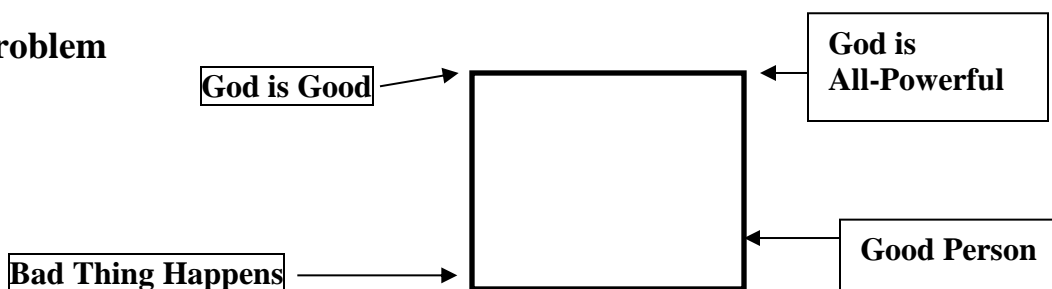


Invitation to Judaism – Lesson Plan – The Problem of Evil

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

Diagram of the Problem



1. **Second Paragraph of Shema** (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) – (Good people are rewarded, bad are punished. Corollary: if bad things happen, must have done something wrong.)
2. **Psalm 37** (need God's perspective – over time)
3. **Talmud Berakhot 7a** (concludes with Inscrutability)
4. **Pirkei Avot 4:19** – Inscrutability
5. **Talmud Menahot 29b** – Inscrutability [This is conclusion of story of Moses in Rabbi Akiba's Bet Midrash, Moses sees Rabbi Akiba tortured to death by Romans.]
6. **Talmud Kiddushin 39b** – Things will work out in the next life. (Story of boy shooing away the mother bird before taking its young – at father's request.)
7. **Maimonides on Laws of Mourning** – Chapter 13, Laws 11-12. The middle road. Do not mourn too much because "Ha'olam noheg k'minhago" – the world operates according to its custom. But you must mourn, and you should consider your own actions, and your own mortality, and return to God. (Past actions? Future actions? Both!)
8. **The Yetzer Hara** – The Evil Inclination.
9. Louis Jacobs piece on **Biblical and Rabbinic Responses to Suffering** at <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/biblical-and-rabbinic-responses-to-suffering/>
10. David Kraemer article "**Medieval Responses to Suffering and Evil**" at <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/medieval-jewish-responses-to-suffering-evil/#>
11. Harold Kushner's piece "**Suffering is Meaningless Unless You Decide Otherwise**" at <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/when-bad-things-happen-to-good-people/#>
12. Or Rose "**The Holocaust: Responding to Modern Suffering**" at <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-holocaust-responding-to-modern-suffering/#>
13. Where is God? – in our responses to suffering. WE are God's partners in doing goodness in the world. We are God's hands and feet. Some see tragic consequences of an earthquake as proof there is no God. I see proof that there IS a God. Why do we in Houston care what happens in Sri Lanka? Why the outpouring of resources and support? What motivates us to do that?
14. Exodus: God acts in dramatic ways: plagues, parting Reed Sea, etc. We do not see that in our world. But, we also learn in Exodus to be kind to the strangers because we were strangers in Egypt. (And in Leviticus we learn: do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor, and love your neighbor as yourself.)

Second Paragraph of Shema

Deuteronomy 11:13-21

13 And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, **14** I will give the rain of your land at its time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. **15** And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be sated. **16** Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them. **17** And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you. **18** And you shall set these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand and they shall be for ornaments between your eyes. **19** And you shall teach them to your sons to speak with them, when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you rise. **20** And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates, **21** in order that your days may increase and the days of your children, on the land which the Lord swore to your forefathers to give them, as the days of heaven above the earth.

יג וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה
אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעַבְדּוֹ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם: יד וְנָתַתִּי מְטַר-אֲרָצְכֶם
בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֵה וּמְלֻקוֹשׁ וְאִסְפֹת דְגָנְךָ וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וְיִצְהַרְךָ: טו וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּשָׂדֶךָ
לְבִהְמֹתֶיךָ וְאָכְלֹת וּשְׂבִיעֹת: טז הַשְּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן-יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסָרְתֶם וְעַבַדְתֶּם
אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם: יז וְחָרָה אַף-יְהוָה בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה מְטָר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֶּן אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מְהֵרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ
הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה נָתַן לָכֶם: יח וְשָׁמַתֶּם אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹהֵי עַל-לִבְבְּכֶם וְעַל-נַפְשְׁכֶם
וְקִשַׂרְתֶּם אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יַדְכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: יט וְלִמְדֹתֶם אֹתָם
אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בְּדַרְךָ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: כ
וְכִתְבֹתֶם עַל-מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: כא לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל
הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם כִּימֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

