

**DRAFT**  
**Drosh for Shabbat BeHukotai, 5763**

by Yehuda Wiesen (updated 9/21/03)

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**A. Introduction and Statement of Problem**

The first few pesukim of today's parsha, known as the To-cha-cha, the warning, set forth the concept of reward and punishment based on obedience to God's stated will. They could not be clearer. Let me roughly paraphrase:

*If you follow my statutes and observe my commandments I will give you rains, harvests, food, safety, and peace.*

Then the other side of the coin.

*If you do not listen to me and do not do all the commandments, if you reject my statutes and abhor my commandments then I will cause you disease, hunger, and subjugation.*

A little further, verse 23 says

*If you do not correct your ways despite divine punishments, further punishments will be even more severe, including: famine, infectious disease, and defenselessness against human enemies.*

What mitzvot are referenced here? Verse 46 tells us, they are the mitzvot in the Torah given at Sinai: the positive and negative mitzvot (observe kashrut, honor parents, attend dead, be honest in business, dwell in sukka, not eat forbidden foods, not take God's name in vain, not marry someone forbidden to you, not tattoo our bodies, etc.)

But quickly we note a **stark problem**. Too often we see:

1. Painful tragedy on small or large scale
2. Extraordinary suffering by ordinary people, individuals or groups

Simply put, The good suffer while the evil prosper and live.

Note: Talmud usually is referring to illness when it talks of suffering.

## Related Problems and Concepts

When we think about this, we quickly reach many related, serious questions, such as:

1. Does God act in the world and in our individual lives and, if so, how much?
2. If we eat a cheeseburger, will we be punished? What if we work on Shabbat?
3. If God is not keeping his part of the bargain, why should we keep our part of the bargain?
  - Should we obey the mitzvot?
  - Should we pray?
  - Related questions here are: Can we pray? and What is prayer?

## Empirical View

The basic problem I want to attack is an empirical one. We look around us and see:

*Reward and punishment seem to be independent of obeying mitzvot*

My goal is to briefly describe some of the Jewish approaches to understanding the ToChaCha, Reward and Punishment, in light of this basic problem.

The operative word is “brief” since to go into any depth would mean we would be here until mincha ... of next week.

### **B. A Collection of Jewish Approaches to Reward and Punishment**

Diverse views about Reward and Punishment date back to the Talmud and even to the Bible. The Talmud relates how our various sages and our people responded to suffering, but only in concrete examples. It does not present an explicit list of theology approaches to suffering. We need to learn from the various vignettes.

I will go thru a list of possible ways to view reward and punishment, and for each will give a source and a brief explanation of the approach.

I will focus on alternatives to the view that reward and punishment are sure and immediate, and the response to suffering is doing teshuva (repentance). (BT Ber 5a )

#### **1. Free Will**

We have free will. The Torah says,

*I place before you today good and evil, choose good.* (Deut., chapter?, also Gen 4)

The Talmud says we each have within us yetzer tov and yetzer rah: our good inclination and bad inclination. We are pulled in two ways and need to overcome bad impulse ((Sounds

Freudian)) (Berachot 61A)

The implication of free will is evil, injustice, and oppression. Much of the evil and suffering in the world is due to people choosing to act to hurt other people. So some bad things that happen to people are due to evil people, not Divine punishment.

Giving free will may be seen as an act of love even as it enables evil and sorrow.

## **2. The Need for the Yetzer Ha Rah**

The Talmud asks, why not simply abolish the Yetzer HaRah. (Yoma 69B)

In addition to the reduction in free will, the Talmud says the Yetzer HaRah is needed for the world to function. In a vivid story, we learn that without Yetzer Ha-Ra man would not build a house, marry, beget children, or work. (Shades of Freud.)

## **3. God's Actions and His Reasons Are Beyond Our Understanding**

Pirkei Avot (4:5) says,

*It is not in our power to understand the suffering of the righteous or the prosperity of the wicked.*

Our limited minds cannot understand God's actions.

Further, we cannot question the decisions of He who created the worlds.

**We accept the unknowable.**

God ultimately is responsible for evil and the resulting suffering by giving us free will and designing world as He did

- We do not understand why
- We do not understand why the Holocaust
- We accept that there is a divine plan

We even say a bracha when we hear someone has died: Baruch Dayan Emet.

## **4. Reward and Punishment Need Not Be Immediate**

The Talmud says that some punishments may be delayed for various reasons for some number of years. (e.g., Woman who sinned had punishment postponed. citation?)

