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WHEN PERMISSION IS GIVEN: ASPECTS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

לעילוי נשמת אמי מורתי מ' פערל בת הרב ר' יעקב הכהן ז"ל
פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה
Prov. 31:26

That suffering is inextricably bound up with sin is the most commonly expressed Rabbinic understanding of the role of suffering in Judaism's moral economy.¹ The rule that one should examine his deeds in the wake of misfortune is the practical application of that general principle.²

The Rabbis nonetheless acknowledged exceptions to this principle, when the influence of ancestral merit, prayer, repentance, grace or the playing out of the Divine will influence events without regard to the incidence of sin. Nevertheless, they did not ignore the problem of theodicy, which in Rabbinic thought appears in two guises: the question of the suffering of the righteous and the success of the wicked.³ The following discussion will examine one Rabbinic solution to the first aspect of this problem, especially as it relates to communal misfortune. The following is as an attempt to describe one exception to the link between suffering and sin in Rabbinic thought. In the succeeding studies, other mechanisms will be investigated, D.v.

I

Universal application of the principle that suffering always implies a concomitant sin makes the first half of the problem—the suffering of the righteous—well nigh insoluble. This consideration may lie behind R. Yanai's assertion that "we have no answer to the [question] of the repose of the wicked, nor of the sufferings of the righteous."⁴

The operation of the principle of "no death without sin" is limited by the Bavli in various ways. Among the limitations proposed are the following. Only those who are absolutely righteous are free from misfortune,⁵ or, as another opinion has it, both personal

rectitude and ancestral merit are necessary preconditions for such bliss. In either case, personal rectitude or piety short of perfection is insufficient; one's ancestral merit must reinforce one's own.⁶ Again, the righteous suffer in this world to atone for their few transgressions so as to merit the pleasures of the world to come in undiluted form. Another principle is that God judges the righteous by a stricter measure than that used for the common run of humanity,⁷ or they are at times afflicted with "sufferings of love" in order to increase their reward in the world to come.⁸ There is the paradoxical explanation of R. Jonathan b. Eliezer, who attributes the death of the righteous to the need to discourage the wicked from attempting an insincere repentance.⁹ Another version has it that the death of the righteous may occur for reasons having to do with God's ultimate plans for the world and not because of any imperfection on the part of the victim.¹⁰ On a communal level, the righteous may by their suffering or deaths provide vicarious atonement for their generation.¹¹ The wicked bring disaster upon the world, but it touches the righteous first.¹²

On the other hand, the wicked may prosper because of ancestral merit, grace, the requirements of historical development,¹³ and the principle that the wicked receive their reward in this world.

On an individual level, the problem is less severe, except in extraordinary circumstances. Few of us may legitimately (at least in the privacy of our consciences) exempt ourselves from even the petty annoyances of every day life. When confronted by the question "What is the minimum measure of suffering [which may be ascribed to the needs of atonement]?" we find little difficulty in mustering whole-hearted agreement with the Talmud's response "Even if one stuck his hand in his purse to take out three [coins] and brought up only two. . . ."

Indeed, the Talmud itself enunciates the underlying principle in a striking way.

It was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: Whoever passes thirty days without suffering has [already] received his [share in the] world [to come]. In the West they say: Punishment is in readiness for him.¹⁴

Again, membership in the Community of Israel alone may bring its own modicum of suffering, especially in exilic times. To be a Jew—even a righteous one—after the Temple's destruction is to share in Israel's misfortune.¹⁵ Whoever grieves with Israel will see its redemption.¹⁶

All these solutions place limits on Divine benevolence. God's Mercy has its limits. But all of these maintain the connection between suffering and sin in one way or another. We now turn to one mode of Divine governance which all but severs the link between the two.¹⁷

II

In instructing the Israelites in Egypt on proper behavior during the Plague of the Firstborn, Moses warns them of the dangers of not following the proper procedure for that night.

None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning. For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer¹⁸ enter and smite your home.¹⁹

The Israelites' merit did not suffice to protect them from the Destroyer; they required the prophylactic mitzvah of the paschal sacrifice. We are reminded of Lot's wife, who accompanied her husband out of Sodom but was not permitted to look back on the destruction of her erstwhile neighbors.²⁰

During the Plague of Hail, "those among Pharaoh's courtiers who feared the Lord's Word brought their slaves and livestock indoors to safety."²¹ In this instance, no Egyptian was permitted to avail himself of the protection provided by the paschal offering. And because of its severity, the Israelites too required extraordinary protection.

Who or what is this Destroyer from whom the Israelites must be protected? One might identify him as the angel charged with the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn. However, most traditional Jewish commentators reject this equation because the midrash interprets Exod. 12:12 to mean that God reserved this plague for His own personal attention.²² Rashi, following the Mekilta,²³ comments as follows:

This tells us that when permission is granted the Destroyer to harm, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked—and night is the [time of] permission to Harmers.²⁴

Thus, the Destroyer, in Rashi's view, fulfilled no function at all within the context of Redemption.²⁵ Rashi apparently interpreted this passage in the Mekilta in light of the following one which explicitly refers to the dangers of travel by night.²⁶ However, as the text of the Mekilta stands, the reference is not to the night or any regularly recurrent danger, but rather, according to the proof-texts cited, to occurrences of plague (Is 26:20 and Ezek 21:8) or a theophany (Exod 33:22).²⁷ It is this aspect of the Destroyer's function which Ramban emphasizes in his remarks on 12:22–23.

I do not understand [Rashi's] remarks insofar as he says, "and night is [the time that] permission is granted to Harmers, as [Scripture] states: 'The beasts

of the field swarm in it.” Is it [then] forbidden, on the basis of this verse, for a person to leave the door of his house every night until morning? [Rashi] should rather have stated that *this night* permission was granted to the Destroyer to harm, and therefore [God] warned them away from him. But the Master did not see fit to state this, for the Holy One Himself, blessed be He, was the Plague-bringer.

Ramban then quotes his version of the Mekilta and then proposes his own interpretation.

This matter is taught in the Mekilta in another version: “None of you shall go outside.” This teaches us that once permission is granted to the Destroyer to harm, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, as [Scripture] states: “Come, My people, enter your chambers” (Is 26:20), and it states: “Behold, I am against you, and will draw forth My sword out of its sheath; I will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked” (Ezek 21:8). It [further] states: “And when My glory passes [you will take refuge in the cleft of the rock]” (Exod 33:22)—to teach you that you should enter in the morning and leave in the morning. You find this [illustrated] as well [by the acts] of the Patriarch and Prophets, [who] followed the common custom. Abraham rose early in the morning (Gen 22:3), Jacob rose early in the morning (Gen 28:18), Moses rose early in the morning (Exod 34:4), Joshua rose early in the morning (Jos 3:1), Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul (I Sam 15:12). Now, is this matter not [to be proved by an argument] *a fortiori*? If the Patriarchs and Prophets, who were on the[ir] way to perform the Will of Him Who spoke and the world came into being, observed this common custom, how much more so other people? And so too [Scripture] states: “You make darkness and it is night, etc., the young lions roar in pursuit of their prey” (Ps 104:20–21), “You give it to them, they gather it, etc.” (*ibid.*, 28), “the sun rises, they slink away” (*ibid.*, 22). From then on—“man goes forth to his work and to his labor till evening” (*ibid.*, 23)—till here the baraita.