Psalms Chapter 37

1. A Psalm of David. **Do not fret because of the wicked, nor be envious against the evil doers. 2. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither like the green herb.** 3. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shall you dwell in the land, and enjoy security. 4. Delight yourself also in the Lord; and he shall give you the desires of your heart. 5. Commit your way to the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass. 6. And he shall bring forth your righteousness like the light, and your judgment like the noonday. 7. **Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret yourself over him who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil schemes.** 8. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret yourself; it comes only to evil. 9. **For evil doers shall be cut off; but those who wait upon the Lord shall inherit the earth.** 10. **For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be; though you look well at his place, he will not be there.** 11. But the humble shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. 12. The wicked plots against the just, and gnashes at him with his teeth. 13. The Lord shall laugh at him; for he sees that his day is coming. 14. The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to bring down the poor and needy, and to slay those who are of upright ways. 15. Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken. 16. **A little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked men.** 17. **For the arms of the wicked shall be broken; but the Lord upholds the righteous.** 18. **The Lord knows the days of the upright; and their inheritance shall be forever.** 19. They shall not be ashamed in the evil time; and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. 20. But the wicked shall perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the meadows; they shall be consumed; they shall pass away like smoke. 21. The wicked borrows, and does not pay back; but the righteous man gives with good loving kindness. 22. For those blessed by him shall inherit the earth; and those cursed by him shall be cut off. 23. The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; and he delights in his way. 24. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with his hand. 25. **I have been young, and I am now old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, and his seed begging bread.**

(נַעַר הַיְתִימִי גַם־זָקֵנִי וְלֹא־רָאִיתִי צָדִיק נִעְזֵב וְזָרְעוֹ מִבְּקֶשׁ־לֶחֶם)

26. He lends generously at all times; and his seed is blessed. 27. Depart from evil, and do good; and you shall abide for ever. 28. For the Lord loves justice, and does not forsake his pious ones; they are preserved for ever; but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off. 29. The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell in it for ever. 30. The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, and his tongue talks of justice. 31. The Torah of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall falter. 32. The wicked man watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him. 33. The Lord will not abandon him to his own hand, nor let him be condemned when he is brought to trial. 34. Wait on the Lord, and keep his way, and he shall exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it. 35. I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green tree. 36. Yet he passed away, and, behold, he was not; I sought him, but he could not be found. 37. Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace. 38. But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; the descendants of the wicked shall be cut off. 39. And the salvation of the righteous is of the Lord; he is their strength in the time of trouble. 40. And the Lord shall help them, and rescue them; he shall rescue them from the wicked, and save them, because they take refuge in him.

Talmud Berakhot 7a

[Rabbi Yohanan states that Moses asked God for three things, and God granted all three of them. The third was to be shown God's ways – i.e., that he should understand how God works in the world.]

The Question:

Moses said before Him: Lord of the Universe, why is it that some righteous men prosper and others are in adversity, some wicked men prosper and others are in adversity?

The Answers:

1. **Need to have perspective of time.** [Compare Psalm 37]

He replied to him: Moses, the righteous man who prospers is the righteous man the son of a righteous man; the righteous man who is in adversity is a righteous man the son of a wicked man. The wicked man who prospers is a wicked man son of a righteous man; the wicked man who is in adversity is a wicked man son of a wicked man.

Objection to first answer: The Master said above: 'The righteous man who prospers is a righteous man son of a righteous man; the righteous man who is in adversity is a righteous man son of a wicked man'. But this is not so! For, lo, one verse says: "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children,"¹ and another verse says: "Neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers."² And a contradiction was pointed out between these two verses, and the answer was given that there is no contradiction. The one verse deals with children who continue in the same course as their fathers, and the other verse with children who do not continue in the course of their fathers! —

2. No one is perfect.

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

3. The "Inscrutability Doctrine" – we cannot understand God's ways after all

Now this [saying of R. Yohanan]³ is in opposition to the saying of R. Meir. For R. Meir said: only two [requests] were granted to him, and one was not granted to him. For it is said: "And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," although he may not deserve it, "And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy,"⁴ although he may not deserve it.⁵

(1) Exodus 34:7

(2) Deuteronomy 24:16

(3) That all the three requests of Moses were granted.

(4) Exodus 33:19.

(5) And God's ways therefore cannot be known.

AVOT 4:19 – Inscrutability of suffering of the righteous

"Rabbi Yannai said: It is not in our hands to comprehend the tranquility of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous."

רַבִּי יַנַּי אָמַר, אֵין בְּיַדֵּינוּ לֹא מַשְׁלֹת הַרְשָׁעִים וְאֵף לֹא מִסּוּרֵי הַצְּדִיקִים.

[Note: this is only one opinion in Avot. There are many differing opinions on this subject.]

TALMUD Kiddushin 39b

MISHNAH. HE WHO PERFORMS ONE PRECEPT IS WELL REWARDED,⁴ HIS DAYS ARE PROLONGED, AND HE INHERITS THE LAND,⁵ BUT HE WHO DOES NOT PERFORM ONE PRECEPT, GOOD IS NOT DONE TO HIM, HIS DAYS ARE NOT PROLONGED, AND HE DOES NOT INHERIT THE LAND.⁶

GEMARA. ...

Said Rab Judah: This is its meaning: HE WHO PERFORMS ONE PRECEPT **in addition to his [equally balanced] merits**¹⁰ IS WELL REWARDED, and he is as though he had fulfilled the whole Torah. ... Said R. Shemaiah: That teaches that if there is an equal balance, it tips the scale.¹²

...

