SUFFERING: THREE BIBLICAL VIEWS

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Theodicy, the vindication of Divine justice in allowing the existence of evil in this world, is a cardinal article of Israel's faith. There are three biblical views on suffering, existentially a corollary of evil. The first, that it is Divine retribution for sins committed. The second, so eloquently expressed in the Book of Job, is that there is no necessary correlation between sin and suffering. The third, is that of Isaiah's "suffering servant" which considers Israel's suffering as part of a Divine plan for the redemption of Israel and all mankind.

DIVINE RETRIBUTION

Two seminal events recorded in the Bible are crucial to our understanding of the biblical view on suffering. In the first, Abraham daringly confronts God Himself on the intended destruction of Sodom. It would seem that He wishes the world to be witness to Abraham's response when He reveals: *'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing?'* (Gen.18:17). Abraham, stunned, exclaims: *'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?'* (18:25). To Abraham's sense of God's justice it is not sufficient that perhaps 50, 40, or even 10 righteous people of Sodom should be swept away together with the wicked. He goes one step further: Should not a God of Justice save the entire city for the sake of the righteous? At any rate, the world as perceived by Abraham, ruled by justice, makes it mandatory that reward and punishment are meted out in keeping with one's conduct. Suffering is the wage of sin.

The second event is the "stand" at Sinai, where Israel entered into a Covenant with the Lord. Under the terms of the Covenant, Israel is committed to keep the Lord's commandments. There would be dire consequences for breaking the terms of the Covenant. Biblical literature interpreted the ebb and flow of Israel's history, its suffering and triumphs, its defeats and victories, from the perspective of two experiences: Theodicy and Covenant. To bring one example from the Book of Judges:

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> *And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord . . . and He gave them over in the hands of Cushan-rishatayim. And when the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord, the Lord raised up a savior . . . Othniel* (Jud. 3:7-8).

In Verse 8 of this passage, we note an additional dimension in the equation of reward and punishment; that is, repentance. In His mercy, He is willing to forgo punishment, to reverse His decision, provided the nation, or later the individual,[1] repents. Perhaps the noblest expression of the power of repentance is the Book of Jonah. As is well known, Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, the cruel empire that will eventually bring down the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to proclaim its forthcoming destruction unless the people repent. With great displeasure and reluctance, Jonah accomplishes his mission. To his regret, the people repent and are saved.

We note some cracks in the ironclad rule of theodicy when Jeremiah complains:

> *You will win* [be in the right], *O Lord, if I make claim against You. Yet I shall present charges against You. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are the works of treachery at ease? You have planted them and they have taken root. They spread, they even bear fruit* (Jer. 12:1-2).

We find similar complaints in Habakkuk 1:13, 2:4, and in Psalms 37, 49, and, especially, 73.

The rabbis of the Talmud held firmly to the belief in theodicy but witnessing too frequently the discrepancy between the ideal and the real, they postponed the principle of reward and punishment into the world to come. We can sense a deviation from this norm in the words of a R. Jannai, who stated: "It is not in our power to explain either the prosperity of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous" (Pirkei Avot 4:19).

JOB

The Book of Job marks a radical departure from the traditional view of suffering. For the first time, the problem of suffering focuses not on Israel collectively but on one man, Job, and, most significantly, it seriously questions the premise that suffering is the consequence of Divine retribution for a sin committed. The remarkable Prologue sets the stage for the unfolding drama

which involves God and Satan, Job and his three friends Eliphas, Bildad, and Zophar. In this Prologue, which had served as a model for Goethe's famed drama *Faust*, the sly Satan presents a serious case before the Lord. Job, Satan admits, is a righteous man, but no wonder; he is wealthy, has an ideal family life, and enjoys excellent health. Take all that away from him, would he continue to be a righteous person? God, as it were, stakes His reputation on Job.

Behind this story is a profound philosophical question. If indeed there is a direct causal relationship between righteous living and Divine benefits bestowed, where is man's freedom and autonomy? It is obvious that a person assured of a good life, provided he adheres to Divine demands, will selfishly do so, not necessarily out of a sense that this is the right thing, but because of a promised reward. Satan has touched upon a most sensitive nerve, affecting the absolute and ideal Divine role of justice in this world. Job then loses all his property, all his children, and, in addition, is afflicted with a painful disease. In his misery, his wife importunes him: *'Doest thou still hold fast to your integrity? Blaspheme God and die.'* Job replies: *'What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?'* (2:9,10). With these words, Job has given an answer to the provocative question raised by Satan. His integrity unimpaired, the question of the "why" of his sufferings still needs an answer.

We, the readers of the book, are aware from the start that the suffering of Job is not due to any sin committed by him; a fact never revealed to either Job or his friends. This offers the great and anonymous author of this book the opportunity to evolve, in Chapters 3-37, the dialogues between Job and his friends. Then comes God's voice from the whirlwind, in Chapters 38-41. Of course, the three friends are strict adherents of Divine retribution, and to illustrate their views, I present at random a few of their abridged statements and a short response by Job.

