

Communications

TO THE EDITOR:

Whereas R. Daniel Stein in “The Limits of Religious Optimism” (*Tradition* 43:2 Summer 2010) describes the debate between the *Hazon Ish* and the Alter of Novardok as a continuation of “full blown medieval disputes” with each side having a “bona fide collection of backers,” it actually relates to a discussion recorded in *Berakhot* 7a, in connection with Exodus, Chapter 33, verse 13, where Moses says to God, “Show me now Thy ways.” The gemara explains this to mean that Moses was asking why a righteous person suffers in this world and, by contrast, why a wicked person does not. R. Yose (emended) says that God’s answer is that the perfectly righteous person does not suffer but an imperfectly righteous person does suffer, and the perfectly wicked person suffers while the imperfectly wicked does not. R. Meir differs, citing verse 19: “I will be gracious unto whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” R. Meir adds: Even to he who is not deserving. Thus R. Yose links the actual experience of the righteous to the perfection of their righteousness, while R. Meir implies that man cannot read the mind of God in explaining the relation between experience and righteousness.

The “traditional” view of *bittahon* described by R. Stein leads to an explanation of the suffering of the righteous that conflicts with the opinions of both R. Yose and R. Meir: the traditional *bittahon* explanation for the suffering of the righteous is the lack of this *bittahon*. As a consequence, there is a reasonable alternative to R. Stein’s opinion that “*The Hazon Ish*’s description of the opposing view of *bittahon* as an ‘old misconception’ is not to be taken literally, but is rather the *Hazon Ish*’s manner of expressing his strong views on the matter.” Indeed, in the debate between the two Tannaim cited above it is clear that he sides with R. Meir; however, while he certainly would not explicitly challenge R. Yose on this matter, his blunt dismissal as an “old misconception” of an opinion that contradicts the views of two great *Tannaim* is not necessarily polemic hyperbole.

In describing the view of the *Hazon Ish*, R. Stein writes, “Curiously the *Hazon Ish* makes no reference to the fact that this perspective of *bittahon* (that is, his own perspective) was originally formulated by many medieval sources.” Since his position is the same as that of R. Meir, perhaps he felt that it was unnecessary to cite these sources. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that R. Stein did not provide any of these, it is worthwhile

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to note that in addition to medieval sources, there are Biblical and Talmudic sources. The two most prominent Biblical sources for the opinion of the *Hazon Ish* (and R. Meir) are the books of Ecclesiastes and Job. In the former it is stated that the wicked and the righteous have the same fate in this world and this is the reason that there is evil in the heart of man. In the latter book Job angrily despairs over the fact that he suffers even though he has been righteous, while his friends maintain that he must have sinned and that his suffering is a punishment. Then God reprimands the friends for questioning Job's righteousness and reprimands Job for presuming to understand the ways of God. The many Talmudic sources for the position of the *Hazon Ish* include, in addition to the statement of R. Meir above, the statement of R. Yannai in Avot, (4:19): "It is not in our power to explain why the wicked are at ease or why the righteous suffer."

As a consequence, the position of the *Hazon Ish* is just as "traditional" as the one he opposed, and it represents one side in a three-way debate, not a two-way debate.

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