For it was taught: R. Jacob said: There is not a single precept in the Torah whose reward is [stated] at its side which is not dependent on the resurrection of the dead.¹⁸

[Thus:] in connection with honoring parents it is written, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you.¹⁹ In reference to the dismissal of the nest²⁰ it is written, that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days.²¹ Now, if one's father said to him, 'Ascend to the loft and bring me young birds,' and he ascends to the loft, dismisses the dam and takes the young, and on his return falls and is killed — where is this man's happiness²² and where is this man's prolonging of days? But 'in order that it may be well with you', means on the day that is wholly good; and 'in order that your days may be long', on the day that is wholly long.²³

- **Yet perhaps there was no such happening?**²⁴ — R. Jacob saw an actual occurrence.
- **Then perhaps he²⁵ was meditating upon a transgression?** — The Holy One, blessed be He, does not combine an evil thought with an [evil] act.²⁶
- **Yet perhaps he was meditating idolatry,** and it is written, that I may take the house of Israel in their own heart?²⁷ — That too was precisely his point: should you think that precepts are rewarded in this world, why did the [fulfilment of these] precepts not shield him from being led to [such] meditation?²⁸
- Yet R. Eleazar said: **Those who are engaged²⁹ on a precept are never harmed?**³⁰ — There, when they are going [to fulfil the precept], it is different.³¹
- But R. Eleazar said: **Those who are engaged on a precept are never harmed, either when going or returning?** — **It was a rickety ladder, so that injury was likely,³² and where injury is likely one must not rely on a miracle,** for it is written, and Samuel said: How can I go? if Saul hear it, he will kill me.³³

R. Joseph said: Had Aher³⁴ interpreted this verse³⁵ as R. Jacob, his daughter's son, he would not have sinned.³⁶ Now, what happened with Aher? Some say, he saw something of this nature.³⁷ Others say, he saw the tongue of Huzpith the Interpreter dragged along by a swine.³⁸ 'The mouth that uttered pearls licks the dust!' he exclaimed. [Thereupon] he went forth and sinned.³⁹

NOTES

(4) Lit., 'good is done to him'.

(5) I.e., the future world.

- (6) The Mishnah is explained in the Gemara.
- (10) I.e., his good deeds and bad are exactly balanced, and then he performs a precept, thus tipping the scale.
- (12) If one's good deeds and bad are exactly equal, yet among the good deeds is one of those enumerated above, it causes the former to preponderate.
- (18) Which shews that the reward spoken of is in the next world. R. Jacob appears to identify the next world with resurrection; v. Sanh. (Sonc. ed.) p. 601, n. 3.
- (19) Deut. V, 16.
- (20) V. Ibid. XXII, 6f; that precept is always technically so named.
- (21) Ibid.
- (22) Lit., 'the goodness of his days'.
- (23) I.e., both refer to the next world, not to this, and thereby emphasize that regard comes only then, but not in this world.
- (24) R. Jacob bases his deduction on a hypothetical event which may never have happened.
- (25) The one who was involved in this occurrence.
- (26) For punishment. — I.e., one is not punished for mere intention.
- (27) Ezek. XIV, 5: 'heart' implies intention; the reference is to idolatry; v. preceding verse, and thus we see that even the intention of idolatry is punished.
- (28) Cf. Aboth IV, 2: 'the reward of a precept is a precept, and the punishment of transgression is transgression, for precept draws precept and transgression draws transgression'.
- (29) Lit., 'sent'.
- (30) How then could this have happened?
- (31) But he was returning, having taken the bird etc.
- (32) Lit., 'established'.
- (33) 1 Sam. XVI, 2; he did not rely upon the fact that his mission was by God's command.
- (34) Elisha b. Abuyah, a great scholar and R. Meir's teacher, who turned against the Torah, whereupon he was dubbed Aher, a different man, a stranger.
- (35) The promise of reward and long life.
- (36) He interpreted it literally, as referring to this world, and seeing that the promise was not fulfilled turned unbeliever.
- (37) Stated above.
- (38) Lit., 'a different thing' — a euphemism for swine, the unmentionable. — Huzpith was one of the martyrs slain in the Hadrianic persecution, after the fall of Bethar; v. Dor. II, 119. The Interpreter was a functionary who interpreted the public readings of the Torah to the people.
- (39) According to this, it was the eternal question, why do the righteous suffer, which is even put into the mouth of Moses (Ber. 7a), which led him to religious apostasy. For other conjectures v. J.E. s.v. Elishah ben Abuyah.

Maimonides Mishneh Torah: Laws of Mourning, Chapter 13

Halacha 11

A person should not become excessively broken hearted because of a person's death, as Jeremiah 22:10 states: "Do not weep for a dead man and do not shake your head because of him." That means not to weep excessively. For death is the pattern of the world. And a person who causes himself grief because of the pattern of the world is a fool.

What should one do? Weep for three days, eulogize for seven, and observe the restrictions on cutting one's hair and the other five matters for 30 days.

Halacha 12

Whoever does not mourn over his dead in the manner which our Sages commanded is cruel. Instead, one should be fearful, worry, examine his deeds and repent.

If one member of a group dies, the entire group should worry. For the first three days, one should see himself as if a sword is drawn over his neck. From the third day until the seventh, he should consider it as if it is in the corner. From that time onward, as if it passing before him in the market place. All of this is so that a person should prepare himself and repent and awake from his sleep. Behold it is written Jeremiah 5:3: "You have stricken them, but they have not trembled." Implied is that one should awake and tremble.