ELIPHAZ: *Remember, I pray thee, who was ever punished being innocent? According as I have seen, they that plow iniquity and sow mischief, reap the same . . .* (4:7,8).

BILDAD: *Doth God pervert judgment . . . or pervert justice? If thy children sinned against Him, He delivered them into the hand of transgression . . .* (8:3,4).

ZOPHAR: *Thou hast said: 'My doctrine is pure and I am clean in Thine eyes.' . . . Know, therefore, that God exacteth of them less than thine iniquity deserves* (11:4-6).

JOB: *The just, the innocent man, is the laughing stock . . . . The tents of robbers prosper, And they that provoke God are secure . . .* (12:4-6), a statement reminiscent of Jeremiah.

Sorely disappointed in his friends, Job entreats God to intervene to *cause me to understand wherein I have erred* (6:24), even accusing: *God had subverted my cause . . . I cry aloud, but there is no justice* (19:6,7). In short, Job demands to know the reason for his suffering. *Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.*

Strangely, the answer of the Lord in Chapters 38-40, reaching dazzling heights of poetic splendor, does not seem to address Job's entreaties. There is only one direct response to Job's accusation that He had willfully caused Job's suffering in spite of his innocence: *'Will you void My judgment, wilt thou condemn Me, that thou mayest be justified?'* (40:8). Yet Job is pacified and he repents in these words: *'I had heard of Thee by the hearing of my ears, But now mine eyes seeth Thee'* (42:5). What is it in the Lord's speech, containing not one word about Job's suffering, that led Job to acquiesce? What is the meaning of *now mine eye seeth Thee*? Job had accepted his suffering, yet in spite of the harangues of his friends, he was certain that it did not come about as a result of any wrongdoing. Now he comprehends God's infinite power and wisdom, as portrayed in the Creation and maintenance of a complex universe. There is even a hint of "evil" as an integral part of Creation,[2] when describing the formidable Leviathan, and when Job is challenged by the question of who provides food for the lioness (38:39), or is concerned with the vulture whose young suck the blood (38:39). Why this concern precisely with creatures of prey? For they also have a legitimate and needed place in Creation.

The author of Job is not as explicit as Isaiah in regard to the part of suffering and evil, or what we conceive as evil in the scheme of Creation. Isaiah had stated unequivocally: *'I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil'* (Isa. 45:7).

'*Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?'* (38:4) the voice from the whirlwind thunders. In the face of grandeur and mystery pervading

the world, Job is overawed, and recognizes man's insignificance in the light of the transcendence of God.

His value judgments do not necessarily correspond to those of man. His justice is not what we comprehend by man's sense of justice, nor is what we conceive as evil, evil in the sight of God. Job's spiritual odyssey has come to an end. His integrity is vindicated, and God's trust in him, or possibly man, justified. And when *the Lord said to Eliphaz. . . 'My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends, for they have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath'* (42:7), Job now knows for a certainty that his suffering was not caused by some sin that he had committed.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

To the two biblical views on suffering, we now add a third one, as articulated in the four magnificent songs of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). In the first of them (42:1-4), God Himself introduces His ideal servant who, by the spirit He has vested in him, will not rest until justice and truth have been universally accepted:

> *Behold My servant, whom I uphold, Mine elect, in whom My soul delighteth. I have put My spirit upon him, he shall make the right to go forth to the nations. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed, he shall not break, and the dimly burning wick shall he not quench. He shall make the right to go forth according to the truth. He shall not fail nor be crushed till he have set the right in the earth and the isles shall wait for his teaching.*

In the second song (49:1-6), it is the prophet who addresses himself to all the nations. Here we note a quaint merger between the prophet, whom *The Lord hath called* (me) *from the womb* (49:1), and Israel *in whom I will be glorified* (49:3). It is now Israel who becomes the Lord's servant, burdened with a task: *I will give thee for a light unto the nations* (42:6).

In the third song (50:4-9), we discern a turning point; the servant pays a heavy price for having taken it upon himself to be God's messenger: *I gave my back to the smiters. And my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair. I hid not my face from shame and spitting* (50:6).

It seems that from the awareness of his being a prophet, Isaiah draws two significant conclusions. The personal experience of the prophet is one of suffering. Elijah prayed to the Lord to take his life. Jonah preferred death to being God's messenger to Nineveh. Jeremiah cursed the day he was born, was threatened by his townspeople of Anatoth, was accused of high treason, and was thrown into a pit to perish, before he was saved from there by "Kushi," probably an Ethiopian palace servant. The little-known prophet Uriah had to flee for his life to Egypt, only to be extradited and executed by King Jehoiakim. Micaiah was struck in the face and imprisoned because he warned King Ahab not to wage war against the Arameans. The second conclusion was to transfer the burden and suffering of the prophet to that of an ideal Israel. Israel, as the Lord's servant, would now serve as a light unto the nations, as witnesses (43:14), and His messengers (42:19, 44:26).

