

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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RALBAG'S INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JOB

INTRODUCTION

Levi ben Gerson, *Ralbag* (commonly called Gersonides or Gershuni, in Hebrew) was born at Bagnols, Southern France, in 1288. He was a philosopher, exegete, physician, and mathematician. As a philosopher, his chief philosophical work, *Milchamot Hashem*, occupies a distinguished place alongside of the *Guide* of Maimonides. As a commentator of the Bible, he depicted the philosophical essences of biblical thought and brought them into harmony with Aristotelianism. This was especially true of the Book of Job which he, like Maimonides, regarded as purely a philosophical work dealing with the problems of good and evil and God's providence.

Though a distinguished Talmudist, Levi ben Gerson never held a rabbinical post. He earned a livelihood most probably by the practice of medicine. He was a descendant of a family of scholars. His father was Gershon b. Solomon, the author of *Shaar ha-Shamayim*, and Nachmanides was his maternal grandfather.¹ He was only in his late twenties when he began writing his magnum opus, *Milchamot Hashem*. In addition to his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, he wrote treatises on logic,² mathematics,³ physics,⁴ medicine,⁵ and a résumé on Averroes.

The Book of Job offered for Gersonides, as well as for Maimonides before him, an excellent opportunity to project the representative opinions held by philosophers on the nature of providence and theodicy. There is first of all the Aristotelian view that God's providence extends only to species and not to individuals. Then there is the notion held by the majority of our people that God provides for every individual of the human race — *hashgachah peratit*. The third view maintains that some individuals are specially provided for but others are under the protection only of "general" providence.

Essentially the problem resolved itself into a consideration as to whether God's omnipotence is so central that we can circumscribe His goodness or vice versa. Now if we assume as some traditionalists do that it is inadmissible that evil proceed from God, we are confronted by the shocking dilemma: why

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are the righteous oppressed by miseries while the wicked are triumphant? What is even more paradoxical is the question why evil exists altogether in a universe which is apparently orderly and purposefully-directed.

Classical and medieval philosophers (unlike some modern thinkers who, geared as they are to a scientific view of reality, assert that we must learn to live with our dilemmas and not waste our energy attempting to resolve them in a rational manner, inasmuch as paradoxes abound in all fields of natural research) worked over in massive theological schemes the contradictions and aberrations posed by the problem of evil. Their doctrines ranged from the Platonic view (adopted by Philo) that evil, being simply the absence of good, is not anything positive or absolute, to the notion that good and evil are distributed in this world according to the law of justice and that in the sublunar world God's omnipotence limits His goodness.

Abraham bar Chiyya, Maimonides, and Gersonides, in the tradition of a philosophy of personalism, maintain that moral evil befalling man is due to the defect of the recipient rather than the dispenser. When man fails to realize his potentialities and rational faculties, he is subject to the immutable, determining laws of nature. He can only escape the rigor of the iron laws of the physical environment by developing his intellectual excellence. The higher he stands in the scale of creation, the greater solicitude and protection is bestowed upon him. The degree of divine protection is proportional to the degree of development through man's free choice. Thus those who strive to develop the faculties of the soul enjoy the care of a special, individual providence, while those who grope in ignorance are guarded only by "general" providence.

What follows is my translation of a major portion of Raibag's introduction to Job which contains in essence his notions on theodicy and providence, expanded upon in his *Milchamot Hashem*.

L.D.S.

Levi ben Gerson said: it is appropriate to interpret this book, the book of Job, in a broad perspective, and to delve deeply into its content in accordance with the dictates of our wisdom, considering especially the great value derived from this work for man's political and intellectual well-being. In fact, the Torah generally is conceived on the principle elucidated in this book. For this reason, our sages ascribed the authorship of this work to Moses our teacher and observed: "Moses authored his book

From the Pages of Tradition

as well as the portion of Balaam and Job.” To be sure, there were differences of opinion among them whether the episode of Job was an allegory or an actual event.