Talmud Bavli Yoma 69b – The Yetzer HaRa – The Evil Inclination

And [they] cried with a great [loud] voice unto the Lord, their God.¹⁰ What did they cry? — Woe, woe, it is he¹¹ who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! Thou hast surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him.¹² We want neither him, nor reward through him! Thereupon a tablet fell down from heaven for them, whereupon the word ‘truth’¹³ was inscribed. (R. Hanina said: One may learn therefrom that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth). They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon he¹¹ was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. Thereupon the Prophet said to Israel: This is the evil desire of idolatry, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness.¹⁴ As they took hold of him a hair of his beard fell out, he raised his voice and it went [was audible] four hundred parasangs. Thereupon they said: How shall we act? Perhaps, God forbid, they might have mercy upon him from heaven! — The prophet said unto them: Cast him into a leaden pot, closing its opening with lead. Because lead absorbs the voice, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness. And he cast her down into the midst of the measure, and he cast the weight of lead upon the mouth thereof.¹⁴ They said: Since this is a time of Grace, let us pray for mercy for the Tempter to evil.¹⁵ They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. He said to them: Realize that if you kill him, the world goes down. They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it.¹⁶ Thereupon they said: What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy?¹⁷ They do not grant ‘halves’ in heaven.¹⁷ They put out his eyes and let him go. It helped inasmuch as he no more entices men to commit incest.¹⁸

(10) Neh. IX, 4. [Here too the text is in disorder as the verse has no connection with the preceding verse to which it is added in explanation of the emergency referred to, the incident in the first verse having taken place on the first of the seventh month, whilst that of the second verse on the twenty-fourth. Var. lec. accordingly omit the first quotations from ibid. VIII, 4 and substitute in its place the second verse ibid. IX, 4; v. Bah.]

(11) The evil desire, tempter of idolatry.

(12) For resisting him successfully Israel would be rewarded.

(13) I.e., I agree with you: you spoke the truth.

(14) Zech. V, 8.

(15) The evil desire, for idolatry is also the evil desire for immorality. The two were found to go hand in hand.

(16) Whereas there is no good in idolatry there is at least some good in the desire for sex indulgence. Perpetuation of the race depends upon it. So does human food. The people who found themselves with the opportunity to destroy the temptation of flesh-love discovered that, when the genius of sex-love is cancelled, no eggs are available.

(17) To ask that temptation or the tempter should live, but not tempt, is to ask a thing that Heaven will not grant. The tempter lives to tempt. But by depriving its flame of its major glare, by keeping it within lawful limits, one promotes domesticity and prevents depravity.

(18) Lit., ‘against relatives’.

The Evil Impulse Becomes an Addiction – Seder Bereshit 22:6

It does not say “*rovetzet*” but rather “*rovetz*.” [Gen. 4:7] From this one can learn that the *yetzer* is at first mild and gentle like the female but later becomes aggressively assertive like the male. Rabbi Akiba said: In the beginning it is like the thin thread spun by a spider but in the end it is as broad as a ship’s rope, as it says [Isaiah 5:18] “Woe to them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as with cart ropes.” Rabbi Yitzhak said: In the beginning he comes as a guest and then later he becomes the landlord. Rabbi Tanhum bar Maryon said: There are dogs in Rome that know how

to tempt. A dog goes and sits before a grocery store and pretends to be asleep. The storeowner (anticipating no problem from the dog) also falls asleep and knocks over a loaf of bread which causes all the bread to fall onto the floor. By the time the grocer has gathered together the fallen loaves the dog has already taken what he wanted. Rab Abba said: This *yetzer* resembles a hunched over robber who used to sit at the crossroads. From everyone who passed he demanded, “Give me what you have.” A certain wise man passed and saw that the robber was far too weak to be effective and he began to pound him. Thus several generations lost the *yetzer hara*... The *yetzer hara* does not walk down the sides but rather down the center of the street and when he sees a person stroke his eyes, fixing his hair, walking on heels he says, “This one is mine!” For it says [Prov. 26:12] Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Said Rabbi Abin: Anyone who indulges his *yetzer* during his youth will in the end be ruled by him in his old age.

How to Control the Evil Impulse

Avot d’Rabbi Natan – Chapter 16

Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar says: ... The evil impulse is like iron which one holds in a flame. So long as it is in the flame one can make of it any implement he pleases. So too the evil impulse: its only remedy is in the words of the Torah, for they are like fire, as it is said, “If your enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: for you will heap coals of fire upon his head, and the LORD will reward you.” (Prov. 25:21f) – read not *will reward you (yeshalem lakh)* but *will put him at peace with you (yashlimennu lakh)*.

Sukkah 52a

R. Judah expounded: In the time to come⁹ the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring the Evil Inclination and slay it in the presence of the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous it will have the appearance of a towering hill, and to the wicked it will have the appearance of a hair thread. Both the former and the latter will weep; the righteous will weep saying, ‘How were we able to overcome such a towering hill!’ The wicked also will weep saying, ‘How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread!’ And the Holy One, blessed be He, will also marvel together with them ...

(9) The Messianic age.

Biblical and Rabbinic Responses to Suffering

Early Jewish writers were more concerned with the randomness of suffering than with its actual existence.

By Louis Jacobs

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The biblical authors and the Talmudic Rabbis, unlike the later Jewish philosophers, do not consider the general problem of evil in the universe, of why the benevolent Creator should have brought evil into being. The earlier writers seem to have accepted the existence of evil as a “given,” seeing this, in so far as they gave any thought to it, as belonging, like questions on the true nature of God, to an area which is beyond the capacity of the human mind to grasp. Their difficulty was not with the problem of evil per se but rather with the apparently random way in which sufferings are visited on creatures.

Why Suffering Appears to Occur Arbitrarily

In a talmudic passage (Berakhot 7a), Moses is said to have asked God why one righteous man enjoys prosperity while another righteous man is afflicted with adversity; why one wicked man enjoys prosperity and another wicked man is afflicted with adversity. If all righteous men suffered and all wicked men were prosperous, some kind of pattern might have emerged, perhaps on the lines that the righteous suffer for their sins here on earth while the wicked are rewarded here on earth so as to be punished by being deprived of bliss in the Hereafter.

