematical principles and that the Rabbis are capable of working out more or less how God does the sums. This idea goes beyond Noach and it presumes to know the rules according to which the Noachide model is computed!

**GEMARA: THE ALTERNATIVE MISHNAH:
PRIVILEGED MITZVOT AS AN INVESTMENT IN *OLAM HABAH* (Mishnah Peah1:1)**

BUT THERE IS A CONTRADICTION [between the Mishnah and a different Tannaitic source, which is now brought]:

THESE ARE THE THINGS THE FRUIT [the interest on the investment – an economic metaphor] **OF WHICH ONE EATS IN THIS WORLD** [בעולם הזה] **WHILE THE PRINCIPAL** [the invested sum itself] **REMAINS FOR HIM/HER IN THE WORLD-TO-COME** [בעולם הבא]:

HONOURING ONE'S PARENTS, THE PRACTICE OF LOVING DEEDS, [גמילות חסדים], HOSPITALITY TO WAYFARERS AND MAKING PEACE BETWEEN A PERSON AND THEIR NEIGHBOUR AND THE STUDY OF TORAH SURPASSES THEM ALL. (Mishnah Peah1:1)

SAID R. JUDAH: THIS IS THE [real, correct] **MEANING** [of our Mishnah]:
“**ONE WHO PERFORMS ONE MITZVAH**” IN ADDITION TO HIS/HER [equally balanced] **MERITS IS “WELL REWARDED” AND S/HE IS AS THOUGH S/HE HAD FULFILLED THE WHOLE TORAH.**

[The Gemara challenges Rabbi Yehuda:] **COULD THIS IMPLY THAT FOR THESE OTHERS** [the privileged mitzvot mentioned in the Mishnah Peah1:1] **ONE IS REWARDED EVEN FOR A SINGLE ONE** [of those mitzvot, even though the majority of one's actions were sinful]?!

R. SHEMAIAH SAID: THAT [Mishnah Peah1:1] **TEACHES US THAT ONLY IF THERE IS AN EQUAL BALANCE, CAN ONE OF THESE** [privileged mitzvot] **TIP THE SCALE.**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

1. The Gemara seeks to clarify the meaning of the first Mishnah in TB Kiddushin by comparing it to another well-known Mishnah in TB Peah. Look at the five special mitzvot listed in the second Mishnah. What do most of them have in common?
2. If your school gave a grade for Mitzvah Performance what would you list as your own five most crucial behaviors by which you would like to be judged? Or would you rather be judged mechanically counting each mitzvah equally whether it is important to you or not? Explain.
3. The Rabbis here introduce a new concept not found in the Tanakh – *Olam Haba*. How is it related to their analogy of principal and interest?

4. Offer two understandings of *Olam Haba*. (Optional: see the Encyclopaedia Judaica or other sources on “Afterlife”).

5. Optional: How does R. Judah change the understanding of the Mishnah? How does he solve the apparent contradiction with the first Mishnah?

6. What has been the effect of the series of re-readings on the understanding of the Mishnah? What have they achieved?

7. What do the Rabbis think that they understand about the way that God works? What is their concept of God that comes out of this discussion? How do you feel about such a concept of God?

OPTIONAL ENRICHMENT EXERCISE

The great Yiddish writer Yehuda Leib Peretz wrote a story named “Three Gifts”. The story is brought below as an appendix. In the story, a soul whose sins and merits are exactly balanced, is told that he can tilt the balance in his favour and gain entrance to heaven, if he brings evidence of three exceptionally beautiful deeds performed by Jews on earth. If he can find such evidence, he is to present it to the saints of heaven. If the gifts are worthy, they will gain him entrance. He flies to earth to seek his gifts...

1. Read the story and write your opinion of it. Did you enjoy it? Did it make you think?

2. Do you find any similarity between the ideas of the story and the text that we have studied so far? If so, what is the similarity? Is it similar or identical to the text? If you find it similar but not identical, what are the differences?

3. Peretz was a secular Jew. Can you suggest what interest he might have had in writing such a story? What do you think he was trying to say?

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONAL ENRICHMENT EXERCISE

Alternatively, get the class or part of it, to present the Peretz story as a drama, and follow this up with a discussion with the whole class centred around the questions raised in the previous suggestion. This is a way of getting to the same ideas in a different medium, and enables those who have dramatic talent, to use it.

GOD THE ACCOUNTANT: PROBLEMS WITH CALCULATING REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

But the far bigger problem with which we opened our interpretation still awaits discussion. Is it really true that a person is rewarded in this world for his or her good deeds? Is that the way that the world works? It is to this intriguing question that the Rabbis now turn.

BUT IS IT A FACT THAT “A PERSON WHO PERFORMS ONE MITZVAH IN ADDITION TO THEIR [equally balanced] MERITS IS REWARDED [in this world]”? THE FOLLOWING SOURCE CONTRADICTS IT: A PERSON WHOSE GOOD DEEDS OUTNUMBER THEIR SINS IS PUNISHED AND [it] IS AS THOUGH THAT PERSON HAD BURNT THE WHOLE TORAH, NOT LEAVING EVEN A SINGLE LETTER; WHILE A PERSON WHOSE SINS OUTNUMBER THEIR GOOD DEEDS IS REWARDED AND [it] IS AS THOUGH THAT PERSON HAD FULFILLED THE WHOLE TORAH NOT OMITTING EVEN A SINGLE LETTER.

Here we finally arrive at reality. Another contradiction is noted – but this time the contradiction is with reality. A Braita is brought which talks of the way the world that the Tannaim experienced, really operates. And this, it seems, has nothing to do with the theoretical construct that the Mishnah and the Gemara have finally accepted regarding what gains you favour in this world. This is a recognition that even when the preceding Halachic contradiction has been resolved, essentially the whole discussion does not make sense since that is not how the world works! The world works in a totally different way. The real world appears to punish the righteous and reward the sinners. It is important at this juncture to remind ourselves of the world which the Rabbis experienced, both the Tannaitic Rabbis of the Mishnaic period and the Rabbis from the time of the Gemara. They lived in a Jobian world where the righteous suffer (צדיק ורע לו) in the famous Rabbinic formula), a world in which virtue not only goes unrewarded but is likely to be punished. So now the Mishnah – and indeed the whole preceding discussion – is contradicted by the real world experience of much of the Jewish community *as a community* as expressed by the Braita. It is worth noticing, however, that the world postulated by the Braita is not a world of chaos but it is rather a world which works according to a logic – a rational logic which appears to contradict the normal Noachide logic used by the Rabbis up till now. This is significant because it now allows a discussion to develop regarding the logic that underlies the world described by the Braita.

**GEMARA: GOD THE ACCOUNTANT:
PROBLEMS WITH CALCULATING REWARD AND PUNISHMENT**

BUT IS IT A FACT THAT “A PERSON WHO PERFORMS ONE MITZVAH IN ADDITION TO THEIR [equally balanced] MERITS IS REWARDED [in this world]”?

THE FOLLOWING SOURCE CONTRADICTS IT:

A PERSON WHOSE GOOD DEEDS OUTNUMBER THEIR SINS IS PUNISHED AND [it] IS AS THOUGH THAT PERSON HAD BURNT THE WHOLE TORAH, NOT LEAVING EVEN A SINGLE LETTER; WHILE A PERSON WHOSE SINS OUTNUMBER THEIR GOOD DEEDS IS REWARDED AND [it] IS AS THOUGH THAT PERSON HAD FULFILLED THE WHOLE TORAH NOT OMITTING EVEN A SINGLE LETTER.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

1. This Braita is structured very similarly to the first Mishnah in terms of contrasting one who does and one who does not do good deeds but the outcome of such behavior seems strangely reversed. What is the reversal? What sense can you make of it, if any?
2. What do you think is bothering the Rabbis who brought this Braita? How might the circumstances of their lives contribute to their bitter expectations for one who observes mitzvot in this world?
3. Compare the world of the Mishnah with the world of the Braita? In your opinion, which offers a better description of the world in which you live? Think first of the way your school works in terms of reward and punishment, then of the economic world in your country, then of the rules of political success in a democracy, and finally of life in a dictatorship.

OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Get the class to divide into small groups and prepare some kind of a sketch in which someone who starts with a set of optimistic or pessimistic suppositions regarding the way that the world works (according to the general ideas of the Mishnah or the Braita), is pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised by an event or an adventure that convinces her or him that the opposite is true.

Follow the preparation with a presentation and follow the presentation with a discussion about the pessimistic or the optimistic view of the world. Which is “truer” and which provides a better way to face the world.

RABBI YAACOV'S PESSIMISM IN *OLAM HAZEH*: NO ILLUSIONS, NO EXPECTATIONS!

SAID ABAYE. OUR MISHNAH MEANS THAT A GOOD DAY AND AN EVIL DAY [יום טוב ויום ביש] **ARE PREPARED FOR ANYONE** [for both the righteous person and for the sinner].

RAVA SAID: THIS LATTER [the Braitā on Divine punishment of the generally good in this world] **AGREES WITH R. YAACOV WHO SAID THERE IS NO REWARD FOR MITZVOT IN THIS WORLD.**

FOR IT WAS TAUGHT THAT R. YAACOV SAID: “NONE OF THE MITZVOT IN THE TORAH WHICH ALSO SPECIFY THEIR REWARDS ARE COMPREHENSIBLE INDEPENDENT OF THE BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD.”

The Gemara now attempts to square the Mishnah with its opposite this Braitā. They are brought by two colleagues in the Yeshivah of Pumbeditha, Abaye and Rava, both of whom experienced the same reality but understood it, according to what we read here, in very different ways.

ABAYE'S POSITION. GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS

Abaye interprets the Mishnah in the following way. He says that there is a Noachide model at work in the world but it is **inverted** in the sense that the real reward or punishment is given in the world-to-come. This world is only here as a preparation for the world-to-come and from the point of view of reward and punishment, **the role of this world is to “clean the slate” in preparation for the world-to-come where the real reward or punishment takes place.** In other words, a generally good person is punished for his or her few sins in this world so that in the world-to-come they will be ready for pure reward. A generally bad person is rewarded for their few good deeds in this world so that they will be able to get their full punishment in the world-to-come. From this point of view a “good day” or a “bad day” is the this-worldly fate. Good people get “bad days” in this world, bad people get “good days” in this world. Abaye sticks to the Braitā and explains the Mishnah in accordance with the Braitā. The reward in the Mishnah is postponed to the next world and the sufferings of the righteous in this world are necessary in order that the logic of reward and punishment should stand.

Here we get the introduction of an interesting and important variation on the Noachide model. There is indeed justice in the “world” with a person receiving what they deserve but it does not happen in this world during a person's lifetime but rather in a totally different dimension of reality. It is worth noting that the author of Job could have used this idea but went in an opposite direction.

If we ask why it was not used in the Book of Job, the historical answer is that the idea of individual after-life had not yet entered Judaism. This concept of the world to come is a Rabbinic concept that is not found in the Tanach (except perhaps in the biblically late Book of Daniel). Some contemporary Jews prefer to go back to the Biblical model and reject *Olam Haba* as an impossible illusion, even though Maimonides makes it one of the 13 principles of faith. To understand the issue of *Olam Haba* we must see that there are powerful motivations for believing in it that derive from the unresolved problem of evil.

RAVA'S POSITION. THE LONELY VOICE OF R. YAACOV.

Rava identifies the Braitā's view with that of R. Yaacov who dissents from the optimism of the Mishnah and does not seek to harmonize the texts. R. Yaacov's position is defined by the words שכר ליכא עולמא: The reward for doing a mitzvah is not [granted] in this world. In other words,

what happens to a person in this world is irrelevant to considerations of reward and punishment. The only relevant categories are reserved for the world-to-come. Any time we are told about reward for mitzvot, the intention is to reward in the world-to-come. According to Rava, R. Yaacov is basically an isolated voice in the Rabbinic camp. His opinion is a דעת יחיד – a sole opinion – and as such carries little importance.

The text now goes on to explain the basis for R. Yaacov's viewpoint.

IN CONNECTION WITH [the mitzvah of] HONOURING PARENTS IT IS WRITTEN:

“THAT YOUR DAYS MAY BE PROLONGED, AND THAT IT MAY GO WELL WITH YOU” [Devarim 5:16].

IN REFERENCE TO THE [mitzvah of] SENDING [a bird away from] THE NEST [before taking the young] IT IS WRITTEN, “THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY PROLONG YOUR DAYS” [Devarim 22:7].

NOW, ONE'S FATHER SAID TO HIM, GO UP A TOWER AND BRING ME YOUNG BIRDS, AND HE ASCENDS TO THE TOWER, DISMISSES THE MOTHER AND TAKES THE YOUNG, AND ON HIS RETURN HE FELL AND WAS KILLED. WHERE THEN IS HIS GOOD LIFE AND WHERE IS HIS LONG LIFE? [Therefore we must understand the Torah's promised rewards: The phrase] **“THAT IT MAY GO WELL WITH YOU” MEANS ON THE DAY THAT IS WHOLLY GOOD** [i.e. at the time of the world-to-come]: **AND [the phrase] “THAT YOU MAY PROLONG YOUR DAYS” [as references] MEANS “ON THE DAY THAT IS WHOLLY LONG”** [i.e. once again, at the time of the world-to-come].

The Gemara here is examining the basis for R. Yaacov's opinion by bringing a case which according to the apparent meaning of the Torah would seem to guarantee for the boy in question a reward in this life – a “long life” and a “good life.” A boy performs two mitzvot in one action, and both of the mitzvot that he performs are meant to bring him that particular reward according to the Torah. Instead, having performed the two mitzvot, Rabbi Yaacov claims that on his way down he falls and dies. This story provides the ultimate challenge to the whole system of this-worldly reward, a story of an innocent child who performs two special mitzvot, either one of which will bring its own reward according to the system. This is not just a random tale: it has all the components of a crucial case built to test the system. The story appears to contradict the idea that reward for mitzvot is achieved in this world. If there is any reward for this boy, it can only come at a later stage, after his death. This explains R. Yaacov's opinion.

There are two ways to read Rabbi Yaacov:

1. The world to come is such a wonderful place that whatever this worldly rewards or punishments we suffer are really insignificant. There is no reason to delve into this worldly logic since in the long run we have the world-to-come.
2. Rabbi Yaacov evinces a **moral and intellectual courage** in honestly admitting the full brunt of a world without justice and yet still maintaining his commitment to mitzvot since he remains a rabbi deeply involved in Torah. Existentially he acts without illusions. Rabbi Yaacov rejects the “selective vision” of his opponents who are ready to squeeze some modicum of Divine justice out of any situation whatever the difficulties of such a stance. He maintains a stark consistency while they seek ad hoc solutions that keep them going with a vision of a just world.

**RABBI YAACOV'S PESSIMISM IN *OLAM HAZEH*:
NO ILLUSIONS, NO EXPECTATIONS!**

SAID ABAYE. OUR MISHNAH MEANS THAT A GOOD DAY AND AN EVIL DAY [יום טוב] [יום רע] ARE PREPARED FOR HIM [for both the righteous person and for the sinner].

RAVA SAID: THIS LATTER [the Braita on Divine punishment of the generally good in this world] AGREES WITH R. YAACOV WHO SAID THERE IS NO REWARD FOR MITZVOT IN THIS WORLD.

FOR IT WAS TAUGHT THAT R. YAACOV SAID: “NONE OF THE MITZVOT IN THE TORAH WHICH ALSO SPECIFY THEIR REWARDS ARE COMPREHENSIBLE INDEPENDENT OF THE BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD.”

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WHERE IS HIS GOOD LIFE AND WHERE IS HIS LONG LIFE?! [The phrase] “THAT IT MAY GO WELL WITH YOU” MEANS ON THE DAY THAT IS WHOLLY GOOD [i.e. at the time of the world-to-come]: AND [the phrase] “THAT YOU MAY PROLONG YOUR DAYS” MEANS “ON THE DAY THAT IS WHOLLY LONG” [i.e. once again, at the time of the world-to-come].

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

1. Rabbi Yaacov thinks it is absurd to look for any rational pattern in what happens to people in this world. The Gemara brings a story to explain R. Yaacov’s reasons for adopting the position that he does. How does the story serve to explain his position?
2. In the story two verses are quoted. What is the dilemma in which R. Yaacov finds himself when facing these verses from the Torah? What is his way out of the dilemma? How would this help him?
3. How can we understand the fact that Rava appears to belittle this position? What might bother Rava (and, as we shall see, the other Rabbis) about the R. Yaacov position?
4. Can you think of a similar story in which your faith that people generally “get what they deserve” was undermined? How did you feel about that case? How might it affect your commitment to keep on doing what is right when in the very act of trying to do what is right you are injured rather than rewarded?

**RABBI YAACOV'S OPPONENTS:
TALKING RABBI YAACOV OUT OF HIS PESSIMISM
ABOUT *OLAM HAZEH*
or
DISMISSING THE STORY OF THE BOY
WHO FELL OFF THE LADDER**

Now, the Rabbis of the Gemara try and find fault with R. Yaacov's logic. They are extremely anxious. It is necessary for them now, not only to save the plain meaning of the Mishnah, but also to save the plain meaning of the Torah's promises. The whole of the Noachide concept of reward and punishment in this world, rests on their ability to undermine the logic of the particular case of this one boy. They will now bring a series of opinions – some of them seemingly very far fetched, in order to shake R. Yaacov's case and save the idea of justice in this world.

It is important to note here, once again, the need of the Rabbis to save the idea of this-worldly Noachide reward, despite the fact that such a view stands in flagrant contradiction to the world that they experience. Experience might lead them to accept the case of the boy gratefully and to breathe a sigh of relief since it allows them to maintain the view of reward and punishment reserved for *Olam Haba* without contradicting their own experience of this world. Perhaps their desperation to undermine the case of the boy and to retain the concept of this-worldly justice is testimony to the human need for this-worldly reassurance, even when the evidence apparently contradicts that promise. **It can be suggested that many people have a need to believe and this need often shows itself most closely times of desperation. In times of crisis we sometimes tend to turn to simpler and closer concepts in order to provide the psychological nourishment that we so badly need at such times.**

As we shall see, some of the ideas that they now present in order to undermine the case of the boy, are very strange. There are those who might find them laughable! But it is far more important to try and understand the lengths to which some of the Rabbis are willing to go, grasping at what appear often to be the flimsiest of straws, as proof of their desire to maintain some hope in the face of despair. These are deeply religious people who find their belief system profoundly threatened. In order to hold on to their deepest beliefs, they feel it necessary to refute the threat that comes from R. Yaacov's overthrow of the treasured concept of this-worldly reward.

The opponents of Rabbi Yaacov begin their counter offensive against the case of the boy on the ladder:

[Objection 1] YET PERHAPS THERE WAS NO SUCH CASE?

[Defence 1] R. JACOB SAW AN ACTUAL OCCURRENCE!

[Objection 2] THEN PERHAPS HE [the boy] WAS CONSIDERING COMMITTING A SIN [so he was being punished for his evil thoughts even though it appeared to Rabbi Yaacov as if he were doing a good deed]?

[Defence 2] THE BLESSED HOLY ONE DOES NOT COMBINE AN EVIL THOUGHT WITH AN EVIL ACT [i.e. God does not see an evil thought as an actual act – and therefore a person is not punished for his or her intentions].

[Objection 3] BUT PERHAPS HE WAS CONSIDERING IDOLATRY, AND IT IS WRITTEN, “THAT I MAY CATCH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL IN THEIR OWN HEART”? [Ezekiel 14:5 is understood as referring to the thought of idolatry in people's hearts. In the extraordinary case of idolatry, intention in and of itself is considered by God to be a crime].

[Defence 3] THAT TOO WAS PRECISELY HIS [R. Yaacov's] POINT: IF YOU THINK THAT MITZVOT ARE REWARDED IN THIS WORLD, THEN WHY DID THE [fulfillment of these] MITZVOT NOT SHIELD HIM FROM BEING LED TO

SUCH [idolatrous] THOUGHTS? [If mitzvot really do work in this world, the doing of the two mitzvot should certainly have acted as a shield and stopped bad thoughts from entering his heart. The fact that perhaps they did not do so and allowed these thoughts to enter him, if the questioner is right, actually strengthens R. Yaacov's case rather than that of his opponents!]

AFTER ALL R. ELAZAR SAID: THOSE SENT TO DO A MITZVAH ARE NEVER HARMED.

[Objection 4] THERE [in the principle of R. Elazar] WHEN THEY ARE ON THEIR WAY [to do the mitzvah they are protected], BUT HERE HE WAS ON HIS WAY BACK FROM DOING A MITZVAH. THEREFORE IT IS DIFFERENT.

[Defence 4] BUT R. ELAZAR [originally] SAID, THOSE WHO ARE SENT ON A MITZVAH ARE NEVER HARMED, EITHER WHEN GOING OR RETURNING.

We have here a number of attempts, (some of which appear somewhat weak), to undermine R. Yaacov's world-to-come concept of reward and punishment, and all have been clearly refuted. All are extraordinary in different ways. The first suggestion, that it never happened, is more than a factual question, because if this particular case was proved to be different, that would not do anything for the thousands of other cases where injustice clearly triumphed in the world! And of course the Rabbis knew that what they are talking about was a whole system even as they discussed it through the prism of one specific story. Thus when they suggest that it never happened, what they are really espousing is a mechanism of what seems like some kind of psychological denial. Let us suppose that it never happened. Or: can't we go on as if it never happened? The answer comes clearly: It happened. Or: it happens all the time around us. It is impossible to answer the problem by thrusting our heads into the sand and adopting an ostrich like attitude to the world.

The second and third suggestions, which are variations on the theme of blaming the child in the story are indeed extreme. But they are attempted anyway, and predictably, they too are refuted. The attempt to retain a this-worldly concept of divine justice has so far failed.

The fourth attempt is the use of Rabbi Elazar's principle that, at the very least, one is protected while doing a mitzvah even if there is no reward beyond actually completing it. Our life has meaning as long as we can succeed in doing what is good and as long as the very act of doing a mitzvah does not bring about our death. But even here Rabbi Yaacov can argue that the case of the boy on the ladder undermines that minimal expectation of fairness to those who try to do mitzvot.

It is significant that in all this seeming desperation to derail the arguments of R. Yaacov, the Rabbis of the Gemara never once resort to the card that could have stopped the debate immediately. They never resort to the argument of Job 38; they never talk about God's incomprehensibility, about the limitations of human reason to comprehend God. Of course, they all knew the book of Job, but they just refused to accept it as a paradigm. On both sides of the present argument they are determined to preserve the idea of an ethical and a rational God who acts in ways that can be comprehended by rational human beings living a rational life. To accept the Jobian paradigm seems unthinkable to them because the whole of Rabbinic Judaism – the whole idea of the Halachic lifestyle is based on a different premise: we know what God wants from us and we will act in that way.

GEMARA: RABBI YAACOV'S OPPONENTS: TALKING RABBI YAACOV OUT OF HIS PESSIMISM ABOUT OLAM HAZEH

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SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What are the arguments that the Rabbis use to try and undermine the logic of R. Yaacov's story? How convincing do you think that the arguments used are?
2. What on earth makes the Rabbis so determined to refute Rabbi Yaacov's pessimism about this world? What is at stake for them?

3. Try to empathize with these opponents of Rabbi Yaacov and write a diary entry for one of them after the third attempt to undermine the story has failed.

4. [For those who have studied Job]:

Do the opponents of Rabbi Yaacov sound to you like Job's friends? Explain your opinion. Why do you think that the Jobian model is never brought in on either side of the argument?

5. Rabbi Elazar's principle is the basis for a widespread Jewish custom to give someone about to go on trip – especially a potentially dangerous trip – a dollar to give to Tzedakah at the point of destination. Explain the logic. Let's say someone knowing this tradition asked you to be *Shaliach Mitzvah* to take tzedakah on your next trip to Israel. How would you react? Explain.

OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

This exercise can be used either at this point or perhaps even more effectively before the detailed reading of the text and the discussion of the above questions.

Ask the students to read the text carefully and, in pairs, to prepare a dramatic reading of the text. What tone of voice do they think should accompany the reading of the piece? Get several pairs to read it out and compare the tone of voice used in the different parts. Is the tone of the opponents increasingly frenzied? If so, what might it suggest? Is the tone even, or world weary as if they are talking to a child? What might that suggest? Develop the idea of voice tones as a key to examining meaning in a text and see if, in fact, the whole class reads it (and thus understands it) in the same way.

THE RICKETY LADDER DEFENSE: LIMITED EXPECTATIONS FOR THIS WORLDLY PROVIDENCE

It looks as though the opponents of R. Yaacov are going to have to give into the strength of his case. All their attempts to derail the argument have gotten them nowhere. Unless they can come up with a better idea to explain the case, victory will go to R. Yaacov, and with it, the death tolls will sound for the idea of this-worldly justice. So one final attempt is now made.

[The Gemara now continues] **IT WAS A “RICKETY LADDER”, SO THAT INJURY WAS LIKELY, AND WHERE INJURY IS LIKELY ONE MUST NOT RELY ON A MIRACLE, FOR IT IS WRITTEN, “SAMUEL SAID [when he was told by God to go and anoint David], HOW CAN I GO? IF SAUL HEARS IT, HE WILL KILL ME?”** [I Samuel 16:2].

Finally, now, an alternative explanation is given and we are introduced to a new explanatory framework, a new paradigm, for understanding the triumph of evil and tragedy in certain situations in our world. We are introduced to the case of the “rickety ladder”! God’s justice might work in this world but it does not necessarily act in supernatural ways. God cannot be relied on to work through miracles. Divine justice sometimes only works where natural law and logic permit it to work.

In the case in point, the boy’s death may not have been caused by God! It was due to the natural cause of a ladder which could not take his weight. In such a case God does not intervene because with such a ladder, it would have required a miraculous rescue by God to save the boy and that is not the way that God necessarily works. **In fact the boy and Rabbi Yaacov had no right to expect that God would protect a foolhardy boy or a careless father from the results of their own behaviour even if their intentions were good.** The proof-text is from the story of Samuel where the prophet was unwilling to go to anoint David in replacement of the jealous King Saul despite the fact that it was a divinely ordained task. Samuel the prophet feared that divine protection would not help him if he fell into the hands of Saul. God himself agreed that Samuel should not rely on supernatural protection. Rather God suggested a trick to outsmart Saul. Pretend that you are going to conduct a sacrifice in Bethel and sneak out to David’s home unnoticed. Thus, out of Rabbinic desperation, a new creative paradigm has been born.

It is a paradigm that appears to come with a price tag. The previous model spoke about an omnipotent God whose omnipotence would always be used positively because God is beneficent. God will do the right thing always, because God is good and because God is able to do so. In this new model of the “rickety ladder”, God might remain omnipotent, but God will not necessarily intervene in all situations. We are not told why God does not necessarily intervene. We are simply told that the “rickety ladder” is the way things work. The system of God’s justice in this world has been saved, but we can suggest that a price has been paid.

Thus, finally, at the end of this whole long debate about the acceptability of R. Yaacov’s convincing case for the operative principle of divine justice being other-worldly, an alternative idea is finally put forward. Here, divine justice is saved for our world, but it is not seen as the exclusive force that determines people’s fates. Natural causes – sickness, carelessness, natural disasters, accidents – all these can cause the triumph of injustice in this world.

In summary the TB Kiddushim 39b text has thus suggested two new explanations for injustice:

1. Justice does not operate in this world but only in the afterlife. This is the personal opinion of R. Yaacov. It has been rejected by many of the Sages but the opinion nevertheless continues to exist. Have no illusions. Do not interpret outcomes in this world in terms of reward or punishment for good or bad deeds.
2. Justice does operate in this world (and in the next world as well) but what seems like injustice can actually result from natural causes that can cause an unjust outcome. God cannot be relied on to work through miracles in the system of reward and punishment and human expectations should be educated accordingly to prevent exaggerated hopes from causing despair.

GEMARA: THE RICKETY LADDER DEFENSE

[The Gemara now continues] **IT WAS A “RICKETY LADDER”, SO THAT INJURY WAS LIKELY, AND WHERE INJURY IS LIKELY ONE MUST NOT RELY ON A MIRACLE, FOR IT IS WRITTEN, “SAMUEL SAID [when he was told by God to go and anoint David], HOW CAN I GO? IF SAUL HEARS IT, HE WILL KILL ME?”** [I Samuel 16:2].

1. What does the “rickety ladder” argument say to Rabbi Yaacov about his crucial case of Divine injustice in the world? Is it a new argument or have we heard it before?
2. Read I Samuel 16:2 in its context. What is his problem? What is so surprising both about the prophet Samuel’s response to God’s command and God’s answer? What is the general principle to be learned from this case. How is it related to the “rickety ladder” argument?
3. What does the “rickety ladder” argument give the Rabbis? Whose benefit does it work to? Rabbi Yaacov or his opponents?
4. What does the “rickety ladder” argument cost the Rabbis? In other words, what have Rabbi Yaacov’s opponents conceded about the way that God does *not* work in the world?
5. In summary, write out, in full, the two new positions put forward in the discussion: the position of Rabbi Yaacov and the position of the proponents of the Rickety Ladder. How are they different from the viewpoint put forward by the Mishnah? Write your opinion of the two new positions? Do you like either of the positions? Which position is easier to live with even if it may not be true?
5. Would you, personally, use either position to comfort someone whose friend:
 - (i) Was a heavy smoker but a wonderfully generous person who died from lung cancer?
 - OR (ii) Lost a child to leukemia at age two.If so, which position and why? If not, why not?

THE MOST FAMOUS UNBELIEVER - *ACHER*: ELISHA BEN ABUYAH

In conclusion, as a kind of an afterthought, a famous story is remembered and retold. The case concerns Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, known infamously as *Acher* – the Other – who had rebelled against Judaism and abandoned the Jewish people and its beliefs to join then Roman side. Milton Steinberg's novel *As A Driven Leaf* describes his experience during the bar Kochba Revolt beautifully. His memory hangs like a shadow over Rabbinic Judaism and thus it is not surprising that at a time like this, when discussing the limits of God's justice on earth, they should retell his story. They are trying to find out what made him lose faith and they suggest that the problem of evil in his era was the crucial issue for him.

R. JOSEPH SAID: HAD ACHER INTERPRETED THIS VERSE [i.e. the verses in Devarim as deferring the Divine reward to the world to come] **AS DID R. YAACOV, HIS DAUGHTERS'S SON, HE WOULD NOT HAVE SINNED. NOW, WHAT HAPPENED WITH ACHER? SOME SAY THAT HE SAW SOMETHING OF THIS NATURE** [the case of the boy on the ladder].

OTHERS SAY, HE SAW THE TONGUE OF HUZPIT THE INTERPRETER DRAGGED ALONG BY A SWINE [during the Roman persecution of Torah scholars during and after the Bar Kochba Revolt]. **THEN HE** [Elisha ben Abuya] **EXCLAIMED:** "THE MOUTH THAT UTTERED PEARS LICKS THE DUST!?" [As a result of his terrible disillusionment], **HE WENT FORTH AND SINNED** [abandoning Judaism altogether].

Huzpit was a leading figure at Yavneh, the new centre of Jewish leadership which arose after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE). He held the position of interpreter, an important scholarly post, when Yavneh was led by Rabban Gamaliel. He died as one of the Rabbinic martyrs of the Bar Kochba rebellion, who were killed mercilessly by the Romans for their defiance of the Roman ban on teaching Torah (c. 135 CE). At a demonstration of Divine impotence or betrayal and injustice of that magnitude, Acher lost his faith in such a radical way as to switch over to the Roman side.

Yet R. Joseph is confident that even the greatest case of disillusionment about divine injustice would have been averted, had R. Yaacov's alternative explanation of the problem of this-worldly evil been available for his consideration instead of the simplistic, pious notion of direct this-worldly reward and punishment.

Another very important aspect is that the explanation given as having been able to convince Acher, was not the "rickety ladder" explanation but rather R. Yaacov's explanation of the world-to-come! Despite all its attempts to find fault with the other-worldly explanation, it is ultimately seen as having the power to convince even the most serious doubters and potential heretics! This should show us clearly the importance of the world-to-come theory. Even though the majority has rejected it, it is still seen as the most effective way of quelling the doubts of the greatest of sceptics. It is an argument that is needed, suggests the Gemara, because there are cases when no other explanation has the power to overcome doubt. We ourselves, suggests the text, might accept the "rickety ladder" theory, but there are those for whom that will never be sufficient. They need the power of the next world – הַעוֹלָם הַבָּא!

Rabbi Joseph's view contains a surprising understanding of Rabbi Yaacov. The view that there is no this-worldly reward might lead us to think it is foolish to continue to observe mitzvot if there is no immediate reward or even minimal protection of those who do good. Delayed gratification to the next world is not convincing for many as opposed to the evidence of their own eyes. Yet Rabbi Joseph holds that it would *prevent apostasy*. For rebellion is the result of deep disillusionment when promises are made and then flagrantly violated. Biblical expectations set us up for the crisis. Remove those exaggerated expectations and we may see that one deeply involved in Torah may well continue that way of life for its own sake expecting and needing no material rewards.

GEMARA: THE MOST FAMOUS UNBELIEVER - ACHER: ELISHA BEN ABUYAH

R. JOSEPH SAID: HAD ACHER INTERPRETED THIS VERSE [i.e. the verses in Devarim as deferring the Divine reward to the world to come] **AS DID R. YAACOV, HIS DAUGHTERS'S SON, HE WOULD NOT HAVE SINNED.**

NOW, WHAT HAPPENED WITH ACHER?

SOME SAY THAT HE SAW SOMETHING OF THIS NATURE [the case of the boy on the ladder]. **OTHERS SAY, HE SAW THE TONGUE OF HUZPIT THE INTERPRETER DRAGGED ALONG BY A SWINE** [during the Roman persecution of Torah scholars during and after the Bar Kochba Revolt]. **THEN HE [Elisha ben Abuya] EXCLAIMED: "THE MOUTH THAT UTTERED PEARLS LICKS THE DUST!?"**. [As a result of his terrible disillusionment] **HE WENT FORTH AND SINNED** [abandoning Judaism altogether].

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

Read the story of Elisha Ben Abuya – Acher – in *As A Driven Leaf* and then answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think Acher joined the Roman side if he saw how cruel they could be? Why did he abandon God if the Romans were so evil?
2. How is the story of the boy on the ladder similar and yet different from the story of Huzpit?
3. How does Rabbi Yaacov solve Acher's problem for Rabbi Joseph? Would the rickety ladder argument also have been sufficient in your judgment?
4. Does Milton Steinberg, the author of "As a Driven Leaf" agree with R. Joseph's statement? Why do you think he concludes his piece as he does?
5. Why do you think that the Rabbinic discussion is closed with the story of Elisha ben Abuya?

SUGGESTED CLOSING EXERCISES

SUGGESTION ONE: A Dialogue with *Acher*

Write a letter to Elisha in which you try to convince him not to lose faith in God. What arguments would you use? You can use any arguments that you have encountered or any that you think might be most effective.

Write Elisha's response to your letter and write your final response to his letter.

SUGGESTION TWO: Chaim Nachman Bialik's "On the Slaughter"

In 1903, the great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik, was sent to Kishinev in the aftermath of a terrible pogrom that had occurred there. Arriving soon after the pogrom was over, he interviewed survivors and toured the wreckage, prior to writing a report on the events. Returning to Odessa where he lived, he wrote two poems of startling power, expressing his emotional reactions to the things that he had seen and heard. One of the poems, a long epic, "The City of Slaughter" is well known. Lesser known is the shorter theological poem "On the Slaughter" in which the author struggles with the implications of what he had seen for religious faith. We bring here parts of the four verses.

*Heavenly spheres, beg mercy for me!
If truly God dwells in your orbit
And in your space is his pathway that I have not found,
Then pray for me.
For my own heart is dead. There is no prayer on my tongue
And strength has failed and hope has passed...*

*If there is justice in the world – let it appear now,
For if justice appears
Only when I have perished from the earth,
Then let its throne be shattered and laid low!
Then let the heavens be no more
While you, Oh murderers, on your murder thrive,
Live on your blood, regurgitate this gore...*

*The devil himself has not yet created
Vengeance fitting the spilt blood of a child...*

Answer the following questions.

1. What is Bialik saying in the poem?
2. According to the poem, how has the violence that he has encountered, affected his faith in God?
3. How would Bialik react to the idea that justice is delayed till the world to come? What would that do to his faith in God? Do you think that it might be possible to revive his faith in God? According to the poem, what might be able to achieve the restoration of his faith?
4. Write brief responses to the poem from the following observers: R. Yaacov, Elisha ben Abuya and the anonymous creator of the "rickety ladder" concept.

III. THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN / OLAM K'MINHAGO NOHEIG (TB Avodah Zarah 54b)

INTRODUCTION – ADJUSTING OUR EXPECTATIONS

The problem of evil is partially a result of a discrepancy of expectations and experience, of ideals and reality, of what we believe about a providential world created and guided by God and how we interpret what we encounter. As we saw before, some Rabbinic solutions seek to modify our reading of the events and some limit our expectations of God. The selection from TB Avodah Zarah 54b presents a radical re-conceptualization of how God establishes the rules of the game for this worldly behavior, how God defines the laws of nature. This view is called “the world has a way of its own” [עולם כמנהגו נוהג]. It is in deep contrast to much of the depiction of the Biblical world of Divine intervention in nature and history.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Mishnah introduces us to a group of anonymous Rabbis simply called the “elders” who visit Rome. The commentators identify them as the four leading Rabbis who travel to Rome in the final years of the first century. These were R. Gamaliel, R. Akiva, R. Joshua and R. Elazar ben Azariah. These four constitute the Rabbinic leadership of Palestine (at this time, the only Rabbinic world) living in the generation after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Romans whom they are visiting. The religious dispute in which they are engaged must be understood against the background of the Roman defeat not only of their nation but of their God’s Temple and city. These Romans are still their rulers and these Rabbis who are also the political leaders of Judea are probably on a diplomatic visit to the capital of the conquering empire.

It was Gamaliel who took over the leadership at the new centre at Yavneh from Yohanan ben Zakkai, who established the centre at the time of the destruction. As such Gamaliel presided over the Sanhedrin at Yavneh. Akiva and Joshua were two of the leading Rabbis of that generation. When Gamaliel was forced to step down from his position after a confrontation with Joshua, it was Elazar ben Azariah, a young prodigy, years younger than the others, who temporarily took over the position of head of the Sanhedrin at Yavneh.

The other figure mentioned near the end of the piece is the Palestinian Amora, Simeon ben Lakish, known to all as Reish Lakish. He was born somewhere near the beginning of the third century and rose to prominence as the disciple, brother in law, friend and chevruta partner of R. Yohanan ben Naptha, the great scholar who appears in the next piece that we will study.

MISHNAH: QUESTIONING GOD’S POWER.

THE ELDERS WERE ASKED IN ROME. IF [Your God] HAS NO DESIRE FOR IDOLATRY, WHY DOES GOD NOT ABOLISH IT?

THEY [the Rabbis] REPLIED: IF IT WAS SOMETHING UNNECESSARY TO THE WORLD THAT WAS WORSHIPPED, GOD WOULD ABOLISH IT. BUT PEOPLE WORSHIP THE SUN, MOON, STARS AND PLANETS. SHOULD GOD DESTROY THE UNIVERSE ON ACCOUNT OF FOOLS?

THEY [the Romans] SAID [to the Elders]: IF SO, [your God] SHOULD DESTROY WHAT IS UNNECESSARY FOR THE WORLD AND LEAVE WHAT IS NECESSARY FOR THE WORLD.

THE [Rabbis] REPLIED: [If God did that] WE SHOULD MERELY BE STRENGTHENING THE HANDS OF THE WORSHIPPERS OF THESE [remaining idolatrous objects], BECAUSE THEY WOULD SAY: BE SURE THAT THESE [others things, which have been left existing] ARE DEITIES FOR BEHOLD THEY HAVE NOT BEEN ABOLISHED.

**INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE:
DEFENDING JUDAISM IN A RELIGIOUS DISPUTATION.**

Before seeing the Mishnah, explain to the students the idea of a religious debate as these things occurred throughout pre-modern history especially in the Christian world led by the Roman Pope who would emerge about 300 years after the debate reported in the Mishnah. In such debates the Jews were asked to defend the truth of Judaism against the claims to truth of other religious groups. Explain that in such a disputation a series of questions would be put to the Jews aimed at discrediting their faith. Give the students one such question: they have to come up with a one-page response to the question which is the sort of question that Jews were asked in debates like these. The question is this:-

IF YOU THINK THAT GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL AND IS ON YOUR SIDE IN HISTORY, HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE FACT THAT JEWS ARE ATTACKED ALL OVER THE WORLD AS JEWS AND IN THE STATE OF ISRAEL, AND GOD DOES NOTHING? IS GOD REALLY SO POWERFUL, OR HAS GOD ABANDONED YOU, OR WAS GOD NEVER ON YOUR SIDE, OR DOES YOUR GOD NOT EXIST?

Bring the responses to class and read out the answers in small groups. Ask each group to report the responsive arguments that were brought up in each group to defend the Jewish position.

List the arguments on the board and discuss which of these arguments would be most effective. If you were attacked as Jews by people using these arguments, which would be most useful in responding?

Finally the members of the group, either singly or in pairs have to produce another page which is based on whatever they have heard in the discussion. This is their final "Defending Judaism Page".

THE CHALLENGE TO JUDAISM.

The background to the Mishnah is the atmosphere of religious/political struggle and competition in the first centuries of the Common Era. At this time, Judaism was involved in a religious argument with paganism – the polytheistic belief that there are many gods in the world, which are connected to the natural and visible forces of nature. Each god was associated with a political entity as well as a central temple so the political vicissitudes of the city or state or the temple were often understood as a reflection of the god's relative power. This politico-religious argumentation is even reflected in the Torah where Moshe uses it to convince God not to destroy his people in the desert: "If You put this people to death, then the nations that have heard of your fame will say that God lacks the capability to bring them to the land he swore to give them and that is why God slew them in the desert." (Numbers 14:15-16)

Paradoxically, even though Judea was defeated and the Christian religion which was just beginning its infiltration of the Roman Empire was prohibited and persecuted, the religious and intellectual competition was slowly but surely being won by the forces representing monotheism. Paganism was still ascendant institutionally by the time the debate in the Mishnah is believed to have happened at the end of the first century C.E., but the tides were turning from paganism towards monotheism. Roman upper class patricians were showing increasing interest in Jewish faith and practice and some were converting so that almost 10% of the empire were Jewish in the second century. Nevertheless, pagan philosophers would be engaged for centuries in a desperate rearguard battle against the forces of monotheism, and at this period, that meant principally the Jews. The Jews would be challenged for centuries by pagan thinkers.

It was at this time, however, that a new and stronger force was beginning to challenge Judaism and its representatives in a series of debates. This group, the ascendant Christian faith, would be a far more formidable opponent in the early centuries of the Common Era. From the Jews' point of view, this was a struggle with the enemy within, the monotheistic faith that had sprung from Judaism and was fighting the Jews for the soul of every disillusioned pagan. Moreover, whereas paganism was on the whole a tolerant world-view that was capable of tolerating other religious ideas, Christianity was exactly the opposite. As a religion that had suffered persecution in its formative stages it might have been expected to behave with tolerance towards other religious concepts. Unfortunately, it would respond to its opponents with great violence, believing that its search for religious truth had automatically delegitimised all other ways to God.

Monotheistic religions were usually less tolerant than their pagan predecessors. They were apt to use their power against their opponents. By the time the Gemara was being put together on the basis of the discussions in the Talmudic academies of Eretz Israel and Babylon, the Church Fathers were developing their doctrines and their rules against the Jews. It is certainly possible that, although the Mishnah and Gemara are both concerned with an argument between the Jews and the pagans, underneath the text of our Gemara, there are echoes of the argument with the increasingly powerful Christians. The latter would use the argument of power against the Jews. God, they said, had abandoned all previous support for the Jews and was proving the superiority of the Christian faith by rewarding them with power. The Jewish concept of God was legitimate only in the version of Christianity. The God of the Bible had abandoned them. Their Temple had been destroyed and their people scattered. If God had wanted to help the Jews, God would have done so. Jewish powerlessness was not proof of God's impotence or non-existence as it was for the pagans in the Mishnah. It was a proof of God's abandonment of the Jews. These were the arguments that lie at the heart of the Mishnah and its discussion in the Gemara. It is to this that we now turn.

Christian and later Moslem thinkers continued to argue with Jews throughout the Middle Ages and at times had great success in attracting or coercing Jewish converts. Those debates are still alive today in the form of a sophisticated propaganda war against Judaism led by missionary Christians and militant Moslems. The Moslems are no longer interested in Jewish converts but their religious attacks on Judaism inflame millions of Moslems to see them as inhuman purveyors of an evil religion.

THE MISHNAH: THE CHALLENGE TO GOD

The Mishnah opens up with the visit of a group of leading Rabbis to Rome. It is believed that the reference is to the leaders of Rabbinic Judaism – Rabbis Gamaliel, Joshua, Elazar ben Azaryah and Akiva, who went to Rome in the year 95 C.E., a quarter of a century after the Temple's destruction. The scene is a discussion between the Rabbis and a group of pagan philosophers. It sounds like a casual conversation at a street corner, but it may have been an organised public debate as part of the diplomatic encounter with the Roman sovereigns.

The pagan philosophers challenge the Rabbis. "If your God is as powerful as you claim, how come God does not destroy idolatry" i.e. worship of all sorts of natural forces? This sounds like a classic religious debate. The idolatry in question is, of course, the religion of the pagans. In other words, the question is as follows. If your God is so powerful, how come we are still here? God could just destroy everything we believe in. At that point we would have no choice but to accept the superiority of your ideas and go over to your faith. In the context of a religious debate against a group that contend that their God has created the world and is all powerful, this is a very strong argument. It is the argument from power against a group who have claimed that their God is all powerful.

The Jews' argument in response is very clever, although ultimately, as we shall see, it is not unproblematic. Their first argument is that such a thing is indeed possible: God could destroy the sources of idolatry, but the cost would be too great. It would be one thing if the things that were worshipped were marginal in importance: all such things could indeed be easily destroyed, but the problem is more complicated. The things that people worship are precisely those things that are essential to the running of the world. To destroy them in order to convince the fools (the pagans) and to undermine their belief system, would be totally counter-productive. It would be to "win the battle but lose the war" since the consequence would be the destruction of the world. This is an excellent response. God's strength is absolute but God's temper is controlled. God uses self-restraint and does not get involved in theological ego battles. This is reminiscent of the argument in the Noah story when God says (Genesis 8:21) "*I will not again curse the ground any more for people's sake for the impulse of a person's heart is evil from youth.*"

Here, as there, God does not resort to the counter-productive. The world will not be destroyed just to make a point. The God of the Rabbis is cool and rational, a true heroic God who will conquer the natural urge to "show them". Now the pagan philosophers come back with an excellent follow up. "Not everything that is worshipped is necessary" for the functioning of the world. Choose one of the unnecessary things – a tree, a rock, a spring. They are right; there was no shortage of candidates for destruction which would have inflicted no damage to the world, but whose destruction, if witnessed, would have proved the truth of Judaism. All it needs is a little miracle, in the sense of something that goes against the laws of nature.

