

Theodicy¹

by Aaron Liebman

I.

The question of theodicy is the question of God's seeming inaction in the face of evil and suffering. Put another way, it is the question of how God can allow injustice to flourish in the world. If God is just yet the world is not, then this implies either that God does not have full dominion over the world or that one of our assumptions is incorrect (i.e. God is not just, there is no God, or the world is indeed just after all).

I agree with Arthur Green² that evil (i.e. malicious harm) and suffering (which might be unintentional) are not the same, but for my purposes they raise similar questions about God, so I will deal with them collectively³. Green makes that distinction in order to point out that the existence of evil is more troubling, whereas with suffering – “while our outcry against the seeming injustice of [natural] suffering is to be expected, there is no one to blame and we know it.”⁴ I agree with Jaron Matlow's observation that Green is completely wrong on this point – there *is* someone to blame and that is God, and the question of theodicy with regards to suffering is therefore most acute. Regarding human evil, on the other hand, the juxtaposed issue of free will clouds the picture⁵.

Arthur Green and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi⁶ each suggest an imperfect God. Green proposes that we accept the evolutionary necessity of evil and its inevitable place in our own striving for ultimate perfection in the world, while Schachter-Shalomi suggests that God is inexperienced and slowly learning from God's mistakes. Such responses seem to

¹ This paper was written as part of the requirements for a course in Personal Theology at the Academy of Jewish Religion, taught by Rabbi Jill Hammer in the fall of 2007. Some of the books referenced were in the required reading for the course, and some of the individuals quoted are rabbinical students who took the course with me. I have made a few, relatively minor, modifications to this paper since that time, and added some postscript musings.

² Green, Arthur. “What About Evil?” in *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*, pp. 138-152.

³ This is not directly relevant to this paper, but in order to respond to a comment in class about sin and evil: I define sin as the commission of an evil deed, and evil as the result of a sinful act – they are flip sides of the same “coincept” and one cannot exist without the other. Evil might also be said to be synonymous with the transgression of God's commandments, and it is sinful to transgress commandments whether we understand the rationale for the commandment (what medieval Jewish philosophers called a *mitzvah sikhlit*) or not (a *mitzvah shim'it*). In the latter case, the rule might have a deeper reason that is beyond our comprehension, or it might even be commanded simply because God wants us to obey God's will (as per Rashi on Leviticus 1:9 s.v. *nichoach*), but in any event the fact that God commanded it gives it the force of a moral imperative. Furthermore, if a particular act is evil then it is a sin to commit it, whether or not we are able to identify the exact commandment that is being transgressed. On the other hand, if we argue that it is *not* sinful (= not evil) to behave in a certain way, then that particular behavior must *ipso facto* not constitute a transgression of a divine commandment.

⁴ Green, p. 141.

⁵ In other words, it could be argued that it is wrong that human evil should cause other humans to suffer, but because free will so important – God intentionally does not intervene. There are two competing values here, but God is ultimately acting in the correct way by stepping back and allowing free will to reign, even though this entails humans perpetrating evil upon others.

⁶ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Jewish With Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice*, pp. 22-24.

fly in the face of modern conceptions of God, according to which the notion that God acts correctly (or at least justly) is probably the most important divine attribute⁷. I am much more comfortable with a “notional” Kaplanesque God than with the all-too-human God which Green and Schachter-Shalomi posit. The latter’s position, in particular, I find to be quite objectionable, in that it adopts a pagan-like idea of God. This might or might not be the perception of God implied in certain passages of the Bible, but it hasn’t been the Jewish notion of God for well over 2,000 years – and thank goodness for that.

Harold Kushner makes several pertinent points in his excellent and popular book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People⁸.” Most of his arguments, such as the importance of pain for human survival⁹ and the importance of evil for free choice¹⁰, are beautifully presented and can be readily adopted by those with a different world view. One of the few instances that I disagree with him, however, is over what I consider to be his main argument: that God is *not* an all-powerful being who causes everything to happen in the world¹¹. Rather, Kushner argues, there is randomness in the world that has nothing to do with God or justice, and it is in this realm of chaos that evil and suffering present themselves.¹² God, however, is kind and benevolent, and we need to appreciate God’s goodness in order to avail ourselves of the strength (and consolation) that God has to offer us.