The intent of the matter is as follows: The verse warns Israel in Egypt not to go out of the entrance of their houses that night, for the Holy One, blessed be He, is passing through Egypt like a king passing from place to place with his officers before him, so that people will not accost him or gaze at him, similar [to the verse]: “The Lord my God shall come, with all the holy beings with you” (Zech 14:5), and so too: “As my glory passes I will place you in the cleft of the rock” (Exod 33:22)—to protect him [i.e., Moses] from the Seraphim and the Heavenly Court. Since we find that when permission is granted to the Destroyer to harm, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, therefore no one may act contrary to the common custom and go out at night, for [night] is the time granted beasts to seek prey without distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked.

In other words, the command to remain indoors on this night was intended to avert the dangers which followed in the wake of God’s descent on Egypt. But, Ramban explains, the dangers which accompany God’s theophany are paradigmatic of those attendant upon being set upon by the wild beasts or bandits at night or other times of danger. It therefore behooves us to avoid both the dangers of unprotected exposure to God’s Presence and other dangers which

can affect human beings without regard to their moral rectitude or lack of it.

The question of the identity of the Destroyer remains open, however. Ramban takes this point up next, in a brief comment on 12:23. The Destroyer is one and the same as the one who brings death to the world during times of plague. Ramban's proof-text is II Samuel 24:16, to which we will turn in section III.

In any case, it is abundantly clear that in times of danger, be they times of darkness, plague or theophany, even the righteous may not expect to be spared. Merit, ancestral or otherwise, will be unavailing. In some cases, Divine guidance will serve to protect those in danger. The Israelites in Egypt used the blood of the paschal lamb, Moses hid in the cleft of the rock in one case and kept out of the Tabernacle in another,²⁸ and the priests at the dedication of the Temple were prevented from entering the Temple.²⁹ It would seem that Moses and Aaron too remained indoors this night of redemption. Mekilta emphasizes that Pharaoh and his servants had to make a house to house search for Moses in order to give formal permission for the Israelites to leave Egypt.³⁰ Thus, there are two streams of interpretation of our passage. One sees the night as dangerous in and of itself, and the night of redemption from Egyptian bondage as no different from any other.³¹ In this instance, God issued a warning and provided specific instructions to avoid a potential *Hillul Ha-Shem*. Another exegetical trend connects the warning to the dangers peculiar to this situation of theophany.³²

Nevertheless, both affirm the validity of this rule in more ordinary times. Once permission is given to the Destroyer to harm, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked either at night or during other times of danger.

It is important to note that though the situation in Egypt was one involving collective danger, a time, as it were, of plague, Mekilta did not hesitate to extend its rule to individuals pursuing their lives in "ordinary" times.³³ As we shall see, it was this theme that the Bavli picked up and developed.

III

The principle that danger in times of danger and plague in plague years affect the righteous and wicked alike is enunciated elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, in Amoraic sources. Indeed, the Bavli extends this teaching. R. Joseph, who quotes the Mekilta's initial statement along with the proof-text from Ezekiel,³⁴ employs that verse to make a somewhat different point: "Not only that, but he *begins* with the

righteous, as [Scripture] states: I will cut off from you righteous and wicked."³⁵

While his disciple Abaye suggests that this illustrates God's benevolence to the righteous, who are spared further anguish, the result is the same. However, it should be noted that R. Joseph's comment on the Mekilta stresses that the Destroyer is not oblivious to the difference between the righteous and the wicked, since he seeks out the former; rather, he attacks both without regard to their merit or lack thereof.

Elsewhere, the matter of vicarious atonement is mooted:

R. Gurion or, some say, R. Joseph son of R. Shemaiah said: When there are righteous men in a generation, they are taken for the sin of the generation.³⁶ When there are no righteous in a generation, schoolchildren are taken for the generation.³⁷

While the righteous of a generation, who presumably exercise influence on their contemporaries, may be held responsible for the sins of their generation,³⁸ this cannot be the case with the schoolchildren.³⁹ They cannot be held responsible for the sins of the adults of their generation, since no leadership role is open to them.

The difference between this passage and the ones dealt with in section III inheres in this: here the plague is a result of sin—"the sin of the generation." The death of the righteous and of schoolchildren is clearly bound up with the doctrine of collective retribution. The righteous and the schoolchildren of the Jewish people are taken as the choicest part of the community.⁴⁰

Whatever interpretation of the role of the Destroyer in Egypt we adopt, however, the Israelites ought to have been triply protected against his ravages. First, as *victims* of the Egyptians' sin which brought about the plague to begin with; second, as members of a different community, not subject to whatever collective retribution the Egyptians had incurred; and third, because of the *Hillul Ha-Shem* which harm to an Israelite would have caused.⁴¹

For our purposes, however, despite the clear demarcation between these two types of danger to the righteous, the two share a common thrust: righteousness alone is scant protection in times of universal danger.

In the passage cited above, Ramban identifies the Destroyer in Egypt with the angel of the plague in II Sam 24.⁴² The reason for the plague is not given, and commentators have scoured the Books of Samuel for it, with perhaps indifferent success.⁴³ But in fact it is this mysterious quality which makes the incident useful as a paradigm for

a reality whose wellsprings are nearly always hidden from us. Moreover, the passage deals with an incident which occurred in the Land of Israel in the time of King David. It is not explicitly connected with any sin, nor is it tied to the processes of exile, redemption, or theophany. Indeed, it dates from a period in Jewish history which one might almost call normal. The chapter begins: "God's wrath flared up against Israel once again (*va-yosef*), and He incited David against them, saying: 'Go, count Israel and Judah.'"

Note that it is only *after* God's wrath is aroused that David is "incited" to carry out his census. At any rate, David is conscience-stricken and prays for God's forgiveness. In response, God (through Nathan the Prophet) offers David three options, two collective and one personal: seven years of famine, three days of plague or three months of flight from an enemy for David. David refuses to choose.

¹⁴David said to Gad [the Seer], "I am very distressed: Let us rather fall in God's hand, for His mercies are great, and let me not fall into the power of man." ¹⁵God sent plague on Israel, from the morning to the set time, and from Dan to Be'er Sheva', 77,000 people died. ¹⁶The angel stretched forth his hand over Jerusalem to destroy it; [but] God turned back from the evil and said to the angel rampaging through the people: "Enough now, stay your hand!" The angel of God was [then] at the threshing floor of Aravnah the Jebusite.

¹⁷David said to God when he saw the angel striking out at the populace—he said: "I have sinned and I have incurred guilt, but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand be [raised] against me and my father's House!"

¹⁸That day Gad came to David and said to him: "Go up and in the threshing floor of Aravnah the Jebusite go set up an altar to God."

In accordance with God's command, David purchases the threshing floor, erects the altar, and offers sacrifice; following this the plague ceases. One ancient exegetical tradition does specify the plague's ultimate cause. The Chronicler, in his recounting of the incident, singles out David's census. "The Satan stood against Israel and incited David."⁴⁴ Why the Satan incited David is not explained, however. Ralbag suggests that God is described as the Cause of David's motivation since He is the Ultimate Cause of all actions, in accord with Rambam's well-known principle that "all [the] intermediate causes are on occasion omitted in the words of the Prophets, and an act in time is ascribed to God."⁴⁵ This exegetical approach, like those listed in n. 42, reduces the incident to one of reasonably straightforward sin and punishment. David's vanity incites him to carry out a census. He thus brings a plague on Israel which results in the death of 77,000 people. The king, as leader and conscience of the nation, is responsible for the Israelites' wrongdoing, as in the case of Josiah, who was killed in battle despite his own personal righteousness,⁴⁶ and is also, as on this occasion, the cause of the Israelites'

suffering. Despite all this, the fact remains that II Sam 24:1 does not provide an explanation for why God's wrath was aroused at this particular time.