This was a clever response since the Rabbis had indicated in their first answer that God would indeed be prepared to destroy anything non-essential. Logically, the pagans have put the Rabbis in a corner. But the Rabbis, of necessity, shift their ground. They appear to feel that they are not living in a world where God performs miracles through intervening in history. If not, the Jewish People would not be in such a humiliating position. God might have the power but there is no evidence that it is being used. This necessitates a slightly different argument. If the smallest things were to be destroyed and the essential sun and moon left, then the worshippers of the latter would be reinforced in their own belief. This would actually assure the triumph of paganism since nothing God can do can prevent its being interpreted perversely to justify the pagan cause. So ends the Mishnah. The Rabbis appear to have won the argument for God's power being expressed in inaction against the Divinely created forces identified mistakenly as pagan gods.

For the moment, let us note the implications of the argument of the Mishnah. God is all-powerful to be sure, but in fact, despite the Divine power, God's hands are tied. God has the power but cannot use it. It would be senseless and counter-productive to use it. Therefore, as long as God wants to keep the world from destruction God has to abdicate the use of power to prove his case. Catch 22.

MISHNAH: QUESTIONING GOD'S POWER.

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SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

1. What is the reality of the power relationship between the Roman pagans and the Rabbis of 100CE?
2. What is the question that the Rabbis are being asked? What are the pagans (worshippers of natural forces) really saying?
3. What is the Rabbis' first answer?
4. Do you think that it is a good response? Why? Why not? Is there any weak point in the Rabbis' response?
5. Explain the pagans' second question. How do you rate this question from the point of view of the pagans?
6. Explain the Rabbis' second answer. How do you rate this answer from the point of view of the Rabbis?
7. Do you think that the fact that the pagans disappear off the page after the Rabbis' second answer shows that the Rabbis have won the debate? Could

the Rabbis' answer have convinced the pagans and won the debate? How might the Rabbis feel about justifying God's inaction in the battle against paganism? Could they have made a better argument?

Reflect on this question in a Rabbinic diary entry, written a day after the debate has finished.

OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Turn this into a play. Let a group of the students prepare a script based on the Mishnah and let them produce it for the class (and parents?). Let them direct it themselves as they see fit.

Which setting do they choose?

Do they see this as a public debate or as a "Hyde Park" street corner free for all where they are attacked for their opinions by a rowdy crowd?

Discuss the choices made after the students have performed it.

After the performance and brief discussion, perhaps bring in the Rabbinic diary entries from the previous group of questions as a fitting finale.

GEMARA: THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN

OUR RABBIS TAUGHT: PHILOSOPHERS ASKED THE ELDERS IN ROME: IF [Your God] HAS NO DESIRE FOR IDOLATRY, WHY DOES GOD NOT ABOLISH IT?

THE [Rabbinic Elders] REPLIED: IF IT WAS SOMETHING UNNECESSARY TO THE WORLD THAT WAS WORSHIPPED, GOD WOULD ABOLISH IT. BUT PEOPLE WORSHIP THE SUN, MOON, STARS AND PLANETS. SHOULD GOD DESTROY THE UNIVERSE ON ACCOUNT OF FOOLS? THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN AND AS FOR THE FOOLS WHO ACT WRONGLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO RENDER AN ACCOUNT.

The beginning of the Gemara brings a Braita, an alternative tradition which tells the same story in a significantly different way. The beginning of the story is identically recounted but at the end of the first answer, the Rabbis in the story add a crucial addition: **the world has a way of its own!** We can imagine the Rabbis adding this comment for themselves, not necessarily to help their argument against the pagans. It is a principled theological position rather than merely a rhetorical flourish as it may be in the Mishnah. This is not sophistry; it is rather a brave and radical philosophical thesis by thinkers stunned by the contrast between the power of God, expressed in countless miracles in the biblical text, and a God who does not display those miracles in their contemporary world, as in the destruction of Jerusalem. The answer brought here extrapolates the argument of the Mishnah that God has power in the world but chooses not to use it against idolatrously interpreted natural forces. But we are told, that God *never* uses that power. The world works according to natural laws and God accepts the rules of the game without intervening according to the ethical laws of reward and punishment or the religious ones distinguishing of idolatry from worship of the Divine.

According to Jewish belief, of course, those laws were established by God at the beginning of creation. But God has decided, for reasons that are unclear, not to interfere in the functioning of the world. The reasons might be clear in the case of idolatry, suggests the Braita, but it has left that argument about God's self-limitation of power behind when it makes the absolute case that the world has a way of its own - עולם כמנהגו נוהג. God still presides over a system of reward and punishment, to be sure, but that system has now been totally relegated to the "world-to-come". It does not happen in this present world. The world has a way of its own - עולם כמנהגו נוהג. There are rules for this world and for the next world. In the next world, there is a system of justice. The fools and sinners will get what they deserve, there. But here, in the present world, the rules are different. The rules are the rules of nature¹ and God does not interfere. עולם כמנהגו נוהג.

The full implications of this start to become clear in the next piece of the Gemara.

¹ Amos Funkenstein, a distinguished scholar of Judaica and the history of science, argues that the notion of nature as self-contained system of laws functioning immanently is not part of Biblical consciousness. It is a Greek notion first imported into Judaism in this rabbinic text.

GEMARA: THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN

OUR RABBIS TAUGHT: PHILOSOPHERS ASKED THE ELDERS IN ROME: IF [Your God] HAS NO DESIRE FOR IDOLATRY, WHY DOES GOD NOT ABOLISH IT?

THE [Rabbinic Elders] REPLIED: IF IT WAS SOMETHING UNNECESSARY TO THE WORLD THAT WAS WORSHIPPED, GOD WOULD ABOLISH IT. BUT PEOPLE WORSHIP THE SUN, MOON, STARS AND PLANETS. SHOULD GOD DESTROY THE UNIVERSE ON ACCOUNT OF FOOLS? THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN AND AS FOR THE FOOLS WHO ACT WRONGLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO RENDER AN ACCOUNT.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY.

1. The Gemara has brought a different version of the story of the debate in the Mishnah. What is the major difference in the two versions?
2. What do you think that the words “The world has a way of its own” עולם – כמנהגו נוהג – actually mean? What is the argument being put forward?
3. Where and in what way do you think that the “fools” of the text will render a full account according to the Rabbis?
4. Which of the two versions of the debate would have been more likely in an argument against the pagans? Why?

DOES CRIME PAY?

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION: SUPPOSE A MAN STOLE A MEASURE OF WHEAT AND WENT AND SOWED IT INTO THE GROUND, [according to moral logic] IT IS RIGHT THAT IT SHOULD *NOT* GROW. BUT THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN AND AS FOR THE FOOLS WHO ACT WRONGLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO RENDER AN ACCOUNT.

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION: SUPPOSE A MAN HAS SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH HIS NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE, [according to moral logic] IT IS RIGHT SHE SHOULD *NOT* CONCEIVE. BUT THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN AND AS FOR THE FOOLS WHO ACT WRONGLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO RENDER AN ACCOUNT.

These two cases add nothing to the previous argument but they spell out the full implications of the argument of עולם כמנהגו נוהג. In a world in which nature takes its course, we must accept that there are really no exceptions. Sin is not punished: there are no moral consequences of human actions built into the natural structure of the universe. A person will be punished for evil deeds if he or she is caught by earthly authorities. There might be justice on earth but that is left up to the decisions of human beings. It is up to people to decide whether or not justice will reign on earth. God does not interfere. The this-worldly universe is morally neutral.

Stolen grain, when planted, will grow and ripen just like any other grain. The conditions are those of nature. They have nothing to do with morality. What will determine whether or not grain grows is not the moral character of the person who planted the grain, nor the circumstances in which the planter obtained the grain but the objective conditions of nature. Rain not virtue causes a good harvest. It is important to see how this contradicts the Biblical concept where rain is granted to the righteous farmer (the Noah model) or to the righteous society (אם שמוע תשמעו).

Women become pregnant according to the laws of nature, not the laws of Moses. As far as pregnancy is concerned, the Ten Commandments have no say here. They may hold sway in a different world, but in this world they are irrelevant in determining the outcome of natural processes. The universe is morally neutral. Some would say morally bankrupt. Morality can only come, in this world, from the individual. It cannot come from God. In a world where natural law has been elected, God has no vote. And still, we do not know why. The only explanation that we have received is the explanation of the Mishnah which holds true for idolatry only. As far as other categories are concerned we are totally in the dark. We do not know whether God does not wish to be involved, whether God has created a set of principles and is sticking to them or whether God is powerless. For a hint of the Gemara's answer we must wait till the next piece of the text.

GEMARA: DOES CRIME PAY?

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION:

SUPPOSE A MAN STOLE A MEASURE OF WHEAT AND WENT AND SOWED IT INTO THE GROUND, [according to moral logic] IT IS RIGHT THAT IT SHOULD *NOT* GROW. BUT THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN AND AS FOR THE FOOLS WHO ACT WRONGLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO RENDER AN ACCOUNT.

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION:

SUPPOSE A MAN HAS SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH HIS NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE, [according to moral logic] IT IS RIGHT SHE SHOULD *NOT* CONCEIVE. BUT THE WORLD HAS A WAY OF ITS OWN AND AS FOR THE FOOLS WHO ACT WRONGLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO RENDER AN ACCOUNT.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What is the similarity between the example of the wheat and the adultery/rape? What argument is the text making in these two illustrations? What are the practical implications of “The world has a way of its own” – עולם כמנהגו נוהג – for a potential violator of the Torah?
2. Write a short piece on the subject “Crime Never Pays – Is this really true?”
3. A close friend of yours has a foolproof opportunity to get into Harvard University by cheating on her or his exams, and has decided to do so. Write a piece in the friend's name defending the decision. Now write a list of arguments that you could use against them. Do the arguments on either side respond to the issue of whether crime pays? Which of these arguments would be likely to be most effective? Why?
4. This is an excerpt from a true story that appeared in the English “Sunday Times” on November 10, 2002.

First came the 9.7 million pound lottery win. Then the celebratory feast, Chinese takeaway for four people and a bottle of cheap vodka. Michael Carroll, the 19 year old convicted criminal who bought two lucky tickets “on a whim” and then scooped the jackpot last weekend, spent less than 36 pounds celebrating his good luck.

The apparent unfairness of a character like Carroll winning the lottery has annoyed many of his victims. Last January, Carroll admitted stealing from the car of Michael Eff, 28. Eff said: "The lottery is supposed to benefit organisations such as 'Victim Support' but instead, thieves win it."

Yesterday Carroll admitted that he had appeared in court about thirty times. Carroll, who had an electronic tag attached to his leg on court instructions, was allowed to travel to the office of 'Camelot', the lottery promoters, who presented him with a cheque for the full amount. Carroll who has the Chinese symbol for evil tattooed on his neck, chose a bottle of vodka to accompany the meal, bought from a supermarket that he was once banned for fighting in. His other offences include stealing cars, throwing a stone through the window of a bus full of schoolchildren and criminal damage.

Write a letter expressing your reaction to one of the following: Michael Carroll, Michael Eff, or the Camelot lottery organisation.

AGAINST MY DIVINE WILL

THIS [illustration about the illicit pregnancy] IS SIMILAR TO WHAT REISH LAKISH SAID: GOD DECLARED: ISN'T BAD ENOUGH THAT THE WICKED PUT MY COINAGE TO VULGAR USE, BUT THEY TROUBLE ME AND COMPEL ME TO PUT MY SEAL ON AGAINST MY WILL.

It is now that we hear God's own opinion about God's hands being tied in the issue of intervening in the natural world. The informant is Reish Lakish whose insights are added on to the previous case of pregnancy after adultery/ rape. Using a familiar image drawn from Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, he puts into God's mouth an opinion which explains his opinion regarding the explanation for the strange phenomenon of God's inactivity in the world. The "coinage" here is a metaphor, for God's creation – human beings. In Sanhedrin human beings were likened to the coins turned out by a mint. Just like the mint, God creates coins and just like the mint God puts a human image on the coins. The difference between these two creations – human (the mint) and divine (the person) is that all the coins put out by the mint bear the same image (king, emperor or whoever). The divine creation has a different image on each "coin". Here, in Reish Lakish's usage, God complains over the fact that whereas God is opposed to the idea of creating babies in immoral circumstances, there is still a divine image stamped on the final product. The divine image is present on a baby born out of immoral circumstances, just as much as in any other birth. This we have heard before. Morality has no role to play. In fact, God becomes an inadvertent and impotent accomplice in the crime.

The new insight here is that God is helpless. The birth happens – בעל כורחו - against God's will. God has no say in the matter. The fact that God disapproves and finds it "vulgar" is irrelevant to the fact itself. This is a world in which nature rules – and God doesn't. God is impotent to change things here. The only thing that God can do is to reserve justice for the world-to-come. In this world, in some unspecified way – God has been removed from all authority. This is a far cry past the image of the "rickety ladder" that we encountered in Kiddushin. There we heard a suggestion that God rules in partnership with nature. Things that happen in this world are not completely caused by God because God does not interfere in nature and reverse nature through resort to miracles. That is not dissimilar from the position expressed in the Mishnah. But the Gemara has gone further. The universe is totally neutral and God is powerless to affect it. What a bleak world! This is a world where prayer has no effect, where moral behaviour can bring no reward which is not human. This is a world where the only God that walks with human beings is a powerless God.

The question now needs to be asked whether a God like this is a valuable God for people. Can a God like this answer human needs? Who, beside philosophers and ascetics can be content with a God who cannot answer their prayers but can only hold out a hope of justice and reward for virtue in the world-to-come? Is this a humanly useful God? All of these questions perhaps explain why this concept of such an impersonal God never really captured the Jewish imagination. A God like this would mean the end of Jewish prayer and indeed an end to the whole Rabbinic enterprise. We said the same thing when we examined the discussion from Kiddushin. There we saw how the Rabbis went onto their hind legs and tried to reject the suggestion that all consolation was in the world-to-come. They tried to isolate R. Yaacov's opinion and to relegate it to the realms of a – אדעתא יחיד – single, non-binding opinion. Here they do no such thing. Here the Gemara itself appears to accept the suggestion. We can only wonder at this and marvel at the courage of the Rabbis in accepting an opinion that is so difficult from the point of view of its human implications.

GEMARA: AGAINST MY DIVINE WILL

THIS [illustration about the illicit pregnancy] IS SIMILAR TO WHAT REISH LAKISH SAID: GOD DECLARED: ISN'T BAD ENOUGH THAT THE WICKED PUT MY COINAGE TO VULGAR USE, BUT THEY TROUBLE ME AND COMPEL ME TO PUT MY SEAL ON AGAINST MY WILL.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Read Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 and explain the imagery of the “coinage” and its relationship to the illicit pregnancy. What is Reish Lakish saying about God’s response?
2. What has happened to the image of an all-powerful God who allows rapists and adulterers to counterfeit his image at will?
3. Does this image of God differ from the image of God that you have been brought up with? How does God feel according to Reish Lakish and how do you feel about such an image of God?

SUGGESTED CLOSING EXERCISE:

Let the members of the class alone or in pairs, create a comic strip based on the adventures of an impotent superhero who can always see what needs to be done and has the best intentions but for one reason or other, can never actually do anything about it. Before they do this, they should think of a name for their “hero” and agree on some common characteristics that define him or her. When the comic strips have been written, let them be displayed or presented.

Then ask the question whether or not such a character could ever be a figure of public hero-worship. Are intentions alone enough to capture public loyalty? Are not deeds needed? Now work this round to the idea of God presented in the text. Could such a God ever have been worshipped by so many millions for such a long time? Do you think that such an image of God could have sustained the Jewish People in their faith for thousands of years? Why? Why not? Discuss.

SUGGESTED CLOSING EXERCISE: Yitzchak Katznelson Attacks Heaven.

Yitzchak Katznelson wrote the long Yiddish poem “The Song of the Murdered Jewish People” after his deportation from Warsaw in mid-1943. He was a famous literary figure who managed to leave the ghetto with one of his sons after the murder of his wife and his two other children and to be transferred to a detention camp in France where the poem was written. He wrote the poem after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto with the consequent murder of all the Jews. This is a part of the poem which seems relevant to the subject that we have been discussing.

*And thus it came to pass, and this was the beginning ... Heavens tell me, why?
Tell me, why this, why? What have we done to merit such disgrace?
The earth is dumb and deaf, she closed her eyes. But you, heavens on high,
You saw it happen and looked on, from high, and did not turn your face.*

*Away! I do not want to look at you, to see you any more.
False and cheating heavens, low heavens up on high, O how you hurt!
Once I believed in you, sharing my joy with you, my smile, my tear –
Who are not different from the ugly earth, that heap of dirt!*

*Away! Away! You have deceived us both, my people and my race.
You cheated us - eternally. My ancestors, my prophets, too, you have deceived.*

*To you, foremost, they lifted up their eyes, and you inspired their faith.
And full of faith they turned to you, when jubilant or grieved.*

*We're still resigned to others' happiness. Saving the world we still see as our task.
O why are you so beautiful, you skies, while we are being murdered, why are you so blue?*

*You heavens, high above, looked on when, day and night,
My people's little children were sent off to death, on foot, by train.
Millions of them raised high their hands to you before they died.
Their noble mothers could not shake your blue-skinned crust – they cried in vain.*

*You have no God in you! Open the doors, you heavens, fling them open wide,
And let the children of my murdered people enter in a stream.
Open the doors up for the great procession of the crucified,
The children of my people, all of them, each one a God – make room!*

Write a response to the poem around the following questions.

1. Why is this part of the poem addressed to the heavens?
2. What is his complaint to the heavens? What does he feel towards the world?
3. How does he believe the heavens should have reacted?
4. Write a description of the author's religious belief at the point of time that he writes the poem. Describe his feelings towards God.

Katznelson hoped that he and his son would survive but they were murdered when the Nazis entered the camp in mid-1944 and sent all the inmates to Auschwitz.

IV. MOSHE'S BIG QUESTION TO GOD

THE SCIENCE OF MORAL GENETICS AND THE EXPLANATION OF THE RIGHTEOUS WHO SUFFER צדיק ורע לו (TB Berachot 7a)

Our third Talmudic source seeks to adjust our expectations of justice in the world by re-examining the principle of the Ten Commandments that explains the suffering of the innocent in terms of the sins of their ancestors. This is a far more conservative approach than we have encountered in the last two sources and it involves complex calculations of the “genetic” element in explaining injustice. Unlike earlier sources this one grows out of Midrashic reading of a dramatic moment in Moshe’s life when he stood at Sinai to request forgiveness for Israel after the sin of the Golden Calf. Then God granted him an even more radical personal request – to learn about the inner logic of God’s mysterious ways of reward and punishment.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

There are three names mentioned in this Gemara. The main figure R. Yochanan was a great Palestinian Amora, born at the end of the 2nd century. Yochanan had a life of great personal misfortune, losing ten sons who died before him. He was also the brother in law and very close friend of Reish Lakish, mentioned in the previous piece. The latter’s death almost drove Yochanan insane. With a life history such as that, it would be strange indeed if he were not to be pre-occupied with issues of God’s justice and personal suffering. As one of the foremost scholars of his age, Yochanan had great influence and many scholars came to his Academy at Tiberias, even from Babylon. The person whose opinion he quotes here, R. Yosi (ben Halafta) died a few years before Yochanan’s birth. He himself was a disciple of R. Akiva and he fled to Babylon after R. Akiva’s martyrdom at the hands of the Romans. However, he returned to Palestine and became one of the great scholars of his generation. The third Rabbi, Meir was a contemporary of R. Yosi. Like him, he was both a disciple of Akiva and escaped to Babylon after the death of the latter as a martyr. Returning to Palestine he gained a reputation as the greatest of all the Tannaim after Akiva, and, like his master, he was very involved in the work of collecting and codifying the law.

GEMARA: MOSHE’S BIG QUESTION: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

**R. YOCHANAN SAID IN THE NAME OF R. YOSI:
THREE THINGS MOSES ASKED OF GOD AND THEY WERE GRANTED TO HIM.**

(1) HE ASKED THAT THE DIVINE PRESENCE SHOULD REST UPON ISRAEL, AND IT WAS GRANTED TO HIM. FOR IT IS SAID: “[How then will it be known that I have found favour in Your eyes] UNLESS YOU ACCOMPANY US” [Shemot 33:16].

(2) HE ASKED THAT THE DIVINE PRESENCE SHOULD NOT REST UPON THE OTHER NATIONS OF THE WORLD, AND IT WAS GRANTED TO HIM. FOR IT IS SAID: “AND I AND YOUR PEOPLE WILL BE MADE DISTINCT” [Shemot 33:16].

(3) HE ASKED THAT GOD SHOULD SHOW HIM GOD’S WAYS, [in dispensing justice] AND IT WAS GRANTED TO HIM. FOR IT IS SAID: “SHOW ME NOW YOUR WAYS” [Shemot 33:13].

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: AN AUDIENCE WITH GOD (Shemot 33: 13-20)

King Solomon once was asked by God in a dream: “Ask what I shall grant you?” (I Kings 3:5–14). Solomon chose wisdom. Ask the students the following question: If you were in a position to ask questions or to make requests from God about the world, what would those questions or requests be? If this is being done in class, we suggest that you bring some quiet background music and create a space for each student so that they can have the ability to think quietly and privately. The task is to list carefully and clearly up to two questions and up to two requests. These must be serious and they can not be personal (“Will I be rich, will I be poor?” or “Please make me rich” etc.).

Divide the class up into subgroups. Each group shares the questions of its members who have to explain why these are the questions and requests that they have chosen. Each group should take the questions and requests and try to divide them up into categories. What are the kinds of question or request that people have for God and what are the most frequent questions and requests that have come up? Discuss why these things might be the commonest of all?

This whole discussion is drawn from a passage in Shemot which occurs after the sin of the Golden Calf. Let us see the relevant passage as a whole.

Moses said to God, “If I have found favour in Your eyes, show me now Your ways, so I may know You and continue to find favour with You. Remember that this nation is Your people”.

God replied, “My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest”.

Then Moses said to God, “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How then will it be known that I and Your people have found favour in Your eyes unless You accompany us? And I and Your people will be made distinct from all the other people on the face of the earth.”

And God said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

And God said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, God, in your presence. “I shall show favour on whom I choose to show favour and I shall show mercy on whom I choose to show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live.”

Shemot 33: 13-20

MOSHE'S AUDIENCE WITH GOD

Moses is pleading with God for mercy for the People after their sin and the Gemara takes this as the opportunity to examine the question of divine justice. The idea here is clear: Moses was the ideal person who was rewarded for his righteousness by being given the chance for personal encounters with God. In this piece from Shemot there is an extended “discussion” between Moses and God and the Rabbis take the opportunity to interject into the dialogue an issue which was of great concern to them, namely the issue of **divine justice**. It must be remembered that the Rabbis lived in an age where they felt that the opportunity for direct contact with God had been taken from them. The age of prophecy had passed for them and they lived in the age of text. Therefore one way of trying to understand God’s world was to search the text for any hints that might be available to them to answer the questions that were of concern to them. This is exactly what they do in this divine dialogue. As far as they were concerned, Moses had been able to ask *their* questions and it was clear that this is what he would have done! When Moses requests of God, “make Your ways known to me” it is clear to the Rabbis that this is Moses’ way of asking the question that they would have asked in that situation, namely, to explain apparent contradictions in divine justice. For them, this was the burning issue.