To the extent that reward and punishment are not immediate, then it is less clear that they are not justly meted out.

## **5. Repentance Averts the Severe Decree**

On Yom Kippur we say we may avert the severity of the decree thru teshuva, tefila, and tzeduka.

If punishment may be averted, then at least some of the good fortune of the wicked may be explained.

## **6. Reward and Punishment Decided At the End of Our Days**

In many places in the Talmud we are told we will be judged at the end of our days. We are told:

- the transgressions we think are small will be judged (Avoda Zara 18A)
- even the little remarks that pass between husband and wife will be judged (Chag 5B)  
(A Cohen, Everyman's Talmud, page 375)
- We will be asked
  - Did you transact business honestly
  - Did you fix times for study of Torah? (Shabbat 31A)

If we are judged at end of our days, then empirical evaluation of Moral Determinism is considerably harder. Perhaps the evil will get their due and the good will get their reward at some point.

## **7. Reward and Punishment in the World to Come**

The world to come is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah or the Bible (tho perhaps there are hints or oblique references). The Talmud strongly and clearly presents views of the world to come and gives it great importance in Judaism.

Shabbat 127A4 says for 6 things a person enjoys fruits in this world and in olam haba

- receiving guests
- visiting sick
- concentration in prayer
- rising early to study hall
- raising children to study torah
- judging fellow favorably

There may be some actions that are so serious that the person is cut off and denied a place in the world to come (pg 829, Ephraim Rottenberg, in Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, 1972). (Sanhedrin 64B). We may not see this punishment from our vantage point in this world.

## **8. Resurrection as a Reward for the Righteous**

Each time we recite the Amida we say a prayer for the resurrection of the dead (tehiyyat

ha-metim)

- de-emphasized since middle ages (per Arthur Cohen pg 807) but still in our tradition.

If our lives are to continue in some way, then what we see in this world is not the full picture concerning Reward and Punishment.

### **9. R&P are partially in this world and partly in the world to come**

Some of the positions just stated can be combined, with some Reward and Punishment in this world, some in heaven, and some if and when we are resurrected.

### **10. Suffering Has Positive Aspects**

The Talmud states in several places that suffering expiates one's sins in this world and allows fuller reward in next world. (15a Shekelim, 11A Tannis, Yoma 86A)

In this way what appears to be suffering is actually beneficial to the person. So apparent injustice may in fact be justice.

It may be that only the good are allowed this opportunity. The evil must suffer in the world to come.

### **11. Suffering Is an Indication of God's Love**

The Talmud says some suffering is sent by God out of love: Yisarin shel a-ha-va, rather than as punishments. (Brachot 5a, Tannit 8A)

Suffering may be chastening of love rather than punishment.

So, we are not required to see suffering as punishment.

But at least some of the Rabbis of the Talmud who were suffering in this way protested against these sufferings of love. - keep pain keep its reward. (bt Brachot 5b)

### **12. Some Illnesses are Not Punishments**

Perhaps your mother told you not to go out without a coat. The Talmud also says explicitly you can get sick by exposing yourself to the elements. (Avoda Zara, 3B)

So not all illness is a Divine punishment. Some may be do to our own stupid actions.

### **13. Merit of Ancestors**

The Torah tells us the sins of the parents will be witnessed on their children, and the rewards

too. We see this as true especially if children follow in ways of their parents.

If punishment spans generations, it is hard to see the link between action and punishment. That means our empirical evaluation of what we see of Reward and Punishment is incomplete.

The Talmud presents a counter position: Makkot 24A: each person answerable for his own deeds

(A Cohen, Everyman's Talmud, Everyman's Talmud, pg 115) (Tannit 65?)

#### **14. The Righteous are Held to a Higher Standard**

The Talmud suggests that the very righteous bear an extra burden of exceptional performance (Tannis 21A)

This was used, in part, to explain the suffering of the sages of the Talmud.

bava metzia 85A2 suffering of the great, benefits the world

#### **15. Punishment for Sins of the Wicked Fall First on the Righteous**

The Talmud tells us that the good bear responsibility for the ills of society. (A Cohen, Everyman's Talmud, Everyman's Talmud, pg 118)

The good suffer on behalf of the wicked (Shabbat 33B, Moed Katan 28A)  
((Also Birnbaum pg 600-601).

#### **16. Collective Reward and Punishment**

The To-cha-cha is in the plural, as is the second paragraph of the Shema.