The placement of this chapter may provide a hint, however. The word *va-yosef* connects chapter 24 with chapter 21. The latter deals with a three-year famine brought about by the unexpiated (and previously unrecorded) sin of Saul against the Gibeonites. Once again a king's transgression involves his entire people, even post-humously. Once this sin is expiated (by handing over seven of Saul's sons to the Gibeonites), the accounts would seem to have been cleared. But chapter 24 begins: "God's wrath flared up . . . once again." This is part and parcel of the supplementary enumeration of wars and natural disasters which round out the Books of Samuel. II Sam 21:1-14, the Gibeonite famine and its aftermath, is followed by four short sections, each of which is prefaced with the phrase "there was yet another war against the Philistines," summing up and supplementing this aspect of David's career. Thus, chapter 24 is a natural continuation of chapter 21.⁴⁷

We need not see the plague as another product of the Gibeonites' mistreatment by Saul, however, just as the four battles with the Philistines do not constitute a continuous narrative. We deal with the juxtaposition (or near juxtaposition) of common themes. The Gibeonite transgression has been expiated, but God's wrath flared once again, for reasons unspecified. David's census is merely the mechanism by which this wrath manifested itself in human affairs. I do not propose, here or in the rest of this discussion, to attempt to unveil what prophecy has kept hidden.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy, however, that the Rabbis did not provide the usual *quid pro quo* in this instance.⁴⁹ Rather than do so, they preferred to minimize the casualties.

Said R. Eleazer: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the angel: Take their master [in learning],⁵⁰ through whose death many sins may be expiated for them. It was at that time that Avishai son of Zeruyah, who was equal to the greater part of the Sanhedrin, died.⁵¹

Or, as Eliyahu Rabba has it,

At that moment the angel descended from the highest heavens and put to death Gad the Seer, David's four sons and the elders who were with David.⁵²

According to these interpretations, this instance of pestilence falls under the rubric provided by R. Joseph or R. Gurion.⁵³ As noted above, the righteous are taken for the "sin of the generation."

To sum up: the rule of the unleashed Destroyer applies both in exile and in the Land of Israel, in times of high significance for

Jewish history and in more “normal” periods. In all cases, the merit of the righteous does not serve to protect them.

IV

What of the protective power of Torah study? According to the Talmud, King David managed to keep the Angel of Death at bay by unceasing study.⁵⁴ As noted above, R. Joshua b. Levi relied on the merit of Torah study and placed himself in a situation of danger while engaging in this mitzvah.

The *locus classicus* for the Talmud’s consideration of the protective power of Torah and mitzvot is bSot 21a. The sugya begins with the view of R. Menahem b. R. Yose that the performance of mitzvot offers temporary protection from misfortune, while the study of Torah provides permanent protection. It continues with the view of R. Joseph (the Babylonian authority behind the rule of the unleashed Destroyer!) that mitzvot protect the one engaged in them only while he is actively involved with them, while Torah study is effective at all times.⁵⁵ In part this is a slightly more concrete formulation of the previous statement, but R. Joseph also introduces another distinction. Torah study not only protects the scholar from suffering, but “rescues” him from the evil inclination. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the protective power of Torah study extends to situations in which the Destroyer is active, even according to R. Joseph. It seems more likely that R. Joseph’s statement that “the righteous are taken first” constitutes an exceptional instance. Moreover, the essential premise of this sugya is rejected by R. Jacob’s statement (in bQid 39b, and introduced by Rava!) that “there is no reward for mitzvot in this world”; see below.

In any case, Rava rejects these formulations. Pointing to the cases of Doeg and Ahitophel, the classic Rabbinic cases of scholars come to a bad end, he proposes that

Torah protects and rescues when one is occupied with its study; when one is not occupied with it, it protects but does not rescue.⁵⁶ Mitzvot protect one whether he is actively occupied with them or not, but they certainly do not rescue him.

Again, though, the protection provided is hardly unbreachable, if only because it is not humanly possible to engage in Torah study without stop. Moreover, as noted above, R. Joseph’s suggestion that the Destroyer takes the righteous first assumes that their merit cannot protect them in these circumstances.

There is yet another source relevant to this question. BQid 39b discusses the famous incident reported by R. Jacob, wherein a man

engaged in the only two mitzvot for which the Torah itself promises long life (filial piety and “sending away the dam”) dies in a fall from a tree.⁵⁷ The Talmud’s conclusion is that, according to R. Jacob, when the possibility of harm is well established (*qevi’a hezeqa*), even the rule that “those engaged in a mitzvah are not harmed either on their way [to performing the mitzvah] or on their return” is not effective. The Talmud adds: “wherever the possibility of harm is great, we do not rely on a miracle.”⁵⁸ Moreover, as the sugya makes clear, the performance of mitzvot, at least according to R. Jacob, will not even rescue the doer from evil thoughts of a serious nature.

The condition of *qevi’a hezeqa* is fulfilled during a time of Divine anger or Divine revelation or theophany. Providence is, as it were, suspended for the duration. R. Joseph, and perhaps Rava, would recognize this condition as one in which the protective power of Torah and mitzvot, however defined, is absent.

According to this sugya, the inability of even the performance of mitzvot to protect the doer where danger is well established (*qevi’a hezeqa*) is one consequence of the rule that “there is no reward for mitzvot in this world.”⁵⁹ This raises a serious question. As Maharsha points out, how can the operation of these principles⁶⁰ be squared with the Torah’s promise of this-worldly reward and punishment?⁶¹

Though Rabbinic sources do not approach this question directly, one answer may be found in the very term the Talmud adopted for the times of trouble in which the unleashed Destroyer operates: *idan ritha*, “a time of anger.”

There is a particular mode in God’s governance of the world which operates at certain times and in which the usual Divine *quid pro quo* for mitzvot is suspended.

“For a fire has flared in My wrath” (Deut. 32:22)—from here [we learn] that when punishment⁶² goes out to the world it does so only in anger.⁶³

Torah Temimah explicitly identifies the “anger” (*af*) referred to here with the Destroyer principle.⁶⁴ He further connects this arousal of anger with misfortunes which affect both Jew and non-Jew.⁶⁵ Once God’s anger is aroused, the consequences may affect everyone.⁶⁶

V

God’s wrath flares at specified times and for unspecified reasons; this is a recognized if subordinate theme in Rabbinic literature. In response to the question “Is there then anger before Heaven?”⁶⁷ the Talmud quotes Ps 7:12, which refers to God as “a God who is angry

every day.”⁶⁸ It is true that the Rabbis limited this anger to the minutest period of time imaginable to them. But the principle remains: God’s anger is recurrent and, as the context makes clear, may be directed against those who are not otherwise deserving of retribution.

No creature has ever been able to fix this moment precisely, except the wicked Balaam. . . . R. Eleazar says: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: See now, how many charitable acts I performed for you in restraining My anger when the wicked Balaam [wished to curse you]. For had I been angry, not one remnant would have been left of Israel.⁶⁹

This point is further illustrated by a story involving R. Joshua b. Levi, who wished to rid himself of a heretic who continually pestered him with annoying questions. He planned to curse the heretic when the moment of Divine anger arrived, but was caught napping. He consoled himself with the thought that it was not proper to act in this way.⁷⁰

In a parallel sugya, R. Papi follows the logic of the verse in another direction.⁷¹ Counterposing Ps 7:12 with Nah 1:6, “Who can stand before His anger?” he concludes that only the community may survive an outbreak of Divine anger, and it is that occurrence of which Ps 7:12 speaks. The verse in Nahum refers to a case in which such anger is directed against an individual. Individuals, even righteous ones, may not survive such an outburst.