GEMARA: MOSHE'S BIG QUESTION: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

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**(3) HE ASKED THAT GOD SHOULD SHOW HIM GOD'S WAYS, [in dispensing
justice] AND IT WAS GRANTED TO HIM. FOR IT IS SAID: “SHOW ME NOW
YOUR WAYS” [Shemot 33:13].**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. In the Mishnah, what are the three things that are on Moses' mind? Write them down in your own words. Which of them is a question and which a request?
2. Are these really Moses' questions or the Rabbis'? Which of the questions or requests would have been on Moses' mind and which on the Rabbis'? (n.b. It is not either/or!)
3. If we say that the third question could belong to both Moses and the Rabbis, would the background to the question be different for them? Would the Rabbis have reason to see the question differently? Why? Why not?
4. Was this question one of your questions in the introductory exercise? If so, why? If not, why not? What would be the background to you asking this kind of question to God?

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? – FIRST VERSION OF THE ANSWER

MOSES SAID TO GOD: LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, WHY IS IT THAT SOME RIGHTEOUS PROSPER AND OTHERS ARE IN ADVERSITY, SOME WICKED PROSPER AND OTHERS ARE IN ADVERSITY?

GOD REPLIED TO HIM:

MOSES, RIGHTEOUS WHO PROSPER ARE THE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF THE RIGHTEOUS; THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF THE WICKED. THE WICKED WHO PROSPER ARE WICKED CHILDREN OF THE RIGHTEOUS; THE WICKED WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE WICKED CHILDREN OF THE WICKED.

Here is the essential question: why do some righteous people prosper and others suffer? In other words, what are the principles of divine justice? How can it be that in what appear to be similar situations of merit, when we have two people regarding whom the principles of justice must be identical, their fates are very different. This is not the same question that was brought in the Braita in Kiddushin, where it was stated that in this world the righteous suffer and the evil flourish. There the issue was confusing because it appeared that the whole system was upside down, and the Chachamim tried to understand the principle of divine justice in a “topsy-turvy” world. Here the issue is consistency. Some people in both categories suffer, while others flourish. The question here is whether or not there is any kind of a system operating or whether the whole issue of divine justice is totally arbitrary. This would be an issue of great concern to the Rabbis.

The whole Rabbinic system, as we mentioned in connection with the discussion in Kiddushin, is based on the supposition that there is a rational system according to which God operates. The effort of the Rabbis is to try and discern the principles behind God’s system and to create a blueprint for life that will enable them to live – and to instruct others to live – the life that God wants. The proof that they have got their system right can only be in a consistent application of divine justice to the world of those who have bought into the system.

However, this clearly is not the case. There are individuals who suffer although according to the “system” they should prosper, while others in the same situation prosper. And the opposite phenomenon prevails too. צדיק ורע לו ורשע וטוב לו. This whole concern is put into Moses’ mouth and the divine answer comes in explanation. From God’s answer it becomes clear that the issue is one of what might be called “moral genetics”. It all goes back to the parents. The reward or punishment that is meted out to the children is in fact all connected to parental behaviour. If the parents were “good”, the children will benefit. If the parents were “bad”, the children will pay the price.

This is clearly a most problematic answer. It is saying that a person’s righteousness or good deeds may have no effect on the outcome for them, but will come to play in the next generations. But it confirms that there is indeed a principle at work here and those that accept this answer will be able to feel that they live in a moral universe where God’s principles of justice are in place. There is order. There is justice – even if the moral principle that is involved to make the system work is very problematic.

Once again, we suggest, as we did in relation to the discussion in Kiddushin, that the suggestion of such an answer – and the willingness to accept it – betrays a clear desperation on the part of the Chachamim. These are deeply religious men trying to understand the principles according to which life should be lived according to God’s will. Their search for coherence should be seen as a mark of the depth of their belief in a righteous and just God.

**GEMARA: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?
– FIRST VERSION OF THE ANSWER**

MOSES SAID TO GOD: LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, WHY IS IT THAT SOME RIGHTEOUS PROSPER AND OTHERS ARE IN ADVERSITY, SOME WICKED PROSPER AND OTHERS ARE IN ADVERSITY?

GOD REPLIED TO HIM:

MOSES, RIGHTEOUS WHO PROSPER ARE THE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF THE RIGHTEOUS; THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF THE WICKED.

THE WICKED WHO PROSPER ARE WICKED CHILDREN OF THE RIGHTEOUS; THE WICKED WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE WICKED CHILDREN OF THE WICKED.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Explain the answer that is given to Moses in this piece. Turn it into a diagram, with all the possibilities clearly drawn.
2. What problems, if any, do you have with the answer? Why does it tend to go against our modern sensibilities?
3. Is there any sense in which you can make sense of such an answer, that we are judged by the virtues or sins of our parents?
4. Do you think that the Rabbis would have been happy with this answer? In what ways, if any, yes? In what ways, if any, no?

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? SECOND VERSION OF THE ANSWER

THE [source above] SAID:

“RIGHTEOUS WHO PROSPER ARE THE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF THE RIGHTEOUS; THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF WICKED.” BUT IS THIS REALLY SO?

FOR WHILE ONE VERSE [regarding the Golden Calf] SAYS:

[“God does not leave the guilty unpunished] GOD PUNISHES THE CHILDREN FOR THE SINS OF THEIR ANCESTORS” [up to the third and four generation. (Shemot 34:7)]; ANOTHER VERSE SAYS: [“parents shall not be put to death on account of the sins of their children NEITHER SHALL THE CHILDREN BE PUT TO DEATH FOR THE SINS OF THEIR ANCESTORS - each is to die for his/her own sins.” (Devarim 24: 16)].

THERE IS A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THESE TWO VERSES. THE RESOLUTION OF THAT CONTRADICTION IS:

THE ONE VERSE DEALS WITH CHILDREN WHO CONTINUE IN THE SAME COURSE AS THEIR ANCESTORS AND THE OTHER VERSE WITH CHILDREN WHO DO NOT CONTINUE IN THE COURSE OF THEIR ANCESTORS.

Here we have an Amoraic objection based on a contradiction between two verses establishing incompatible standards for Divinely sanctioned punishment of the innocent children of sinful parents. It is clear that there would be many who would have a principled as well as a consistency problem with the principle suggested above. The way the objection is made is by showing the contradiction between the two quotations that are brought from Shemot and Devarim. The quotations themselves are taken from different contexts. The quotation from Shemot is taken from the description of God’s characteristics and virtues that we ritually recite on Yom Kippur. The idea of punishment through the generations is here brought up after the sin of the Golden Calf. The piece from Devarim comes in a discussion of the laws of the legal system that will be binding on the people’s judicial system.

As a response, the solution is that retribution according to the sins of the parents is only operative in the case of a person who has continued the sins of the parents without making a conscious decision to change. In that case that person is indeed punished for the parental sins - but only if they are also their own.

GEMARA: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? –SECOND VERSION OF THE ANSWER

THE [source above] SAID:

“RIGHTEOUS WHO PROSPER ARE THE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF THE RIGHTEOUS; THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN OF WICKED.”

BUT IS THIS REALLY SO?

FOR WHILE ONE VERSE [regarding the Golden Calf] SAYS:

[“God does not leave the guilty unpunished] GOD PUNISHES THE CHILDREN FOR THE SINS OF THEIR ANCESTORS [up to the third and four generation. (Shemot 34:7)];

ANOTHER VERSE SAYS: [“parents shall not be put to death on account of the sins of their children NEITHER SHALL THE CHILDREN BE PUT TO DEATH FOR THE SINS OF THEIR ANCESTORS - each is to die for his/her own sins.” (Devarim 24: 16)].

THERE IS A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THESE TWO VERSES.

THE RESOLUTION OF THAT CONTRADICTION IS: THE ONE VERSE DEALS WITH CHILDREN WHO CONTINUE IN THE SAME COURSE AS THEIR ANCESTORS AND THE OTHER VERSE WITH CHILDREN WHO DO NOT CONTINUE IN THE COURSE OF THEIR ANCESTORS.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. The Gemara shows that the Torah itself seems inconsistent regarding the legitimacy of visiting the sins of the ancestors on the children. What is the difference between these two verses? What does this whole piece tell us about the feelings of the Gemara towards the previous answer?
2. Can you explain the new answer? What might be problematic even with the second answer?

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Divide the class into small groups. Each group can choose one of the following sayings.

“The apple never falls far from the tree”.

“Like father like son”.

“Like mother like daughter”.

They have to prepare and perform a small scene that represents their ‘take’ on the saying that they have chosen. They can do it in such a way that they endorse the sentiment or they can undermine it critically and turn the scene around to provide an

ironic comment on the saying. Ultimately, they are using the saying of their choice to make a statement on their feelings towards the idea.

After each presentation, the rest of the class should discuss the attitude portrayed, and the group should confirm or explain differently, how they have taken the saying.

This should lead into a final discussion about heredity and environment – “nature and nurture” and whether the group relates to such ideas as positive or negative. Finally, lead things back to the text of the Gemara and conclude.

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? – THIRD VERSION OF THE ANSWER

[Let us therefore reconstruct the answer attributed to God to read:] **THE LORD SAID THUS TO MOSES: RIGHTEOUS WHO PROSPER ARE ONLY THE PERFECTLY RIGHTEOUS. THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE *NOT* PERFECTLY RIGHTEOUS. THE WICKED WHO PROSPER ARE NOT PERFECTLY WICKED. THE WICKED WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE PERFECTLY WICKED.**

In this piece we now have a development away from the whole parental argument. Parents are taken out of the picture and we have a return to the argument advanced by Abaye in the discussion which led to the “rickety ladder” idea. We recall that Abaye advanced the idea of the “good day” and the “bad day” that was understood as follows. This world is only here as a preparation for the world-to-come and from the point of view of reward and punishment, the role of this world is to “clean the slate” in preparation for the world-to-come where the real reward or punishment takes place.

In other words, a generally good person is punished for his or her sins in this world so that in the world-to-come they will be freed up for their real reward. A generally bad person is rewarded for their few good deeds in this world so that they will be able to get their punishment in the world-to-come. From this point of view a “good day” or a “bad day” is the this-worldly fate. Good people get “bad days” in this world, bad people get “good days” in this world. This is the meaning of the Gemara here, too. A totally good person will get their reward both here and in the world-to-come. A totally bad person will have the same fate. But for people in the middle, the role of this world is to wipe the slate clean, punishing the righteous and rewarding the not so righteous, so that the ultimate justice will come in the next world when the rest of the account has been settled. What we have here, then, is an attempt to preserve the idea of God’s justice, and the concept of consistency in the application of that justice, in a way that keeps individual responsibility at the centre of the picture, rather than resorting to parental good or evil.

So far we have had three attempts to preserve the integrity of the system. Two involved parents, one did not. All three explained in various ways, the rational concept of justice in this world. All three say that there is a logic to the system that can be divined by human beings. Justice is not arbitrary and even where it looks on the face of things to be contrary to what we might expect in a specific case, that is because there is a more complex principle at work than the simple Noachide principle. According to this, it is perfectly possible for a Tzaddik to have a bad time in this world, either because of principle A, or principle B or principle C. They argue about which principle is in place, but nobody doubts that there is a principle at work! Moses might have heard one explanation or another: he might have understood the explanation one way or another way – but an explanation was given as Moses requested. R. Yochanan was right.

**GEMARA: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? –
THIRD VERSION OF THE ANSWER**

[Let us therefore reconstruct the answer attributed to God to read:]

**THE LORD SAID THUS TO MOSES: RIGHTEOUS WHO PROSPER ARE ONLY
THE PERFECTLY RIGHTEOUS. THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY
ARE *NOT* PERFECTLY RIGHTEOUS.**

**THE WICKED WHO PROSPER ARE NOT PERFECTLY WICKED.
THE WICKED WHO ARE IN ADVERSITY ARE PERFECTLY WICKED.**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Here we are given a third explanation. It throws us back to the discussion that we had in Kiddushin. If we say that this third explanation reflects Abaye's position in the excerpt from Kiddushin, how can the answer be understood?
2. The three explanations are all different but they have something in common. What is the common principle underlying all three Rabbinic explanations up to now?

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? – FOURTH VERSION OF THE ANSWER

NOW THIS (saying of R. Yochanan) IS IN OPPOSITION TO THE SAYING OF R. MEIR. FOR R. MEIR SAID: ONLY TWO (requests) WERE GRANTED TO HIM [MOSHE] AND ONE WAS NOT GRANTED TO HIM.

FOR IT IS SAID: “AND I WILL SHOW FAVOUR ON WHOM I CHOOSE TO SHOW FAVOUR” [Shemot 33:19] EVEN THOUGH ONE MAY NOT DESERVE IT. “AND I WILL SHOW MERCY ON WHOM I CHOOSE TO SHOW MERCY” [the continuation of the same sentence] EVEN THOUGH ONE MAY NOT DESERVE IT. “YOU CANNOT SEE MY FACE, [for no one may see Me and live]. [Shemot 33:20]”

Now another opinion is given and this one is in a different direction from the other three. This is the opinion of R. Meir, the great Tanna from the generation after the destruction. R. Meir was the contemporary of R. Akiva and the teacher of Elisha ben Abuya – Acher – whom we met previously. Rabbi, Meir was a contemporary of R. Yosi. Like him, he was both a disciple of Akiva and escaped to Babylon after the death of the latter as a martyr. Returning to Palestine he gained a reputation as the greatest of all the Tannaim after Akiva, and, like his master, he was very involved in the work of collecting and codifying the law. Rabbi Meir who was married to the scholarly woman Bruria also suffered a terrible personal tragedy – the death of his two sons on one day.

Rabbi Meir's Braita is brought and for the first time in this discussion, we have a contradiction to the opinion of R. Yochanan. It is true that Moses requested three things but he only received responses to his first two requests. The third request - that God should show Moses God's ways – i.e. God's system of justice – went **unanswered**, according to R. Meir. He brings another piece of the same description in Shemot 33, to prove his point. “I shall show favour when I choose to show favour and I shall show mercy when I choose to show mercy.”

This goes totally against the direction of the discussion up till now, not just in the specifics of the answer but in the whole underlying assumption. God does not dispense justice according to rational principles that can be calculated and assessed by human beings. God “works in mysterious ways”, ways that are known only to God. God is not bound by the rational categories that people have created in order to understand God: rather God acts alone, without reference to human logic. In other words, Moses' attempt to understand God and God's ways ended in failure. The rule encapsulated in Shemot 33:20 – that no-one shall see God's face, was true for Moses too. Even Moses, the man who more than any other was vouchsafed a nearness to God that included direct dialogue and interaction, was unable to penetrate this layer and to get a response to the issue of divine justice. This ultimately must remain a mystery forever. **All attempts to understand God's justice through the use of human reason and logic will always fail. This, of course, takes us back to Job. All we are left with according to R. Meir is the divine mystery.**

Thus we have heard here in this discussion four different opinions, all presented through the medium of the discussion between Moses and God in the wake of the Golden Calf episode.

1. This worldly reward and punishment is rational. It depends on the sins or merits of the previous generation. To understand the system it is necessary to look at the parents rather than the children. If they were good, there will be this worldly reward: if they were bad, there will be this worldly punishment. The individual plays no part in determining his or her own reward or punishment.
2. This worldly reward and punishment is rational. It depends on the sins or merits of the previous generation and on the way that the individual in question reacted to his or her heritage. Retribution according to the sins of the parents is only operative in the case of a person who has continued the sins of the parents without making a conscious decision to change.

3. This worldly reward and punishment is rational. It has nothing to do with the previous generation but is rather directly connected with the actions of the individual. In the case of the wholly good or bad, it appears in this world as we might expect. The righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. In the case, however, of the vast majority of people who are neither wholly good nor bad, it operates in the opposite way to what we might expect. The good suffer and the evil prosper, in order to clean the slate for the world-to-come.

4. This worldly reward and punishment is not rational. It cannot be explained by reference to any human principle. It is based on a divine principle of justice which is known - and knowable - only to God. All human attempts to penetrate the logic of divine justice are doomed to failure. Even Moses failed. Divine justice is a divine mystery.

**GEMARA: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER? –
FOURTH VERSION OF THE ANSWER**

NOW THIS (saying of R. Yochanan) **IS IN OPPOSITION OF THE SAYING OF R. MEIR.**

FOR R. MEIR SAID: ONLY TWO (requests) WERE GRANTED TO HIM [MOSHE] AND ONE WAS NOT GRANTED TO HIM.

FOR IT IS SAID: “AND I WILL SHOW FAVOUR ON WHOM I CHOOSE TO SHOW FAVOUR” [Shemot 33:19] EVEN THOUGH ONE MAY NOT DESERVE IT.

“AND I WILL SHOW MERCY ON WHOM I CHOOSE TO SHOW MERCY” [the continuation of the same sentence] EVEN THOUGH ONE MAY NOT DESERVE IT.

“YOU CANNOT SEE MY FACE, [for no one may see Me and live]. [Shemot 33:20]”

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. R. Meir understands the whole issue in a totally different way. How has he interpreted the discussion between Moses and God in a different way?
2. How might his views be influenced by the following story told about him, his wife and the death of his two sons?

It happened that while R. Meir was expounding in the house of study on a Sabbath afternoon, his two sons died. What did their mother, Beruria, do? She put them both on a couch and spread a sheet over them.

At the end of the Sabbath, R. Meir returned home from the house of study and asked, “Where are my two sons? She replied, “they went to the house of study”. R. Meir said “I looked for them there but did not see them.”

Then she gave him the cup for Havdalah, and he pronounced the blessing. Again he asked: “Where are my two sons?” She replied, “They went to such-and-such a place and will be back soon.” Then she brought food for him. After he had eaten, she said, “My teacher, I have a question.” R. Meir responded: “Ask your question.” She said the following: “My teacher, a while ago a man came and deposited something in my keeping. Now he has come back to claim what he left. Shall I return it to him or not?” R. Meir replied: “My daughter, is not one who holds a deposit required to return it to its owner?” She said: “Still, without your opinion, I would not have returned it.”

Then what did she do? She took R. Meir by his hand, led him up to the chamber, and brought him near the couch. Then she pulled off the sheet that covered them, and he saw that both children lying on the couch were dead. He began to weep and say, “My sons, my sons, my teachers, my teachers. My sons in the way of the world, but my teachers because they illumined my eyes with their understanding of Torah.” Then she came out with: “My teacher, did you not say to me that we are required to restore to the owner what is left with us in trust? “The Lord gave, the Lord took. May the Name of the Lord be blessed” (Job 1:21) (Midrash Proverbs 31:10 on Eishet Hayil)

3. In what way does the answer of R. Meir differentiate his position from all of the three other positions by resort to a different principle? Have we met this position before?
4. Do you think R. Meir's answer would be a popular one among the Rabbis? Why?
5. We have met four positions. Write each position briefly and next to it write your own reflections on that position.
6. Read another source about God's conversation with Moses on Sinai and about Rabbi Meir's teacher Rabbi Akiba. To which of the four positions is it most similar? Does this view appeal to you? Why or why not?

R. Judah said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One affixing crowns to letters of the Torah [i.e. adding decorative flourishes to the writing of the letters of the Torah in the way of scribes]. Moses asked, "Lord of the universe, why use crowns to hint at what You wish? Who hinders Your hand from writing out in full all of Torah's precepts?" God replied, "at the end of many generations there will arise a man, Akiva ben Joseph by name, who will infer heaps and heaps of laws from each line on these crowns." "Lord of the universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him." God replied, "Turn around."

Moses found himself in a study house where R. Akiva was teaching Torah. He went and sat down behind eight rows of R. Akiva's disciples and listened to the discussions on Torah. Not being able to follow what they were saying, he was so distressed that he grew faint. But when they came to a certain subject and the disciples asked R. Akiva, "Master, where did you learn this?" and R. Akiva replied, "It is a law given to Moses at Sinai," Moses was reassured.

He returned to the Holy One and said, "Lord of the universe, You have such a man, yet You give the Torah not by his hand but by mine?" God replied, "Be silent – thus has it come to My mind." Then Moses said, "Lord of the universe, You have shown me his Torah – now show me his reward." "Turn around," said God. Moses turned around and saw R. Akiva's flesh being weighed out in a meat market [i.e. he saw what happened to Akiva's body after his very cruel death at the hands of the Romans]. "Lord of the universe," Moses cried out in protest, "such Torah, and such is its reward?" God replied, "Be silent – thus has it come to My mind."

T.B. Menachot 29b

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL EXERCISE: Interviewing Rabbi Meir

Organise an interview programme where the guest is Rabbi Meir. The programme is one of a series that aims to discover the reasons for major Jewish thinkers arriving at their understanding of God and the world. R. Meir is being interviewed by a panel to find out his views on divine justice. The interviewers should use the two stories (of the death of R. Akiva and the death of R. Meir's sons) in order to probe the Rabbi's point of view. R. Meir should explain the connection, if any, between the stories and his opinion as represented in our Gemara. Other guests and interviewees can certainly be invited if they are felt to be able to shed light on the issue. All the "actors" should do a little research on the figure and the life of R. Meir before the programme.

**V. GOD IS NOT INDIFFERENT:
SUFFERING AS A SIGN OF DIVINE LOVE (TB Berachot 5a) –
יסורין של אהבה**

The views of *Olam Kminhago Noheig* and Rabbi Meir offer us little consolation in contemplating a world neutral to ethical issues. In fact God seems to be indifferent altogether to human fate. That later impression may be more devastating than lack of justice. The next response separates the issue of evil from indifference. It will introduce us to a strange new category of – יסורין של אהבה – suffering as a sign of God's love.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The whole Gemara is brought in one name but there is confusion as to which of the two Babylonian Amoraim of the third to the fourth century. – Rav Hisda or Rava. Hisda was older than Rava and was the latter's teacher when he served as the head of the great Yeshiva at Sura where Rava – twenty to thirty years younger – was a student.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: ACCOUNTING FOR OUR SINS

The students should be asked to write at home for their eyes only, a personal letter to themselves, in which they will examine their deeds over the last year. This חשבון נפש – (literally an “account of the soul”) should be done very seriously. The students should concentrate especially on the following question: “Were there any bad things that happened to you that you feel that you did not deserve?”

Alternatively, they should think of the following question. “Can you think of a friend who suddenly abandoned you and stopped relating to you at all? At that time did you conduct a thorough accounting of your behaviour to see whether you did something wrong? Would you prefer that the ex-friend abandoned you for no reason or because you deserved it? Do you still care about that friend and want the friend to care about you even if you were treated unfairly or arbitrarily? Or do you prefer to cut off relations and even maintain anger at being ignored for no good reason?”

In class, following this, the students should be asked to talk – not about the content of what they wrote – but rather about the experience of writing it and the general mixed feelings that arose. Is it important to examine one's actions in such situations? Explain the meaning of the term חשבון נפש. Is it a good phrase to describe this kind of a process?

GEMARA: (SOUL) SEARCHING FOR REASONS.

RAVA – AND SOME SAY R. HISDA – SAYS: IF A PERSON SEES THAT AFFLICTIONS ARE BEFALLING THEM, THEY SHOULD EXAMINE THEIR DEEDS. FOR IT IS SAID “LET US SEARCH AND EXAMINE OUR WAYS AND RETURN TO GOD” [Eicha 3:40].

IF THE PERSON EXAMINES AND FINDS NOTHING [that would explain the suffering], LET THEM ATTRIBUTE IT TO THE NEGLECT OF THE STUDY OF TORAH, AS IT IS SAID “LUCKY IS THE PERSON WHOM GOD AFFLICTS AND WHOM YOU TEACH FROM YOUR TORAH” [Psalm 94:12].

This Gemara starts off with a typical Noachide formulation. A person who undergoes suffering should examine their own deeds in order to see the reasons for the sufferings. It is evident that a clear connection of cause-and-effect exists between behaviour and suffering. Thus a person who suffers must examine their behaviour.

Following this, Rava (or R. Hisda) turns to the possibility that a person examines their deeds and fails to find a problem. Obviously this takes us to the realm of the exceptional person, since any ordinary person will have no problem coming up with a long list of deeds that could and should be atoned for. We have now turned to a special category of people, the extremely righteous and are continuing to ask the same question that was asked in the previous discussion from Brachot – why do the truly righteous suffer? The answer given here is an interesting and clever answer that goes very well with the general world-view of the Rabbis.