Kushner presents a cogent paradox to challenge the traditional view of God:

“[C]an we say logically that an all-powerful God *must* be fair? Would He still be all-powerful if we, by living virtuous lives, could *compel* Him to protect and reward us? Or would He then be reduced to a kind of cosmic vending machine, into which we insert the right number of tokens and from which we get what we want...?”¹³

My own personal view of God is a rather traditional (Maimonidean?) one, in which God is both all-powerful and fair¹⁴. One might argue that God is *constrained* by this fact, insofar as God has no free will¹⁵. Accordingly, one might indeed perceive of God as a cosmic vending machine¹⁶. However, it would be wrong to presume that, based on that

⁷ The five basic attributes of God, as I see them, are: (a) omnipotence, (b) omniscience, (c) omnipresence in time, (d) omnipresence in space, and (e) justice (by which I mean acting upon the world correctly).

⁸ Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Schocken Books, NY, 1981

⁹ Kushner, pp. 61-68

¹⁰ Kushner, pp. 79-86

¹¹ Kushner, pp. 42-45

¹² Some traditionalists might describe Kushner’s position on randomness in the world as “Amalekite” – a group that, according to rabbinic interpretation, celebrated randomness and happenstance, as in *asher korkha baderekh* (Deu. 25:18) and Haman’s lottery.

¹³ Kushner, p. 40

¹⁴ I prefer the term “just” to “fair”, but I feel the need to respond to Kushner in the terms he chose.

¹⁵ Free will presupposes the opportunity to choose between good and bad options, but God always chooses good.

¹⁶ Within the traditional Jewish conception of God there is tension between the divine aspects of *Din* (judgement) and *Rachamim* (mercy). Kushner’s paradox strikes at the core of the *Din* aspect. But it is this aspect that I am most comfortable with theologically, so – at least for the purposes of this paper – I will ignore *Rachamim* altogether.

fact, we can expect to be able to determine how God interacts with the world. First, because the tokens that we insert into this cosmic vending machine are not just our own (good and bad) deeds, but rather all that is happening in the universe, as well as all that has happened and might yet happen, and as such the vending machine is so vastly complex that we could never expect to fully understand it. Second, because the product which the vending machine dispenses is not necessarily our own personal justice, but rather “the correct and proper action for God to take.” I will elaborate upon this further later on, but suffice to say that my perception of God is well described by the verse in the poem of Ha’azinu: *hatzur tamim po’olo ki khol d’rakhav mishpat, el emunah v’ein avel, tzadik v’yashar hu* – “The Rock – his actions are flawless, for all his ways are just; a God of trust without wrong – he is righteous and correct.”¹⁷

Kushner’s concept of God, on the other hand, is at odds not only with traditional Jewish theology but with biblical sources as well. Kushner’s reliance on biblical sources is half-hearted at best, and I doubt whether he regarded Psalm 121¹⁸ or the Book of Job to be of any real probative value for his position. On the other hand, his position seems to directly contradict the famous verse in Isaiah: “Establisher of light and creator of darkness, maker of peace and *creator of evil* – it is I, God, who does all these.”¹⁹

As for my own position, if one accepts this brash statement in Isaiah at the same time that one affirms the above quote from Ha’azinu, then the question of theodicy is stark indeed.

II.

My own personal belief on the question of theodicy can be presented in long form or short form. Being a rabbi in training, I naturally opt for the long form. Besides, if I chose the short form then I would look rather silly handing in a paper consisting solely of the words “I don’t know.”

As I just intimated, I am not really going to answer the question of theodicy, any more than the theologians we read fully answered it. What I intend to do is set the question in context, so that when I end up not answering it, this will not seem like such an unreasonable thing to do. Sometimes a question can be addressed not by answering it straight on but rather by examining the question instead.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 32:4. The translation is mine, and I’ll be the first to admit that any translation is an interpretation.

¹⁸ Kushner, p. 30

¹⁹ Isaiah 45:7. The rabbis softened these last words when they introduced them into the liturgy, probably because they were seeking to emphasize the dependence of our diurnal cycles on God (i.e. the beginning of the verse) rather than strike a pose against Zoroastrians or other dualists, as was Isaiah. The phrase *borei ra* – “creator of evil” would have been an unnecessary distraction in the liturgy, almost as if one had prayed “You are blessed by every living soul – including Hitler’s”.

For instance, let's examine the famous pair of questions: "can God create an unmovable rock? – if so, then can God move it?" The best way of responding to this riddle, in my opinion, is not by trying to answer the question of what God can or cannot do, but by pointing out that there is an inherent paradox in the way the question is presented. A completely unmovable rock (i.e. a rock unmovable even by God) is an impossibility, and therefore the underlying structure of the question really is: Is the impossible possible? The question is clever wordplay, but while it points to some interesting semantic issues it doesn't really raise any questions about God.