God’s anger is thus a recurrent phenomenon whose regularity may be likened to the operation of natural laws. It may be manipulated by individuals, such as Balaam, but the righteous (e.g., R. Joshua b. Levi) ought not to act in such a way.⁷² Or it may remain “unharnessed.” Whether focused by a human agency or not, however, it will often affect life on earth. These are “times of anger”—times of drought, famine, plague, which affect righteous and wicked alike.

“Rava used to lock his windows in time of anger (*idan ritha*), as it is written: ‘For death has come in through our windows’ (Jer. 9:20).”⁷³ The *ritha* here refers to an instance of either famine or plague, as the context makes clear. Of particular interest is the fact that our Exodus passage is considered exemplary in suggesting the proper course of action in responding to such situations.

Our rabbis taught: When there is an epidemic in town, keep your feet inside, as is written: “And none of you shall go out the door of his house until morning” (Exod 12:22), and it says: “Come, my people, enter into your chambers and shut your doors about you” (Is 26:20), and it says: “The sword without, the terror within shall destroy.” (Deut 32:25)

Rava’s practice of shutting his windows in such times follows,⁷⁴ and later in this sugya the Talmud lists a number of suggestions of

how to avoid the Angel of Death. During epidemics, avoid the center of the road, "for since permission is granted him, he stalks openly." When there is peace in town, he slinks along the sides of the road. The sugya then links the Destroyer and the Angel of Death with *idan ritha*. It thus goes a step beyond the author of Chronicles, who identified Satan as one of the initiatory causes of the *idan ritha* in David's time, but did not assign him a role in the plague itself. This is in consonance with the identification in bBB 16a of the Angel of Death with the evil inclination and of both with Satan. The sugya does not incorporate the theme of *hester Panim*, which will be discussed elsewhere, D.v.

VI

Judgment is strict in times of *ritha*. The parameters of strict judgment are widened, and transgressions which would ordinarily be considered "misdemeanors," as it were, are handled as felonies.

This is illustrated by the conversation reported to have taken place between R. Qetina and an angel.⁷⁵ It seems that R. Qetina was in the habit of wearing garments which were free of the obligation of *tsitsit*. Meeting him one day, the angel chided him. "Qetina, Qetina, a wrap in summer and a cloak in winter—what will be of the mitzvah of *tsitsit*?" R. Qetina responded, "And do you then mete out punishment for the nonperformance of a positive mitzvah?" "In time of wrath," replied the angel, "we do."

This dialogue seems to place *idan ritha* squarely within the realm of strict justice. In ordinary times, Heaven may look unfavorably on one who arranges his affairs so as to avoid certain religious obligations, but no punishment attaches to such a course of action. In times of Divine anger, however, one is liable to punishment.

Does the converse imply that the reverse course of action does offer some protection? If R. Qetina were to make a point of wearing garments which require *tsitsit* (as we do now), would the performance of what amounts to an optional mitzvah protect him somewhat from the ravages of plague?⁷⁶

The answer should be clear in the light of our discussion in section V. Unfortunately, the transaction operates in only one direction. The avoidance of certain mitzvot may be harmful in times of danger, but their performance does not protect the doer in times of *ritha*. God's governance of *this world* is not a zero-sum game.⁷⁷ The accounts are squared only in the next world.

VII

R. Joseph is not the only third-generation Amora to have been concerned with the death of the righteous as depicted in Ezek 21:18. R. Aba b. Kahana counterposed Abraham's challenge, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put to death the righteous along with the wicked!" (Gen 18:23), to Ezekiel's, "And I will cut off the righteous and the wicked."⁷⁸ The verse in Ezekiel, R. Aba suggests, applies to those who are not absolutely righteous, while Abraham referred to those few Sodomites who might have been absolutely righteous.⁷⁹ In response, a variant of R. Joseph's dictum that the righteous are taken first is cited. While the general sequence of argumentation is similar to that of bBQ 60a, the contrast in tone is striking. Abaye softens the effect of R. Joseph's statement;⁸⁰ this sugya suggests instead that the righteous are taken first because they ought to have attempted to prevent the wicked deeds which brought on the trouble in the first place. This failing alone is sufficient to remove them from the category of the totally righteous. According to R. Aba, then, Ezekiel refers only to the "relatively" righteous; the "absolutely" righteous will be spared by virtue of their good deeds and/or learning. In the here and now, however, there is practically no difference between the two positions. According to both R. Aba and Abaye (and possibly R. Joseph as well), in times of communal turmoil, even the second group is not spared.

This brings us full circle. The protective arm of Providence is, as it were, suspended in periods of Divine anger.

What is the source of these periods of anger? Whether death comes to the righteous in order to spare them anguish (Abaye) or because they did not fulfill their communal responsibilities (R. Aba), the sources suggest that the cause of these recurrent times of *rit̕ha* must be attributed to mankind's sinfulness, at least in some sense. It is not a matter of strict *quid pro quo*, however. "When the wicked enter the world, [Divine] anger enters the world."⁸¹ The presence of the wicked triggers the coming of *idan rit̕ha* and its accompanying Destroyers.

The Mekilta passage indicates that the Destroyer is no respecter of persons even in times of Redemption. The very fact that the forces of Redemption must fight the wicked ensures that the righteous will be caught in the crossfire. During the Exodus, the Israelites were granted a mitzvah which would serve to protect them from the ravages of the Destroyer, but mitzvot as such are not generally effective in such circumstances. In times of trouble, there are practical steps which one must take, but these too are not foolproof. Remaining indoors, flight, avoiding the middle of the road or the

sides—these measures must be carefully considered and carefully timed. But the possibility of error is ever-present.

No matter how high the spiritual level of a particular generation, the presence of the wicked suffices to allow the entrance of Divine anger into the world. In this world, the reward of a mitzvah is another mitzvah,⁸² but not protection from the dangers inherent in the human condition.

Having said all this, I must stress that the connection between the presence of the wicked and Divine anger of the type represented by the Amoraic *idan ritha* is not made explicit in our sources. It is my assumption that the Tannaitic and Biblical Hebrew *haron af* corresponds to the Amoraic Aramaic *idan ritha*. But this may not be so. First, an exact correspondence would require a Hebrew *zeman haron af*, *zeman ka'as*, or the like. More important, the Tannaitic concept of Divine anger is closely tied to the presence of the wicked or wickedness: i.e., sin and the principle of Reward and Punishment.⁸³ As I have tried to demonstrate, this is not necessarily the case in regard to the Amoraic use of the concept. (Indeed, its usefulness and power depend precisely on its comparative distance from that principle!) Nevertheless, the Talmudic passage examined in the last section indicates that they cannot be separated altogether. Moreover, Ramban (on Exod. 12:23) identifies the Destroyer as the angel which operates in time of plague (*negef*).

VIII

Though the flaring of Divine anger may be explained by the activity of the wicked, the matter of the discretion granted the Destroyer remains a puzzle. It is not, to my knowledge, explained in any explicit manner in Rabbinic literature. But we cannot pass over the matter in silence. While its operation in times of Divine anger may perhaps be attributed to some “spillover” effect,⁸⁴ what are we to say of the Destroyer’s “business as usual” attitude in the time of the Exodus? How does our principle relate to the continuing post-Adamic (or post-Creation) tension between the Divine attributes of Mercy and Justice?⁸⁵

A full discussion of this conundrum requires a monographic treatment, but one solution (of many!) may proceed along the following lines. In this post-Adamic world in which good and evil are at loggerheads and yet intermixed, neither redemption nor punishment takes place in isolation. The redemption of the righteous often takes place at the expense of the wicked, even when one side is not totally righteous and the other not absolutely wicked. Two Talmudic passages taken in tandem illustrate the dilemma.