If a righteous person can come up with no other answer for their suffering, they should pin that suffering on the cause of not having studied enough Torah. This is a clever answer because it is always irrefutable. Every Jew could always spend more time in the study of Torah. Not only the person who spends an hour a month can improve the time that they give to Torah. The person who spends twelve hours a day could also improve by spending thirteen hours a day and the person who spends thirteen hours can always find an extra hour – at least in theory! Thus this is an answer which can serve well every time there is a need to explain suffering that can not be explained in any other way. It is also an excellent tool for the Rabbis since the acceptance and internalisation of this idea by the public could lead to increased study of Torah and a commitment of everyone to try and increase the time spent in studying. That would be excellent for the Rabbis who are a group based around an ideology of studying Torah as a virtuous act of serving God.

Nevertheless, despite finding such a perfect answer, it is clear that this is not an answer which totally satisfies Rava (or Rav Hisda). It is similar from this point of view to the answer given by the Rabbis to the pagan philosophers in Tractate Avodah Zarah. We said then that the Rabbis give an answer which apparently satisfies the pagans since they disappear from the discussion. However, it clearly did not satisfy the Rabbis themselves, because the internal discussion continued and finally came to a totally different answer to the one that had satisfied the pagans. It seems that we have a similar phenomenon here. The answer of בִּיטוּל תּוֹרָה is a great and foolproof answer which serves the Rabbinic agenda but the statement continues suggesting that the speaker himself was unhappy with the explanation.

GEMARA: (SOUL) SEARCHING FOR REASONS.

RAVA – AND SOME SAY R. HISDA – SAYS: IF A PERSON SEES THAT AFFLICTIONS ARE BEFALLING THEM, THEY SHOULD EXAMINE THEIR DEEDS. FOR IT IS SAID “LET US SEARCH AND EXAMINE OUR WAYS AND RETURN TO GOD” [Eicha 3:40].

IF THE PERSON EXAMINES AND FINDS NOTHING [that would explain the suffering], LET THEM ATTRIBUTE IT TO THE NEGLIGENCE OF THE STUDY OF TORAH, AS IT IS SAID “LUCKY IS THE PERSON WHOM GOD AFFLICTS AND WHOM YOU TEACH FROM YOUR TORAH” [Psalm 94:12].

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. The piece starts off by saying that a person who is having a very bad time should engage in a process of **חשבון נפש**, examining their deeds. Why should they do this? What will they gain from such a process? Will it change their bad situation?
2. What is the ideological position of the Rabbis that underlies this suggestion for self-examination?
3. Is it possible that a person will search and find nothing that would explain the suffering according to the underlying ideology of the piece? What sort of a person, if any, do you think the text now begins to talk of?
4. Why is the answer of **ביטול תורה** – neglect of the study of Torah – such a clever answer from the Rabbinic point of view for people in this category?

SUFFERINGS OF LOVE

AND IF A PERSON DOES EXAMINE [the possibility that their suffering is caused by a neglect of Torah but] **DID NOT FIND** [this to be an adequate explanation],
LET THAT PERSON ASSUME THAT THESE ARE “SUFFERINGS OF LOVE” יסורים של אהבה - **AS IT IS STATED “FOR GOD REBUKES THE ONE THAT GOD LOVES”** [Mishlei 3:12].

Despite the theoretically foolproof nature of the answer of ביטול תורה there are some people for whom the answer simply will not work. Let us remember our context: we are, by definition, at this point talking about the “super righteous” the ones that find it hard to come up with any personal sins of their own. We are not talking about the “once-a-monthers”, we are talking about those who are truly righteous and who, therefore, by Rabbinic definition, spend an enormous amount of time studying Torah. It cannot be thought seriously that these are going to be divinely reprimanded for not spending even more of their time in study. The attribution of these people’s sufferings to neglect of Torah is simply not a convincing idea. And so the discussion has to change direction. It can go no further in this direction. To avoid a dead end, another avenue of thought in a different direction must be opened up. Now it would be possible to open up any of the other models that we have examined in other texts, but significantly Rava does not do this. Instead, taking a lead from a phrase in Mishlei, a whole new idea is introduced. Suffering is not necessarily a sign of God’s displeasure. It should not necessarily be seen as punishment – as it has been in all of the texts up till now. It can be seen as a sign of God’s love.

This is a major **paradigm shift**. Up to now, as we have seen, suffering has been seen in accordance with the Noachide model of reward and punishment in reaction to human behaviour. But now we are being given a brand new idea, which on the face of it is both strange and contradictory. **Why on earth should people of exemplary behaviour – the truly righteous – be afflicted with suffering as a sign of God’s special love for them?** If we were to encounter an explanation like this in the world of human interactions, we would naturally think that there is something extremely sick about such behaviour. Can we conceive of a healthy situation whereby a person shows his or her love by deliberately inflicting suffering on the object of their love? But in order to try and understand this direction of thought it is clear that we must depart from all thought of human parallels as we try and fathom the meaning of the idea behind the phrase.

Let us examine several responses to this paradoxical text:

A. RASHI (Ashkenaz 11th century) explained that the idea is that God afflicts the righteous with suffering in order to increase their reward in the world-to-come. According to this idea, the normal reward that good people get in the world-to-come is simply not sufficient for the truly righteous: they need an extra reward and this is given in compensation for the suffering that they have endured on earth. The more suffering now, the more **delayed gratification** later.

B. The RAMBAN (Spain 13th century) goes in a different direction. He introduces the idea of sins that are committed inadvertently without the conscious knowledge of the person in question. It is for these sins of the righteous that the category of יסורים של אהבה is introduced. God’s love for such people brings God to want to pave the way to their perfect reward in the world-to-come. Since they cannot atone for these sins (because they have no knowledge of them), God makes them pay here in this world and so prepares for a perfect future in the next world. This of course, reintroduces us to an idea that we have already met twice. The difference here is Ramban’s category of the inadvertent misdeeds of the righteous and the idea that what appears to be punishment comes out of a special and conscious concern on the part of God that these people be fully rewarded. This comes out of love.

C. The MAHARAL (Prague, 16th/17th century) talks of God’s love expressing itself in God’s decision to cleanse the most righteous of the taint of physicality and corporeality in order to raise them to a

higher spiritual level. This will enable them – once again in the world-to-come – to reach the full reward that only those of the most exalted spiritual level are allowed to attain.

All of these ideas offer variations on the theme of the world-to-come that we have encountered and use the phrase יסורין של אהבה to explore specific applications of that idea. For many modern people, the idea of the world-to-come might be intellectually interesting but will not speak to them in meaningful personal terms. This begs the question: Is there a way in which the idea of God inflicting suffering upon the righteous out of a sense of love, can speak to people who do not want to invoke the idea of the world-to-come? Is there a way of understanding the concept so that it can have value in a this-worldly belief system?

D. JEWS IN THE CRUSADES invoke the idea of suffering as a **test**, as a נסיון for a righteous person. The idea became very popular in the Middle Ages, in Ashkenaz, as that great Jewish society underwent a series of incredibly hard blows from the time of the First Crusade at the end of the 11th century. Thousands died in the anti-Jewish riots of this Crusade. Whole communities were destroyed. This was only the beginning. In the next three to four centuries, the murderous violence hit the communities of Ashkenaz in waves at least once a generation. Every few years more blood was spilled in the community that historians believe to have been perhaps the most scholarly community that the Jewish People ever produced.

Over the years a large literature was produced in a number of different genres, describing, or responding to the terrible violence that surrounded the whole community. And at this time, in this literature, we begin to see the emergence of a new explanation for the suffering. The idea of punishment begins to be relegated to a place on the back-burner. It clearly does not answer the needs of these generations. No community sins could possibly justify a punishment such as this. Thus a new paradigm begins to emerge from the wings, until it finally fills almost the entire stage as the dominant explanation pushing any other explanation to a marginal place. This is the paradigm of the trial. The idea that God is testing the Jewish People to see if they are indeed as faithful as they appear to be. It is of course a paradigm that draws on Job although, interestingly and significantly, in the literature of the time, they present their model as the Akedah – the binding of Isaac. They see themselves as a generation on trial for faith. They are Abraham and they are Isaac at one and the same time. They themselves are being tested and they are also the sacrifice. And thus we have for the first time that we know of in Jewish history a whole community that sees itself being tested by God.

And what does it avail a community or an individual to see itself as being tested as opposed to being punished? What benefit accrues to an individual who passes the test of suffering? The idea of the test as a refining principle, as something which actually changes and improves the individual, is an important and fertile idea that can be employed here in relation to יסורין של אהבה. Let us look at this comment on the Akedah from the great early fifteenth Spanish Jewish thinker, R. Yosef Albo :

Should you ask, since God knew whether Abraham would withstand his trial or not, what was the reason for imposing on him these things, the answer is as follows. The reward for potential good is not the same as for actual good deeds...He who has not performed bold deeds, but who is prepared for battle can not be compared to the one who has actually fought and performed these deeds. For this reason, God often inflicts suffering on the righteous in order that...their outward actions conform to the potential of their inner character. The deed will intensify love of God since every action leaves its own indelible mark on the performer.

A test is something that can change and improve an individual. A person who has gone through hardship and suffering is not the same person that he or she was before that suffering. Suffering offers an opportunity for growth to those people who have the potential inside them, and God sends that suffering in order to enable that potential to be realised, says Albo. Interestingly, Albo might well be talking out of bitter personal experience when he makes this reflection. We talked earlier of the phenomenon of the religious disputation or debate which essentially put the Jews on trial for their

Judaism. Albo was present at one of the most difficult of all the medieval religious disputations, the Disputation of Tortosa, which was designed to effect a mass conversion among the Jews of Spain in 1413-14. Enormous pressure was put on the Jews to convert to Christianity. To a man like Albo, this must have been seen as both a personal and a collective trial.

Albo draws close here to the idea put forward in Mishlei in the text quoted in our Gemara. Proverbs 3:12 explains punishment may be a form of **corrective education**. Only the loving parent or teacher will bother to correct someone – rebuking them in words and actions in order to urge them to change their ways before it is too late. In those cases our suffering is a result of love and we must respond with Heshbon Nefesh.

Thus in this Gemara we have gained another set of arguments connected to a new idea that of יסורים של - אלהים the sufferings that come from the love of God for the righteous. We have seen how some of the explanations of this phrase employed the idea of the world-to-come and gave us slight variations on concepts that we have previously examined. The idea of sufferings being something that allow for spiritual and personal growth in this world, and that contribute to the individual, however, is a new idea.

GEMARA: SUFFERINGS OF LOVE

AND IF A PERSON DOES EXAMINE [the possibility that their suffering is caused by a neglect of Torah but] **DID NOT FIND** [this to be an adequate explanation], **LET THAT PERSON ASSUME THAT THESE ARE “SUFFERINGS OF LOVE”** - יסורין של אהבה - **AS IT IS STATED* FOR GOD REBUKES THE ONE THAT GOD LOVES”** [Mishlei 3:12].

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What do you think the Rabbis might mean by the phrase - יסורין של אהבה - sufferings of love ?
2. In your opinion is there any way that suffering can be seen as a blessing?
3. Look at the following piece from R. Yosef Albo, an important Spanish-Jewish thinker from the fifteenth century. It gives a perspective on the familiar story of the binding of Isaac – the עקדה.

Should you ask, since God knew whether Abraham would withstand his trial or not, what was the reason for imposing on him these things, the answer is as follows. The reward for potential good is not the same as for actual good deeds...He who has not performed bold deeds, but who is prepared for battle can not be compared to the one who has actually fought and performed these deeds. For this reason, God often inflicts suffering on the righteous in order that...their outward actions conform to the potential of their inner character. The deed will intensify love of God since every action leaves its own indelible mark on the performer.

4. Does Albo believe that people can gain from suffering?
5. In what ways does he believe that a person tends to gain from his or her suffering?
6. Do you think he means that people should actively court suffering in order to grow? How is this different than taking pleasure in pain i.e. masochism?

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Every student should try and think of a time when she or he was “improved” or changed for the better through some difficult event that they went through. If they can identify any such occurrence, they should take that as the basis of a story or a monologue or a picture that they should create. If they cannot locate such a personal occurrence, or do not wish to use their own personal experience, they should invent a story as the basis of such a change. After presenting the stories or monologues or pictures (or any other form such as dance, sculpture etc), a discussion should develop regarding the ideas presented by Albo. Can suffering, in the view of the group, ever be really beneficial for the individual?

SUFFERING FOR THE GOOD THINGS IN LIFE

IT HAS BEEN TAUGHT:

R. SHIMON BAR YOCHAI SAYS: GOD GAVE ISRAEL THREE PRECIOUS GIFTS AND ALL OF THEM WERE GIVEN ONLY THROUGH SUFFERING. THESE ARE THE TORAH, THE LAND OF ISRAEL AND THE WORLD TO COME.

WHERE DO WE KNOW OF THIS REGARDING THE TORAH? BECAUSE IT IS SAID: “BLESSED IS THE PERSON THAT YOU DISCIPLINE, GOD, THE PERSON YOU TEACH FROM YOUR LAW” [Tehillim 94:10].

WHERE DO WE KNOW OF THIS REGARDING THE LAND OF ISRAEL? BECAUSE IT IS SAID: “AS A PERSON DISCIPLINES THEIR CHILD, SO GOD DISCIPLINES YOU” [Devarim 8:5] AND AFTER THAT IT IS WRITTEN “FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD BRINGS YOU INTO A GOOD LAND” [Devarim 8:7].

WHERE DO WE KNOW OF THIS REGARDING THE WORLD TO COME? BECAUSE IT IS SAID “THE COMMANDMENT IS A LAMP AND TORAH IS LIGHT AND THE CORRECTIONS OF DISCIPLINE ARE THE WAY TO LIFE” [Mishlei 6:23 - here life is understood as a metaphor for the world to come].

In the continuation of the Gemara we find the above piece from Shimon bar Yochai who gives an interesting reading of the idea of יסורין של אהבה. Up to now the discussion has been conducted in terms of the individual. It is for those specific people who cannot account for their sufferings by reference to sin, that the category of יסורין של אהבה has been created. Now however, the discussion shifts and R. Shimon brings in a collective dimension to the idea. Three specific gifts have been given by God to the Jewish People and each of them has come at great cost. There is no denying that each of these things – the Torah, the Land of Israel and the world to come – are seen as great and wonderful gifts, but a tremendous price has been paid for them by the Jewish People, according to R. Shimon. The great benefits, he seems to be suggesting, do not come without the necessity of paying a very high price. Collective Jewish suffering has meaning. It is not arbitrary. It is the price paid for the great things that God presented to the Jews and, he implies, who would not be willing to pay a price like this for the great things that the Jews have been given? He does not say why a price has to be paid for these things. Maybe he has a concept that the Jews had to prove – and continue to have to prove – their worthiness of the gifts that they have been given. In any case, we have here a new idea: an extension of יסורין של אהבה to cover the case of the collective

GEMARA: SUFFERING FOR THE GOOD THINGS IN LIFE

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SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What is the new dimension of the idea of יסורין של אהבה that R. Shimon is offering us here?
2. How do you understand his comment that the Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to come were only given through suffering?
3. Concentrate on the category of Eretz Israel. Write a modern interpretation of the idea that Israel has been obtained by the Jews through suffering. Is there any way that the phrase makes sense to you in terms of what you know about Israel today?
4. There are people for whom important things in their life have only been obtained at enormous personal cost. Can you think of anything that is important to you in your own life or in the life of someone close to you that has been bought or obtained at the cost of suffering?

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL EXERCISE: Poem. “Oh God of Mercy”

The following poem by the Yiddish poetess, Kadia Molodowsky, was written in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. It tells of the desire of the writer to hand back to God the gift of chosenness that was given to the Jewish People. It has cost too much. The price of chosenness has been too high. It is time for someone else to take it on.

*Oh God of Mercy,
For the time being
Choose another People.
We are tired of death, tired of corpses.
We have no more prayers.
For the time being
Choose another People.
We have run out of blood
For victims,
Our houses have been turned into desert
The earth lacks space for tombstones.
There are no more lamentations,
Nor songs of woe
In the ancient texts.*

*God of Mercy,
Sanctify another land,
Another Sinai.
We have covered every field and stone
With ashes and holiness.
With our old women
With our young
With our infants
We have paid for each letter in your Commandments.
God of Mercy
Lift up your fiery brow,
Look on the Peoples of the world.
Let them have the prophecies and Holy Days
Who mumble your words in every tongue.
Teach them the Mitzvot
And the ways of temptation.*

God of Mercy

*To us give rough clothing
Of shepherds who tend sheep
Of blacksmiths at the hammer
Of washerwomen, cattle slaughterers
And lower still.
And God of Mercy,
Grant us one more blessing –
Take back the gift of our separateness.*

Kadya Molodowsky

In pairs, the students should improvise a dialogue between Kadya Molodowsky and Shimon Bar Yochai. What would they say to each other? What would Molodowsky say to the idea of *יסורין של אהבה*?

SUGGESTED FINAL ACTIVITY: ENNOBLED BY SUFFERING?

Reread the following piece by Yosef Albo.

Should you ask, since God knew whether Abraham would withstand his trial or not, what was the reason for imposing on him these things, the answer is as follows. The reward for potential good is not the same as for actual good deeds...He who has not performed bold deeds, but who is prepared for battle can not be compared to the one who has actually fought and performed these deeds. For this reason, God often inflicts suffering on the righteous in order that...their outward actions conform to the potential of their inner character. The deed will intensify love of God since every action leaves its own indelible mark on the performer.

Albo believes that people reach their full potential when they are tested by experience. He believes that the Abraham that came through the *עקדה* was different from the same Abraham before the experience. Presumably this is true, but the question of whether it was a better or nobler Abraham that came through or a bitter and broken man is perhaps not as clear as Albo would have us believe.

Choose Abraham or any other character in Jewish history who goes through some time of traumatic experience of at least temporary suffering and survives to tell the tale. Write a reflection from the point of view of the person some time after the traumatic events in question. They are asked to reflect on what the suffering that they went through has done to them. Has it changed them in any ways? How has it affected them psychologically and emotionally? Can they see any good fortune or benefit that has come to them as a result of their suffering? Have they gained or have they lost? In which ways?

VI. A THEOLOGY OF RESPONSE versus A THEOLOGY OF EXPLANATION

Modern Jewish Thought from Rabbis Soloveitchik, Heschel and Hartman

REVIEW OF RABBINIC PARADIGMS FOR EXPLAINING WHY THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER IN THIS WORLD

Up to now we have seen a number of attempts to explain the presence of evil in our world. We have mentioned that the Rabbis were living in a time where circumstances to a large extent pushed them in this direction. The paradox for them of living as part of what they saw as God's Chosen People while ruled over and humiliated by other nations would certainly be likely to bring them to explain their situation. Almost all the responses that we have examined so far, have led us in this direction.

We have seen many answers. We have seen that the **Noachide model** remained, for most, the paradigm through which the question of evil's existence was asked. We have moreover seen (as for example in case of the Rabbis who opposed R. Ya'akov in the first part of the "rickety ladder" text or in the case of R. Yochanan in his interpretation of Moshe's questions) that for many, this was indeed the explanation for evil. But we have also encountered some other explanations of varying degrees of radicalism and daring.

1. The **"world-to-come" idea** developed partly out of a need to provide an answer to those people who realised that there was injustice in the world but did not want to let go of the Noachide model of a rational and just God.
2. The **"rickety ladder"** introduced us to the idea that God did not necessarily intervene against natural circumstances and that nature was a partner to a virtuous God in establishing the fate of people and situations.
3. The עולם כמנהגו נוהג **Olam K'Minhago model** gave a much more radical reading of the situation. According to this idea, it will be recalled, God is virtually a prisoner in the world, powerless to impose a moral vision on a world where the forces of nature rule alone.
4. A final explanation was given in the last piece that we studied, where we heard the suggestion that God afflicts those that God loves with the **sufferings of love**. Great people, especially loved by God, are likely to be afflicted with terrible sorrows and troubles, as part of the love that God holds for them. All of these models of how God operates – or fails to operate - in the world were developed out of the Rabbinic need to understand the evils of the world in which they lived. This was a world that, at face value, appeared to contradict the idea of the righteous God who acted within the moral universe, to reward good and to punish evil.
5. In addition, it should be noted, we have met one opinion, that of R. Meir, who went against the Rabbinic tendency and followed a more **Jobian line** of saying that there are things that we can never understand and that we cannot know the way of God in our world.

With the exception of that last opinion, everything that we have met so far has been based on the idea that it is possible to know and to explain the presence of evil in our world. God works in ways that are comprehensible to humans because the world is essentially rational and God's work in the world is rational too. There are keys to understanding the way that God's world works and it is possible for humans to find the answers to the way that the world works. All they have to do is to find the right key and to turn it in the lock of God's world. By this metaphor what we have experienced so far is a group

of Rabbinic thinkers who are sitting around with a large bunch of keys, debating and arguing over which is the right key to unlock the problem of evil.

A LOGIC OF RESPONSE RATHER THAN OF EXPLANATION

However there is another approach and we started to touch it at the end of the last part of the discussion over the idea of יסורים של אהבה² - sufferings of love. This is the approach of those who cease to argue over the right key to use, and accept the fact that the door is locked .

For these thinkers, the fact that the door to a knowledge that gives a rational reason for suffering is locked to them is the springboard for a new approach that says, essentially, the following. We are not going to argue over the reason that the door is locked and whether or not there is a way to open it. What we must do is to decide how to respond to the fact of the locked door, how to react in the face of a world in which evil exists. For these thinkers **the essential need is not to explain but to respond, to work out how to behave and how to try and see a way forward in a world where the door is locked for ever.** There *is* evil in the world for whatever reason, say these thinkers. It is clear that *Olam K'Minhago* – עולם כמנהגו נוהג – that the world goes its own way and that we do not inhabit a universe where the righteous are rewarded or the evil punished. What can we learn and what can we do?

Modern Jewish Thinkers on Living with and Learning from Suffering

Let us look at the opinions of three modern Jewish thinkers, Rabbis Joseph Soloveitchik, Avraham Yehoshua Heschel and David Hartman to see how they focus on the question of response to the world in general and to the issues of suffering and evil that we have been examining. We open with **Rav Soloveitchik**.

Afflictions come to elevate a person, to purify and sanctify his spirit, to cleanse and purge it of the dross of superficiality and vulgarity, to refine his soul and to broaden his horizons. In a word the function of suffering is to mend that which is flawed in an individual's personality. The Halachah teaches us that the sufferer commits a grave sin if he allows his troubles to go to waste and to remain without meaning or purpose. Suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man...in order to redeem him from corruption, vulgarity and depravity. From out of its midst the sufferer must arise ennobled and refined, clean and pure...The agony itself will serve to form and shape his character so that he will, thereby, reach a level of exaltedness not possible in a world bereft of suffering.

Kol Dodi Dofek, in Reflections on the Holocaust p.56³

Suffering can lift a person to places that he or she could never attain without the “benefit” of suffering: so says Rav Soloveitchik. Suffering might be a terrible thing but it can be seen as **an opportunity for growth** that is unattainable without it. Suffering can be seen as God’s gift to the individual who can gain spiritually in unparalleled ways. These, it can be suggested, are precisely, the sufferings of love, יסורים של אהבה, that we saw in the last Rabbinic piece .

³ It should be noted that Soloveitchik comes out very strongly against the “theology of explanation”. In the same article from which the present quote is taken, he says the following:

Judaism determined that man, entrapped in the depths of a frozen, fate-laden existence, will seek in vain for the solution to the problem of evil within the framework of speculative thought, for he will never find it... We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty but rather, about the path wherein man may walk when suffering strikes. We ask neither about the cause of evil nor about its purpose, but rather how it might be mended and elevated... “Kol Dodi Dofek” in “Reflections on the Holocaust” pp. 53, 56

Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel has this to say.

