



Handout for week of 10/15/18 Mark 10: 35-45 & Is. 53: 10-11

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Is. 53: Is. 10 Yet it pleased HaShem to crush him by disease; to see if his soul would offer itself in restitution, that he might see his seed, prolong his days, and that the purpose of HaShem might prosper by his hand: 11 Of the travail of his soul he shall see to the full, even My servant, who by his knowledge did justify the Righteous One to the many, and their iniquities he did bear.

COMMENTARY: Overview: Solving the Problem of Suffering and Evil

The concept of reward and punishment is the Torah's explanation for the existence of suffering. The covenant between God and the people of Israel established at Mount Sinai and elaborated in the book of Deuteronomy states that suffering will be visited upon the community of Israel (and possibly individuals) when they abandon the ways of God. In this sense, reward and punishment is not a solution to a problem; it is merely explanatory. Indeed, it creates further problems. If the Torah guarantees rewards to the righteous, why do some righteous people suffer?

The book of Job is dedicated to this problem. Job's life is invaded by tragedy despite his righteousness. His friends maintain that he must have sinned, but Job affirms his innocence and questions God's justice. Ultimately, God speaks to Job from a whirlwind, rejecting the response of his friends--thus admitting that righteous people can suffer--and also chastising Job. God wonders how Job could question the master of all creation. The book of Job appeals to the mysteries of the universe as a response to the problem of suffering. Humans with finite minds can't possibly understand the ways of God. This solution (or non-solution) is articulated in rabbinic literature as well. In Avot 4:19, Rabbi Yannai says: "It is not in our powers to explain either the well-being of the wicked or the sufferings of the righteous."

Similarly, contemporary scholar David Hartman notes that rabbinic literature often eschews theological solutions, focusing instead on the human response to suffering. Thus when the 1st-century sage Rabbi Akiva is tortured at the end of his life, he does not wonder why he--a righteous man--suffers so greatly, instead he recognizes it as an opportunity to fulfill the commandment set forth in the Shema prayer: to love God, "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

However, there were rabbinic figures that sought to retain reward and punishment as an explanation for suffering. These rabbis suggested that reward and punishment is meted out judiciously--but in the World to Come, rather than in this world. Thus when we see a righteous person suffer, it is not a problem; he or she will be rewarded in the next life. Similarly, in the Middle Ages, some kabbalists introduced the notion of reincarnation, suggesting that one may suffer for sins committed in a previous life.

Indeed, in the Middle Ages mystics and philosophers gave much attention to the problem of suffering and evil. Medieval thinkers tried to reconcile four claims: God is perfectly good; God is all-powerful; God is all-knowing; evil is real. As Byron Sherwin has pointed out, most medieval solutions to this problem denied or modified one of these claims.

Maimonides, for example, denied that evil was real. According to him, evils are "privations," that is the lack of good. Things that appear to be evil are results of privations of human knowledge and virtue. This philosophical solution gets a benevolent God off the hook, but will probably do little to comfort a sufferer. Saadiah Gaon also gave a version of this response, claiming that God causes us to suffer for our own good; what we perceive as evil is actually beneficial.

Solving the problem of suffering and evil is the focus of much post-Holocaust theology. Some theologians have presented altered versions of previous solutions. Thus Eliezer Berkovits stresses the role of human free will, and Ignaz Maybaum offers the paradigm of the suffering servant--the idea presented in Isaiah 53 that the Jewish people suffer vicariously for the wickedness of others. (Interestingly, Jewish tradition has often tried to distance itself from this passage because of its importance to Christians, who believe it to be a prophetic allusion to Jesus.) Some thinkers, however, have offered radically new solutions to the problem. Both Emil Fackenheim and Irving Greenberg suggest that the Holocaust was a revelatory event, which changes Judaism. Interestingly, perhaps the most radical post-Holocaust theologian, Richard Rubenstein, maintains that the terms of the covenant cannot be amended. Since the Holocaust contradicted the covenantal reality, we can only deduce one thing: God must be dead.