In one, King Hezekiah is taken to task for not expressing in song his thanks to his Redeemer for saving him from the Assyrian hosts under Sennacherib (II Kings 19:35).⁸⁶ Indeed, his very destiny—to become the Messiah—was altered by his failure to do so. On the other hand, the serving angels were silenced while singing their thanks for Israel's salvation from the Egyptians at the Red Sea. "The work of My hands is drowning in the sea and you offer song?"⁸⁷ It is not to be thought that redemption is without its cost. "Said R. Jacob b. Bath Jacob: One for whose sake his fellow is punished is not admitted into the pavilion of the Holy One, blessed be He." This is derived from Prov 17:26, which is interpreted to mean: "Punishment [of others for his sake] is not good for the righteous."⁸⁸ The same thought is attributed to God Himself regarding His punishment of sin.⁸⁹ "Even if a righteous man pursues a wicked one [with intent to commit murder], God will seek the one pursued."⁹⁰ There can be no outpouring of wrath on the wicked without a concomitant danger to others or discomfort to the one for whom or by Whom justice is dispensed. If it is the presence of the wicked which arouses the Divine wrath in the first place, it is the righteous and the innocent who suffer as well from its unfocused peripheral effects.

NOTES

1. BShab 55a.
2. BBer 5a.
3. It might seem reasonable to distinguish between the two, since the prosperity of the wicked might come about by the operation of Divine benevolence, while the suffering of the righteous ought not to be attributed to that cause. As the Resh Laqish put it, those who show benevolence to the base demonstrate their lack of compassion for those in need of it (Kohelet Rabba 7:16). God's apparently benevolent treatment of the wicked is an expression of the Divine Attribute of Justice rather than that of Mercy. The object of such benevolence is to reward the wicked in this world for whatever good they may have done and thus eliminate their portion in the world to come. The sufferings of the righteous are a result of the reverse mechanism: they are punished in this world so as to ensure the unblemished wholeness of their portion in the world to come; see bQid 40b, among many other sources. The concept of *yissurim shel ahavah*, "sufferings of love" (bBer 5a, Genesis Rabbah 92:1, among other sources) will be discussed elsewhere, D.V. In the meantime, see n. 56.
- On the two Divine *hanhagot* governing prosperity for the wicked and suffering for the righteous, see *Pahad Yitzhak*, Purim (Brooklyn: Gur Arye Publications, 1966), par. 23.2 and Pesah, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn, 1984), par. 54.4.
4. Avot 5:15, according to one popular interpretation. See Bertinoro and *Tosafot Yom Tov ad loc.*, and compare Chanoch Albeck, *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*, *Neziqin*, p. 498.
5. BBer 7a. Maimonides' theory of Providence, as expressed in *Guide* III:51, may be subsumed under this rubric.
6. BBer 7a.
7. BYeb 121b, B.Q. 50a.
8. See nn. 4 and 56.
9. Genesis Rabbah 9:16, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 70.
10. BT'a'an 5b.

11. BShab 33b.
12. BB.Q. 60a; see sec. III for a discussion of this passage.
13. E.g., Is 10:5 in which Assyria is referred to as the “rod of My anger.”
14. BAR 16b; see Rashi s.v. *qibbel olamo*. I am not sure why Rashi uses the phrase *kol menuhato le’atid* in his gloss. Could this include the reward of the wicked in *this* world? But this would limit the “repose of the wicked” (*shalvat resha'im*) to thirty days of stress-free living!
15. In this connection note the Bavli’s astringent comment: “Said R. Bardela b. Tavyomi in the name of Rav: Whoever [has not experienced God’s] hiding of [His] face is not [to be included] in [Israel]. Whoever [has not experienced the curse of] ‘they shall be ready prey’ is not [to be included] in [Israel]” (bHag 5a-b). This passage will be taken up in sec. VIII below.

At any rate, one version of the story of the visit of four sages to the ailing R. Eliezer (bSanh 101a) makes the same point in regard to both the danger of stress-free living in this world and the ameliorative affect of suffering. R. Akiva is reported (according to the first version) to have expressed his worry for his former teacher’s fate. “I rejoice [now] because as long as I saw that his wine did not sour, his flax did not become diseased, his oil did not spoil and his honey did not turn bad, I thought [that] perhaps my master had already [i.e., in this world] received his [portion in] the world [to come]. Now that I see him in pain, I rejoice.”

16. BTa’an 11a.
17. In a sense, the lack of strict measure for measure justice works both ways, since the demands of strict justice precludes the efficacy of repentance: why should one’s regrets for past trespass suffice to undo the past? Repentance is one method by which the connection between sin and suffering is broken; see Pesikta deRav Kahana, Shabbat Shuva, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 355, which notes that Wisdom and Prophecy do not hold open the option of repentance. There are other such mechanisms, not all the products of Mercy, however.
18. The word here rendered “Destroyer” (*mashhit*) is apparently borrowed from military terminology and refers to that part of the army which goes out on sorties (“raiders”) as opposed to those concerned with holding operations (*matzav*, the garrison or “stationary” units, or as NJPS translates: “outposts”); see I Sam 13:17–18, 14:15. From this it acquired the more general meaning of “forces of destruction” (Exod 12:13 and 23, Is 54:16, Ezek 5:16).
19. Exod. 12:22–23.
20. See Rashi *ad* Gen 19:26, s.v. *al*.
21. Exod 9:20.
22. Mekilta Bo 7, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 23. But see Bechor Shor on 12:7 s.v. *ve-natenu*, who preserves a role for the Destroyer within the context of the redemption. An anonymous glossator (apparently concerned with Bechor Shor’s departure from tradition on this point) suggests that while God Himself descended to Egypt to take “personal” charge of the matter, it was a destroying angel which served as the means (12:7 s.v. *ve-lo*). See ed. Jellinek (Leipzig, 1855, rep. Jerusalem, 1978), where this is clear; Gad’s edition (rep. Jerusalem, 1982/83) confuses the issue by an adventitious placement of brackets.

Sforno also allows the Destroyer a separate role. According to him, the Destroyer is identical with the four groups of angels whose existence the Rabbis derived from Ps 48:79. These attacked Egyptians other than the firstborn and the Israelites themselves were subject to harm from them as well.

Abarbanel denies any supernatural identity for the Destroyer and takes the word as referring to the Egyptians, who might have attempted to stage a pogrom against the Israelites.

23. Pisha 11, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 38.
24. Rashi *ad* Exod 12:22, s.v. *ve’atem*.
25. Mizrahi suggests that, according to Rashi, God’s advice was intended to prevent the Hillul Ha-Shem (“Profanation of the [Divine] Name”) that would inevitably follow in the wake of any harm to an Israelite. The efficacy of the plagues as “signs” hinged in part on the Israelites’ immunity from their effects, see Exod 8:19.

Another form of Hillul Ha-Shem was possible, however. The plague would seem to have been limited to the Egyptian firstborn. If so, the existence of any additional Egyptian victims could be used by Pharaoh to deny that the plague had originated with Israel’s God.

The same mind-set is manifested (according to R. Ashi's well known comment) in Moses' alteration of "at midnight" to "about midnight" (bBer 3b, cited by Rashi on Exod 11:4, s.v. *ka-hatzot*). The Destroyer's activities thus contradict the basic purpose of the plague, just as his disregard of the distinction between righteous and wicked contravenes the principle of reward and punishment.