Evil is not only a threat, it is also a challenge. Neither the recognition of the peril nor faith in the redemptive power of God is sufficient to solve the tragic predicament of the world. We cannot stem the tide of evil by taking refuge in Temples and Synagogues...by imploring...God. The mitzvah, the humble single act of serving God, of helping man, of cleansing the self, is our way of dealing with the problem. We do not know how to solve the problem of evil, but we are not exempt from dealing with evils...At the end of days, evil will be conquered by the One: in historic times, evils must be conquered one by one. Jewish tradition, though conscious of the perils and pitfalls of existence, is a constant reminder of the grand and everlasting opportunities to do the good. We are taught to love life in this world because of the possibilities of charity and sanctity, because of the many ways open to us in which to serve God.

Between God and Man, edited by F. Rothschild, p.196

We cannot deal with the question of evil, says Heschel. But we can deal with questions of evils and we have the responses to evils in the system of mitzvot around which the Jewish **way** of life and the Jewish **attitude** to life are constructed. We have the tools to respond: it is up to us to recognise that we have the tools and to decide to use them.

Rabbi David Hartman continues the same theme.

By utilising tragedy and suffering as a catalyst for active moral renewal, the Judaic tradition prevents political powerlessness from creating feelings of personal impotence and loss of self-esteem. If events in the larger world are unpredictable, if the nation is subject to the violence and whims of foreign rulers, the Rabbinic mind does not fall victim to despair, disillusionment and escapism, but rather focuses on the personal and communal as the framework to contain its activist dignity... The covenantal spirit of Sinai is crushed when a person feels paralysed to act. It is broadened and deepened, however, when it is discovered that suffering can energise us to strive actively for moral renewal...The emphasis on repentance as a response to suffering helps sustain the significance of mitzvah action by its focus on what I can do, what I am called upon to achieve.

Rabbi David Hartman, *A Living Covenant*, p.196

Here, what Hartman emphasises is the empowerment that can result from embracing the potential in suffering. If an individual responds constructively to suffering by seeing it as an opportunity offered to bring necessary introspection and improvement, then this can counteract the idea of being crushed by fate or by circumstances, both on the national and the individual levels. What Hartman does is to recognise the fact that acceptance of the Rabbinic principle of *העולם כמנהגו נוהג* - *HaOlam K'Minhago Noheig* can be a dangerous disincentive to an activist theology and can lead to a sense of fatalism and disempowerment for the individual. In an amoral world where the morality that we assign to God plays no part, how can the individual motivate him or herself to act in a way that is consonant with ethics and morality? This is the question that Hartman asks and the answer is that the individual can respond to the world and to suffering in the world with an activist agenda which prevents powerlessness and disillusionment from taking a hold.

What all three of these thinkers have tried to do is to place response to suffering in the place that explanations for suffering have largely held up to now. When Rav Soloveichik says that “suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man,” this should not be seen as any endorsement of suffering as something positive and desirable. Suffering is bad. However, if viewed from the point of view of what it does to a person – or what it *can* do to a person – it can be seen indeed as something which can have positive effects for an individual. **For all three thinkers, suffering can be a liberating experience, in that it can call forth a human response that can both elevate and enrich the individual who experiences it.** When Heschel says that the response cannot

be one of taking refuge in Temples and Synagogues and by imploring God from within the refuge of the Synagogue walls, he is seeking a personal response out in the world. It is in the human arena, out in the world, that the question of evil and suffering must be dealt with. When Hartman says that suffering can energise us to strive actively for moral renewal, he points both inwards and outwards, in our internal moral struggles and in our interactions within the world, as directions that people must seek as they respond to evil and suffering. Significantly, he does not point the finger upwards towards heaven. The struggle is fought by us, in this world.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: CHANGING DIRECTION

Take the following three texts by Rabbis Soloveichik, Heschel and Hartman and read them carefully.

Afflictions come to elevate a person, to purify and sanctify his spirit, to cleanse and purge it of the dross of superficiality and vulgarity, to refine his soul and to broaden his horizons. In a word the function of suffering is to mend that which is flawed in an individual's personality. The Halachah teaches us that the sufferer commits a grave sin if he allows his troubles to go to waste and to remain without meaning or purpose. Suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man...in order to redeem him from corruption, vulgarity and depravity. From out of its midst the sufferer must arise ennobled and refined, clean and pure...The agony itself will serve to form and shape his character so that he will, thereby, reach a level of exaltedness not possible in a world bereft of suffering.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,

Kol Dodi Dofek, in Reflections on the Holocaust p.56

Evil is not only a threat, it is also a challenge. Neither the recognition of the peril nor faith in the redemptive power of God is sufficient to solve the tragic predicament of the world. We cannot stem the tide of evil by taking refuge in Temples and Synagogues...by imploring...God. The mitzvah, the humble single act of serving God, of helping man, of cleansing the self, is our way of dealing with the problem. We do not know how to solve the problem of evil, but we are not exempt from dealing with evils...At the end of days, evil will be conquered by the One: in historic times, evils must be conquered one by one. Jewish tradition, though conscious of the perils and pitfalls of existence, is a constant reminder of the grand and everlasting opportunities to do the good. We are taught to love life in this world because of the possibilities of charity and sanctity, because of the many ways open to us in which to serve God.

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Rabbi David Hartman, A Living Covenant, p.196

Now answer the following questions about these thinkers:

1. What do you think R. Soloveichik means by the phrase “*Suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man*”?

What do you think R. Heschel means by the phrase “*We cannot stem the tide of evil by taking refuge in Temples and Synagogues... by imploring... God*”?

What do you think R. Hartman means by the phrase “*suffering can energise us to strive actively for moral renewal*”?

2. What do the three texts have in common?

3. In what way do these texts differ from the Rabbinic texts that you have examined up to now?

4. Can you come up with a name for the type of approach represented here? Can you come up with a name for the approach used in the texts up to now? Explain your reasons.

5. Which of the two approaches speaks to you more? Why?

6. Write a letter to a Jewish friend who has experienced some great sadness in their life and whom you know to be suffering. Your letter is an attempt to comfort them. In conversation with them you have seen that they are reacting in one or another variation of the first approach, attempting to explain the tragedy to themselves. Respond to them in terms of the second approach. You can quote from any of the three thinkers.

VII. THREE APPROACHES TO A LIFE OF MITZVOT AND PRAYER WITHOUT DIVINE REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

A. VIRTUE BRINGS ITS OWN REWARD

Skhar Mitzvah Mitzvah

Pirkei Avot 4:2

B. SANCTIFYING THE MOMENT: THE WORLD OF THE *BRACHA*

Mishnah Berachot 9:1-2

C. REINTERPRETING TRADITIONAL IMAGES OF GOD: CHANGING WORDS, CHANGING MEANING

Anschei Knesset HaGedola, TB Yoma 69b

Let us now pass to a series of texts – our last group of Rabbinic texts, that shed light on the approach that we have just examined and talk in terms of responding rather than exploring the causes of suffering. So far we have examined the thinking that emerges from an encounter with suffering that seems unjustified. The explanations and responses have been *ex post facto*. Some of them lead us to change our basic expectations about reward and punishment in this world. They encourage us not only not to explain the past but to prepare for the future.

Here we must raise three problems or challenges with which the Rabbis had to contend. As deeply religious people struggling with a world in which the Noachide model of this worldly reward and suffering, seemed to be strangely elusive, they needed to come up with answers to their own questions that would enable them to go forward with a sense of God in their lives. Whatever disappointment they felt towards the seeming absence of the results of God's promises in the world in which they lived, they were determined not to lose hold of God in their own lives. As such, they felt the need to look for new perspectives on God's involvement in the world. These perspectives would allow them – and others – to go on in the world without a feeling that they were losing contact with the Divine.

A. How do we give people incentives to do mitzvot?

We have seen attempts to adjust the mitzvah-reward causal pattern by postponement to the world-to-come since there is no this-worldly reward. But for many people a reward in this world is essential. The Mishnah Pirkei Avot 4:2 introduces us to the idea of *מַצְוָה גּוֹרֶדֶת מַצְוָה*, which can be translated as “one good deed leads to another” and *שְׂכָר מַצְוָה מַצְוָה* which can be translated as “virtue brings its own reward”. The mitzvah-reward causal pattern is preserved but it is also subverted by making the mitzvah its own intrinsic reward without looking for external incentives.

B. How does one develop a strong consciousness of the Divine in a world where God does not appear to intervene for reward or punishment?

In Mishnah Brachot 9:1-2 we are introduced to the ability of *brachot* to enhance our perception of God's activity in the world through historical memory, through awareness of nature and through an interpretation of the events of our personal biography that call for response.

C. How can we pray using images of God that contradict our experience of a world without Divine power to grant reward and punishment?

In TB Yoma 69b the Rabbis face the gap between the expectations and reality regarding a God. As portrayed by the Torah God acts in history to bring reward and punishment and that is perpetuated in the prayer language of the Amidah. Its formulation is attributed to Anshei Knesset HaGedola who lived in the centuries not long after the destruction of the First Temple and the beginning of Second Temple period. Here they faced the gap between the traditional Noachide image of an all powerful and just God and the Second Temple reality. They ask themselves: how can we continue to say the same prayers with sincerity?

A. VIRTUE BRINGS ITS OWN REWARD

Skhar Mitzvah Mitzvah

Pirkei Avot 4:2

THE CHALLENGE:

How do we give people incentives to do mitzvot?

We have seen attempts to adjust the mitzvah-reward causal pattern by postponement to world-to-come since there is no this-worldly reward. But for many people a reward in this world is essential. The Mishnah Pirkei Avot 4:2 introduces us to the idea of מצוה גוררת מצוה, which can be translated as “one good deed leads to another” and מצוה שכר מצוה which can be translated as “virtue brings its own reward.” The mitzvah-reward causal pattern is preserved but it is also subverted by making the mitzvah its own intrinsic reward without looking for external incentives.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The Mishnah is brought in the name of one authority, the disciple and colleague of R. Akiva, [Shimon] Ben Azzai. Ben Azzai was also a close disciple of R. Joshua, mentioned above, together with Akiva, in the story of the Rabbis who went to Rome. Ben Azzai is unusual in several ways. First, he is never called a “rabbi” and so he may have remained outside the rabbinic hierarchy. The status of being a rabbi is the reward for most people who devoted their life to Talmud Torah. Second, Ben Azzai never married even though he believed everyone should marry and procreate. He explained that that he was helpless against his desire to study Torah – *nafshi hashkiah baTorah* – so he could not enter into a relationship with a woman that would take him away from his exclusive love and pre-occupation with study. Clearly he was a man who acted outside the usual reward-punishment structure and dedicated himself to Torah for its own sake.

MISHNAH: THE REWARD FOR MITZVOT

BEN AZZAI SAID: RUN TO AN EASY MITZVAH [show enthusiasm in the performing of a small mitzvah] **AS** [you would in the case of] **A DIFFICULT ONE. FLEE FROM TRANSGRESSION. FOR [one] MITZVAH LEADS TO [another] MITZVAH, AND [one] TRANSGRESSION LEADS TO [another] TRANSGRESSION. THE REWARD FOR A MITZVAH IS A MITZVAH AND THE REWARD FOR A TRANSGRESSION IS A TRANSGRESSION.**

Ben Azzai takes us away from the idea of reward and punishment that has dominated our Rabbinic discussions up to now. If the primary reason for performing mitzvot is the reward and punishment that is promised in the Torah, then there is a danger for the whole of Judaism. The moment that theology evolves to a stage of understanding that God does not necessarily act in this world and that if there is any reward and punishment to be received, that can only come about in the world-to-come, many

might find no real incentive to live a life of mitzvot. The question now needs to be asked: why should people live a life of mitzvot in a world which promises no reward?

What Ben Azzai does here when he says שָׂכָר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה – “the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah” - is to cut the tie between mitzvah and external reward and substitute an internal reward system in which the reward for the act is the act itself. In other words, **the act itself has an intrinsic value not dependent on anything but itself.** The reason for living according to a system of mitzvot is that it inherently is better than living according to another system. A life of mitzvot is here presented as an inherently superior life which does not need to be motivated by anything else. The value of the system is the system itself. Whether or not it brings additional reward from God, whether or not God is in a position to reward those who are faithful to the system, is ultimately irrelevant. These are not the questions to be asking when deciding to live a life of mitzvah. It is enough to consider the character of the life itself.

There is an antecedent to this opinion in the Torah itself. In Devarim 4:5-6,8, we read the following in one of Moshe’s orations to the Israelites.

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations who will hear about all of these decrees and say: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding nation”...And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today.

Here we have a departure from the normal reward-and-punishment theology of the Torah. In a rare glimpse of a different perspective, we hear that there is “wisdom and understanding” in the system which is clearly recognisable by universal and rational standards to those outside of the system. The system itself is identifiably and demonstrably wise and virtuous. The Mishnah comes and draws on that wisdom tradition within Judaism and presents the system, once again, as an objectively positive way of life **in and of itself.**

The Rambam presented this point of view in a very eloquent manner. At the beginning of Hilchot Teshuvah Chapter 10 in the Mishneh Torah:

A person should not say: I follow the Mitzvot of the Torah and its wisdom in order that I should receive all the blessings promised me, or in order that I should gain a life in the world to come. Nor should a person say: I go away from the sins against which the Torah warns in order to spare myself the curses and punishments mentioned in the Torah or in order not to be shut off from the world-to-come. This is not the way to worship God. The person who worships God in this way acts out of fear, and this is neither the way of the Prophets nor the way of the wise. Those who worship God in this way are...ignorant people...who have been taught to worship through fear until such time as they get more understanding and start to worship God through love.

The person who worships out of love rather than fear, follows the Torah and its wisdom not in order to gain anything. Not because of fear of punishment and not because of hope of reward but for its own sake – because it is the truth and virtue is its own reward. This level of understanding is very great and not every wise person reaches it. This is the level of Abraham that was called “my beloved” by God, since he worshipped God through love alone. And this is what we were commanded by God through Moshe as it is said, “And you should love the Lord, your God”, and when a person loves God in the right way, that person will immediately do all the commandments through love.

Maimonides, in this piece, continues the emphasis on the following of the mitzvot for their own sake rather than because of any reward or punishment that might come out of their observance or failure to

observe them. The mitzvot themselves have their own reward. Whatever might be the consequences of their observance for the life of the individual, in this world or the next, should have no bearing on the fact of the individual's observance. This approach clearly takes the emphasis away from the calculus of reward and punishment that we have seen in our examinations of Rabbinic ideas of the world-to-come so far.

The other comment of Ben Azzai in this piece that is worth examining is the idea of מצוה גוררת מצוה - *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*. This can perhaps best be understood in the following way. Since we are talking about an integrated system of mitzvot rather than an arbitrary collection of observances, the performance of one mitzvah inside the system clearly draws the individual into a deeper relationship with the rest of the system. A single mitzvah does not stand purely on its own merit. They exist as the framework for an integrated way of life. Since the system has an inherent value, the further that a person is drawn in to observing that system and following its dictates, the more benefit will result. One mitzvah will automatically have the effect of confronting the individual who is drawn into the system with the chance to perform other mitzvot.

We can understand the beginning of the Mishnah in the same light. Since we are talking about a system, the "easy" mitzvah is as important as the more "difficult" one. All are interlocking elements of an integrated system. "Wisdom and understanding" the whole system. If elements – even what appear to be minor elements – are removed from the complex machinery of the system, the whole apparatus falls apart. Thus, the statement made in Devarim sees the way of life based on the framework of laws commanded by God at Sinai as that which will gain appreciation for the Israelites - and for God – among the nations of the world. The system must stand or the system must fall. This is the heart of the viewpoint being presented here by Ben Azzai.

Thus we see the important achievement of Ben Azzai. The system can now stand alone even when it is totally unsupported by external props. This is a system that can quite happily stand in a world where *Olam K'Minhago Noheig*. A system justified in terms of its own inherent virtue will never be threatened by external circumstances because it is not dependent on external circumstance for its own verification. Evil, suffering and misfortune cannot threaten it. The Rabbis world, as we have said, was a world where both individual suffering and collective national misfortune must have caused many to wonder about the discrepancies between the biblical promises and the state of the world. But if one bases the system on Devarim 4 rather than Noach (individually) or Devarim 11 *V'Haya Im Shamoah* (collectively), then the system can stand unscathed. It becomes a self-supporting and self-justifying system. This, perhaps, can be termed "closed-circuit Judaism." It will work as long as the intrinsic virtue that the system claims for itself is accepted by the members of the group itself. This provides an enormous challenge for the proponents of this approach, who have to be able to demonstrate the virtues of the system to the group members on a constant basis without "external" – divine – help.

This text offers us a worldview that sidesteps the problem of evil and neutralizes its dangerous effect on the way of mitzvot and moral action in a world without external remuneration. It attempts to respond to evil rather than to explain it. The underlying assumptions of the framework have been changed in a way which ultimately makes the existence of evil in the world irrelevant to the truth or the justification of Judaism. Even in the face of the existence of enormous evil, the Jew can go forward and find meaning in a life of Torah.

The mitzvah is its own intrinsic reward because it generates a whole way of life of mitzvot or the converse for sins. This seems to be the view of Ben Azzai that the good life promised extrinsically in the Torah is really a metaphor for the good life itself of doing mitzvot. With or without a just and powerful God of History, it is worthwhile to be a Jew *not* because the God who commanded is powerful enough to give us a material reward in this world or the next, *but* because the mitzvot God gave are wise and good in themselves for our human fulfillment in the here and now. We do not need a miracle to disprove idolatry or to force us to accept the logic of faith but rather we are invited to a Jewish way of life with or without an active Providential God. God provided enough when God gave us the Torah. *Baruch sheNatan Torah L'Amo Yisrael*.

MISHNAH: THE REWARD FOR MITZVOT

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SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What do you think that Ben Azzai is saying in this piece?
2. "שכר מצוה מצוה" The reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah": what do you think Ben Azzai means by this phrase?
3. What opinion, or range of opinions, do you think that he is opposing here?
4. Read the following piece from the Hilchot Teshuva of the Rambam.

A person should not say: I follow the Mitzvot of the Torah and its wisdom in order that I should receive all the blessings promised me, or in order that I should gain a life in the world to come. Nor should a person say: I go away from the sins against which the Torah warns in order to spare myself the curses and punishments mentioned in the Torah or in order not to be shut off from the world-to-come. This is not the way to worship God. The person who worships God in this way acts out of fear, and this is neither the way of the Prophets nor the way of the wise. Those who worship God in this way are...ignorant people...who have been taught to worship through fear until such time as they get more understanding and start to worship God through love. The person who worships through love rather than fear, follows the Torah and its wisdom not in order to gain anything. Not because of fear of punishment and not because of hope of reward but for its own sake – because it is the truth and virtue is its own reward. This level of understanding is very great and not every wise person reaches it. This is the level of Abraham that was called “my beloved” by God, since he worshipped God through love alone. And this is what we were commanded by God through Moshe as it is said, “And you should love the Lord, your God”, and when a person loves God in the right way, that person will immediately do all the commandments through love.

Write a conversation between the Rambam and Ben Azzai in which they discuss Ben Azzai's comment in the Mishnah.

5. Do you think that a value system based on Ben Azzai is viable? Why? Why not? Do you prefer Deuteronomy

6. *Tizkeh L'Mitzvot* – “May you be privileged to have many more opportunities to perform Mitzvot” is a traditional response to someone who gives Tzedakah. Instead of saying “Thank you” or “May God bless you and your family” we wish that person more opportunities to do good in the world. How does this greeting reflect the philosophy of Ben Azzai? Would you prefer that response to one that thanks you for helping someone? Explain.

7. Compare two sections from the Book of Devarim. First look at the second paragraph of the *Shma* – Deuteronomy 11:13–17 and then Devarim 4:5–6,8:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations who will hear about all of these decrees and say: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding nation”...And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today.

What is the concept of mitzvot and rewards in each? Which do you think should be part of the Shma and why?

SUGGESTED FINAL ACTIVITY

Look at the two systems that we have met above, the “Ben Azzai” system of “the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah” – שכר מצוה מצוה – and the alternative system of reward and punishment שכר ועונש . Write a description of your school based on the two ideas. To what extent does your school use either or both of these systems to motivate its students ?

In small groups, plan a school which is based purely on the “Ben Azzai system”.

Having planned the school in outline, write a letter to potential parents describing the school’s structure and its special character.

As a class, present some of the plans and letters and then discuss whether such a school is viable. What are the pros and cons of a school like this?

B. SANCTIFYING THE MOMENT: THE WORLD OF THE *BRACHA* Mishnah Berachot 9:1-2

THE CHALLENGE:

How does one develop a strong consciousness of the Divine in a world where God does not appear to intervene for reward or punishment?

We have seen how a different relationship with the concept of Mitzvah can have deep theological implications which can compensate the believer for the realisation that he or she is living in a faulty and amoral world. We now go on to a second Rabbinic approach that emphasises developing a consciousness of the Divine within a world where God is not directly experienced as intervening in the natural order to reward or punish. In Mishnah Berachot 9:1-2 we are introduced to the ability of brachot to enhance our perception of God's activity in the world through historical memory, through awareness of nature and through an interpretation of the events of our personal biography that call for response.

The miracles of Egypt and of the desert were designed to prove God's power so that God would be known even to idolators. The Greek philosophers quoted in the TB Avodah Zara (studied above) made the same demand. The memory of miracles was clearly insufficient in a world in which such things seemed to be absent.

The Rabbis in Mishnah Berachot began with a desire to help Jews "see" God around them in a world without supernatural historical miracles. Their point was not to "force belief by logic or a dramatic show of incontrovertible power" but **to enable a rich God-consciousness to be mediated through everyday events for those desirous of such an immediate feeling of Divine power and providence.**

Four models of raising consciousness of the role of the Divine presence in the everyday are proposed:

1. In the absence of present historical miracles of salvation like Egypt, we can import the broader perspective of **past Divine acts** into our lives through associating them with everyday locations in geographic land of Israel like pilgrim's map of Israel or a Washington DC tour of great events through monuments. This applies to miracles in our own lives at our own holy places of individual miracles.
2. In a neutral natural world of *Olam kminhago noheig* we can be taught to *describe* in the language of the bracha and therefore *perceive* the hand of God within natural law rather than violating natural law. The **God of Creation** is present even if the God of History is absent. Both dramatic events that draw our attention like thunder that speaks of power as well as static beautiful scenery when seen as new after 30 days can be reinterpreted to make the one time act of creation into a ever-renewed act of daily beneficence.
3. Armed with knowledge of the everyday beneficence of God we can perhaps read even suffering, bad news, as Divine blessing in disguise – at least to help us grow. *Baruch Dayan Emet* may not be extended to all events in our lives. *Olam kminhago* or even Jobian anger maybe preferable for us individually. But with a sufficient supply of blessed everyday events we can still continue the relationship with God without it necessarily breaking down in the ultimate test of the unassimilable suffering. Similarly we put up with disillusionment and disappointed expectations and even some kinds of betrayals in a relationship when we have a rich and varied nuanced relationship with a significant other.
4. Finally, in our personal biography or our nation's biography we can interpret each good event – *besorot tovo* – as **an act of personal providence** from a caring God. That is what we do on Purim when finding God's hand in the Megillah's coincidences even though none are never signed explicitly by God's supernatural signature. Thus we build up a personal experience of God active presence and

concern even without experience of the supernatural historical events which tend to create impossible expectations . We even attribute our own successful efforts to bring good as an opportunity created by God and a human power to do good granted by God.

