

# Suffering: Why Does God Allow It?

The Essence of Jewish Belief

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*1) It goes back a long way ...*

**Genesis 4:6-12**

“And the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you distressed, And why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door. Its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master.’”

And Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. The LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ And he said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’ And God said, ‘What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!

... ‘You shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.’”

*2) Retribution: collective punishment for communal, sinful behavior.*

**Deuteronomy 11:13-21**

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil- I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle- and thus you shall eat your fill. **Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you.** Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, and teach them to your children- reciting them when you stay at home and when you

are away, when you lie down and when you get up; and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

### ***3) Does God hide God's face?***

#### **Deuteronomy 32:20**

“He said: **I will hide My face from them**, and see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them.”

#### **Isaiah 54:8**

“In slight anger, for a moment, **I hid my face from you**; But with kindness everlasting I will take you back in love; says the Lord your Redeemer.”

(i.e., the opposite of Numbers 6:26)

### ***4) There's a countervoice***

a) The traditional doctrine is untrue:

#### **Job 42:7**

“After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job.’”

b) Another version: Psalm 13:2

“How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?”

c) What replaces the traditional doctrine?

1) Job 38-41

2) “God tells Job: “Who are you to try to package Me, to try to fit Me into your human, moral, or epistemological categories? What kind of a God would I be if you could understand Me! I am God and you are a simple human being. What seems to you to be good or evil, just or unjust, purposive or non-purposive, rational or irrational are simply your own, puny, human conceptualizations. My reality totally transcends them all. Don't try to account for my behavior.”

### ***5) The eschatological resolution:***

a) ***Death marks the end of everything***

Ps. 146:3-4

“His breath departs; he returns to the dust;

on that day his plans come to naught.”

Ps. 115:17-18

“The dead can not praise the Lord,  
nor any who go down into silence.  
But we will bless the Lord now and forever.”

**b) *And yet, to the rabbis, it doesn't.***

1) We must praise God over evil as we praise God over good (M. Berachot 9:5) by reciting “Blessed be the righteous judge” (9:2).

2) ***How can we say this?*** Because we believe in the world to come: “May His great name be magnified and sanctified in the world that is to be created anew, where He will revive the dead, and raise them to eternal life; and will rebuild the city of Jerusalem, and establish His Temple in its midst; and will uproot all alien worship from the earth, and restore the worship of Heaven to its place.”  
(from the traditional Burial Kaddish)

**3) *Moreover, beyond theology there is religion:***

“May the One Who creates *shalom* in the heavens,  
create *shalom* for us, and for all Israel” (The Kaddish)

**6) *Monotheism precludes an independent malevolent force.***

**1) *Isaiah 45:6-7:***

I am the Lord and there is none else.  
I form light and create darkness.  
I make weal (*shalom*) and create woe (*rah*)  
I the Lord do all these things.

**2) *Note how the liturgy alters those words:***

“I form light and create darkness.  
I make weal (*shalom*) and create everything (*ha-kol*).

**7) *How then do we reconcile evil with God's justice and benevolence?***

- a) Retribution
- b) Individual Eschatology
- c) God's self-willed limitation of his power (proof: human freedom)

**8) *In the modern period, in place of an omnipotent God responsible for evil, we encounter a limited God who is not.***

A. Kaplan: God did not make polio. God gives us the intelligence to understand, prevent, and cure disease. He enables us to develop technology to make polio more bearable.

He gives us friends and families who care for us when we are ill. God is the sum total of all the good things we discover in our lives.

**9) *Why doesn't Kaplan unify the ensemble of evil qualities in nature and call them Evil?***

Kushner: "God does much for us; He has created a world where the good outweighs the evil. But He does not, He can not, eliminate evil from the world." "A personal experience is pitted against a long-standing theological tradition." (Gilman)

**10) *God and Auschwitz***

Is the Holocaust just one more instance of human cruelty, not intrinsically different than the death of one innocent child?

Or is it totally unique? Where was God? Why did He let it happen?

**11) *Rubenstein's "Death of God Theology"***

What has died is our CONCEPTION of God, our theological and religious symbols and myths. "The thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?" "In an age of the death of God, we need religion--its communities, traditions, rituals, norms, and institutional structures--more than ever. They provide us with the shared context that enables us to deal with the crises that are inherent in human existence." "Rubenstein suggests that we return to the God of the mystics, God as Holy Nothingness, the totally indeterminate and indeterminable God who is the source of all creation and to which all of creation returns." (Gilman)

**12) *Buber's "Eclipse of God"***

An eclipse is temporary; death is final. Buber integrates the event into the categories of classical Jewish theology. There is no faith without moments of despair, just as there is no despair without moments of affirmation. It is not at all clear who is the believer and who the atheist. They differ only in the frequency of

their moments of despair or affirmation, not at all in the certainty or demonstrability of their positions. (Irving Greenberg, per Gilman)

### ***13) Eliezer Berkovits' Faith After the Holocaust***

Auschwitz doesn't stand alone. Jewish history is littered with Holocausts just as it is studded with expressions of God's love for Israel. Both are true. Both are part of the complex pattern of Jewish history. Berkovits sees God's presence even in the throes of the Holocaust: the countless instances of courage, determination, and humanity that occurred even in the death camps. The Jewish people did survive the Holocaust, despite its powerlessness. The Holocaust, then, reveals both aspects of God's relationship to Israel--His presence as well as his absence. (Gilman)

### ***14) Heschel's Suffering God***

The Holocaust represents a human, not a divine failure. Auschwitz is an example of the pervasive human tendency to ignore God's voice, for He is "everywhere or nowhere, the Father of all men or no man, concerned about everything or nothing." Where is God? "He will return to us when we shall be willing to let Him in ...". In the meantime, He waits for us to redeem the world. As He waits, He joins in the suffering of his people. This sharing of human suffering is the ultimate expression of His pathos. God cries over the suffering of His people for despite everything, they are still His 'hapless people.' God may not be able to prevent suffering but He can share in it, and in this sharing provide a measure of consolation and strength to a suffering humanity." (Gilman)

### ***15) Cosmos and Chaos***

The problem of evil is the greatest theological problem because it threatens the central function of any religious system as a whole. It represents the eruption of the chaos that destroys our cosmos. When that happens, we can respond in two ways.

**Intellectually**, we try to account for the evil, explain why it had to be so, and thereby integrate it into our cosmic pattern. ...

Or, ... we can move in a different, less intellectual, and more **affective** direction, ... a "**religious**" direction. ... We stop trying to explain, and instead, somehow

existentially affirm our conviction that our cosmos will be restored intact. Jews say the Kaddish, which in its last line becomes a prayer for an eschatological *shalom*, for harmony, for cosmos in human affairs.

**The medium becomes the message. It's not so much what we say, but rather that we say it, again and again, predictably, as a structured portion of our daily life. We counter chaos by infusing our life with structure. In fact, the main reason why in all cultures death, burial and mourning are so highly ritualized is precisely this intuitive human impulse to restore structure at the very moment when it is most threatened.**

In the final analysis, most theodicies are inadequate. That is probably why the Book of Job is in the Bible. It's almost as if our ancestors said, 'We really don't have any conclusive answer for why human beings are doomed to suffer. So here's another approach.' The genius of most ancient and rich religious traditions is that they give us multiple ways of accomplishing the same purpose. (Gilman)