This notion of divine reward and retribution as accounting for suffering is found frequently in the talmudic literature but, in the passage quoted, it is implied that such solutions fall short of the truth because of the sheer arbitrariness evident in the way afflictions and prosperity are apportioned.

The book of Job is directed explicitly to the rejection of the idea that suffering can be easily explained on the grounds of reward and punishment. Job is a good man and yet he suffers greatly and he cannot accept the “comforts” of his friends that his sufferings are the result of his sins. He cannot believe that any sins he may have committed are commensurate with the torment inflicted on him. Similarly, in Ethics of the Fathers (4:19) Rabbi Yannai says: “It is not in our power to explain either the well-being of the wicked or the sufferings of the righteous.”

How Does Rabbinic Literature Approach Suffering?

That some of the Rabbis believed that the problem of suffering does not bear discussion at all can be seen from the talmudic legend (Menahot 29b) in which God transports Moses through time to witness Rabbi Akiba teaching the Torah. Moses asks God to show him what Akiba’s fate will be and God shows him Akiba being tortured to death for teaching the Torah and his flesh sold by weight. Moses is moved to cry out: “Sovereign of the universe, such Torah and such a reward!” to which God replies: “Be silent, for such is My decree.”

Typical of the various, sometimes contradictory, views on the subject is the talmudic passage (Berakhot 5b) in which the problem of suffering is discussed and in which ideas are dismissed without any definite conclusion being reached. In the passage the second-century teacher, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, remarks that three precious gifts were given by God to Israel and they were only given through sufferings. The three precious gifts are: the Torah, the land of Israel, and the World to Come.

Rabbinic Tales of Suffering

There is here a constant weaving of ideas around the question of suffering in terms of reward and punishment. Three narratives are recorded, in each of which a rabbi who suffers is asked by a colleague whether his sufferings are dear to him. In each instance the rabbi replies that he desires neither them nor their reward, whereupon the colleague miraculously restores him to good health by giving him his hand to raise him from the bed of sickness.

Another narrative concerns the third-century teacher, Rav Huna, who has 400 flasks of wine which have turned sour, involving him in severe financial loss. When the scholars visit Rav Huna, they urge him to look into his deeds, that is, they hint that he has been guilty of some dishonesty in connection with an employee of his engaged in the manufacture of wine. Rav Huna eventually admits that he has been guilty in the matter and no sooner does he agree to compensate his employee than the sour wine becomes sweet again.

All this is in no way a theological exposition of the problem of suffering. There is obviously a legendary element in all these narratives and there is even a touch of humor. In another version of the same story, the Talmud says that Rav

Huna's wine did not miraculously revert to its former sweet state; the miracle was that while the wine remained sour, the price of vinegar shot up so that it was equal to the price of the wine!

“Sufferings of Love”

In this passage the striking idea is introduced that there can be “sufferings of love.” This section reads:

“If a man sees that sufferings have come upon him, let him scrutinize his deeds, as it is said: ‘Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord’ [Lamentations 3: 40]. If he did scrutinize his deeds without finding [any sin for which he would deserve to suffer] let him attribute it [the suffering] to the sin of neglect of the Torah [i.e. there may be no sin of commission for which he deserves to be punished, but there may be, nevertheless, this serious sin of omission], as it is said: ‘Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, and teachest out of Thy Torah’ [Psalms 94: 12; i.e. God chastises a man so that he should return to the study of the Torah]. If he did attribute his sufferings to his neglect of the Torah without finding [that he has been indolent in study of the Torah], it then becomes known that they are sufferings of love, as it is said: ‘For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth’ [Proverbs 3: 12].”

Thus “sufferings of love” are neither for sins of commission nor of omission, but are due solely to God's love and are not penal. The passage contains a further discussion as to how to know when sufferings are penal and when they are “sufferings of love.”

Rashi (1040-1105), obviously puzzled by the whole concept of “sufferings of love,” comments: “The Holy One, blessed be He, chastises him in this world, though he is guiltless of any sin, for the purpose of increasing his reward in the World to Come to a degree greater than his merits would otherwise have deserved.”

Maimonides, in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (3. 17), refers to this talmudic passage in which the Rabbis speak of “sufferings of love” and remarks that according to this opinion, sometimes misfortunes befall an individual not because of his having sinned before, but in order for his reward to be the greater.

Maimonides considers this to be a minority opinion, one which, in his view, is hard to reconcile with God's justice. Maimonides contrasts this with the other Rabbinic sayings: “There is no death without sin, and no sufferings without transgression” (Shabbat 55a) and: “A man is measured with the measure he himself uses” (Mishnah Sotah 1: 7). This latter saying, continues **Maimonides**, occurring as it does in the **Mishnah**, enjoys special authority.

Throughout the literature of Jewish piety, the idea is found of accepting suffering in love and faith in God. The **Mekhilta** [a midrash on the book of Exodus] to the verse: “Ye shall not make with Me gods of silver and gods of gold” (Exodus 20: 23) comments: “Do not behave towards Me as heathens behave to their gods. When happiness come to them, they sing praises to their gods, but when retribution comes upon them they curse their gods. If I bring happiness upon you give thanks, and when I bring sufferings give thanks also.”

On the same lines the Mishnah (Berakhot 9: 5) states: “A man is duty-bound to utter a benediction for the bad even as he utters one for the good.” The benediction on receiving good tidings is: “Blessed is He, the good and the doer of good.” On receiving bad tidings the benediction is: “Blessed is He, the true judge.” The Talmud (Berakhot 60b) observes that the benediction over the bad should be recited with the same joyfulness as that over the good.

