

Rabbi Granatstein, a frequent contributor, is Director of the Hillel Foundation of the University of Manitoba.

## THEODICY AND BELIEF

“The universe follows its accustomed pattern.”<sup>1</sup> This Rabbinic aphorism which Maimonides later employed to evoke his own naturalist sentiments expresses much more than tough-minded realism. As a principle, it gives form to the underlying supposition of normative religious life. No form of halakhic life could exist except in a world which nature is expected to follow her inexorable course.

In the World to Come we might eat the flesh of Leviathan slaughtered by Divine fiat. In this world we ourselves must attend to the technical and mundane problems of ritual slaughter and inspection before we are entitled to eat. We ourselves must administer charitable services to make sure that the poor and helpless can also eat, and are forbidden to rely on miracles to provide for their needs. When decisions are to be rendered on halakhic questions no Divine voice can be invoked not even the turning back of a river will obviate the need for sober recourse to the canons of halakhic decision making.<sup>2</sup> The halakhist is not a charismatic miracle worker but a scholar and a technician who relies on the empirical evidence of the natural facts of any case and the data of binding legal material. In his universe of discourse both joy and tragedy are present as factors in the inexorable flow of events which must be scrutinized and sanctified by Divine Law. In short, his concerns are the cold empirical realities with which men must live.

The Halakhah as a normative system then depends on the inexorability of the nature of things. However, this naturalist quality contrasts sharply with the claims made regarding the genesis of the Halakhah. If the Halakhah depends upon the norm as its *modus operandi*, its genesis lies in the most radical

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suspension of the norm. The Torah does not evolve from the nature of things but is given by God and it is the Halakhah itself that binds us to this belief. Thus the origin of the Halakhah stands in radical contrast to the way in which the Halakhah works.

This contrast between genesis and normative application corresponds roughly to two historical periods in the sacred history of our people; the period in which the voice of prophecy was heard in Israel and the period thereafter.<sup>3</sup> This contrast between two periods is not to be lightly dismissed and holds the key to many of the seemingly unsurmountable crises of belief present in the generations after Auschwitz. Only if we understand the doctrinal claims of the Bible regarding the nature of Divine intervention in human history will we be able to evaluate the possibility of continuing to cleave to the faith of our fathers.

From the Bible, we can seemingly claim that God is "present in history" and not merely the Creator of the natural world. He rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked for "shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" His Divine guidance extends from Creation so that it is He who divides the boundaries of nations, and fixes their inheritances. Surely this entitles us to draw conclusions about the Biblical world-view which affirms a God of history and a moral rule guaranteeing metaphysical justice and guiding man to the Messianic goal at history's culmination.

But this theological position is untenable. In our experience virtue is not rewarded, evil is not punished and we are powerless to explain either the prosperity of the wicked or the afflictions of the righteous. We who live after Auschwitz<sup>4</sup> can "justify the judgment" only by condemning the innocent thus compounding the sin of Job's comforters beyond the tolerance of decent, sensitive people. It would seem that we are faced with a dilemma; either the God we worship is powerless to help us or He refuses to help us. Both options seem to render the same conclusion; the Biblical God of history is a mythical projection unhelpful to modern man. Such is the conclusion we must draw if the above statement of classical Jewish faith is accurate.

But there is another possibility; namely that the conventional understanding of Jewish belief is an inadequate one; and if this is true, the dismissal of traditional Jewish belief may be premature.

According to the Torah's account, God not only creates the world but grieves at man's failings and brings him to justice. But we must now trace the dialectic of human failing and Divine response through the stages that the Torah presents to our view. There are, as the Mishnah says, ten generations from Adam to Noah and ten generations from Noah to Abraham. In this unfolding of the generations of man, man exercises his freedom not only to err but to inflict violence and pain and destroy the ways of all flesh — to "slay a man for wounding me and a lad for bruising me." We are given this account in order "to demonstrate the patience of God" so that only at the end of a long period of injustice and undeserved suffering does the Divine judgment intrude.<sup>5</sup>