Collective punishment appears often in the Talmud. For example, the traditional response to drought is prayer and fasting. The Talmud assumes if there is a drought it is because the community did something wrong, such as unscrupulous financial conduct by the townspeople. (BT Tannit 12B).

Jews are individuals but we also are the nation of Israel. Judaism is a very communal religion.

The Talmud, of course, also has individual views of reward and punishment, for example, illness is due to sin, recover when repent (Nedarim 41A)

#### **17. Argue with God and Demand He Act**

In the Psalms incorporated in the daily siddur we read such thoughts as:

*How long will you judge lawlessly and show partiality to the wicked?*

Arguing with God has a long history in Judaism.

We recognize undeserved suffering and call God to account. We scream in protest.

Abraham said, Shall not the judge of the earth deal justly? (Gen 18:25)

### **18. Kushner's When Bad Things Happen**

At least in his first book Kushner focuses only on one aspect of Reward and Punishment: Suffering of basically good people. He says that suffering is not sent by God, it is just the unfortunate, random action of the world. We get sick, we are in car accidents, and so on.

I had the opportunity to ask how he squares his view with the second paragraph of the Shema, and he said the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph is worded in the plural. (Personal communication)

Kushner is not alone. Some of the scholars in the past have said that God does not oversee all aspects of the world on a daily basis. Maimonides says: (Birnbaum pg 173) "Nor do I hold that when a spider catches a fly it is the result of a special divine decree at that moment."

One position in the Talmud says, BT Shabbat 55B: There IS death without sin and suffering without transgression. (Earlier position said not, 55A).

### **19. Limiting God's Powers**

The Talmud says, God lets the world function according to its natural order Avoda Zara: 54B4. If so, he limits his own powers.

Also in the Talmud we find God praying that his compassion overcomes his wrath (pesachim 87B, also see Meg 29A, Hag 15A.)

According to this view, the injustice we see is due to limits of God's powers, perhaps limits he places on himself.

### **20. Reward for Doing a Mitzva is the Performance of the Mitzva**

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Azzai says, virtue is its own reward, sin its own punishment.

In this view, the reward for doing a mitzva is in the mitzva itself.



## **21. Lack of Awareness of Punishment**

In the Talmud Rabbi Akiva says that we are punished daily, and we not be aware of being punished. (Avot 3:15-16?)

If the person being punished is not aware of the punishment, then we as observers may also not be aware of it, making it difficult to empirically evaluate the Reward-Punishment relationship.

## **22. Nachman Gam-Zu**

Contemporary (teacher) of Akiva. In the face of severe personal suffering he said: This too is for the best. It is G-d's will and he accepts it and deals with it as best possible, and cheerfully.

## **23. What does our Siddur Say?**

The siddur is a complex compilation of the thinking of our people over the ages. The daily siddur is in some ways richer than the Shabbat siddur, which is purged of topics that are not appropriate for a day of rest. Several of the views above appear in the siddur, such as:

We pray for divine retribution, as in the Amida (12<sup>th</sup> blessing)

Of course, we say the Shema twice daily, with its clear statement of reward and punishment..

So, the siddur has considerable emphasis on Reward & Punishment and God acting in this world and in our personal world.

## **C. Conclusion**

Our tradition does not offer one mandatory model of how to conceptualize and respond to suffering. Different people may feel comfortable with different approaches. One person may be drawn to different approaches over time.

The many approaches show it is impossible to fully explain suffering and evil either in the abstract or for the individuals involved. We see or experience suffering and struggle to understand it even as we know we can never fully do so.

Despite many clear statements about observance, our tradition has less clear statements about theological positions or orientations. Each of us has to make our own sense of suffering while we live with the God of the covenant. (pg Hartman 946, in Cohen and Medes-Flohr).

What makes an approach to reward and punishment acceptable from a Jewish point of view?

David Hartman says “Our tradition demands we find some approach that enables us to maintain commitment to Mitzvot.” (pg 943 in Cohen and Mendes-Flohr) This is consistent with Emet ve-Emunah, the Conservative statement of Jewish Principles. So, any view of reward and punishment that supports observance of Jewish precepts and living a Jewish life is acceptable.

Using the language of our parsha, we are to strive not to reject God’s statutes nor abhor his commandments. We are to start where we are, regularly and even continually do a heshbon nefesh, an accounting of the soul, and we are to try to strive for ever high levels of Jewish knowledge, living and observance. This will help us live a proper and meaningful life, and help heal the world.

Shabbat Shalom.

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