The magnificent fourth song of the Suffering Servant (52:13-53:12), strongly suggests that Isaiah had struggled valiantly with the painful question of the "why" of Israel's suffering. Firstly, his tentative answers are spread over the first three songs. Secondly, we note a steady progression of his insights, crystallizing and coming to a head in the fourth song. Thirdly, we discern a shifting of perspectives. In the first song, the servant is called by the Lord, in the second, he addresses the nations of the world, in the third, the sad servant of sorrow engages in soliloquy, and in the fourth, the nations of the world, who had victimized Israel, speak out in astonishment by God's assurance: '*Behold My servant shall prosper. He shall be exalted and lifted up'* (52:13). Startled by this assurance of Israel's restoration, they now admit: '*Whereas we did esteem him stricken, smitten by God . . . he was wounded because of our transgressions'* (53:4-5). It was not entirely for his sins committed that the servant had been crushed – *for he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people* (53:8) – but *It pleased the Lord to crush him by disease to see if his soul would offer itself in restitution . . . that the purpose of the Lord might prosper by his hand* (53:10).

Israel, the collective man of sorrow, suffering from brutal oppression by the nations of the world, is to serve as the tool for His plan. What is His purpose? The vindication of Israel, now redeemed, will lead to universal redemption, when the nations of the world will recognize their guilt. There is another purpose: *He was oppressed, though he humbled himself and opened not his*

mouth, As a lamb that is led to slaughter and as a sheep that before its shearing is dumb (52:7). Israel stood the test of its unprecedented suffering with resignation, a suffering reminiscent of the many sad events in its history, culminating in the Shoah.

Here, perhaps, is the place to raise the important question of the *Sitz im Leben* of Isaiah's songs. Robert Pfeiffer, while conceding that Isaiah 40-62 was "a spiritual epic which surpassed all other writings of the Old Testament . . . in its influence on mankind," his comment that its author was "a thinker and a poet, rather than a prophet"[3] seems entirely wrong. The author of these marvelous songs was first and foremost a prophet, presenting a vision, projected into the distant messianic future. For there was nothing in his time, and in almost 2,500 years following, that would allow for a glorious restoration of Israel, followed by regrets of the nations, and universal redemption.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

One cannot but turn to thoughts of the Shoah. It is a phenomenon *sui generis*. The tragedy and suffering it engendered has no precedence in human history, and has raised serious theological questions. It is not the purpose of this article to deal with them and their attempted answers. Here I will deal with what Paul Tillich, the eminent Christian theologian, in his interview by Albert Friedlander[4] had to say:

> "Hitler represented everything to which Judaism was opposed . . . The people of Israel will always be persecuted because its mere existence challenges those pagan gods found within, personified by the Nazis and similar groups . . . . There will always be those who hate and fear the One God, or those who follow Him."

Is this perhaps what Elie Wiesel had in mind when he told this macabre incident (true or fiction?) in his book *Night*? A young boy, the "favorite" of an *Oberkapo*, apparently caught in an act of sabotage, was executed by hanging in the presence of thousands of his fellow prisoners. "'Where is God? Where is He?' someone behind the lines remarked . . . And I heard a voice within me answering: 'Where is He? Here He is, hanging here on this gallows.'"

Isaiah seems to say that the fate of God is inextricably bound to the fate of Israel. When Israel is fully redeemed, and when the peoples of the earth will

regret the suffering they had inflicted on Israel, then this may be the beginning of universal redemption. *When the Lord shall be King over all the earth . . . on that day shall the Lord be One, and His Name One* (Zech. 14:9).

NOTES

1. It should be noted that the historical books of the Bible deal primarily with the collective guilt of Israel. Only in the Book of Job is the problem of suffering focused on one individual.
2. Job 40:25 -32:41.
3. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 3rd Ed. (New York: Harper, 1941) p. 471.
4. Albert H. Friedlander, *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of Holocaust Literature*. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1968) p. 471.

RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Before and after the passage 6:13-6:29 the same words appear (6:12 and 6:30) indicating an inserted section. The Torah often repeats a phrase when returning to the original subject.

2. In 4:37, Moses states that God chose Israel because He loved the patriarchs. In 7:6-8 he explains that it is not numbers, since Israel is the smallest of nations, but that God loves this people in order to keep His oath to their ancestors. Note the emphasis on love.

3. The products are listed in 8:8: wheat, barley, vintage, figs, pomegranates, olives and honey (probably an extract of dates). All are presently cultivated in Israel. The special grace ברכה מעין שלוש for these may be found in the Prayer Book (Artscroll p. 200,

Sim Shalom p. 782). It is also recited at the Pesah Seder after the last cup of wine.