MISHNAH: THE POWER OF *BRACHA*

A) ONCE UPON A TIME: THE GOD OF HISTORY

ONE WHO SEES A PLACE WHERE MIRACLES HAVE BEEN PERFORMED FOR ISRAEL, SHOULD SAY: *BLESSED BE GOD WHO WROUGHT MIRACLES FOR OUR ANCESTORS IN THIS PLACE.*

ONE WHO SEES A PLACE WHERE IDOLATRY HAS BEEN UPROOTED, SHOULD SAY: *BLESSED BE GOD WHO UPROOTED IDOLATRY FROM OUR LAND.*

The Mishnah is divided into a number of different sections. Each one expands the use of brachot over the use in the previous category and attempts, by so doing, to expand spiritual consciousness, a consciousness of God's presence, in a world from which the Biblical God of history seems to be conspicuously absent. In a sense, this whole system of brachot can be seen to be a response to the idea of *Olam K'Minhago Noheig* . עולם כמנהגו נוהג. If the problem which the Rabbis are trying to address is the danger to religious faith in a world which is seemingly Godless and in which God's moral character appears not to operate, then brachot here come to compensate and to offer a different spiritual consciousness. It is a brilliant system of what might be called "alternative spiritual consciousness-raising." Let us take it step by step.

In the first part of the Mishnah, we get the first step for the believing Jew in a world where biblical categories of God's miracles no longer operate. It is true, suggests the Mishnah, that we no longer experience those miracles that we are told about in the Tanach. It is clear that we are in a different time period. Not only has the Age of Prophecy passed but it is unclear whether it is possible to experience God's miracles in the world. However, if we do not have any more the power to witness miracles in the biblical sense, we still have the power to remember miracles. Those miracles that we are told about in the Bible are still able to be remembered: we can still be conscious of what was done in a miraculous past and we still benefit from its results, just as on Pesach when we acknowledge that if God had not taken us out of Egypt, we and our children would still be enslaved there. The key tool for remembering the greatness of the biblical miracle is the **bracha moment**. Whenever we come upon a place where a miracle was performed or where another great manifestation of God's greatness *in the past* took place, we must stop and recall the moment. **The way that we bear witness to God's greatness and manifestation of power in the past is through the bracha.** We stop, we take notice, and we praise the fact that in a different era, God acted differently. We do not doubt the past. Neither do we judge the past through the eyes of the present in which God's power is not evident through supernatural miracles. That time may be over but we appreciate what was.

Thus the Mishnah equips us with the "**miracle-detecting device**," a new consciousness that tells us to go through our world searching out signs of God's miraculous benevolence in the past in order to celebrate them in the present. It makes us pilgrims in God's world, telling us to see the world as a kind of *Geographia Sacra*, searching out the record of God in the past as witness to his presence in the present.

MISHNAH: A) ONCE UPON A TIME: THE GOD OF HISTORY

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ONE WHO SEES A PLACE WHERE IDOLATRY HAS BEEN UPROOTED, SHOULD SAY: *BLESSED BE GOD WHO UPROOTED IDOLATRY FROM OUR LAND.*

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What do you think the problem is that this Mishnah is trying to address?
2. What effect does it have on an individual to break a journey for a few minutes in order to think of important things that are said to have happened in a specific place?
3. Make a list of four places that are mentioned in the Tanach which would fit into this category. What do you think is the thought that the Mishnah would want a person to have in each of these places?
4. If you were to think of four places in the world where historically significant events (not miracles) occurred and you deemed it important for people to stop and take note as they passed through those places, what would they be and why?
5. Write a diary entry for someone who has visited one of the places you have mentioned in your answer to question three and one person that has visited one of the places that you have mentioned in your answer to question four. Write a reflection that you think would reflect the kind of thought that the Mishnah would like a person to have had there.
6. Why do you think that the Mishnah has presented this thought in the form of a bracha that has to be said? Would that not deaden the spontaneity of a person's response in such a place?
7. Write a series of "pros" and "cons" for saying brachot in situations like this.

B) THE GOD OF CREATION: “THE MIRACLES THAT ARE WITH US EVERYDAY” (*Modim Prayer, Siddur*)

[On witnessing] **SHOOTING STARS, EARTHQUAKES, THUNDERCLAPS, STORMS AND LIGHTNING, ONE SHOULD SAY: *BLESSED BE GOD WHOSE STRENGTH AND MIGHT FILL THE WORLD.***

The second category is very different. It takes the emphasis away completely from the idea of the God of miracles – what might be called the God of Shemot or the God of Egypt and places at its centre the God of Creation. The God of Creation can be witnessed at any time and in any place, because nature, seen as God’s handiwork, surrounds us all through our lives. However, the Mishnah recognises our limitations. Precisely because it surrounds us on an everyday level, we are incapable at most times of working up any special excitement about it. Therefore the Mishnah tells us to limit ourselves to those special moments where we are still capable of experiencing a sense of wonder. It is these special manifestations of God’s creative power as they surround us on the almost-but-not-quite-everyday level – thunder and lightning, earthquakes, shooting stars and by extension any out-of-the-ordinary aspect of nature, that can – and must – remind us of the creative capacity of God. We have the ability to appreciate extraordinary things like this, and the mechanism for sparking of our sense of response to these wonders is once again, the bracha. A person who knows that he or she has to stop for a moment on seeing a storm and to say a bracha recalling God’s creative power, is a person into whose life religious consciousness will ever be present.

ON SEEING MOUNTAINS, HILLS, SEAS, RIVERS AND DESERTS, ONE SHOULD SAY: *BLESSED BE GOD WHO MAKES [the work of] CREATION.*

R.YEHUDAH SAYS: IF ONE SEES THE GREAT SEA ONE SHOULD SAY: *BLESSED BE GOD WHO MADE THE GREAT SEA.* [That is the case] ONLY IF IT IS SEEN AT [considerable] INTERVALS.

A new sub-category is now introduced. It is not only the extraordinary natural events in time whose **dynamic** explosion of power sparks our sense of appreciation for God’s creative power. It is also the extraordinary places whose **static** beauty evoke our admiration as long as we do not taken them for granted. In other words there are things that are with us all the time in the natural world – unlike storms or tidal waves – that are testimony to God’s creative power and to which we are capable of responding with enthusiasm and wonder. We can respond to ever-present impressive natural phenomena such as great lakes or internal seas, high mountains, great rivers and deserts. These are things whose greatness is so self-evident that we can respond to them and see in them manifestations of the creative power of God, as long as we take the time to think about the significance of what we are looking at. This is the role of the bracha.

But there is a problem with the system in its relation to these splendid ever-present natural phenomena and R. Yehuda now addresses this. He talks about the Great Sea – presumably the Mediterranean, which would be seen by residents of Eretz Israel in the Rabbinic era as the greatest natural phenomenon in the area. This is indeed something that would be capable of arousing wonder. But the key to feeling that wonder and being capable of responding to it in terms of God’s creative power is not to take it for granted. In order to do that, in R. Yehuda’s opinion, it is necessary not to see it too often. For those who experience natural grandeur on an everyday basis, even brachot might be incapable of engendering the sense of wonder and making it much more than lip-service. Thus R. Yehuda adds the proviso. Even the Great Sea can only be an effective part of the system if it is viewed at intervals. Halacha set that interval as 30 days for revisiting places of wonder. In order to understand this comment it is vital to remember what the Rabbis are trying to do here. They are involved in no less an enterprise than the reclamation of God for our world. Those who seek God in supernatural miracles or in this worldly justice are doomed to disappointment for *Olam K’Minhago Noheig*. Those who are capable of recognising the God of Creation in the world around them, and responding to that

God in wonder have reincorporated God into their world *despite the presence of evil in the world* . They, like Maimonides and Heschel, understand that **nature reveals its Creator's will and wisdom via the way the world is, by virtue of its lawfulness and harmony.**

In all of this, the challenge of response is addressed to the individual. Are we capable of responding to the wonder of the world around us? The focus in the system of brachot has been changed from the limitations of God as in *Olam K'Minhago Noheig* עולם כמנהגו נוהג to the limitations of people in appreciating the self-evident claims of God's world of nature. Our limitations are in our limited capacity for wonder. Martin Buber, the 20th century Jewish philosopher captured this spirit when he said:

Any natural event may be a revelation for those who understand the event as really addressing them personally.

For those who cannot respond, the world of nature as witness of God, will remain closed. The world of brachot is an attempt to open up human limitation and to enable and strengthen the sense of wonder. This was a challenge to the Rabbis. In the modern world that most of us inhabit, it is an even more forbidding challenge. As the American writer, James Lovelock, eloquently put it,

Our urbanized societies have estranged us from the natural world, so that we have little experience with the source of the food that we eat, while we also insulate our lives from the natural world's rhythms by carefully controlling the temperature of our environment. The natural world has become one more object for our manipulation rather than a holy source of our physical sustenance and the inspiration for our spiritual awe. ...How can we revere the living world if we can no longer hear the bird song through the noise of the traffic, or smell the sweetness of fresh air? How can we wonder about God and the universe if we never see the stars because of the city lights?

MISHNAH: B) THE GOD OF CREATION

[On witnessing] **SHOOTING STARS, EARTHQUAKES, THUNDERCLAPS, STORMS AND LIGHTNING, ONE SHOULD SAY, BLESSED BE GOD WHOSE STRENGTH AND MIGHT FILL THE WORLD.**

ON SEEING MOUNTAINS, HILLS, SEAS, RIVERS AND DESERTS, ONE SHOULD SAY: BLESSED BE GOD WHO MAKES [the work of] CREATION.

R.YEHUDAH SAYS: IF ONE SEES THE GREAT SEA ONE SHOULD SAY: BLESSED BE GOD WHO MADE THE GREAT SEA. [That is the case] IF IT IS SEEN AT [considerable] INTERVALS.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Is this simply more of the same idea that we have already encountered at the beginning of the Mishnah? If it adds something, what is it that it adds?
2. What is the difference between the two categories mentioned here, of shooting stars, earthquakes and thunderclaps etc. on the one hand, and mountains, seas and rivers etc. on the other? Why does the Mishnah not just put them together in the same category and save space?
3. Explain the strange comment “if it is seen at intervals”.
4. What is the Mishnah trying to achieve by getting people to stop and look at these things and say a bracha?
5. What do you think is the effect on a person who starts to do what the Mishnah is suggesting here? In what way would they change if they were to do so?
6. Describe one occurrence where you were struck with amazement at a particular natural phenomenon of the type described by the Mishnah?
7. Compose a bracha that you think would have been appropriate at that particular place. Would saying this bracha have changed your experience in any way?

C) BARUCH DAYAN HAEMET. BLESSED IS THE TRUE JUDGE

FOR RAIN AND GOOD NEWS, ONE SAYS, BLESSED BE GOD THAT IS GOOD AND BESTOWS GOOD. FOR EVIL TIDINGS ONE SAYS: *BLESSED BE THE TRUE JUDGE. Baruch Dayan HaEmet.*

The next part of the Mishnah confronts us with a new problem by bringing in two new categories, that of good and bad news. How should a person respond to things, good and bad which suddenly intrude on his consciousness unexpectedly. These are by their very nature, exceptional circumstances - (not in their weight or importance, necessarily but in their essence)- that break the routine of daily life, providing slight or great “bumps” in the fabric of everyday life.

Once again, the Rabbis of the Mishnah seek to integrate such events into a fuller appreciation of God, tying such tidings good and bad, to a consciousness that they are part of God’s world. Rather than merely taking such things for granted, they are used in order to enhance the awareness that they happen in a world behind which stands God. Even if there is no direct causal responsibility of God – that would return us to the theology of explanation –the Rabbis attempt to direct us towards a response, an interpretation that gives them meaning.

When we hear of good things, let us not take them for granted. Let us see them as being part of God’s world. In the reality of the often parched climate of Eretz Israel it is clear why rain would enter into this category. That is the classic example in *V’Haya Im Shamo’a*. Had the Mishnah been written in London or New York presumably a different example would have been used.

Now we have a new and serious challenge. Granted, it is possible and perhaps desirable to integrate good news into God-consciousness, but what do we do about bad news? How do we respond to bad news? The Rabbis go the only route that they can really go, given everything that they have previously said. If they wish to retain the idea of the world as God’s world and fight against a dualist Gnostic style of argument, they must accept this too as being something which is not ignored but which in itself leads to a new appreciation of God rather than to a rebellion against God. It needs to be integrated into our world-view, easy or not. The bracha, ברוך דיין אמת - Blessed be the True Judge, or the Judge of Truth, is a very difficult bracha especially when the news to which it responds is tragic and not just “bad”. For those who are capable of integrating bad or tragic news into their world of God, that world might rock a little, perhaps, but it will remain intact. Whatever happens in God’s world must ultimately be accepted as making sense. Avraham Joshua Heschel explained the idea of the bracha as the response to news, good or bad, in this way.

To appreciate the daily miracles is to see neither the hidden nor the apparent, but the hidden in the apparent; not the order but the mystery of the order that exists in the universe. Not only the good tidings but especially the bad, call for our interpretation. Blessings are our first line of defense in assimilating novelty. The Rabbis established: One is obligated to bless the evil events just as one blesses the good tidings. As Job said when he heard of the tragic death of all his children ,Adonai natan vAdonai lakakh. Yhi shem Adonai mevorakh. “God gave and God took away. May God’s name be blessed.” (Job 1:21).

MISHNAH: C) *BARUCH DAYAN HAEMET.*

FOR RAIN AND GOOD NEWS, ONE SAYS, BLESSED BE GOD THAT IS GOOD AND BESTOWS GOOD. FOR EVIL TIDINGS ONE SAYS: BLESSED BE THE TRUE JUDGE.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What does this section add to our understanding?
2. Why would rain and good news be included in the same category?
3. Write the version of the Mishnah that you would be likely to have, had it been written in your home town rather than in Eretz Israel?
4. Why is bad news included here under the category of something that deserves its own bracha?
5. How would the Rabbinic bracha idea be different if the category of bad news had not been added to this Mishnah?

D) THE GOD OF THE EVERYDAY EVENT (*SHE-HE-KHIY-ANU*)

**ONE WHO HAS BUILT A NEW HOUSE OR BOUGHT NEW VESSELS SAYS:
BLESSED BE GOD WHO HAS KEPT US ALIVE AND PRESERVED US AND
BROUGHT US TO THIS TIME. *She-he-khi-anu.***

In the evolution of the Rabbinic system of appreciation of God's world, and their attempt to expand God consciousness in the everyday life of this world, we now have yet another category, and it is a strange one. Previously we were told of situations in which sudden things – good and bad – impinge on the world of the individual. When we hear of unexpected things, it is not illogical to ascribe these things in some way to the presence of God in the world. It is clear that they come from an outside source as they surprise the consciousness of the individual. But we have here the extraordinary **category of things that result from the express individual decision of the individual.** A person has decided to build a new house or to buy some fresh dishes: what is the connection with God? Surely, this comes totally into the category of individual free will and fall within the sphere of the autonomic responsibility of the individual? The answer to this strange extension of the bracha idea is found in the particular bracha that the individual is to say. There is a general providence that has allowed this to happen. It could have worked out differently –remember the “rickety ladder”? - but as the individual completes his or her task, they are asked to give thanks to the fact that it did not happen in that way. Whether or not God is the sole controlling cause here is irrelevant. One thanks the force for good in the world, even if *Olam K'Minhago Noheig*, for the timing worked out so well and so much could have gone wrong that did not. We choose to interpret this event in God's creation as an act of personal providence without asserting its violation of the laws of nature that God created.

A full framework of brachot is in place raising the consciousness of the individual to God's presence and beneficence even in this most imperfect of worlds. A person that has succeeded in genuinely internalising this idea of brachot has provided what might be seen as an almost watertight alternative to the Noachide evidence for God, so vulnerable in the real world.

It is when we juxtapose the two parts of the idea as we have encountered them in the Mishnah that the full meaning of the bracha becomes clear. The bracha in this present incarnation as expressed in the Mishnah must be seen as a tool designed to foster and express an awareness of God in the world of the believer. The bracha does not attempt to explain the world and God's apparent failure to act in accordance with the principles put forward in the Torah. It offers a way of incorporating a sense of God's power into the world of the believer. It is not dependent on any specific event, good or bad, which the individual believer might experience. It is another closed-circuit system of response in the sense that it is sustainable without reference to external events. It has a weak point, and we have pointed it out. The inability of the believer to respond with a bracha at a time of individual or communal tragedy can upset the whole idea. This was an idea which said more about the believing individual and his or her limitations than it did about God and God's limitations. It was a magnificent response and it helped bring dozens of generations of Jews towards an appreciation of God's world, despite the pain and the evil within. Let us end by quoting modern Jewish theologian, Lawrence Kushner who sums the subject up beautifully.

Blessings give reverent and routine voice to our conviction that life is good, one blessing after another. Even, and especially, when life is cold and dark. Indeed to offer blessings at such times may be our only deliverance.

Blessings keep our awareness of life's holy potential ever present. They awaken us to our own lives. Every blessing says, “I am grateful to be a creature and to remind myself and God that life is good.”

With each blessing uttered we extend the boundaries of the sacred and ritualize our love of life. One hundred times a day. Everywhere we turn, everything we touch,

everyone we see. The blessing can be whispered. No one even needs to hear. No one but the Holy One. “Holy One of Blessing, your Presence fills the Universe. Your presence fills me.”

MISHNAH: D) THE GOD OF THE EVERYDAY EVENT

ONE WHO HAS BUILT A NEW HOUSE OR BOUGHT NEW VESSELS SAYS: BLESSED BE GOD WHO HAS KEPT US ALIVE AND PRESERVED US AND BROUGHT US TO THIS TIME.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Why is this a strange category to find in a Mishnah developing a framework of brachot?
2. Write a dialogue between two Rabbis at the time of the formulation of the Mishnah on the subject of whether to include this category in the candidates for a bracha. One Rabbi is in favour of inclusion, seeing it as vital for the idea and explaining why. The other Rabbi is against inclusion, seeing it as a strange and rather silly candidate for inclusion.
3. Why do you think the particular bracha here is the שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ? Would you have written a different one? If so, do so!
4. Examine the whole Mishnah up to here. Write a rationale for the whole idea presented here. Write it in the form of a Rabbinic memo, written a few years previously, to the Sanhedrin (the central decision making Rabbinic institution), which advocates the creation of a serious Bracha framework.
5. Write a response to the following piece by a non-Jewish writer, James Lovelock, who is not talking about the subject of brachot at all. Can you find a connection between this piece and your rationale for the Bracha framework?

Our urbanized societies have estranged us from the natural world, so that we have little experience with the source of the food that we eat, while we also insulate our lives from the natural world's rhythms by carefully controlling the temperature of our environment. The natural world has become one more object for our manipulation rather than a holy source of our physical sustenance and the inspiration for our spiritual awe...How can we revere the living world if we can no longer hear the bird song through the noise of the traffic, or smell the sweetness of fresh air? How can we wonder about God and the universe if we never see the stars because of the city lights?

SUGGESTED SUMMING UP ACTIVITY

We suggest an activity based around developing the observational skills of the group and encouraging them to observe the natural world around them in detail and to react to that world.

Start with an observational game where a member of the class is sent out of the room and the rest of the class has to describe the absent student in as much detail as possible. The description should include clothes, objects of decoration that the people are wearing, plus a basic description of his or her appearance. Subjective value words (“untidy”, “ugly” etc.) cannot be used. The words used should be precise and descriptive. After everyone has had time to list the relevant information, the person is brought back in and the descriptions are read out. This can be repeated twice or three times.

Inform the group that they are going out for a real test of their observational skills. They are going to be asked to observe nature. The class should be taken out of doors to a field, park or other natural scene and there they should be placed at intervals from each other, so there is minimal interaction. It might be advisable to turn them in different directions so that they do not distract each other. They should be told that their task is to observe everything that lies in their immediate vicinity – about a yard in front of them. They are not allowed to move. They have to be as observant as possible.

They should sit like this for about a quarter of an hour and then they should be brought paper and pens and asked to write in a couple of sentences what they have seen.

Following this they should be asked to do exactly the same but to write about half a page (in the same size writing as previously). In other words, they have to write the same scene but in much more detail.

They are then asked to move to a new location and to take in a new view, before writing a whole page describing what they see.

Gather them together and get some of the group to read their descriptions aloud.

Now ask them to go back to their page of observations and to turn their page into a poem or a drawing. Bring them together and recite the poems and view the pictures interlacing some of the brachot used for the observation or experience of natural phenomena (rain, storms, mountains, rivers, snow etc. etc.).

Sum up the suggested reasons for brachot as they have been examined in relation to the text in question.

C. REINTERPRETING TRADITIONAL IMAGES OF GOD: CHANGING WORDS, CHANGING MEANING (TB Yoma 69b)

THE CHALLENGE:

How can we pray using images of God that contradict our experience of a world without Divine power to grant reward and punishment?

So far we have examined two different approaches to living in a world without this worldly rewards and punishment. One approach developed a new rationale for the concept of a reward for a mitzvah. The second developed a revolutionary concept of bracha as a tool for raising consciousness of God. We now move to a third approach based on a re-examination of the relationship between meaning and language in prayer.

In TB Yoma 69b the Rabbis face the gap between the expectations and reality regarding our relationship with God. As portrayed by the Torah, God acts in history to bring reward and punishment and that is perpetuated in the prayer language of the Amidah. Its formulation is attributed to Anshei Knesset HaGedola who lived in the difficult centuries in the early Second Temple period not long after the destruction of the First Temple. Here they faced the gap between the traditional Noachide image of an all powerful and just God and the Second Temple reality. They ask themselves: how can we educate people to continue to say the same prayers with sincerity? Can we continue to speak of God in traditional terms even though our experience of God's presence in our world, falls short of our hopes and needs?

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The discussion is about the Men of the Great Assembly, a leadership institution that is believed to have existed in the first part of the Second Temple period. Before them the spiritual leadership was in the hands of prophets like Jeremiah who lived through the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE) and Daniel (traditionally identified with the end of the Babylonian period, though his book is edited much later).

The main speaker in this piece is R. Joshua ben Levi, a 3rd century Palestinian Amora from Lod who was one of the most prominent teachers of Midrash Aggadah in his generation. A generation or so later, R. Elazar, a fervent Zionist who was born in Babylon, a student of the two great Rabbinic leaders, Rav and Shmu'el, came to Eretz Yisrael to study under R. Yochanan, whom we met earlier. At Yochanan's death, Elazar succeeded him as the principal of the Yeshiva at Tiberias.

GEMARA: THE LANGUAGE OF PRAYER.

R. JOSHUA BEN LEVI SAID: WHY WERE THEY CALLED MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY? BECAUSE THEY RESTORED THE CROWN [of God's glory] TO ITS ANCIENT STATUS. (For) [originally] MOSHE HAD COME AND SAID: "THE GREAT GOD, THE MIGHTY, AND THE AWESOME".

The subject of the Men of the Great Assembly comes up in a discussion, and a predictable question is asked. What caused this assembly to be described as great? There were other great institutions of leadership such as the Sanhedrin. So what was special about this particular group? The answer is given that they restored God's reputation to its former glory because over

the years, God's power and greatness had been eroded. This power was represented by the phrase attributed to Moshe, " – האל הגדול והנורא – the great God, the mighty and the awesome" [Devarim 10:17] which he, Moshe, used as he tried to explain the characteristics of God to the Israelites. The next part of the text explains the nature of the erosion that had taken place in God's "reputation" and image.

CRITIQUING THE PROPHETS

THEN JEREMIAH CAME AND SAID: ALIENS ARE DEFILING GOD'S TEMPLE. WHERE ARE, THEN, GOD'S AWESOME DEEDS? HENCE HE DID NOT MENTION THE [attribute] 'AWESOME.'

