

Providence and Theodicy in Hazal
Second and Third Classes

Tractate Avot (Pirkay Avot), chapter 4, mishna 19

Rebbi Yanai said: It is not in our hands to explain either the contentment of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot, page 29b

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters.⁵ Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Who stays Thy hand?'⁶ He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws'. 'Lord of the Universe', said Moses; 'permit me to see him'. He replied, 'Turn thee round'. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows⁷ [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master 'Whence do you know it?' and the latter replied 'It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai' he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah by me!' He replied, 'Be silent, for such is My decree'.⁸ Then said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his reward'. 'Turn thee round', said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls.⁹ 'Lord of the Universe', cried Moses, 'such Torah, and such a reward!' He replied, 'Be silent, for such is My decree'.

(5) These are the Taggin, i.e., three small strokes written on top of the letters mdzbyga in the form of a crown. V. infra Raba's statement, and note thereon.

(6) I.e., is there anything wanting in the Torah that these additions are necessary?

(7) Of R. Akiba's disciples.

(8) Lit., 'so it has come to My mind'.

(9) R. Akiba died a martyr's death at the hands of the Romans during the Hadrianic persecution. V. Ber. 61b.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot page 7a

R. Johanan further said in the name of R. Jose: Three things did Moses ask of the Holy One, blessed be He, and they were granted to him. He asked that the Divine Presence should rest upon Israel, and it was granted to him. For it is said: Is it not in that Thou goest with us [so that we are distinguished, I and Thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth].²² He asked that the Divine Presence should not rest upon the idolaters, and it was granted to him. For it is said: 'So that we are distinguished, I and Thy people'. He asked that He should show him the ways

of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him. For it is said: Show me now Thy ways.²³ 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? 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.

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,²⁴ and another verse says: Neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers.²⁵ 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! — [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. Now this [saying of R. Johanan]²⁶ 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,²⁷ although he may not deserve it.²⁸

(22) Ex. XXXIII, 16.

(23) Ex. XXXIII, 13.

(24) Ibid. XXXIV, 7.

(25) Deut. XXIV, 16.

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

(27) Ex. XXXIII, 19.

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

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot, page 33a

Our rabbis taught in a breita: In a certain place there was once a viper that used to injure people. They came to Rebbi Hanina ben Dosa. He said to them, "Show me its hole."

They showed him its hole, and he put his heel over the hole, the viper came out, bit Rebbi Hanina, and died.

Rebbi Hanina put it on his shoulder, brought it to the House of Study, and sent to them: "See my sons, it is not the viper that kills, it is sin that kills!"

Mechilta, Nezikin, 95b, paragraph 18

Rebbi Yishmael ben Elisha the High Priest and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel were on their way out to be killed by the Romans, when Rabban Shimon said to Rebbi Yishmael, "Rebbi, my heart goes out, for I do not know why I am being killed."

Rebbi Yishmael said to Rabban Shimon, "Has it ever happened that a person came to you for judgement or with a question and you delayed him until you swallowed what was in your bag or until you tied your sandal or until you wrapped yourself in your shawl? Remember, the Torah says; 'You shall not ill treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them in any way, and they cry out to Me. I will surely hear their cry.'"

And for this explanation, Rabban Shimon said to him, "You have comforted me, Rebbi."

Talmud of the Land of Israel, Tractate Hagigah, chapter 2, halacha 1

Said Rebbi Meir to his teacher Elisha ben Avuyah, "You have so much wisdom and yet you do not repent and return to your faith!" He answered, "I am not able." Rebbi Meir asked, "Why?" he answered, "For once I was passing before the Holy of Holies, riding upon my horse on Yom Kipur that fell on shabat, and I heard a heavenly voice emanating from the Holy of Holies and it was saying, "Return children in repentance –except for Elisha ben Ayuyah, who knew my power but nevertheless rebelled against me".

And that's all that happened, that's what brought this upon him?

Actually, once he was sitting and studying in the Valley of Ginosar and he saw a man ascend to the crown of a palm tree, reach into a nest, and snatch the mother bird that was roosting there upon her eggs. He descended the tree without incident. The next day, he saw another man ascend to the crown of the palm tree, and take away the eggs after sending the mother bird away. He descended, was bit by a snake, and died.

Elisha ben Avuyah said: :It is written in the Torah, 'And you shall surely send the mother bird away and take the eggs, in order that it shall be good for you and you shall have a long life'. Where is the goodness for this man? Where is the long life that he was promised?"