Rabbi Dr. Louis Jacobs is the rabbi of the New London Synagogue, Goldsmid Visiting Professor at University College London, and Visiting Professor at Lancaster University. His books include Jewish Prayer, We Have Reason to Believe, Principles of the Jewish Faith, and A Jewish Theology.

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Medieval Responses to Suffering & Evil

The philosophers and mystics of the Middle Ages suggested an array of solutions to the problem of suffering.

By David Kraemer

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Exponents of the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition represent a range of opinions regarding suffering and evil. Saadia, writing in the early tenth century, follows a traditional path. Beginning with the uncompromising insistence that humans have free will, he offers that suffering may be either punishment for the few sins a person commits in this world (assuring his place in the future world) or a test from God, later to be compensated. Judah Halevi likewise writes (early twelfth century) that a person's troubles serve to cleanse sins, and therefore he recommends a pious attitude of acceptance and joy.

In the *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Repentance, chapter 5), Maimonides (twelfth century) polemically insists that God has granted humans complete free will; he will allow no room for the opinion, evidently still popular, that God decrees the course a person will follow from his or her youth. Thus, evil caused by humans must be understood as the result of their freely chosen path. Those who fail properly to repent will, as the tradition suggests, die as a consequence of their sins. Obviously speaking from a philosophical perspective, Maimonides nevertheless employs the voice of Torah.

Evil as Absence

But in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:10-12), Maimonides forces a distinctive philosophical position. He begins with the assumption that God's created world is thoroughly good. Contrary to the claim of [the biblical book of] Isaiah, then, God cannot have created evil in any of its forms. If not, then how can the obvious evils of creation be explained? He answers that evil is privation, and privation, being not a thing but the absence of some thing or quality, is not created.

By his enumeration, there are three species of evil: 1) evils that befall people because they possess a body that degenerates; 2) evils that people, because of their ignorance (that is, the absence of wisdom), cause one another; and 3) evils that people, because of their ignorance, cause themselves. God creates none of these evils or their associated sufferings. According to Maimonides' system, all are caused by natural forces, by essential human failings, or by human ignorance.

Suffering in Medieval Mysticism

The opinions of medieval Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) regarding evil and consequent suffering are varied and sometimes at odds. Early Kabbalistic texts record the belief that evil is a product of the unchecked growth of divine judgment. Judgment, untempered by mercy, is wicked. The domain of judgment gone awry is called the *sitra achra*, "the other side."

The great classic of the Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, gives credit to the view that evil originates in leftovers (*k'lipot*) of earlier worlds that God destroyed. Alternatively, it suggests that evil was contained, *in potentia*, in the Tree of Knowledge (of Good and Evil), but was suppressed by the Tree of life, to which the Tree of Knowledge was bound. When Adam "cut the shoots," separating one tree from the other, he activated the evil the tree had contained.

The Contribution of Lurianic Kabbalah

Perhaps the most enduring contribution of Kabbalah to the Jewish understandings of evil is that of Isaac Luria (sixteenth century). According to the interpretation of Gershom Scholem, Luria's views, contained in his highly original cosmology, are a response to the great tragedy of the prior generation, the expulsion of the Jewish community from the Iberian peninsula. Struggling to understand why they had suffered so, Jews found unparalleled comfort in the interpretation that Luria promulgated.

According to Luria, in order to create the world, God—the *ein-sof* ("the limitless one")—had to contract into himself, leaving space for creation. In this space remained sparks of the divine light, preserved in special vessels. This light contained concentrated "shells" of stern divine judgment that, when the vessels were shattered (due to a flaw in the plan of creation), were scattered throughout creation. This, in the system of Lurianic Kabbalah, is the root of all evil. The system's popularity lay not only in its explanation of the suffering of Israel but also in its recipe for redemption: Redemption required that the vessels be repaired, and the tools of reparation were the mitzvot of the Torah performed even by common Jews.

Liturgical and Poetic Responses to National Suffering

The most extreme persecutions of these centuries provoked profoundly ambivalent responses, or so the evidence of contemporary liturgical compositions suggests. On the one hand, Jewish poets returned again and again to the notion that suffering is punishment for sin. In one of the most exemplary (and best known) of these poems, the "*Eileh ezkerah*" (composed shortly after the first crusade in the late eleventh century), the author justifies the Roman torture and execution of ten talmudic rabbis as punishment for the sin of Joseph's brothers who had "kidnapped" him and sold him into slavery. Of course, for the author and his readers, this is not history but theodicy; it explains their own suffering as

well as that of their rabbinic ancestors. It is appropriate, therefore, that in liturgical performance, the reciter ends each stanza by declaring, "We have sinned...forgive us."

On the other hand, this and many similar compositions from the same broad period exhibit a considerable degree of horror and even anger, some complaining against the God who is "mute" or who "hides his face." This is a God who bids his children slaughter their own children on the altar, even as Abraham prepared to do to Isaac so long before. Still, the act of sacrifice—whether of Isaac or of their own sons and daughters—is justified as "sanctification of God's name." It is an act both meritorious and cleansing.

Crucially, neither the availability of alternatives nor the experience of persecution caused Jews to abandon the ancient formula. Even Gluckel of Hameln, a woman of relative comfort and culture, returns to this piety on several occasions in her memoirs. Writing near the end of the seventeenth century, she clearly believes that sin is punished with suffering, which in turn atones the sin. God's judgment is just, she says, and to be accepted in modesty.

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Dr. David Kraemer is Professor of [Talmud](#) and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is the author of Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Suffering is meaningless unless you decide otherwise.

