**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

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**In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l**

**הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ​**

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**Shiur #04: Theodicy (1)**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

One of the major principles of faith is the belief that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. But this belief seems to be contradicted by the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked, which can be seen in every generation. This fundamental question is raised in the *Tanakh* by the prophet Yirmiyahu (12:1): “Why has the way of the wicked prospered?” It is the topic of the entire book of *Iyov*. And according to *Chazal* (*Berakhot* 7a), at Mount Sinai, Moshe Rabbeinu asked God why some of the righteous prosper but others suffer, and why some of the wicked suffer but others prosper. Attempts to explain the problem of “*tzaddik ve-ra lo, rasha ve-tov lo*” – the righteous who suffer and the wicked who prosper – are referred to as theodicies.

**Friends of Iyov**

The simple, perhaps simplistic, answer to this question is given by Iyov’s friends in the book of *Iyov*. Iyov’s friends tell him that he suffers because he must deserve it. God is a righteous judge, and Iyov would not have been punished if he were not in fact wicked.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Our moral intuition and experience reject this answer. We know that there are people in this world who suffer and do not deserve it, and Iyov is apparently one of them. At the end of the book of *Iyov*, God Himself appears to Iyov out of the whirlwind and tells him that he will never really understand the answer to this deep philosophical problem. At the same time, God makes very clear that while Iyov’s questioning was proper, Iyov’s friends misunderstood the way that God runs the world. As a matter of a fact, Iyov’s friends need Iyov to intercede on their behalf so that God will forgive them for their philosophical mistake (*Iyov* 42:7-10).

Not only was the accusation by Iyov’s friends inappropriate, it was a violation of the biblical prohibition of *ona’at devarim* (*Vayikra* 25:17)*.* It is forbidden to verbally oppress one’s fellow, and one of the examples of verbal oppression prohibited by this commandment is telling someone that his suffering is due to his sins (*Bava Metzia* 58b).[[2]](#footnote-2) Clearly, we do not endorse the simplistic approach of Iyov’s friends, who believe that there is a direct correlation between one’s lot in life and what one deserves based on one’s moral and spiritual attainment.

The first chapter of the book of *Iyov* actually tells us why Iyov suffered (although the characters are unaware of this background). It is because God made a bet with Satan. But this is an unsatisfying as a philosophical answer. Do we really think that the righteous suffer because of disputes between Satan and God? The book of *Iyov* obscures much more than it reveals, and we are left, as is Iyov himself, with no clarity as to why there is so much injustice in the world if God is ultimately just.

***Olam Ha-Ba* as Theodicy**

There are a number of approaches in normative Jewish philosophy to this problem. One of the most popular approaches maintains that Iyov’s friends were almost right. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 7a) cites a disagreement between R. Yossi and R. Meir on the matter. R. Yossi firmly believes that suffering can always be explained, while R. Meir denies this.

According to R. Yossi, all suffering is a result of sin and all prosperity is due to good deeds. A righteous person who never suffers is fully righteous; a righteous person with some misdeeds suffers for those sins. Likewise, someone who is completely wicked could never prosper, but someone who is mostly wicked but still performs a few *mitzvot* can prosper because of those good deeds.[[3]](#footnote-3)

How does this make sense? Rashi and other commentators explain that in God’s calculus, there are two realms in which He can apply reward and punishment – this world (*Olam Ha-Zeh*) and the next world (*Olam Ha-Ba*). If someone is completely righteous, he doesn’t need any punishment, and he will prosper in this world and the next. But a mostly righteous person deserves much reward and little punishment, and God decides that He would rather give him the punishment in this world and save all the reward for the next world. He wants this mostly righteous person to have unmitigated bliss in the next world, and so He pays him back for all his sins in this world. It seems like the righteous person suffers a lot in this world because this world is so short, such that if he deserves only a slight punishment, he seems to suffer terribly in this world. But even terrible suffering in this world is only a tiny fraction compared to the eternity of the next world. Thus, a mostly righteous person who deserves only one percent punishment may suffer terribly in this world, but his suffering is nothing compared to the eternal bliss he will inherit in the World to Come.