III.

To set the stage for theodicy, I'd first like to raise a seemingly unrelated question: What is it that God really wants from us? What does God want us to do?

The Talmud addresses this question in Tractate Makot²⁰ and Rabbi Simlai responds with his now-famous notion of the 613 biblical commandments. But the Talmud goes on to note other attempts to summarize how God wants humans to behave. These include quotes from Psalms and various prophets, all of which are interesting and well worth reading. They tend to emphasize what we would regard as moral, not necessarily spiritual or obedient. The quote from Michah is a good example: "You are told, human, what is good and what it is that the Lord your God demands of you – none but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly before your God."²¹

The discussion in the Talmud ends up with a very short and pithy synopsis of what God wants that appears in the book of Habakuk: *Tzadik be'emunato yichyeh* – "a righteous person lives according to their faith"²². It seems to me that this beautiful little statement sums up an awful lot. First of all it expects the righteous person to first ask what their faith indeed is. It isn't easy to clear away all the emotional and intellectual²³ cobwebs that blur our vision of what we truly believe in. Second, after a righteous person has determined what they truly believe in, then they are expected to live according to their convictions, regardless of the sacrifices this might demand. If they can do that, then they are truly righteous.

At this point one might ask: How do we know that a righteous person will ultimately end up believing that they ought to behave in the manner which God considers virtuous? Is it not possible, or even likely, that different people will arrive at different conclusions as to what God wants from them? That one righteous person will end up being a devout

²⁰ BT Makot 23b-24a

²¹ Michah 6:8 (translation mine)

²² Habakuk 2:4

²³ Excuses and rationalizations, I believe, form a good part of our repertoire. Even if we are able to resist giving in to blatant temptations, more often than not we believe in something because we *want* to believe. Intellectual honesty is a difficult trait to acquire.

Christian and the other will end up a devout Jew? Or that one will end up a suicide bomber while the other will end up a terrorist hunter? If this is the case, then evidently at least one of these individuals is wrong. How can we determine, in truth, what God really wants from us?

The answer, I believe, lies back in the statement from Habakuk. God wants for each person to act in whatever manner that person truly believes God wants them to act. The fact that this might conceivably play out in seemingly contradictory ways should not deter us from this conclusion, just as there was no inherent contradiction in the fact that both Pinchas and Zimri, according to the Ishbitzer, were striving to fulfill God's commandments yet one ended up killing the other²⁴. God wants humans to try their best. Sometimes, as Forrest Gump might have said, shit happens, and when it does there isn't necessarily an evil intent at its root cause.

But there is more to it than that. I believe that more often than not, two honest and righteous persons will **not** embark on journeys that will lead them in such contradictory trajectories. The reason for this is that we all have something within us that tells us what is right and what is wrong. We may not agree on every last detail on how we ought to behave in the real world, but we all share a basic human sense of morality. We somehow know that it is wrong to hurt others, and when we talk about fixing the world we have a general sense of what this means. Although we also possess an inclination – a drive – to do evil, we correctly perceive this as a desire to do something which is inherently sinful. It is this perception, this understanding of what is right and what is wrong, that is at the root of the *emunah* (faith) of the righteous person according to Habakuk.

According to my reading of Genesis, this perception of good and evil was given to Adam and Eve when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In other words, up to that point all they knew was the one prohibition that they must not eat from the forbidden tree. After that point “the eyes of both of them were opened”²⁵ and they understood (among other things) what is good and what is bad behavior in the broad sense – i.e. how God wants them and doesn't want them to behave²⁶.

IV.

The argument I made in the preceding section is, it seems to me, quite palatable: it makes sense to us; it strikes a chord in our psyche. It does so because it is part of how we make sense of the world around us. We organize the world into good and bad, or degrees

²⁴ Lainer, Mordechai Yosef. *Mei HaShiloach*, parshat Pinchas

²⁵ Genesis 3:7

²⁶ It might be suggested that the ability to perceive good and evil in the larger sense was a necessary skill for Adam and Eve only now, because that ability enabled them to repent and atone for their sin. Further, as Boaz Marmon suggested, God might have intended all along that they should eat the fruit and subsequently understand, because it was necessary to them to experience for themselves such a first lesson in sin and punishment.

thereof. This itself is not a bad thing because, as I've argued, good and evil should be the dominant principle in how we conduct our lives. It is indeed what God wants from us.