As far as the night of the Exodus is concerned, it may be that the second type of Hillul Ha-Shem may have been mitigated by the fact that the plague was not limited to the Egyptians' "official" firstborn, i.e., those legitimately recognized as the firstborn offspring of a marital relationship; the Midrash notes that the firstborn of adulterous or incestuous relationships were also struck down; but see n. 33.

The second problem just noted, that of the Destroyer's contravention of the normal operation of the principle of reward and punishment, will be dealt with in sec. VI and VII.

26. It may be that Rashi's text combined both (as did Ramban's; see below), but all extant manuscripts of the Mekilta, as far as can be gauged from Horowitz' edition, separate the two.
27. Ramban *ad loc.* in his animadversions on Rashi seems to suggest that Rashi was misled by his (erroneous) text: "this matter is taught in Mekilta in *another version (bi-leshon aheret)*." This would refer to Rashi's closing remark and his proof-text from Ps 104, which in our texts (and Ramban's) comes at the end.
28. Sifra, end of Baraita R. Ishmael.
29. Yalqut Shimoni Kings r. 189. Theophanies of this character must be distinguished from the more limited (in intensity and/or number of witnesses) descent of Divine inspiration, *ruah ha-qodesh*. The dangers of the latter involve only loss of consciousness and respect for the conventions, as when Saul strips off his clothes under its influence (I Sam 19:24).
30. Pisha 13 on 12:31 and see Mekilta deRashbi, ed. Melamed-Epstein, p. 29.
31. The dispute between R. Joshua and R. Eliezer regarding the implications of the term "night of watching" as applied to the night of the Exodus (bR.H. 11b) may be related. The former interprets the phrase as referring to God's reserving this night for the Redemption; the latter suggest that demonic forces (*mazziqin*) are restrained from their normal activities. The relation between the *mazziqin* and the Destroyer is unclear, though it would seem that *mazziqin* need no specific permission to do harm, while the Destroyer does. *Mazziqin* are thus more common. *Ets Yosef ad Ein Yaakov* on bR.H. 11b and *Torah Temimah ad Exod 12:42* suggest that "watching" refers to the warning of Exod 12:21–23 and thus to the danger of the Destroyer.
32. See *Birkhat Ha-Netziv* (Jerusalem, 5730) on the Mekilta *ad loc.* (pp. 42–44). Netziv combines the two motifs: the danger involved affected only those who were sufficiently advanced in spiritual matters to perceive the theophany but not able to survive such an encounter. Since the firstborn (as those charged with priestly functions) were of this category, they were in greater danger than others. Thus, the word "you" in Exod 12:22 is directed both to the Israelite elders and the Israelite firstborn.

On the other hand, Netziv's interpretation in *Ha'ameq Davar* (*ad Exod 12:23*) allows both factors full play. That is, the arousal of the powers of Divine Justice produce an *idan ritha* with its "spillover" effect. The end result is that the innocent too are in danger. According to Netziv, this occurred not only in Egypt but at the Sea (*Ha'ameq Davar ad Exod 14:29* and 15:19) and in Sodom (*Ha'ameq Davar ad Exod 12:13*; see Gen 19:15).

Netziv's interpretation solves an important exegetical problem. How can the Destroyer, with his disregard for distinctions, be allowed to pursue his activities at a time set aside for the plague of the *firstborn*? Would not the death of those Egyptians who were not firstborn also constitute a form of Hillul Ha-Shem? See n. 25 for other possible solutions of this problem.

There is actually a third possibility, raised by Maharal (*Gur Aryeh ad Exod 12:22* s.v. *mishe-nitan*). He suggests that the dangers attendant on the appearance of the Destroyer included the presence of large numbers of *mazziqim*, and it was for this reason that the prohibition of leaving one's home extended to the whole night, rather than the period around midnight when the plague struck the firstborn.

33. The rationale for this power on the part of the Destroyer may be linked to a general lack of absolute human moral excellence. The distance between the righteous and the wicked *in this world*, in which there is no reward for mitzvot, may not be great enough to protect them in times of danger. See yQid 1:10 (61d [Vilna: 1:9, 22b]): "Said R. Yohanan, If you

hear something [taught in the name of] R. Liezer b. R. Yose the Galilean, open your ears [wide as the] hopper [of a millstone] and listen! [This applies to the following.] as R. Yohanan said: R. Liezer b. R. Yose the Galilean taught: Even if 999 angels condemn him and [only] one defends him, the Holy One, blessed be He, acquits him. Not only that, [added R. Yohanan,] if 999 parts of that [one] angel condemn him and only one part defends him, the Holy One, blessed be He, acquits him."

As the context makes clear, this teaching refers to "normal" conditions, under which transgressions may be atoned for by repentance and suffering; see bQid 39b and sec. IV below.

In this context it is relevant to point out that the Destroyer's role is not merely that of a *mazziq* or *shed*. He is not a "free agent," free to wreak havoc in the way that the garden variety demon may be. He operates only when granted permission to do so, and then he may disregard even the merit of the righteous. In contrast, *mazziqim* or *shedim* may be foiled in their designs by the presence of a righteous man; see E. E. Urbach, *Hazal: Emunot Ve-De'ot* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), p. 143, n. 11.

34. A different version of this *memra* is quoted in bA.Z. 4a, on which see section VII.
35. BB.Q. 60a.
36. The death of the righteous provides atonement just as the red heifer does (bM.Q. 28a). The fact that this is derived from the placement of the account of Miriam's death demonstrates that its application is not limited to the absolutely righteous such as those who would not have died but for *'etvo shel nahash*—because of the mortality decreed on all of the descendants of Adam and Eve (bShab 55b). Miriam was not included in this category.
37. BShab 33b.
38. See sec. VII. This doctrine is stated explicitly in bA.Z. 4a.
39. Some commentators (e.g., *Yefeh Einayim ad loc.*, *Ets Yosef* on *Ein Yaakov*) connect this with Tanhuma Vayigash 2, wherein Israelite children are offered as the guarantors of the Covenant made at Sinai. See preceding note.
40. See *Ets Yosef* cited in preceding note.
41. See n. 25. The Midrash points out that the Israelites in Egypt were idolators and barely worthy of redemption because of God's promises to the Patriarchs (Midrash Mattan Torah 15:5; see Mekilta, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 111), and the merit provided by the mitzvah of the paschal sacrifice is one element of the commentators' understanding of its purpose. However, if this constituted its entire purpose, once the sacrifice had been offered no further prophylactic ceremony ought to have been necessary.
42. This identification is not explicitly made in Talmudic sources, but the fact that the Talmud's sole mention of the Destroyer principle leads to a discussion of the proper behavior in times of *ritza* would suggest a link.
43. Rashi explicitly confesses his puzzlement. Most commentators, however, attribute God's anger to a sin committed either by David or the Israelites. While there is no lack of such sins, the chapter does not really fit into the neat moral equation of *midah keneged midah* (*quid pro quo*), as the following table of proposed transgressions illustrates.

1. The murder of Uriah the Hittite (Pesiqta Rabbati 11). But Nathan's reproof of David after the murder of Uriah contained a number of punishments—all of which had already been fulfilled; why would God "reopen" the file?

2. The Israelites' failure to protest the murder (Numbers Rabbah 23:13). But the Israelites were unaware of the true cause of Uriah's death; how could they be blamed?