By Harold S. Kushner

The following article, excerpted from Kushner's bestseller, is a response to suffering which assumes that God is not the immediate cause of tragedy. It should be noted, however, that this is the theological solution of this particular thinker, and indeed, is probably contrary to traditional covenantal theology, which assumes that suffering is inflicted on the Jewish people because of their sins. Reprinted with permission from [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#), published by Schocken Books.

Suffering is Not Punishment from a Cruel God

I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about Him that I did years ago, when I was growing up or when I was a theological student. I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom.

I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.

Some years ago, when the "death of God" theology was a fad, I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read "My God is not dead; sorry about yours." I guess my bumper sticker reads "My God is not cruel; sorry about yours."

God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws.

The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.

A Sense of Meaning Makes Pain More Bearable

"Does that mean that my suffering has no meaning?" That is the most significant challenge that can be offered to the point of view I have been advocating in this book. We could bear nearly any pain or disappointment if we thought there was a reason behind it, a purpose, to it. But even a lesser burden becomes too much for us if we feel it makes no sense.

Patients in a veterans' hospital who have been seriously wounded in combat have an easier time adjusting to their injuries than do patients with exactly the same injury, sustained while fooling around on a basketball court or a swimming pool, because they can tell themselves their suffering at least was in a good cause. Parents who convince themselves that there is some purpose somewhere served by their child's handicap can accept it better for the same reason.

Do you remember the biblical story, in chapter 32 of Exodus, about Moses, how, when he came down from Mount Sinai and saw the Israelites worshipping the [golden calf](#), he threw down the tablets of the [Ten Commandments](#) so that they shattered?

There is a Jewish legend that tells us that while Moses was climbing down the mountain with the two stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments, he had no trouble carrying them although they were large, heavy slabs of stone and the path was steep. After all, though they were heavy, they had been inscribed by God and were precious to him. But when Moses came upon the people dancing around the golden calf, the legend goes, the words disappeared from the stone. They were just blank stones again. And now they became too heavy for him to hold on to.

We could bear any burden if we thought there was a meaning to what we were doing. Have I made it harder for people to accept their illnesses, their misfortunes, their family tragedies by telling them that they are not sent by God as part of some master plan of His?

Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them.

Looking to the Future Redeems Our Tragedies

The question we should be asking is not, "Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?" That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be "Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?"

Martin Gray, a survivor of the Warsaw [Ghetto](#) and the Holocaust, writes of his life in a book called *For Those I Loved*. He tells how, after the Holocaust, he rebuilt his life, became successful, married, and raised a family. Life seemed good after the horrors of the concentration camp.

Then one day, his wife and children were killed when a forest fire ravaged their home in the south of France. Gray was distraught, pushed almost to the breaking point by this added tragedy. People urged him to demand an inquiry into what caused the fire, but instead he chose to put his resources into a movement to protect nature from future fires.

He explained that an inquiry, an investigation, would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame. He wanted to focus on the future. An inquiry would set him against other people--"was someone negligent? whose fault was it?"--and being against other people, setting out to find a villain, accusing other people of being responsible for your misery, only makes a lonely person lonelier. Life, he concluded, has to be lived for something, not just against something.

We too need to get over the questions that focus on the past and on the pain--"why did this happen to me?"--and ask instead the question which opens doors to the future: "Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?"

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner is Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts. He is the author of numerous books including Living a Life that Matters.

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The Holocaust: Responding to Modern Suffering

The events of the Holocaust put the problem of suffering at the fore of Jewish theological discourse.

BY RABBI OR N. ROSE | February 24, 2003

Awareness of the realities of evil and suffering is as old as human consciousness itself. In every age people have wrestled with these issues, trying desperately to make sense of the painful, cruel, and unjust dimensions of life. For many contemporary Jews, however, the tragic events of the Holocaust represent the most troubling examples of evil and suffering in all of human history.

Some Pre-Holocaust Responses to Evil and Suffering

Modern thinkers confronted the problem of evil and suffering long before the Holocaust. As with the post-Holocaust theologians who followed, thinkers such as Abraham Isaac Kook and Mordecai Kaplan mediated traditional Jewish theology with the specific challenges of the modern world.

Kook (1865-1935), the great mystical thinker and first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel, understood life to include two cosmic forces: good and evil, both emanating directly from the divine. Kook rejected the medieval philosophical assertion that evil is mere privation—the absence of good—or an accidental force in an otherwise hospitable universe. However, this did not lead him to utter despair. Like his kabbalistic and Hasidic forbears, Kook saw all of life as striving for perfection, a perfection that would eventually include the transformation of evil (not its destruction) and its elevation to the holy.

At roughly the same time, Kaplan (1881-1983), founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, was beginning to formulate his naturalistic religious vision. Kaplan interpreted the term “God” to mean “the power for salvation” in the universe—the drive within nature, and within the human heart, to reach its full potential (a concept not entirely different from Kook’s).

Kaplan averred with great optimism that humanity was, in fact, progressing forward, as increasing numbers of people embraced the modern values of democracy and rationality. In dealing with the subject of evil, Kaplan insisted that the events that we commonly refer to as “natural evils” or “natural disasters” bear no moral weight. They are simply organic processes at work in the world, as it evolves and strives for fulfillment.

On the human level, Kaplan argued tenaciously for the adoption of an “ethics of immanence”: a moral stance in which human beings throw off the shackles of theistic (belief in a transcendent and personal god) religion, and use their rational minds to create a just civilization.

As Kook and Kaplan demonstrate, the pre-Holocaust period was marked by a strong sense of theological optimism. This hopefulness eroded quickly with the rise of Nazism.