But because we've assimilated this principle so deeply into our psyche, we sometimes err in extending it too far. We apply it to animals, for instance, when we have no business applying it. Thus we say that a crab who eats her own offspring is "bad" or that penguins who remain devoted to their mates are "good", when we have no valid basis for doing so other than our own human sense of morality. More importantly for the issue at hand, we also apply our own anthropic morality to God.

As I've noted above, the core principle which dominates the cosmic-vending-machine-that-is-God is not human justice, or human kindness, or any of the other attributes which we (rightly) associate as positive human traits. Rather, the core principle is – the correct way for God to act. When we insert all our tokens, and even take into account all the tokens that the world is inserting into the vending machine, the product that is dispensed is not guaranteed to be personal justice. God may have so many other considerations including – but not limited to – the arguments that Kushner raised about pain (how it is necessary for human survival) and free will (how it would be effectively constrained if God always punished us for wrong choices).

In the quote from Ha'azinu I noted above, God is described as *tzadik v'yashar*. *Tzadik* is often translated as "pious," but I would argue that in the biblical context it might mean "one who acts correctly" (as in *tzodek*). In the human sphere, to act correctly means to act according to the principles of law and justice – *tzedek* – or even according to the rules of kindness and generosity – *tzedakah*, but might other parameters of correctness apply to God? *Yashar* implies honesty or righteousness, but also a sense of straightness, of being true to one's basic principles. What I am arguing is that God is correct/true, but not necessarily what we humans consider to be kind. If we could determine what it means to be completely correct or true – in other words if we knew everything there is to know and understood all the principles that govern the universe – then indeed God would be quite predictable, like a cosmic vending machine. But we can't know that, so we will never understand God.

Essentially, this is what the Book of Job is arguing, as well as other biblical sources.²⁷ In the final analysis, we cannot fathom God because there is so much we don't know, both in terms of the facts concerning the universe's existence and in terms of the principles which dictate God's actions ("God's algorithm" in Kushner's parlance). This doesn't mean that we are not commanded to act with kindness and compassion. It just means that

²⁷ Compare to Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways, says Adonai. As the sky is high above the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts are higher than yours." While these verses refer specifically to God's willingness to accept repentant sinners and to restore vigor to a broken nation, I believe that they generally state how we cannot hope to fathom and understand God's thoughts and ways of doing things. Hence what is correct and just in God's view might not seem correct and just in ours.

we should not extrapolate from our human experience to make assumptions about the ways of the universe.

As I noted in the second section, I haven't really answered the question of whether God is just. I can't fathom either the universe or God, so I can't explain God's justice or lack thereof. What I've tried to do is show that the assumption upon which the question of theodicy is based is not necessarily a valid assumption, because what determines God's actions, I believe, is not personal justice but rather "correctness" as I've described it. The moral qualities that God wants from us might not be synonymous with the way God works.

The solution I am offering here might be satisfying intellectually but, as Halina Rubinstein noted, the suggestion that God might not share our human sense of justice is untenable for spiritual people who are disturbed by the injustice they see in the world. (But see my note 16 above). It is possible that this shortcoming is what compelled Kushner to seek a different – spiritually soothing – resolution. Kushner's main concern, after all, was to offer advice and words of consolation to those stricken with grief, not to resolve a theological dilemma.

I would like to imagine that personal justice is one of those ideals that God will ultimately resolve, and that the suffering we endure and the good deeds we perform are eventually made up to us. At the same time I recognize that in the real world, ideals are often in conflict with each other, and that it is impossible to attain all of them²⁸. Hopefully, personal justice, and in a form that humans can comprehend and appreciate, will be a feature of the world to come: *bayom hahu yihyeh Adonai echad ush'mo echad* – "on that day will God be one and his name be one."²⁹

Postscripts

In his book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", Harold Kushner argues that God is not necessarily involved with evil in this world; rather God leaves a realm in which God is not involved, and in that realm evil may flourish. I argue against that this is contrary to Jewish notions of God, and specifically to the statement in Isaiah *yotzer or uvorei choshekh, oseh shalom uvorei ra, ani Adonai oseh kol eileh* – "maker of light and creator of darkness, doer of peace and creator of evil – it is I, God, who does all these" (Isaiah 45:7).