3. The Israelites' failure to demand the building of the Temple (Midrash Samuel and Midrash Shohar Tov 17; see Ramban on Num 16:21). But according to I Chr 22:7–8, God Himself turned down the suggestion to build the Temple in David's time. Ramban counters this with the suggestion that the whole nation should have attended to the building, but the fact that it was necessary to appoint a king before building the Temple would obviate such an interpretation (see Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim 1:1–2 and bSanh 20b).

4. The revolts of Absalom and Sheva' son of Bichri (Abarbanel, Malbim). But these revolts ended with the deaths of their instigators and the reconciliation of David and the Israelites.

5. The killing of Saul's sons. David did not resist or reject the Gibeonites' demand for their deaths. But the Urim VeTumim itself termed Saul's family "a bloody house."

6. David's reliance on strength of numbers (Ralbag). But David repeatedly proclaims his trust in God.

7. All or some of the above (*Daat Mikra*). But a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

8. Certain unspecified sins performed by the Israelites in secret (Radak). This assertion is undeniably attractive if only because no hint of the reason is given in the book; it can hardly be proven.

The continued search for a proper understanding of this tragic incident is sufficient indication that none of these reasons is completely satisfactory. All are open to objections.

44. I Chr 21:1. See Sarah Yefet, *Emunot Ve-De'ot Be-Sefer Divrei Ha-Yomim U-Meqoman Be-Olam Ha-Mahshavah Ha-Miqra'it* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1977), pp. 129–32, esp. n. 435.

45. *Guide* II:48.

46. See C. R. North, "The Religious Aspects of Hebrew Kingship," *Zeitschrift fuer die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 50 (1932), pp. 10–11.

47. The separation of chapter 24 from 21 may have been motivated by a desire to connect the former to the future building of the Temple on that site; see H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 411.

48. The significance of this incident is not exhausted by the mysterious origin and nature of the Divine Wrath manifested therein. It is indeed noteworthy that its ultimate origin was not revealed by prophecy; whatever hints we have are provided by other parts of the Books of Samuel. Despite Amos' proud boast that God does not act without revealing His intentions to his servants the Prophets (Amos 3:7), a boast contradicted by incidents in the life of Samuel (see I Sam 16:1–13, and most recently M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* [Bloomington: University of Indiana Press,] pp. 96–98), Gad the Seer here is given only a superficial understanding of the incident. The plague is a result of the census, but what motivated David to embark on this disastrous course is withheld.

For the halakhic aspects of the problem posed by the census, see J. David Bleich, "The Halachic Controversy Concerning the Israeli Census," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 7 (Fall 1984), pp. 62–86, esp. pp. 71–76.

49. See for example, bSotah 46b on II Kings 2:23, where the attempt is made to justify Elisha's drastic action, or the series of *derashot* regarding Gehazi's wickedness; see Sanh 90a, 100a, 105a; Avot deRabbi Nathan A, 9 (p. 41), Leviticus Rabbah 16:4.

50. A play on *rav*, "enough."

51. BBer 62b.

52. Seder Eliyahu Rabba, ed. Friedmann, p. 39 (chap. 7 [8]); see his n. 4. Whether the text reflects a confusion between Gad and Avishai or not, it is clear that Avishai/Gad was not singled out as victim. The phrase with which R. Eleazar described Avishai, "who was equal to the greater part of the Sanhedrin," also points in this direction. It is clear that the number 70 serves to link the 77,000 victims of II Sam 24:15 and the Sanhedrin. Why then the extra 7,000, or, if we wish to take the phrase "greater part" literally, what of the, say, remaining 34,000 (= lesser part) + the remaining 7,000? Some residue must remain unaccounted for, even if the 7,000 are also related to the number 70. See Maharsha *ad loc.*, who explains the phrase "greater part" as a play on *rav-rov*. In any case, why was Avishai to suffer on David's behalf? Indeed, the same question may be asked in regard to the incident of Achan at Ai, when Scripture's report of 36 casualties is transformed into the death of Yair b. Menasseh (bB.B. 121b). The difference is that the cause of this disaster is revealed by God to Joshua and the "numbers" work out. The common theme is the death of the righteous.

53. See p. 28 above, sec. III.

54. BShab 30a–b.

55. This may lie behind Rambam's linkage of Divine Providence with the degree of one's preoccupation with God, though he prefaces his remarks with the comment that this "most extraordinary speculation" had "just now" occurred to him; see *Guide* III:51 (*Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by S. Pines [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], p. 624). This will be discussed elsewhere, D.v.

56. According to bBer 5a, "whoever engages in Torah study, sufferings are kept from him." This dictum, attributed to Resh Laqish, is reworked by his colleague R. Yohanan as

follows: "If one has the opportunity to study Torah and does not study it, the Holy One, blessed be He, brings disfiguring diseases on him to stir him up." It is significant that R. Yohanan is quoted (*ibid.*) as asserting that even sufferings which interfere with Torah study and prayer may yet be considered "sufferings of love" (suffering which are not occasioned by sin but demonstrate God's concern for the sufferer's spiritual well-being; see Urbach, *Hazal*, p. 394) in contrast to the view of others (R. Jacob b. Idi and R. Aha b. Hanina) that chronic or disabling illness cannot be considered "sufferings of love." As R. Huna is reported as having stated a generation later, "If the Holy One, blessed be He, is pleased with someone, He crushes him with sufferings."

Nevertheless, it is clear that mainstream Rabbinic opinion held that sufferings could be warded off by Torah study or other mitzvot. And, on the other hand, the Rabbis could not deny the evidence of their senses: even scholars of note fall victim to disease and suffering. This question falls outside the area of the present study, which is primarily concerned with communal suffering in times of Divine anger: plague, war, famine, and the like.

57. This sugya seems to be an expanded version of bHul 142b.
58. This statement is not included in the parallel passage in bHul.
59. Maharsha (bQid 39b, s.v. *sakhar*) suggests that R. Jacob refers only to individuals, but that collectively the performance of mitzvot does have a protective effect, since the Torah speaks of it in many places. In bB.Q. 60a (s.v. *mishe-nitan reshut*) he adopts Rashi's view of the principle (see sec. II), and apparently overlooks the collective aspects of its operation. Indeed, he rejects both Ramban's objection to Rashi's interpretation of the Mekilta passage (as not conforming with its plain meaning) and Mizrahi's defense of Rashi's position (as *dahuq*). In the end, however, his own interpretation is similar to that of Ramban.

At any rate, Maharsha's distinction between collective and individual trouble is important, but it is difficult to apply to the situations with which this discussion is concerned. In the end, plague and the like affect both individuals and the collective. Maharsha's distinction must then apply only to R. Jacob's dictum regarding the lack of reward for mitzvot in this world, but not to the unleashed Destroyer. Even those who disagree with R. Jacob retain the rule of the unleashed Destroyer as applicable at specific times.

MPeah 1:1 and mQid 1:10 express the view that the performance of certain mitzvot (Peah) or any mitzvah (Qid) does have a beneficial effect on the doer even in this world. At a minimum, these mitzvot include *kibbud av va-em*, *gemulut hasadim*, and above all, the study of Torah. But these do not ward off the Destroyer.