And some say that he saw the tongue of Rebbi Yehudah the Baker who had been tortured and murdered buy the Romans, in the mouth of a dog, dripping with blood, and he said: "This is Torah, and this is its reward?! This is the tongue that was engaged in study of the Torah all of its days! This is Torah, and this is its reward?! It appears to me that there is no reward and there is no ultimate resurrection of the dead."

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kidushin, page 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. But a contradiction is shewn: These are the things the fruit of which man eats in this world,⁷ while the principal remains for him for the future world. Viz., honouring one's parents, the practice of loving deeds, hospitality to wayfarers,⁸ and making peace between man and his neighbour; and the study of the Torah surpasses them all.⁹ — Said Rab Judah: This is its meaning: HE WHO PERFORMS ONE PRECEPT in addition to his [equally balanced] merits¹⁰ IS WELL REWARDED, and he is as though he had fulfilled the whole Torah. Hence it follows that for these others [one is rewarded] even for a single one!¹¹ — Said R. Shemaiah: That teaches that if there is an equal balance, it tips the scale.¹²

Yet is it a fact that he who performs one precept in addition to his [equally balanced] merits is rewarded? But the following contradicts it: He whose good deeds outnumber his iniquities is punished,¹³ and is as though he had burnt the whole Torah, not leaving even a single letter;¹⁴ while he whose iniquities outnumber his good deeds is rewarded,¹⁵ and is as though he had fulfilled the whole Torah, not omitting even a single letter! — Said Abaye: Our Mishnah means that a festive day and an evil day are prepared for him,¹⁶ Raba said: This latter agrees with R. Jacob, who said: There is no reward for precepts in this world.¹⁷ 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 honouring parents it is written, that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee.¹⁹ In reference to the dismissal of the nest²⁰ it is written, that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy 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 thee', means on the day that is wholly good; and 'in order that thy 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

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

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

(6) The Mishnah is explained in the Gemara.

(7) I.e., he is rewarded for them in this world.

(8) [This does not occur in the Mishnah, Pe'ah I, whence the passage is quoted, and is omitted in MS.M.]

(9) Thus, only for these is one rewarded in this world, whereas the Mishnah states this of any precept. To the Rabbis study was not only a means to religious observance (cf. infra 40b: study is great, as it leads to action), but a religious act in itself, — indeed, one of the most important, as is shewn by this and numerous other passages in the Talmud. Nevertheless, they were far from believing that religious sincerity might be replaced by mere intellectualism; v. M. Joseph, *Judaism as Creed and Life*, p. 360.

(10) I.e., his good deeds and bad are exactly balanced, and then he performs a precept, thus tipping the scale.

(11) Even if he has no other good deeds to his credit — surely not!

(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.

(13) Lit., 'evil is done to him'.

(14) Thus he is purged of his sins in this world, that he may wholly enjoy the next.

(15) For his good deeds in this world, that he may wholly suffer punishment in the next.

(16) By 'good is done to him' the Mishnah means that he is punished in this world; this punishment is regarded as a festive day for him, since he thereby wholly enjoys the next. Conversely the second half of the Mishnah.

(17) But our Mishnah disagrees, and is literally meant, referring to this world.

(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.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit, page 11a

A God of faithfulness and without iniquity.¹⁶ 'A God of faithfulness': Just as punishment will be exacted of the wicked in the world to come even for a slight transgression which they commit, So too is punishment exacted in this world of the righteous for any slight transgression which they commit. 'And without iniquity': Just as the righteous will receive their reward in the world to come, even for the least meritorious act which they do, so too are the wicked rewarded in this world even for the least meritorious act which they do. Just and right is He:¹⁷ They [the Rabbis] said: When a man departs to his eternal home all his deeds are enumerated before him and he is told, Such and such a thing have you done, in such and such a place on that particular day. And he replies, 'Yes'. Then they say to him. 'Sign' — And he signs, as it is said, He sealeth up the hand of every man.¹⁸ And what is even more, he acknowledges the justice of the verdict and he says. 'You have judged me well', in order that the words of Scripture may be fulfilled, That thou mayest be justified when Thou speakest.¹⁹

- (16) Deut. XXXII, 4.
- (17) [MS.M. reverses the application of the two texts.]
- (18) Job XXXVII, 7.
- (19) Ps. LI, 6.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Archin page 16b

The School of R. Ishmael taught: Anyone upon whom forty days have passed without suffering, had received his world