I have some doubts about my own position. The statement in Isaiah is a merism, which is a statement that includes two seeming opposites, and implies that everything is included, such as we might say "from A to Z." So, for instance, if we say that God is *koneh shamayim va'arets* – "establisher of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19) this does not only state that God is master of the heaven and the earth but rather of everything there is. That is why the statement by Malchitzedek *koneh shamayim va'arets* – could be restated by the rabbis who wrote the liturgy as *koneh hakol* – establisher of everything – in the regular amidah (although they left the original form in the *brakhah achat mei' ein sheva* in the shabbat ma'ariv). In other words, *yotzer or uvoreih choshekh* means that God is master of light and darkness (and anything in between) just as *oseh shalom uvoreih ra* means that God is master (or creator of)

²⁸ Berlin, Isaiah. "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. H. Hardy & R. Hausner, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997, pp. 1-16

²⁹ Zech. 14:9.

all aspects of good and evil in the world, and the rabbis who substituted *et hakol* (everything) instead of *ra* (evil) were not subverting the biblical text when they modified it for inclusion in the liturgy.

Recently I noticed something interesting about one particular merism. When Lavan is pursuing Yaakov from Charan toward Mount Gil'ad, God appears in a dream to Lavan and tells him *hishamer lecha pen t'daber im Yaakov mitov ad ra* – be careful lest you speak with Yaakov from good to bad (Gen. 31:24). The next day Lavan relates this warning in almost exactly the same form (verse 29). According to the way I've described merisms, this would suggest that Lavan is forbidden to speak at all to Yaakov. But that is not what happens, and Lavan goes on to speak to Yaakov but does him no harm. Unless Lavan is expressly disobeying a divine command – and there is nothing in the text to suggest that this is so – Lavan must have correctly understood God's merism as a way of emphatically forbidding only one half of the merism. He is not really prohibited from speaking to Yaakov "good" despite the fact that technically this seems to be something that God forbade him to do.

It follows, that a merism does not necessarily encompass everything in the scope of the two extremes, and in some circumstances it might be an emphatic way of stating only one of the two extremes. Which brings us back to Isaiah: Can the merism there be interpreted as only emphatically attributing to God one of the two characteristics? Is it possible that Isaiah is saying that God is only – and emphatically – good?

Ultimately, I think that is very unlikely. Deutero-Isaiah seems quite confident in asserting that everything – including pain and suffering – comes from God, such as in *hen gor yagur efes me'oti* – "surely no harm can be done without my consent" (Isaiah 54:15). In this context it is meant to convey reassurance that evil will not happen because God will not let it happen, but it follows that when evil does happen it is God who intends it.³⁰

* * *

In his book "God's Problem", Bart D. Ehrman³¹ addresses the question of theodicy, and finds the religious answers wanting. In Chapter 1, Ehrman argues that "free will" is not an adequate response to theodicy because, even if free will were an adequate explanation for the evils that humans have inflicted on each other, such as the holocaust, gulags, Idi Amin, etc. – it cannot explain the pain and suffering which seem to be coming from forces of nature such as droughts, famine, flood and pestilence.

I agree that there is a big difference between the two. But what Ehrman fails to acknowledge is that the free will answer comes in two parts. The first part is applicable to human evil only – that people must be able to inflict suffering on each other if they are to have free will. The second part is applicable to all suffering – that if virtue were always rewarded and virtue punished then this would also effectively eliminate free will, because even the most evil people would strive hard to do good in order to maximize their own benefit,³² but not for the sake of doing good itself (i.e. for God or to help others or for the sake of some other higher cause).

Later on, Ehrman traces his steps on leaving religion to his loss of faith. This is the problem of all hard core theology, which relies on faith as the sole inducement to observe a religion. But religion is not just a faith; it can also be seen as a form of social organization. With its literature and norms that inform our behavior and give structure to our social interactions, religion can still be immensely helpful to all people, including those who have lost their belief in the veracity of their faith.³³ I would even argue that it is ok to question many elements of one's religion because, for a religion to be effective in uniting a diverse community, skeptics and other outliers need to curb their own argumentative tendencies to allow a rough broad consensus to flourish in the mainstream community.

³⁰ But I'm still scratching my head over Lavan's dream. Maybe the root "daber" here suggests intentionality of action, as opposed to the ordinary modern Hebrew meaning of "to speak"?

³¹ Of whom I am a huge fan, by the way. Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus" should be on the short list of anyone trying to make sense of any ancient religious texts.

³² Compare to Elbo, Joseph. *Sefer Ha'ikarim*, statement 4 chap. 25; and Sforno on Ex. 7:3.

³³ It occurs to me that theological dilemmas like theodicy might be more threatening to Christianity, with its strong emphasis on faith, than to Judaism, which puts more emphasis on religious practice and on peoplehood. Thus Ehrman, when he says that he does not believe, states that he is therefore no longer a Christian, which is not the kind of thing that most Jews would say.