

Providence and Theodicy in Hazal
Gesher at JCC
December 8, 2011

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXV:9

9. AND IT CAME TO PASS, THAT WHEN ISAAC WAS OLD. Rebbi Yehudah ben Shimon said: Abraham requested [the a man should experience] old age,¹ pleading before Him: 'Sovereign of the Universe! When a man and his son enter a town, none know whom to honor! But if Thou wilt crown him [the father] with [the appearance of] old age, one will know whom to honor.' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'As thou livest, thou hast asked well, and it will commence with thee.' Thus from the beginning of the Book until here old age is not mentioned, but when Abraham arose [the experience of] old age was granted to him: "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age" (Gen XXIV, 1). Isaac demanded suffering, pleading thus: 'Sovereign of the Universe! When a man dies without previous suffering, the attribute of judgment is stretched out against him; but if Thou causest him to suffer, the attribute of judgment will not be stretched out against him.'² Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'By thy life, thou hast asked well, and I will commence with thee.' Thus suffering is not mentioned from the beginning of the Book until here: "AND IT CAME TO PASS, THAT WHEN ISAAC WAS OLD, AND HIS EYES WERE DIM". Jacob demanded illness, saying to Him: 'Sovereign of the Universe! A man dies without previous illness and does not settle his affairs with his children; but if he were ill two or three days, he would settle his affairs with his children.' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'By thy life, thou hast asked well, and it will commence

(1) Until Abraham old and young looked alike (B.M. 87a).

(2) For through suffering he will have expiated some at least of his misdeeds.

with thee.' Hence, "And one said to Joseph: Behold, thy father is sick" (ib. XLVIII, 1). Rebbi Levi said: Thus Abraham introduced old age, Isaac suffering, and Jacob illness. Hezekiah introduced repeated sickness.¹ Said he to Him: 'Thou hast kept him in good health until the day of his death; but if a man falls sick and recovers, falls sick and recovers, he will fully repent.' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'By thy life! thou hast asked well, and with thee will I commence.' Thus it is written, "The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness" (Isa. XXXVIII, 9). Rebbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: This intimates that between one sickness and another he had an illness more severe than both.²

(1) Till his time there was only one sickness-that which preceded death.

(2) E.J.: between this sickness and his fatal sickness there was another. This is deduced from 'Of his sickness', which is really superfluous, and therefore understood to hint at another illness.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis IX:5

5. In the copy of R. Meir's Torah [Pentateuch] was found written: AND, BEHOLD, IT WAS VERY GOOD: and behold, death was good.¹ Rebbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: I was seated on my grandfather's shoulder going up from my own town to Kefar Hana via Beth-Shean,² and I heard Rebbi Shimon ben Rebbi Eleazar as he sat and lectured say in Rebbi Meir's name: AND, BEHOLD, IT WAS VERY GOOD: and, behold, death was good.³ Rebbi Hama ben Rebbi Hanina and Rebbi Yonatan said the following. Rebbi Hama ben Rebbi Hanina said: Adam deserved to be spared the experience of death. Why then was the penalty of death decreed against him? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that Nebuchadnezzar and Hiram would declare themselves gods; therefore was death decreed against him. Thus it is written, Thou wast in Eden the garden of God (Ezek. XXVIII, 13): was then Hiram in Eden? Surely not! But He said thus to him: 'It is thou who causedst him who was in Eden to die.' R. Hiyya, the son of R. Berekiah's daughter, quoted in R. Berekiah's name: Thou wast the far-covering cherub--kerub (ib. 14): it was thou who didst cause that youth

(1) This may mean either that the MS. read מות instead of מאד, or that this was inserted as a marginal comment.

(2) Scythopolis, in Galilee; v. 'A.Z. (Sonc. ed.), p. 64, n. 7.

(3) Because it is a potent force for repentance.

(robeh--sc. Adam) to die. Said Rebbi Yonatan to him: If so, He should have decreed death for the wicked but not for the righteous! But the reason is lest the wicked perform a fraudulent repentance, saying: 'Surely the righteous live only because they treasure up religious acts and good deeds; so shall we too lay up a store of religious acts and good deeds,' and as a result their performance of such would be with ulterior motives. Rebbi Yohanan and Rebbi Shimon ben Lakish discussed this. Rebbi Yohanan said: Why was death decreed against the wicked? Because as long as the wicked live they anger the Lord, as it is written, Ye have wearied the Lord with your words (Mal. II, 17); but when they die they cease to anger Him as it is written, There the wicked cease from raging (Job III, 17), which means, there the wicked cease from enraging the Holy One, blessed be He. Why was death decreed against the righteous? Because as long as the righteous live they must fight against their evil desires, but when they die they enjoy rest; that is the meaning of 'And there the weary are at rest' (ib.): [they say]: We have laboured sufficiently.¹ Rebbi Shimon ben Lakish said: [Death was decreed] in order to reward the righteous in double measure and to punish the wicked in double measure. To reward the righteous, who had not deserved to experience death, yet did accept the experience of death: Therefore in their land they shall possess double (Isa. LXI, 7); and to punish the wicked, since the righteous had not deserved death yet accepted it on their account; therefore, And destroy them with double destruction (Jer. XVII, 18).

(1) M.K.: in our fight against evil; Y.T.: we have laboured to attain a sufficient reward.