Likewise, someone who is completely wicked will be punished in both worlds. But if someone is mostly wicked, God does not want him to get any reward in the next world, so He must fulfill His obligation to give him his full reward in this world. Accordingly, the mostly wicked might experience much goodness in this world, because from the perspective of eternity, the tiny amount of reward he deserves translates into great reward in this world, but that is miniscule compared to the punishment that he receives in the next world.

The Ramban posits a fascinating application of this idea in *Torat Ha-Adam*, his work that discusses laws of life and death, in the section called *Sha’ar Ha-Gmul,* which deals with the philosophy of reward and punishment.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Ramban uses this idea polemically to defend Judaism against a very popular, powerful, and threatening Christian argument that was made throughout the Middle Ages. The Christians, in an attempt to convert Jews, brought an apparently strong proof that Christianity is correct and the Jews were rejected by God: After all, it says in the Torah that those who are good are rewarded by God and the evil are punished, and the Jews are oppressed, persecuted, enslaved, and exiled, while the Christians rule the world! This fact, the Christians claimed, proves that God has chosen the Christians and rejected the Jews.

Many Jews were threatened by the intellectual power of this argument, but the Ramban turned this argument on its head and used it to prove that the Jews are in fact the Chosen People. After all, no entire nation can be completely righteous or completely wicked; there is always a range or variety of people. Nations can be mostly wicked or mostly righteous or somewhere in between. Accordingly, the Ramban argues, if a nation is mostly righteous, God treats it as He would a mostly righteous person, saving all the reward for the World to Come and punishing the nation for their few sins in this world, and they thus endure much suffering. If a nation is mostly wicked, then God must pay them for their few good deeds, and so He rewards them with great rewards in this world to discharge the obligation created by those few good deeds. Then He can send them straight to damnation in the next world. Thus, says the Ramban, this is the proof of the truth of Judaism! The Jews suffer because we must be so righteous that we have few sins, and so God saves our reward for the next world and punishes us for our sins in this world. The Christians prosper because they are idolaters who violate the Torah, and therefore God treats them as mostly wicked and saves eternal damnation for them in the next world, rewarding them for the acts of kindness that they do in this world by granting them domination, wealth, and power.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This approach, that all suffering is a punishment for wrongdoing, was not accepted by all of the Talmudic Rabbis.[[6]](#footnote-6) As noted above, in the *gemara* in *Berakhot* (7a), R. Meir rejects this approach and argues that this explanation was not given to Moshe Rabbeinu on Mount Sinai, where he was in fact informed that there is no philosophical explanation for reward and punishment (*Shemot* 33:19): “And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” – even though he is not worthy; “and I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy” – even though he is not worthy. Similarly, while R. Ami initially maintained that all suffering is a result of sin, the Talmud rejects this opinion and conclude that not all suffering can be attributed to sin (*Shabbat* 55). Likewise, we find a debate between R. Yaakov and the Rabbis in which the Rabbis seem to say that there is reward and punishment in this world, while R. Yaakov believes that there is no reward and punishment in this world (*Kiddushin* 39b and *Chullin* 142b).[[7]](#footnote-7) This may also be the intention of the statement of R. Yanai in *Pirkei Avot* (4:15): “We do not have in our hands neither the tranquility of the wicked nor the afflictions of the righteous.” Most commentaries understand this to mean that we cannot understand why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. Thus, we must explore other explanations for the suffering of the righteous.

**Sufferings of Love**

Another possible theodicy is raised in *Berakhot* 5a. The Talmud gives practical advice: If a person sees that he is suffering, he should examine his actions and improve them through repentance. If someone checks and cannot find where he is doing something wrong, then it must be that he is not learning enough Torah. And if he cannot attribute his sufferings to a neglect of Torah learning either, then Rava tells us that these are “*yissurin shel ahava*,” “sufferings of love,” as the verse says that “he whom He loves, God chastises” (*Mishlei* 3:12). A person who suffers because of God’s love accepts the suffering willingly and loves God more and more as he accepts the suffering.

