

PARSHA KI TAVO
By Gary Laveman
September 9 2017



WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

In Parsha Ki Tavo (chapter 38) we read about the blessings and the curses: If one leads a good life, then that person will receive G-d's blessings: "If thou shall harken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy G-d... [then] the Lord thy G-D will set thee on high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon thee..." On the other hand, failure to lead a good life will yield "...all these curses shall come upon thee and overtake thee." It seems so simple—lead a good life; you will be blessed. Lead a bad life; you will be cursed.

An examination of the "real" world seems to belie this formula! Parents lose their children; drunken drivers kill totally innocent persons; good people suffer from dread diseases; and, ultimately the six million lost in the Shoah. Then one might wonder: why do bad things happen to good people?

The Saadia Gaon in *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (Treatise V, Chapter 3) concedes that completely guiltless individuals may be subjected to horrific trials by G-D. However, Saadia also explains that such individuals who may suffer in this life, will be handsomely rewarded by G-D in the next life. Saadia goes on to offer an opinion as to why some monsters may go unpunished in this world: (1) G-D may know that an evil person will repent. (2) An evil person may give birth to a pious person. (3) Some evil persons accomplish good deeds, for which they are rewarded. (4) Sometimes, evil persons live for a period of time, only to be consumed (e.g. G-D spared Pharaoh from the ten plagues so that he could ultimately be drowned).

Maimonides in his work, *Eight Chapters*, also addresses the question of why bad things happen to good people. Like the Saadia Gaon, Maimonides believes that the good will be rewarded in the next life while the evil will be punished. He states: "For G-D knows the sinners and His wisdom and equity mete out their punishment. Sometimes, he punishes only in this world, sometimes only in the world to come, sometimes in both."

Clearly, the *Book of Job* centers around this fundamental question. Rabbi Robert Gordis, in *A Faith for Moderns* (1960), advances the argument that Job, a pious man, suffered as a warning to others. After all, Rabbi Gordis avers, if an evil person is punished, others will quickly say, "He deserved it." When a good man suffers, others may conclude that no one is exempt from G-D's scrutiny. Rabbi Gordis quotes from the British poet John Donne, "No man is an island entire of itself. Each man is a piece of the continent... never seek to ask for whom the bell tolls... it tolls for thee."

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, a work that became an international best-seller. Rabbi Kushner wrote his book shortly after he lost his teenage son to a dread disease. Rabbi Kushner addresses the moral dilemma in the *Book of Job*, as did Rabbi Gordis, but reaches a different conclusion. Rabbi Kushner opines that Job suffered as a result of "random actions" not controlled by G-D. He goes on to posit that G-D is not all-powerful, that He does not control everything, and that the laws of nature govern our lives. In a memorable sentence from the book, Rabbi Kushner writes: "There are no exceptions for nice people." The laws of physics determine what happens to humans, not G-D. He quotes from Brenner's book, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*: "It never

occurred to me to associate the calamity we were experiencing with G-D, to blame Him, or to believe in Him or cease believing in Him at all because He didn't come to our aid. G-D doesn't owe us that, or anything. We owe our lives to Him...."

Two early commentators also face the question of bad things happening to good people. Rabbi Akiva states that: "the evil *yetzer* is at first like a spider's thread, and at last it is like the rope of a ship." Rabbi Hanina ben Papa writes that "the desire of the evil *yetzer* is to rule over you, but you are to rule over it." Both sages conclude that when we are able to control the *yetzer*, we lead lives worthy of emulation. The sages cite *Kidushin* 30b to try to explain how we can overcome the *yetzer*: "So G-D says to the Israelites, I created within you the evil *yetzer*, but I created the Law as a drug. As long as you occupy yourselves with the Law, the *yetzer* will not rule over you...."

To sum up, we have four interpretations as to why bad things happen to good people: (1) This life is short, the next life is infinite. The good will be rewarded in the next life and the evil will be punished. (2) Human disasters and suffering are a warning to society at large. (3) Bad things happen randomly; G-D has nothing to do with it. (4) The *yetzer* is always present to tempt us to do the wrong things.

Putting our fundamental question in another perspective, we can examine the *Unesane Tokef*, traditionally ascribed to Rabbi Amnon of Mayence: "We will celebrate the mighty holiness of this day, for it is one of awe and terror. Thereon is thy dominion exalted and thy throne is established in mercy and thou sittest thereon in truth. Verify it is thou alone who art judge and arbiter, who knowest and art witness; thou writest down and wettest the seal, thou recordest and tellest; yea, thou rememberest the things forgotten... The seal of every man's hand is set thereto..."

Lastly, turning to *Devarim* (Chapter 29, verse 28): "The secret things belong unto the Lord our G-D." Rabbi Dr. J.H. Hertz (Hertz Chumash, footnote, page 880) states: "There are limits to what mortal beings can know. Certain things are in the hands of G-D alone and must be left with Him...." Perhaps this captures the essential answer to the question: Why do Bad Things happen to Good People?