The term intrusion is used intentionally. God is not simply "present in history"; this is where the language of much of modern Jewish thought misleads us. God "descends" to judge man.<sup>6</sup> But a descent implies that God is, so to speak, out of place in the moment of judgment. History is man's arena and if the doctrine of moral freedom has any meaning it must imply a notion of normality in which God is not present in history. The terror of deciding and bearing responsibility for the decisions that are made devolves on man. God may, so to speak, grieve over our failings but He can judge us only by "descending" into our midst — in short by violating, impinging, intruding into the dimension of human freedom. If we are to affirm doctrines, let us first affirm God's absence from history as the primary implication of our faith in human freedom. In the context of this affirmation let us next affirm the abnormal and therefore unpredictable "descent" of God's presence into our midst at His own time and for purposes ultimately beyond human knowledge. We cannot predict such intrusions with accuracy and therefore we cannot rely on them. Normative religious life does not depend on them even though its foundations are based on such an intrusion.

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Yet a problem would seem to arise. If God has intruded into our midst at certain times and we are in no position to predict the occurrence of such intrusions, we are forced to ascribe a capricious quality to Divine governance. But to affirm a capricious Deity is to fly in the face of the Jewish experience of God as “compassionate and gracious” — in short, loving, concerned and therefore just. Yet if there are no humanly knowable rules governing the Divine intrusion how can we escape that implication?

At the outset it must be said that there are no ultimate answers to such questions. This is but a reformulation of the problem of theodicy directed toward the suggested reformulation of classical Jewish belief. In brief the dialectic can be restated thus:

**POINT: I**

It is assumed that Jewish belief binds us to affirm that there is justice in this world because God is present in history, punishing sin and rewarding righteousness.

**COUNTERPOINT: I**

Empirical evidence proves this false.

**POINT: II**

We recognize that God is absent from history but at rare moments in history His judgment has been experienced as a “descent” into our midst.

**COUNTERPOINT: II**

Since there are no knowable rules governing Divine descent we can only conclude that Divine governance is capricious and this flies in the face of Jewish tradition.

One must not suppose that the problematic character of the notion of Divine descent is of late origin. Already in Biblical times it expressed itself in the bitter proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”<sup>7</sup> Why should guilty generations pass by with impunity and a later generation bear all of the punishment? It was against this heretical proverb that Jeremiah and Ezekiel railed. Ezekiel engages in a sophisticated argument to demonstrate the individualized

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character of Divine justice that punishes each according to his deserts while sparing the penitent sinner even in the sunset of his life.<sup>8</sup>

Yet such affirmations do not easily bandage the ugly wound of witnessing mothers consuming their children's flesh, of modest women being raped and exploited by human swine, of helpless innocent people being loaded into freight cars in order to be converted into soap. This gnawing obscenity remains.

There is no way out. We can claim no comprehension of the nature of Divine governance at all. All statements regarding the nature of God as compassionate, gracious, and just arise only from the experience of God's presence in the moments of Divine descent into our midst. In short our knowledge of God is restricted to what God Himself reveals within the constricted contexts of His revelations to us. On all other questions we can only remain silent. When Abraham stands before God pleading for the righteous of Sodom, he can expect no less than absolute justice for "shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"<sup>9</sup> But Abraham of all people was not naive about the evil existing in the world. A man who was compelled to lie about his wife and then see her dragged to the bedchamber of monstrously selfish and insensitive ruler surely understood all too well that evil exists unchecked in this world cruelly trampling underfoot every human decency. Sodom is different only because God has declared His intention to descend in judgment against her. Whenever such an intrusion takes place there can be no capriciousness for "shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" Our formulation of classical Jewish belief can be expressed thus: God reveals Himself to us in the context of our history as the executor of justice, but every such revelation is a violation of the norm and for this reason, we must conclude that "there is no reward in this world."<sup>10</sup>

Rabbinic tradition, to be sure, has gone to the greatest lengths to find justifications for all that occurs in the empirical world, the above quotation notwithstanding. Yet as Professor Urbach has taught us, the Rabbinic responses to the problem of evil are far more complex and varied than our modern theologians have supposed.<sup>11</sup> For the purpose of this essay we shall

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cite one example of Aggadic evocation which indicates this complexity.