Two Decades of Silence: 1945-1965

One noteworthy fact about North American, post-Holocaust theology is that its leading exponents did not begin addressing the key issues raised by the Holocaust for twenty years after its conclusion. During the years immediately following the *Shoah*, much of the attention of the Jewish world was focused on reporting the atrocities and creating accurate records of victims, survivors, and perpetrators. It was not until the mid-1960s that theologians began to discuss the religious implications of the Holocaust in earnest.

However, there were individuals in the ultra-Orthodox world of Eastern Europe that made more immediate declarations. One such figure was Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (the Satmar Rebbe), the leader of a Hasidic community in Hungary.

In his book *Va’Yoel Moshe*, Teitelbaum states unequivocally that the Holocaust was a divine punishment for the secular Zionist efforts to create a modern Jewish state in the land of Israel. He condemned this endeavor as a blasphemous attempt at returning to the Promised Land prematurely, that is, before the Messianic age. Thus Teitelbaum understood the Holocaust in terms of traditional covenantal theology, as a punishment for Jewish sins.

Facing the Challenge

The acclaimed journalist and author, Elie Weisel is credited with beginning the post-Holocaust theological discussion in the West. In his haunting autobiographical book *Night*, Weisel shares his

journey from Hasidic piety, to Auschwitz, and finally to liberation. One of the important elements of this book is Weisel's ability to raise key theological questions.

Was Auschwitz a unique event in Jewish history, one requiring new theological responses? Was it a new "Sinai"? If so, what was revealed? Had God died in the death camps? While Weisel, the novelist, raised these crucial questions, he left it to theologians to piece together full theological treatments.

The Death of God

One important sociological factor contributing to the rise of post-Holocaust Jewish thought in North America was the Protestant "Death-of-God" movement. In the wake of the Second World War, several respected Protestant theologians began to reassess their core beliefs and commitments. The "Death-of-God" writers claimed that faith in a personal and providential God was absurd in light of recent events. However, these religious renegades did not abandon religious life, rather they chose to rebuild the church, "as if there was no God," (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

Richard Rubenstein, an academic and ordained Conservative rabbi, is considered the Jewish "Death-of-God" theologian. In his controversial book, *After Auschwitz*, he asserted that none of the traditional forms of theodicy—belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God despite the existence of evil—are tenable after the Holocaust. Rubenstein believed that the horrors of Auschwitz should lead us to agree with the French philosopher, Albert Camus, that "we stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources."

Influenced by developments in the field of psychology, he argued that Judaism must be re-envisioned as a profound system of ritual and myth that serves to aid its adherents in coping with the inevitable traumas of life. Rubenstein referred to this system as a new Jewish "paganism," because he felt that Jews must re-establish a special relationship to the Land of Israel, where they could live in safety and freedom.

In response to Rubenstein, the modern orthodox thinker Eliezer Berkovits argued for a renewal of traditional Jewish faith after Auschwitz. He asserted that God's "absence" in Nazi Germany could be explained through the classical concept of *hester panim*, "the hiding of the divine face." Berkovits claimed that in order for God to maintain His respect and care for humanity as a whole, He necessarily had to withdraw Himself and allow human beings—even the most cruel and vicious—to exercise their free will.

The Holocaust as a Revelatory Event

Beginning in the 1940s, Emil Fackenheim emerged as a leading exponent of Jewish philosophy. A faithful admirer of Martin Buber's humanist theology, the Holocaust forced Fackenheim to rethink his basic theological positions. He was one of the last ordained liberal rabbis in Germany, and he was interned in a labor camp before escaping to Canada.

Fackenheim argued that the Holocaust was a *unique* event in history for two reasons: (1) The Nazis persecuted the Jews not because of their religious beliefs or practices as in former times, but strictly because of their genetic makeup. (2) The demonic will of the persecutors to exterminate the Jews superseded their aims at winning the War.

Like Weisel, Fackenheim saw a new revelation emanating from Auschwitz. It came *not* from the death camps themselves, but from the Jewish people's response to the Holocaust. Rather than giving up, as one might have expected, they rebuilt their lives. The Jews heard a commanding voice, Fackenheim argued, not to hand Hitler "posthumous victories."

This “614th Commandment,” as he called it, required that Jews actively work for their own survival, that they always remember the victims, and that they not despair of God’s existence. He also claimed that in the post-Auschwitz era, traditional differences between secular and religious Jews were insignificant. For now, they had to band together in the name of survival.

Like Rubenstein, Fackenheim also gained a new regard for the State of Israel. He saw it as the ultimate response to Auschwitz—the establishment of a strong and independent Jewish society.

Finally, Fackenheim called on non-Jews—especially the leaders of the Catholic church—to take responsibility for their role in the Holocaust.

Where Was Man?

While Weisel, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim all regarded the Holocaust as an event that required serious theological reconsideration, others have argued that despite the devastation, it does not require such revisions.

Theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), for example, argued that the Holocaust should move people to examine their own behavior, and not that of God: “The question about Auschwitz is not where was God, but where was man?” In a world where men and women are given free will (as the Hebrew Bible insists), we are accountable for our own moral failings. The time has come, Heschel insists, to heed God’s call and work as His partner in completing the work of creation.

Rabbi Or N. Rose is Associate Dean of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton, MA. He is the co-editor of Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice and God in All Moments: Spiritual and Practical Wisdom from the Hasidic Masters. He is currently completing a doctorate in Jewish thought at Brandeis University.

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-holocaust-responding-to-modern-suffering/>