The central problem we shall investigate in this book is whether God’s special providence is extended to each person individually, in keeping with basic biblical doctrine, and whether the Almighty watches over all human activities or not. Accordingly, if we establish the premise that God’s providence is over all his creatures individually in consonance with the doctrines of the Torah, it follows inevitably that we ascribe an injustice to the Almighty on account of the apparent evil order in the world pertaining to good and evil that befalls particular individuals. For, invariably, we can find a righteous person who suffers and a wicked one who is prosperous. This paradox led philosophers to believe that the Almighty does not apprehend particular things in the sublunar world, as we indicated before.

Doubts about the doctrine of divine providence continued to receive renewed impetus among ancient and later thinkers and even among the prophets and revered sages. Our sages maintained that even Moses, our teacher, already made reference to this cosmic paradox when he beseeched the Almighty: “. . . Do make me know Thy way that I may know Thee” (*Exodus* 33:13). From the very response by the Almighty to this supplication, it is apparent that this was the problem agitating Moses. For the Almighty, proclaimed: “The Lord is the immutable, eternal Being, merciful and gracious” (*Ibid* 34:6).

The prophet Habakkuk likewise was concerned about this doctrine when he queried: “Wherefore wilt Thou look upon those that deal treacherously, be silent when the wicked swalloweth up him that is more righteous than he?” (*Hab.* 1:13).

The Psalmist David similarly was troubled when he stated: “For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs at their death but their strength is firm . . . Behold, such are the wicked, and they that are always at ease increase riches. Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart and washed my hands in innocence . . . And when I pondered how I might know this, it was wearisome in mine eyes” (*Ps.* 73:3, 4, 12, 13, 16).

Before we commence the interpretation of this book we shall preface one postulate that is all-embracing in this work. It is our contention that the evils that befall men are generally due to human potentialities that have not been actualized, or to pure accident. This is because tragic incidents basically originate either with the recipient of the misfortune himself or with an object external to him. As regards the former, the roots of evil occurrences in the recipient are to be found either in human temperament, one's character, or psychological disposition. If it is due to human temperament, then it must surely be ascribed to one's potential faculty. For the cause of the disorder here is the submergence of the passive powers to the active ones as demonstrated in the fourth proof. The same explanation holds true for the other factors of man's character or psychological disposition as the cause of evil. For in those instances as well, danger strikes when man does not channel his potentialities in the proper direction, that is, when they are not guided by his rational mind. For alas, it is only one's rational spirit that leads man in the right direction in everything that has to do with human needs.

By the same token, tragedies originating outside of man, which have their roots in human temperament or man's free choice, as is the case with wars, may be explained in the same manner as previously and ascribed to man's potentialities not developed.

Misfortunes, however, that do not have their genesis in human temperament or in man's free-will, such as earthquakes, violent storms, lightnings, and similar disorders are the result of pure accidents. For what is involved in this instance are destructive forces whose very nature is to destroy by design. It is necessary to assume, therefore, that in some cases there are celestial causes determining and guiding them so that at one time one malevolent force prevails over the other and vice versa. This takes place according to a determined rhythmic design and a permanent plan as has been indicated by our physical sciences. For this reason, too, we find at one time the element of fire predominant; at another time air, or water, or earth in accordance with the relation that exists between the active and the passive forces.

From the Pages of Tradition

In this way it is possible to maintain the sublunar forms of existence whose survival depends upon the uniform elements found in the substances that compose them. The cause for the unity in sublunar nature is the impact upon the substances from heavenly bodies.

From this standpoint, then, we deduce that such calamities strike us as pure chance. Consider for instance the case of one individual struck down by a conflagration or a group of people, who by chance dwell in a certain area, suddenly overtaken by a calamitous earthquake. Surely in those instances only a chance element is involved. In general, then it is inadmissible that evil can proceed directly from God. That is why we often hear the expression that no tragedy ever descends from On High.

NOTES

1. *Yuchasin*, Abraham Zacuto (ed. Phillipowski, p. 224).
2. *Sefer ha-Hekkehsh ha-Yashar* -- a treatise on syllogism.
3. *Sefer ha-Mispar* -- a treatise on algebra and *Melo Chofnayim* on Euclid.
4. *Dillugim* -- a treatise on the seven constellations.
5. *Meshichah* -- a remedy for gout.