We can certainly admire a person who accepts suffering with love, but we are not provided with an explanation as to why God would cause suffering out of love. If I love someone, I want to help them and not hurt them, and it is not clear why God would not act similarly. In fact, several Jewish philosophers could not accept the simple meaning of this passage. For example, the Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* III:17), in discussing the mainstream Jewish opinion, tells us that some of our sages believed in suffering out of love, but that is a later theory that has no source in the Torah and is merely a minority opinion.

The Ramban, in contrast, brilliantly reinterprets the *gemara* by reading it very closely. The *gemara* does not say that we are speaking of a person who did not sin. Rather, it discusses a case in which one examined his actions and found no sins. That merely proves that he has committed no sins of which he is aware. In halakhic language, we would say that he is innocent of intentional sins, but he still may have accidentally or negligently sinned. Perhaps he doesn’t even realize that he is sinning because he failed to investigate his actions properly. Perhaps he doesn’t know all the details of the halakha and is sinning constantly. “Sufferings of love” mean that God punishes the righteous in this world not only for the sins committed intentionally, but even for unintentional sins, so that He will not have to punish them in the next world.[[8]](#footnote-8) Accordingly, this explanation does not contradict the assumption that all suffering is the result of sin. All suffering must have resulted from someone sinning, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Most commentators, however, take the *gemara* literally as meaning that God sometimes causes suffering merely out of love. *Yissurin shel ahava* are sufferings that are good for you and not punishments. Sometimes the righteous suffer because they are better off for having suffered. In fact, the *gemara* tells us that *yissurin shel ahava*refer to those kinds of suffering that do not distract a person from his spiritual undertakings (i.e., they do not interfere with his prayer or learning), perhaps hinting to us that there is a type of suffering that is good for us.

How can this be? Rashi (*Berakhot* 5a, s.v. *yissurin shel ahava*) cryptically explains that by suffering, the righteous person amasses even more merit and gets an even greater reward in the World to Come. Perhaps God visits suffering upon the righteous so that they will amass even more reward by passing the test and continuing to increase their religious devotion and spiritual pursuits in spite of their suffering.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Other philosophers suggest other reasons why it is good for the righteous to suffer. The *Pnei Yehoshua*, in analyzing the words of Rashi, suggests that the suffering of the righteous in fact adheres to the credit of an entire generation; sometimes, when God needs to punish the sinners of the Jewish People, He punishes the righteous instead, and the suffering of the righteous achieves atonement for the entire generation. This is in fact a favor to the *tzaddik*, because the merit of having saved the entire Jewish community is a great *mitzva* for which he will be rewarded in the World to Come.

R. Saadia Gaon (*Emunot Ve-De’ot*, ch. 5) suggests that perhaps God brings suffering upon the righteous even though they do not deserve it in order to show everyone else what a *tzaddik* is and what heights of spirituality can be achieved. If the *tzaddik* serves God and has a comfortable life, then everyone will say that he was religious only because it worked out well for him. But if the *tzaddik* suffers and remains steadfast in his belief and devotion nonetheless, the entire world is impressed and sees the sincerity of religious faith. This didactic function of the righteous suffering fits well with the theme of *Iyov*. Why did Iyov suffer? So that God could show Satan, representing the skeptics of the world, that Iyov was a true *tzaddik*, who preserved his belief even in the face of his suffering.

Other Jewish philosophers understand this in a more straightforward way. The Ran (*Derashot* 9), the *Pnei Yehoshua* (*Berakhot* 5a), and the Maharal (*Netivot Olam, Netiv Ha-Yissurin*, ch. 1) assume that for a true *tzaddik*, suffering is good because it diminishes his physicality. The more one suffers physically, the less stake one has in the physical world, and the more one is cleansed and spiritualized. Someone who does not have any pleasures in the physical world will naturally shift his focus from the physical to the spiritual, focusing on his soul to the exclusion of his body. He can become purely spiritual through his retreat from the physical world. Of course, an average person who suffers might just focus on his physical sufferings. But, the Ran tells us, a true *tzaddik* can use suffering as a way of distancing from this physical world and focusing purely on his soul and purifying it so it can reach the most exalted heights possible in the ultimate reward of the next world.