... Moses said "The great mighty and awesome God." Jeremiah came and said, "Aliens revel in His Temple! Where is His awesomeness?" He would therefore not say "awesome." Daniel came and said "Aliens enslave His children! Where is His might?" He would therefore not say "mighty." The Members of the Great Assembly came and said, "On the contrary, this itself is His might that He subdues His desire and is patient toward the evildoers. And this itself is His awesomeness for were it not for the awesomeness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, how could one nation survive amongst the nations?"<sup>12</sup>

The Members of the Great Assembly can return to the Mosaic formulation without reciting untruths because they recognize the multi-dimensional character of claims made with reference to God. God's absence from history and Israel's persistence in the teeth of unbridled evil power express their own religious truths which are not less affirmations of traditional Jewish belief. What remains as a binding doctrine in Rabbinic thought is the affirmation of ultimate justice, if not in this world then in the next. But this suggests a radical contrast between the real and inescapable pain and void of the world of mundane experience and the standards of ultimacy which are yet to emerge for those of us still in the antechamber of worldly life. The contrast itself serves to underscore the injustice of this world.

There are three Books in the Bible which speak to this question: Jonah, Job, and Ecclesiastes. An examination of the themes of each of these books will give us a clearer insight into the nature of the Jewish response to the problem of evil.

It is one of the more pronounced idiocies of liberal Jewish apologetics that the Book of Jonah should be taken as an expression of Jewish "universalism" when in reality it expresses the opposite.<sup>13</sup> Jonah attempts to escape from his Divine mission, because God's desire to save Ninevah is capricious and violates the universal justice in which Jonah believes. What Jonah cannot accept is the unjustifiable selectivity involved in the Divine "descent" to save an undeserving city while others more deserving are surrendered to the onslaught of events.

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Even when God drives him back to accomplish his mission, Jonah is sickened almost to death by his very success. The deliverance of Ninevah signals a triumph of capriciousness, over the demands of justice. The Book of Jonah is among other things a parable of compassion and the power of repentance. God justifies His actions to Jonah by asking rhetorically if the Creator should not have compassion for His Creation. The magnificence of the message can scarcely be denied but is problematic nonetheless. God's compassion is extended only within the constricted limits of the event in question. The story is religiously significant because we are taught something about the values that God manifests in the context of His revelation. "As He is compassionate, so shall we be compassionate." We are presented with a sublime model regarding values but are given no guidance regarding God's ways in governing His world.

Emil Fackenheim, in his eloquent statement, *God's Presence in History* rightly asserts, "If God is ever present in history, this is not presence-in-general but rather a presence to particular men in particular situations."<sup>14</sup> This expresses the fundamental notion at work in the Book of Jonah and in all places in the Bible in which God intrudes into human events.

If the Book of Jonah expresses the paradoxical selectivity of Divine revelation, the Book of Job protests against the absence of Divine justice where this revelation is not present. Job's comforters, for all their eloquence, fail to convince him of the justice of his fate. Indeed, the prologue is open to the interpretation that God is permitting Satan to play with Job and his vulnerability to suffering. Only Job's sanity and self-esteem are untouched and this is the reserve of energy that charges his protest.

The Divine answer is the end of all answers. Man's thoughts and God's thoughts can in no way be compared. One can only stand in silent uncomprehending awe in the presence of God and His Creative power.<sup>15</sup> Attempts to justify human misery do not always elevate faith — they may only cheapen it. This was certainly the case with Job's friends. The religious stance — the appropriate relation binding man to God is only this silent awe which testifies with believing agnosticism. There is

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considerable ambiguity in the Rabbinic treatment of Job. When Job refuses to accept the suffering visited upon him as just he acts in a way that has the connotation of impiety.<sup>16</sup> And yet Rabbi Yohanan sees Job as being even greater than Abraham.<sup>17</sup> Love "does not depend on anything."<sup>18</sup> The religious ideal is to be as a slave who serves the master without thought of reward.<sup>19</sup> And yet protest against the evil of the human condition is the source of all passionate quest for righteousness. In the end love and awe triumph but Job's protest, with all of its ambiguity remains to testify against simplistic "solutions" to the problem of evil.