60. There is no reward for mitzvot in this world and when the Destroyer is unleashed, the righteous are not protected by their merit.
61. See n. 59.
62. The word *pur'anut* may refer to misfortune in general, but almost always has overtones of judgment, as the root *pr'* indicates.
63. This is the version of *Sifre* 320 quoted in *Torah Temimah ad Deut 32:22*, and corresponds to that of Yalkut Shimoni; see *Sifre Deut 320*, ed. Finkelstein, p. 367. Variants include "When anger goes out from before Me" and "from before the Holy One, blessed be He"; see crit. app. *ad loc.*
64. *Ad Deut 32:22*, n. 66.
65. See Tosafot, bTa'an 21b s.v. *ameru*.
66. He again connects the operation of the Destroyer principle with Abraham's challenge "Will the Judge of all the earth not act justly?" in his comments on Gen 18:25.
67. BBer 7a.
68. Later on the Talmud cites Ps 30:6 in this connection.
69. Based on Mic 6:5.
70. This Talmudic passage ends with a baraita which quotes R. Meir. God becomes angry when He sees "all the kings of East and West . . . bow down to the sun," in line with the passage in bBQ 60a which connects God's retribution—which affects the righteous first—with the presence of the wicked in the world. The earlier *memrot* do not mention sin or the wicked as reasons for God's anger, though such an origin may be assumed. The earlier baraita seems to refer to a recurrent period of anger which is independent of the presence of the wicked or of sin. In any case, the point I wish to make is that, once aroused, God's anger may be directed at any target, even a relatively undeserving one.

71. BAZ 4a.
72. Note that it is R. Joshua b. Levi who is reputed to have outwitted the Angel of Death (bKet 77b). He also relied on his own merit in exposing himself to a highly infectious disease while studying Torah, in contrast to a number of other sages who would not take the risk (*ibid.*). Finally, in another instance, which involved the welfare of his entire community, he was reproved for acting in accordance with the strict line of the law, even though it had been in order to protect his community, rather than going beyond it and endangering them. For this Elijah ceased visiting him for a time (yTer, ed. Vilna 8:4 [47a] = ed. Venice 8:10 [46b]), Genesis Rabbah 94:9 on Gen 46:26).
73. BBQ 60b.
74. See *Responsa Maharil* 50 regarding the question of whether it is proper, in contravention of Rava's advice, to flee a city which is affected by plague. Maharil's suggestion is that it is proper to do so before the plague takes hold.
75. BMen 41a.
76. See *Iyyun Yaakov*, *ad loc.* He points to the attack on Moses at the inn (Exod 4:24–26) as a similar instance.
77. Maharsha limits this instance of the rule of strict judgment to the righteous of a generation, of whose number R. Qetina must have been in order to merit this modicum of Divine inspiration. It behooves the righteous to maximize their performance of mitzvot in order to provide the requisite merit so as to avoid the occurrence of "times of anger." We have already noted (see n. 59) that Maharsha severely limits the operation of the Destroyer's principle, and his interpretation here conforms to his general orientation. Moreover, since the righteous are always subject to a stricter standard of judgment than ordinary people (see bYev 121b, BQ 50a), one wonders what difference Maharsha's limitation of the punishment of the righteous for *bittul aseh* to *idan riha* makes. The principle that "the Holy One, blessed be He, is strict with those around him [i.e., the righteous, in matters involving distinctions] as [fine as] a single hair" is explicitly limited to "those around him" (based on the phrase in Ps 50:3 from which the principle is derived), while R. Qetina's colloquy with the angel seems to refer to everyone. Nevertheless, Maharsha may interpret the punishment for *bittul aseh* as one instance of God's strict judgment of the righteous. In his comments on bYev 121b he relates this strictness to God's desire to rid the righteous in this world of any guilt they may have incurred so as to make their reward greater in the world to come.

It may be that R. Joseph's interpretation of Mekilta allows for this: the righteous are taken first because of the stricter standard of judgment which affects them; see sec. III.

78. Though there is some uncertainty as to whether R. Aba was of Palestinian or Babylonian origin, he was certainly a contemporary of R. Joseph; see A. Hymen, *Toledot Tannaim Va-Amora'im*, vol. I (reprint: Jerusalem: Kiryah Ne'emanah, 1963/64), pp. 48–49.
79. See bAZ 4a.
80. In bBQ 60a; see sec. III above.
81. This formulation is that of tSot 10:3 = bSanh 113b; mSanh 10:6 is slightly different: "As long as the wicked are in the world, there is Divine anger in the world; when the wicked leave the world, Divine anger leaves the world." See also tSot 10:1, *Sifte Ekev* 38, ed. Finkelstein, p. 75.

A similar concept is expressed in the name of R. Yohanan in Genesis Rabbah 9:5 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 71): "Why was death decreed for the wicked? For as long as the wicked live they anger the Holy One, blessed be He. . . . Once they die, they cease to anger Him. . . . Why was death decreed for the righteous? For as long as the righteous live they struggle with the [evil side of] their natures. Once they die, they rest [from that struggle]."

82. MAvot 4:2. It is not clear whether R. Jacob would admit even this; see sec. IV.
83. Aside from the Mishnaic and Talmudic passages in Sanhedrin noted above, see tSot 14:3: "When whisperers of secret things [literally: whispers] increased in the courts, Divine anger entered the world and the Divine Presence left Israel" (according to MS Erfurt, except for the addition of one word on the basis of MS Vienna); see *Tosefta*, ed. Lieberman, p. 236 and *Tosefta Ki-Feshutah*, vol. 8, pp. 751–52 for the interpretation.

MS Vienna contains another instance: "When *ba'lei hana'ah* increased [in number], Divine anger entered the world and the honor of Torah ceased (*batel*). Those who live only for pleasure are a danger to humanity.

84. In this post-Adamic world, the two attributes of Justice and Mercy do not, as was originally intended, work in consort (Genesis Rabbah 12:15). And while Justice may at

times be tempered by Mercy, it is sometimes modified by impertinence as well. As R. Nahman comments, "Impertinence (*hutzpah*) is effective even against Heaven" (bSanh 105a). His proof-text is Num 22:20, where Balaam is permitted to go with the Moabites despite God's earlier prohibition. The same theme is sounded in yTa'an (ed. Vilna) 2:1 (8a) = 2:1 (65b): "Said R. Simon b. Halafta [adopting the reading of Yalqut Shimoni, Jonah r. 3 = ed. princ. r. 553]: The impertinent one is victor over the upright (*kesherim*), how much more so [over] the Good of the World"—referring to God. His proof-text is Jon 3:8.

85. See preceding note.
86. bSanh 94a.
87. bSanh 39b = bMeg 10b. The Bavli's version of this midrash is all the more striking when contrasted to the version preserved in Tanhuma, ed. Buber, Beshalah 13; Exodus Rabbah 23:7; and (in mangled form) Shohar Tov 106. In this version the angels are silenced either because the Israelites are in danger or because the Israelites have precedence in praising God for their salvation. See R. Margalit, *Margaliyot Ha-Yam*, p. 101a and the sources quoted therein, esp. R. Yair Bacharach, *Sh'elot U-Teshuvot Havot Yair* 225, who in that context adduces bBer 9b, in which David's composition of Psalms is explicitly related to the downfall of the wicked. He suggests that praise is not permitted at the time of their downfall, but only afterwards. In any case, however one reconciles the contradiction between bSanh 39b and 94b, the two midrashic traditions illustrate the two aspects of redemption.
88. BShab 149b. The same thought is expressed in bBer 7a regarding R. Joshua b. Levi; see above.
89. See Leviticus Rabbah 20:6 (R. Berechiah); see Radal, Reshash *ad loc.*, and the variant in Midrash Ha-Gadol on Lev. 10:4 (ed. Steinsaltz, p. 228), all of which are clearly apologetic in intent. See also Tanhuma Ahare 5, Tanhuma Buber Aharei 5, Pesikta deR. Kahana Aharei 6, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 393.
90. Leviticus Rabbah 27:5.