**Summary**

We have seen three approaches to why the righteous suffer. The first, which is unacceptable and is not to be emulated, was that of the friends of Iyov, who claim that the more one prospers the more righteous he must be, and the more one suffers the more wicked he must be. We discussed two more sophisticated and acceptable approaches. The Ramban, following R. Yossi, holds that all prosperity is reward for *mitzva*, all suffering is punishment for sin, and the only reason that the righteous suffer is because they are not complete *tzaddikim* and God wants to cleanse them of their few sins in this world. Conversely, the reason the wicked prosper is because they are not completely wicked and God wants to reward them for all their good deeds in this world so that he can punish them severely in the next.[[10]](#footnote-10) The other formulation, the simple understanding of Rava’s words in *Berakhot* 5a, is that sometimes a *tzaddik* suffers because it is good for him. This may be because suffering might increase his merit when he passes the test by accepting the suffering with love (as Rashi implies); alternatively, the *tzaddik* may suffer because it helps his generation, either by providing an example for them (R. Saadia Gaon) or by achieving atonement on their behalf (Pnei Yehoshua). Or, as the Ran, Maharal, and others claim, physical suffering is good for someone on a very high level of spirituality because it helps him purify his soul from physicality. Sometimes what seems bad for you is in fact good for you, and for a true *tzaddik*, physical suffering might be a reward.

In the next *shiur*, we will next explore a more radical approach in *Chazal*, which claims that suffering is not a response to one’s deeds at all.

1. See, e.g., *Iyov* 4:7-9, 8:3-4, 11:4-6, 34:10-12. We follow the simple reading of the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 58b), which lumps all of Iyov’s friends together, as opposed to the Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* III:23) and many other Jewish philosophers, who understood that each of Iyov’s friend propounded a distinct philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although the *gemara* merely forbids verbalizing this thought and does not explicitly state that it is philosophically wrong, *Iyov* 42:7 states explicitly that Iyov’s friends spoke incorrectly about God, and not merely to Iyov. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This approach is taken by many *Rishonim*, including the Ramban. On the exoteric level, the Ramban consistently accepts the approach of R. Yossi, and the Meiri in many places (e.g., *Kiddushin* 39b) also takes this approach. Similarly, the Rambam in the *Guide to the Perplexed* (III:17) states that the mainstream Jewish approach is to view all prosperity as reward for good deeds and suffering as punishment for sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this context, we will not discuss the kabbalistic approach of the Ramban. He hints strongly in *Torat Ha-Adam* that according to Kabbala, a righteous person suffers because of sins that he committed in a previous life, based on the doctrine of *gilgul neshamot,*transmigration of souls. According to this notion, the wicked prosper because of good deeds performed in a previous life. The Ramban leaves this kabbalistic notion as a hint, following his usual approach of attributing ultimate truth to Kabbala but finding a rational explanation for everything in the Torah without having to resort to Kabbala. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It seems questionable whether Ramban actually accepted this argument across the board, as he would then have difficulty explaining the periods in Jewish history, such as the reigns of David and Solomon, when the Jews prospered and their enemies suffered. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Why would anyone reject this explanation? Perhaps the objection was practical or moral. Looking around the world, it is very difficult to accept that the extreme suffering that the righteous experience is because of some slight sins that they did in their lives. (Think of R. Akiva, for example). The Ran in his *Derashot* (chapter 10) suggests a logical objection. He questions whether it is fair for God to be biased, as it were, and give the righteous extra reward in the next world by shuttling their punishment off to this world. After all, he says, if the tradeoff God is making is exactly even, why would He make this tradeoff, in which no one gains and no one loses? And if it is not exactly even and the righteous end up better off, then God is no longer just. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, however, Tosafot there, who understand R. Yaakov in line with the approach that suffering is indeed a punishment for wrongdoing. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ramban specifies that although a generally righteous person would not receive actual punishment in the next world for accidental sins, his reward in the World to Come would be reduced. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. TheRambam also understands the *gemara* this way, but as mentioned above, he rejects this position. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As mentioned above, this is also the mainstream Jewish approach according to the Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* III:17). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)