The futility of finding "purposes" in the pain inflicted on man finds its most powerful statement in the Book of Ecclesiastes. No progression and therefore, no goals can be found anywhere "under the sun." One can do nothing more than "eat and drink and enjoy oneself."<sup>20</sup> Delaying gratification to a distant future is a pointless exercise in a universe that travels nowhere.<sup>21</sup> Ecclesiastes warns us of an ultimate judgment and yet contrasts the standards of ultimacy with the ever-present futility of this world.

Contemporary academic orthodoxy, to be sure, denies that such a contrast was present in the "original" version. Rather it is contended that this contrast is the result of an insertion of a later pious scribe. The assumption of respectable scholarship would seem to be that Biblical writers are incapable of psychological and intellectual complexity. But it would not be the first or the last time that academic orthodoxy erred and the *Massorah* should prove to be correct. If this is the case, a profound affirmation emerges from the book. Ultimate judgment though affirmed does not redeem the futility and pain of this world. That which is only "under the sun" remains futile.<sup>23</sup> All that remains to imbue mundane life with meaning is the fear of God and the observance of the Commandments. This is our only worldly portal to ultimate value.<sup>24</sup>

Kohelet can help us pinpoint the deepest religious meaning enshrined in the doctrine of Divine descent. If man bears responsibility for his acts, he also bears responsibility for the social and historical consequences of these acts. To put it Aggadically,

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God will not destroy the sun because men are foolish enough to worship it, and He will not prevent pain and ultimate humiliation because men are evil enough to inflict it. But He commands us to respond to His Torah and live by its standards. The Commandments alone when observed are redeeming of an otherwise fruitless existence; the reward of a Mitzvah is the Mitzvah itself. The Torah is the supreme intrusion into the natural flow of the world's life. To live a life of Mitzvah is to impose a superordinate redeeming structure where none exists by inertia alone. This structure is the gate to ultimacy open to all who are in the realm of mundane existence. Every descent of God into history recorded by the Tradition, is a redeeming religious model evoking moral emulation in the believing Jew.

The Giving of the Torah is the supreme intrusion and the supreme model. It expresses God's concern for man by demanding that we transform the world so that the world itself shall reflect His concern. The world follows its accustomed pattern and only we can sanctify it, not with magic or reliance on miracles but by fearing God and keeping His Commandments. This would seem to be the implication of Ecclesiastes as the *Massorah* records it.

To be sure we were the recipients of a Divine promise; that we shall remain an eternal people, and that our ties to our land will not irrevocably be broken no matter how long the exile. In a redeemed world the experience of the Divine intrusion might more fully be experienced but more immediately we must rely on human choice and action.

To summarize, Judaism may indeed be powerless to "explain" either the prosperity of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous. Human knowledge does not comprehend such an overview of the world. God is not an explanation; a God who serves as an explanation is an idol. The iconoclastic faith of Israel demands that we serve God as slaves who serve their master without thought of reward. The Torah is not a psychological crutch for the weak but a challenge. After Auschwitz we must as Job cry aloud against metaphysical and human evil and again like Job stand in awe at the incommensurability of God's creation.

Will God intrude into our midst again? We cannot intelli-

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gently deal with such a question. Was the Six Day War such an intrusion? We have no way of verifying this and if we therefore assert this as a dogma we are guilty of a type of arrogance that is liable to endanger Israel's survival. The state was created out of a tough-minded sense of the world following its accustomed pattern. Contrary to a fashionable and dangerous myth, it is the spirit of Yavneh and not the spirit of the Bible that produced the State.

Our religious faith does not rest in the verifiability of past or present day miracles but in the compelling nature of the Commandments of God. To repeat a distinction made at the beginning of this essay, the way the Halakhah works contrasts radically with its genesis. It is the Halakhah itself and its applications and structures that constitute our religious universe of discourse and not the miraculous character of its origin. It is by keeping the Commandments that we rejoice in our portion and understand that this precious instrument was given to us by God at Sinai. We do not begin by accepting the doctrine and then observe the Commandments. It is because we observe the Commandments that we are compelled to believe.