[Then a while later] **DANIEL CAME AND SAID: ALIENS ARE ENSLAVING HIS CHILDREN. WHERE ARE GOD'S MIGHTY DEEDS? HENCE HE DID NOT MENTION THE [attribute] 'MIGHTY'.**

We now hear that the two figures who played a central part in demeaning God's status were Jeremiah and Daniel. Jeremiah who lived at the end of the First Temple period and for whom the climactic event of his life was the destruction of that Temple, expressed the phrase in question at the time of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah 32:18-24 we hear the following cry.

Oh great and mighty God [האל הגדול והנורא] whose name is Lord of Hosts, wondrous in purpose and mighty in deed, whose eyes observe all the ways of people so as to repay every person according to their ways and with the proper fruit of their deeds! You displayed signs and marvels in the land of Egypt with lasting effect and won renown in Israel and among humanity to this very day. You freed your People Israel from the land of Egypt with signs and marvels, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror. You gave them the land that You had sworn to their father to give them - a land flowing with milk and honey, and they came and took possession of it. But they did not listen to you, nor follow your teaching. They did nothing of what you commanded them to do. Therefore you have caused all this misfortune to befall them. Here are the siege-works raised against the city to storm it, and the city, because of sword and famine and pestilence, is at the mercy of those who attack it. What you threatened has come to pass.

We see here that Jeremiah calls God האל הגדול והנורא the great and mighty God but omits the word awesome, as if to imply that God's name has not scared away the Babylonian army and prevented them from besieging Jerusalem. He recalls the wonders of the past in Egypt and says that then – in Egypt – God acted not only with strength and with power but במורא גדול with "great terror", inspiring all with fear and with the greatest of respect. That is in contrast to the situation that Jeremiah himself observes, where God does not inspire that fear and respect. It is certainly true that in Jeremiah's view this is because of the misdeeds of the Israelites and not because of any inherent weakness in God – it appears to come from God's decision to allow this situation to develop as a punishment for the sins and misdeeds of the Israelites. Nevertheless, the Rabbis are correct to note that indeed, Jeremiah has left out one of the words in the Mosaic formula which, presumably he is (half) quoting.

We hear a similar thing about Daniel, whose story occurs a little later, when the Persians have taken over the Babylonian exile. Daniel, in Persia, laments the fate of the Jewish People. In Daniel 9:4-10 we hear the following in Daniel's prayer to God.

Oh Lord, great and awesome God [הַאֵל הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא] Who stays faithful to the covenant with those who love God and keep God's commandments. We have sinned, we have gone astray, we have acted wickedly, we have been rebellious and have deviated from Your commandments and Your rules. We have not obeyed Your servants the prophets who spoke in Your name to our kings, our officers, our fathers and all the people of the land. With You, Lord, is the right, and the shame is on us to this very day, on the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, all Israel, near and far, in all the lands where You have banished them for the trespasses they have committed against You.

Daniel here uses the phrase, הַאֵל הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא - the great and awesome God but omits the word mighty - גִּבּוֹר . Once again, similarly to the case of Jeremiah, Daniel does not suggest that God lacks the capacity to be mighty. He puts the blame on the Jews themselves who have not followed the word of God and implies that God has punished the Jews for their misdeeds. Nevertheless, it is true that he omits the word 'mighty' when he prays to God, once again presumably quoting the familiar Mosaic formula. Thus we have two cases in which two great and important Jews, loyal to the Mosaic tradition and to their understanding of God's demands, can be seen to have implicitly criticised God out of their own experience. Both of them have witnessed in their own lives, situations in which the biblical God appears not to have used the full capacity of divine power as they understand it, in order that the Jews should internalise the price of their non-obedience of God.

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[Then a while later] **DANIEL CAME AND SAID: ALIENS ARE ENSLAVING HIS CHILDREN. WHERE ARE GOD'S MIGHTY DEEDS? HENCE HE DID NOT MENTION THE [attribute] 'MIGHTY'.**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What is the text saying about Jeremiah and Daniel? It is making a criticism about them but what is the precise nature of the criticism?
2. Read the following two pieces taken from the Books of Jeremiah and Daniel. It was on the basis of these pieces that R. Joshua ben Levi was making his criticism. Taking into account the circumstances in which the pieces take place (Jeremiah is watching the Babylonians besieging Jerusalem and beginning to break through the walls, at the end of the First Temple period, Daniel is in exile a few generations later) you must decide whether the criticism is justified.

Oh great and mighty God [אהל הגדול הגבור] whose name is Lord of Hosts, wondrous in purpose and mighty in deed, whose eyes observe all the ways of people so as to repay every person according to their ways and with the proper fruit of their deeds! You displayed signs and marvels in the land of Egypt with lasting effect and won renown in Israel and among humanity to this very day. You freed your People Israel from the land of Egypt with signs and marvels, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror. You gave them the land that You had sworn to their father to give them - a land flowing with milk and honey, and they came and took possession of it. But they did not listen to you, nor follow your teaching. They did nothing of what you commanded them to do. Therefore you have caused all this misfortune to befall them. Here are the siege-works raised against the city to storm it, and the city, because of sword and famine

and pestilence, is at the mercy of those who attack it. What you threatened has come to pass.

Jeremiah 32: 18-24

Oh Lord, great and awesome God [האל הגדול והנורא] Who stays faithful to the covenant with those who love God and keep God's commandments. We have sinned, we have gone astray, we have acted wickedly, we have been rebellious and have deviated from Your commandments and Your rules. We have not obeyed Your servants the prophets who spoke in Your name to our kings, our officers, our fathers and all the people of the land. With You, Lord, is the right, and the shame is on us to this very day, on the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, all Israel, near and far, in all the lands where You have banished them for the trespasses they have committed against You.

Daniel 9: 4-10

Write a letter to R. Joshua ben Levi in which you either defend Jeremiah and Daniel or condemn them in accordance with the Rabbi's opinion.

RESTORING GOD'S GLORY

**BUT THEY [the Men of the Great Assembly] CAME AND SAID:
ON THE CONTRARY! THIS IS PRECISELY GOD'S MAGNIFICENT "MIGHT
[Gibor]" GOD RESTRAINS GOD'S WILL, AND EXTENDS LONG-SUFFERING
TO THE WICKED.**

**AND THESE ARE [indeed the great displays of] GOD'S "AWESOMENESS"
[Norah]: FOR BUT FOR THE AWE [in which the nations hold] GOD, HOW
COULD ONE [solitary and small] NATION SURVIVE AMONG THE (many)
NATIONS!**

Now the Rabbis of the Talmud refer back to the Men of the Great Assembly and discuss their reactions to this whole apparent diminution in the divine status. According to the Talmudic discussion, the Men of the Great Assembly took a very different line. Rather than removing words from the traditional formula, they reinterpreted the words so that the phrase could fit their own situation. Also living at a time when the Jews were not in a glorious situation, they chose to interpret the words mighty and awesome in a way which would enable them to use the traditional formula, but in a different way. For them, God's power is manifested in the Divine ability to exercise self-restraint in accordance with the Rabbinic dictum from Pirkei Avot – איזהו גיבור, הכובש את יצרו . And God's awesomeness is manifest in the fact that the Jews have been enabled to exist among the nations of the world despite all their trials and tribulations. Thus, even in a period of apparent weakness, there is no need to doubt the capacity of God. God remains God, with full power and ability. The divine will is still manifest in the world but it expresses itself in a different way because of circumstances.

What the Men of the Great Synagogue have done is to save the words that describe God in the traditional prayer, while changing the meaning of the words to describe their contemporary reality. Where is the evidence for this, according to the Rabbis?

In the text of the Amidah, attributed by them to these self-same Men of the Great Synagogue, we encounter the following formula for the first bracha.

ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו ואלוהי אבותינו, אלוהי אברהם אלוהי יצחק ואלוהי יעקב, האל הגדול
הגיבור והנורא אל עליון, גומל חסדים טובים וקונה הכל , וזוכר חסדי אבות ומביא גואל לבני
בניהם למען שמו באהבה.

***Blessed are You, O Lord our God and God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
the great, mighty and awesome God, the Supreme God, Who bestows loving kindness, creator of
all, and Who remembers the pious deeds of our ancestors and brings redemption to their
descendants in God's name with love.***

Here the formula is intact. For the Rabbis who praise the Men of the Synagogue, the great contribution of the latter group was to adapt content while maintaining form. In a world which draws strength from the power of tradition, it can truly be seen as a great achievement to allow authentic tradition to continue to answer the needs of a changing population facing a new situation. The times have changed, the reality has changed, the needs have changed, but the text remains the same and still manages to meet the needs of the new situation.

This is a kind of intellectual sleight of hand which will ultimately enable the tradition to continue for thousands of years in many different circumstances. It enables people to take their traditions and texts

with them into a series of changing realities. As long as the meaning can be adapted, the tradition can be saved. This is what Judaism managed to do for generations, that paganism, for example, never succeeded in doing. When the idea of many competing gods began to seem unconvincing to many in the ancient world, they failed to be able to interpret their existing pantheons of gods in a way that made sense to the peoples of the time. Those people sought other explanations and changed their paradigm for understanding the world to monotheism, a completely different system of thought. Judaism in the pre-modern world managed to ward off that danger by adapting the meaning of its tradition and enabling the tradition to “swallow” different understandings and perceptions.

When Judaism failed to be able to do that, at the beginning of the modern age, we get the first major breaks and splits in the Jewish world which were not healed within the tradition, but by a break which left the texts behind. Modern thinkers and theologians changed both the form **and** the content and brought on a major rift in the Jewish world which continues till today. But the Rabbis here praise the Men of the Great Assembly for keeping the text while changing the meaning. They believed in the need to keep the texts and changed the tendency of Jeremiah and Daniel, who changed the texts to reflect their reality.

GEMARA: RESTORING GOD’S GLORY

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[Norah]: FOR BUT FOR THE AWE [in which the nations hold] GOD, HOW
COULD ONE [solitary and small] NATION SURVIVE AMONG THE (many)
NATIONS!**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What have the Men of the Great Assembly done according to R. Joshua ben Levi?
2. Why does R. Joshua believe that this justifies the epithet “great”? What is the contribution of the Men of the Great Assembly, to Judaism?
3. Write your own appraisal of the achievement of the Men of the Great Assembly? To what extent do you think that they have achieved something important? Why? Why not?
4. Have you any idea where the phrase attributed to them actually occurs?
Hint: it appears in a prayer that is said regularly, every day? What is that suggesting about the Rabbis’ opinion of the origins of the prayer?

THE VALUE OF HONESTY IN PRAYER

BUT HOW COULD THE RABBIS [i.e. Jeremiah and Daniel] ABOLISH SOMETHING ESTABLISHED BY MOSHE?

R. ELAZAR SAID: SINCE THEY KNEW THAT THE BLESSED HOLY ONE INSISTS ON TRUTH, THEY WOULD NOT SPEAK UNTRUTHS [in their prayers] TO GOD [i.e. they would not attribute qualities to God that they themselves did not experience].

The question is now asked which criticises implicitly the way that Jeremiah and Daniel acted. How could they abolish a form of prayer established by Moshe himself? The question, we should understand, is much more far-reaching than it appears to be on the surface. The question could be rephrased: How could they have endangered tradition? Did they not realise the fact that they were leading to a devaluation of God's reputation, among non-Jews and Jews alike? Did they not understand that they were standing at the edge of a slippery slope where their changes could have started a process which could have led to the end of Judaism? Do they think they have greater wisdom and authority than Moshe? Do they think they know God's attributes better than Moshe to whom they were revealed on Mount Sinai?

A fascinating answer is given by R. Elazar. God, he says, **demands truth. God is not interested in hearing false praise.** It is far more important for God to hear real prayer which reflects the genuine feelings and perceptions of those who are praying. False prayer means nothing. Truth is not a matter of an objective description of God or reality but a subjective interpretation of one's own experience, our own true testimony to God's relationship to us and our generation.

If God values truth, it is because lip-service, meaningless mouthing of well-known prayer formulae, is a very dangerous situation for any religious structure. People have to be committed to their prayers. They have to feel that their contact with God is real and authentic. Above all, a true religious life needs an honesty that can only come when people speak their real and true thoughts. If there is a need to change the formula of texts and prayers in order to save a religious consciousness which is in danger of dying because those texts have lost their authentic meaning, then keep the consciousness and change the prayer. If the prayer is real and reflects genuine feelings, the religion can last. When the picture of God changes but the formulae stay the same, that is precisely the same slippery slope mentioned previously. It too will lead to the death of Judaism, but for the opposite reasons.

Thus what we have here is no less than a major philosophical discussion about the way to carry a tradition forward so that the tradition remains fresh and vital and meaningful. There are those who say: "keep the texts but change the meaning to reflect the new reality" and there are those who say the opposite, namely: "change the texts to reflect the new meaning".

In many ways this looks like a prototype of the fierce argument that broke out again at the beginning of the Haskalah - the modern Jewish enlightenment. Modern enlightened thinkers attacked the defenders of traditional Judaism accusing them of killing Judaism through their defense of all sorts of outmoded traditions and beliefs that had degenerated in parts of the Jewish world into superstitions that had little or nothing to do with the spiritual truths of Judaism. In turn the traditionalists attacked the would-be-changers of Judaism and accused them of bringing in innovation that would undermine and finally lead to the death of Judaism. It is the argument that has broken out countless times between defenders of a traditional system and between those who wish to change the system and claim to be doing it for the good of the system itself. Can any change be permitted? Is there a line, over which, to change is to throw out the "baby" with the "bath-water"? What is the best way to preserve tradition?

The discussion in the Gemara appears at first glance to be an early case of precisely this argument. But in fact this discussion is far subtler and much more complex. It is between two groups who want **to save the personal testimony to God's reality for a new generation with different experiences**. Both accept the need for change: the question is what should be changed. Is it better to change the meaning of the words or to change the words themselves? The Gemara gives us two different answers. It does not decide between them. Perhaps it cannot. Perhaps it realises that both answers are in their own way correct.

The two answers look very different. In fact they have a great deal in common. Both of them realise that a religious system needs to reflect the honest experience of its members. Religion must be based on honesty. There are different possible ways open to effecting this aim. It is possible to change one's understanding or it is possible to change one's texts. Both are ways of authentic religious response. Both have their pitfalls and their dangers, because both can open the way to misunderstandings. Both are capable of undermining a system and leading to disintegration instead of growth. Demanding to retain the text and change the meaning is a difficult and subtle path that is perhaps not open to Every-man and Every-woman. It can lead to blind conservatism and to a rigid defence of what might well be indefensible. The other path, the path of changing text, can lead to an attitude that the text is expendable, marginal and ultimately unimportant. Both paths can lead to growth and flowering, but they can also lead to attrition and death.

The challenge of faith in Judaism is not only to express what we believe today but to continue to find a place for ourselves in a rich tradition reflecting on the problem of evil and nature of our personal faith in Divine goodness and power. The gap between the Biblical experience of the God of Noach and of the Exodus and the Rabbinic experience of God after the exile and destruction makes this problem an ancient one not a peculiarly modern one. The variety of positions honored within the traditional conversation offer almost all our students a view about which they can feel both sincerely honest to their experience and authentically Jewish. In fact it is only when honest enough to face the gap between our typical God language of omnipotence and goodness and our generational and personal experience that the interesting and potentially creative search for meaning takes place.

Jeremiah and Daniel represent a truth about God's limited power rooted in their generational experience. It gives them not only the right to censor Moshe's standard formulae of praise but the duty to do so out of respect for God's own trademark – truth and integrity.

Yet Anshei Knesset Hagedola also represent a possible compromise. Both God's actions or lack thereof and the words of the tradition may be reinterpreted. Masculine strength *Gevurah* maybe seen in self-restraint. (*mi hu hagibor hakoveish et yitzro*) as our notions of a praiseworthy hero change. Learning the tradition is not only a matter of finding someone we already agree with but also stretching ourselves to perceive the world and the tradition in new ways.

By speaking the words of tradition may we may come to perceive it and the world in new ways (*acharei hamaasim nimshachim halevavot*). The problem of evil does not require a knockout logical argument or an overwhelming miracle, but an invitation to reframe our tradition and the perception of our reality without ever denying our honest experience.

GEMARA: RESTORING GOD’S GLORY

**BUT THEY [the Men of the Great Assembly] CAME AND SAID:
ON THE CONTRARY! THIS IS PRECISELY GOD’S MAGNIFICENT “MIGHT
[Gibor]” GOD RESTRAINS GOD’S WILL, AND EXTENDS LONG-SUFFERING
TO THE WICKED.**

**AND THESE ARE [indeed the great displays of] GOD’S “AWESOMENESS”
[Norah]: FOR BUT FOR THE AWE [in which the nations hold] GOD, HOW
COULD ONE [solitary and small] NATION SURVIVE AMONG THE (many)
NATIONS!**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What is the argument that is reflected under the surface of this piece of the discussion?
2. Divide into pairs or small groups. Half the groups think, together with the Rabbi Joshua ben Levi that Daniel and Jeremiah have taken totally the wrong approach to their Judaism. The other groups accept the opinion of R. Elazar justifying their actions. Each group has to prepare a response to the claims of the opposing opinion.
3. Following this, two “opposing” groups should get together and argue out the question, suggesting the best way for a religious cultural system like Judaism to go forward on this issue.
4. Finally, have an open discussion followed by a vote on the question: Who’s way is better for Judaism – Joshua ben Levi or R. Elazar – or neither?

ADDITIONAL OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:

Bialik's Poem of Protest - *In the City of Slaughter*

This activity is based on a reading of a challenging and complex text. It is recommended for advanced students who have the maturity to understand the implications of the text and to be able to deal with them.

One of our first activities in the Rabbinic section was based on the poem "On the Slaughter" written by Chaim Nachman Bialik in 1903, in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom. That was one of two poems that he wrote at that time in reaction to the terrible things that he had witnessed. The other was a longer epic poem called

בעיר ההריגה **"In the City of Slaughter"**. The following piece is taken from the poem.

*Descend then, to the cellars of the town,
There where the virginal daughters of thy folk were fouled,
Where seven heathen flung a woman down,
The daughter in the presence of her mother,
The mother in the presence of her daughter,
Before slaughter, during slaughter, and after slaughter!
Touch with thy hand the cushion stained; touch
The pillow crimson with blood:
This is the place the wild ones of the wood, the beasts of
The field
With bloody axes in their paws compelled thy daughters yield:
Beasted and swined!*

Having read this part of the poem, we reach a scene where the reactions of the surviving men among the Jews is described. The pogrom has passed. Many of the women have been raped: some have been murdered. The poem describes the men going to the synagogue.

Each student should write two continuations of the poem describing the scene inside the synagogue as R. Joshua ben Levi would like to see it or as R. Elazar would like to see it, each according to his own belief system as expressed in the piece that we have just read.

Some of the class should share the pieces that they have written.

Now read together the following piece of the poem as Bialik wrote it. It is worth mentioning that it becomes clear in this part of the poem that the speaker is God and the character addressed is a Prophet of God, a Jeremiah or an Ezekiel.

*Turn, then, your gaze from the dead, and I will lead
You from the graveyard to your living brothers,
And you will come, with those of your own breed,
Into the synagogue, and on a day of fasting,
To hear the cry of their agony,
Their weeping everlasting.
Your skin will grow cold, the hair on your skin stand up,
And you will be by fear and trembling tossed;*

*Are they not real, their bruises?
Why is their prayer false?
Why, in the day of their trials
Approach Me with pious ruses,
Afflict Me with denials?
Regard them now, in these their woes:
Ululating, lachrymose,
Crying from their throes,
We have sinned! And Sinned have we!
Self-flagellative with confession's whips.
Their hearts, however, do not believe their lips.
Is it, then, possible for shattered limbs to sin?
Wherefore their cries imploring, their supplicating din?
Speak to them, bid them rage!
Let them against Me raise the outraged hand,
Let them demand!
Demand the retribution for the shamed
Of all the centuries and every age!
Let fists be flung like stone
Against the heavens and the heavenly Throne!*

Bialik is clearly very critical of the reactions of the men in the synagogue. Ask the students: why? What is he actually saying? By putting his poem into the mouth of a prophet of God, how does this affect the meaning or message of the poem? Whose point of view is he closer to, that of R. Joshua ben Levi or R. Elazar? Why do you think Bialik is so angry?

SUGGESTED FINAL ACTIVITY: Berl Katznelson on Memory and Forgetfulness

The following piece is taken from a speech made by the great Zionist activist and educator, Berl Katznelson in the mid-1930's.

Man is endowed with two faculties: memory and forgetfulness. We cannot live without both. If we were only to remember things and never to forget them, then we would be crushed under the burden of memory. We would become slaves to our memories and to our ancestors...And were we ruled entirely by forgetfulness, what place would there be for culture, science, and spiritual life?

A renewing and creative generation does not throw the cultural heritage of ages into the dustbin. It examines and scrutinizes, accepts and rejects. At times, it may keep and add to an accepted tradition. At times, it descends into ruined grottos to excavate and remove the dust from that which had lain in forgetfulness, in order to resuscitate old traditions which have the power to stimulate the spirit of the generation of renewal. If a people possesses something old and profound, which can educate people and train them for their future tasks, is it truly revolutionary to despise it and become estranged from it?

The speech was made to an audience of youth leaders and Katznelson was trying to persuade his audience to change their minds about something. Both he and his audience were very Jewish and very secular.

Let one person make the speech without introduction, in the intonation of a real fiery speech. Then the speaker should be introduced and the circumstances of the speech (in pre-State Palestine, to a secular audience of young idealistic youth leaders) be explained.

Now the speech should be made again. Following the speech, the students, in small groups, need to try and understand what Katznelson is trying to persuade his audience. What do they think must be the point of view of the audience before the speech?

After this they should try and continue the speech with some examples or extra points.

Now discuss whether there is any connection between the ideas in the speech and any of the ideas put forward in the Gemara.

SUMMING UP:

SOME OF THE ISSUES IN THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN RABBINIC THOUGHT

We have looked at three educational paths to build and maintain a religious consciousness in a world seemingly lacking in Divine reward and punishment. We have seen a revaluing of the idea of mitzvah, so that the reward for virtue is virtue itself, rather than the fulfillment of a desire for some kind of an extrinsic prize. We have seen an increased awareness of the great contributions of God to our world through the development of a systematic bracha consciousness. Last, we have seen a struggle with issues of truth and meaning in the language of prayer, with an implicit warning not to expect miraculous answers from the outside. Rather we should increase our appreciation for what God has done and continues to do in the world. All three are Rabbinic replies and all three of them go along with the idea of Rambam, quoted earlier, namely that the right path to God is through love and not fear. Let us recall Maimonides' words:

The person who worships through love rather than fear, follows the Torah and its wisdom not in order to gain anything. Not because of fear of punishment and not because of hope of reward but for its own sake – because it is the truth and virtue is its own reward.

To a large extent, this sums up the ideas that we have seen in this section. There is the way of explanation or the way of response. There is worship through love and worship through fear and hope for material consequences of our mitzvot. Each person must decide for him or herself, which is the right way forward.

SUGGESTED FINAL ACTIVITY: Writing an Editorial

Each student should go through their notes for all the different Rabbinic texts that have been examined. They should write down as many different Rabbinic positions as they can find in one big list.

Let them choose the two positions that speak to them most convincingly, and the two positions that appeal to them least.

The students are asked to examine the local newspapers and to find a report of a car crash in which lives were tragically lost.

They are asked to write two editorial articles about road accidents in general and **this** accident in particular for different Jewish newspapers, each of which has reported the accident in its news coverage. One of the editorials should reflect one or both of the positions that appeal to the student and the other should reflect one or both of the positions that do not appeal to them at all. They must in addition, think of the type of Jewish person whom they would expect to write each editorial and the kind of Jewish newspaper which would print each article on its editorial page.