The nature of Divine providence is much debated in classical Jewish thought. The debate itself testifies to the nebulous character of our knowledge in this area. But there is a dimension of providence accessible to every Jew. This providence is found in the relationship to God and established in the life of Mitzvah. Martin Buber's description of the I-Thou relation is very helpful here. In this relation established in keeping the Commandments with *Kavanah*, we are joined to the primal relation of all Israel with God at Sinai. Whatever dogma we possess is derivative from the Halakhic universe of discourse through which we encounter the Creator. It is the Halakhah that provides normative authority for all the texts and traditions which speak of Divine intrusion into history. In this sense we can say that the Oral Torah logically precedes the Written.

If the above analysis is accurate the problem of theodicy cannot arise. It will be objected that this provides us with no answers. To this objection we readily admit. It is true that the Tradition is no more competent to answer such questions than

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the functionally atheistic alternatives to traditional belief. But as stated above, religion is not an “answer” in that sense. The Torah is not a crutch but a yoke and if we refuse to bear this yoke the world will be turned back into chaos. The world that is merely “under the sun” is futility and a pursuit of wind. But the fear of God and the observance of His Commandments is the whole of man and the portal to the ultimate.

### NOTES

1. *Babylonian Talmud; Avodah Zarah* 54b.
2. *B.T. Bava M'tsiah* 59b.
3. *B.T. Berakhot* 8a.

... מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקב"ה בעולמו אלא ד'  
אמות דהלכה בלבד.

*Maharasha* explains that after the Temple was destroyed wherever scholars study Torah, there the *Shekhinah* is present. The Halakhic exercise itself is the vehicle that brings God's presence into the world.

4. See R. L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs Merrill), 1966.

5. The account in the *Mishnah: Avot* 5:1, 2 should be read in conjunction with the version found in *Avot d'Rabbi Nathan*, 31:2. There the stress is on the power of single human decisions to have the most universal of effects: in short the Biblical concern with detail is presented as demonstrating the decisive power of human choice and action. When taken together with the Mishnaic version, it is God's “patience” in absenting himself from history that gives universal power to single human choices.

6. e.g. *Genesis* 11:5, 7; 18:21 — *Exodus* 3:8; 19:20. See *Avot d'Rabbi Nathan* 34:5, 6. Here we are told of 10 “descents” of the *Shekhinah* into the world and the 10 “ascents” from the world caused, judging from the proof-texts, by human sin. Curiously, however, the “descents” are not ascribed to human virtue but are often judgments visited on evil-doers. e.g., the instances of the Tower of Babel and the destruction of Sodom.

7. *Jeremiah* 31:29, *Ezekiel* 118:2.

8. *Ezekiel* 18.

9. *Genesis* 18:25.

10. *B.T. Chullin* 142.

11. Urbach, Ephraim, *HaZal, Pirkei Emunot Vede'ot* (J. L. Magnes Press, Hebrew University: Jerusalem), 1969.

12. *B.T. Yoma* 69b.

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13. A more charitable criticism along the same lines is presented in *The Five Megilloth and Jonah: A New Translation*, ed. H. L. Ginsburg (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia), 1969, p. 115.

14. *God's Presence in History* (New York University Press: New York), p. 8.

15. *Job* 38-42.

16. *B.T. Bava Batra* 15b. In one account offered here, Job fails the test, gets his reward in this world and is cast out of the World to Come. cf. *Bereshith Rabbah*, 57:3.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Avot* 5:16.

19. *Ibid.* 1:3.

20. *Ecclesiastes* 8:15.

21. *Ibid.* 5:9-19.

22. *Ibid.* 11:7-10.

23. *B.T. Shabbath* 30b. The school of Rabbi Yanai stresses the contrast between life lived only "under the sun" which is futile and a life related to what "preceded" the sun: namely, the Torah which has ultimate value. This is the "beginning which is Torah" that redeems the book from the heresy of denying the existence of any values.

24. *Ecclesiastes* 12:13.