

Talmudic Texts and Commentary: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

- *Are there any conversations about why do bad things happen to good people in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic texts?*

Job 1:1-12

There was a man in the land of Uz named Job. That man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

Seven sons and three daughters were born to him;

his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred she-asses, and a very large household. That man was wealthier than anyone in the East.

It was the custom of his sons to hold feasts, each on his set day in his own home. They would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.

When a round of feast days was over, Job would send word to them to sanctify themselves, and, rising early in the morning, he would make burnt offerings, one for each of them; for Job thought, “Perhaps my children have sinned and blasphemed God in their thoughts.” This is what Job always used to do.

One day the divine beings presented themselves before the LORD, and the Adversary^a came along with them.

The LORD said to the Adversary, “Where have you been?” The Adversary answered the LORD, “I have been roaming all over the earth.”

The LORD said to the Adversary, “Have you noticed My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil!”

The Adversary answered the LORD, “Does Job not have good reason to fear God?

Why, it is You who have fenced him round, him and his household and all that he has. You have blessed his efforts so that his possessions spread out in the land.

But lay Your hand upon all that he has and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face.”

The LORD replied to the Adversary, “See, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on him.” The Adversary departed from the presence of the LORD.

- What is the issue here? What bothers us about this beginning to the book of Job?

Deuteronomy 30:1-3

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which your God יהוה has banished you, and you return to your God יהוה, and you and your children heed God’s command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day,

then your God יהוה will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. [God] will bring you together again from all the peoples where your God יהוה has scattered you.

- How does this contrast with the Job text?

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Job 4:1-8

Then Eliphaz the Temanite said in reply:
 If one ventures a word with you, will it be too much?
 But who can hold back his words?
 See, you have encouraged many;
 You have strengthened failing hands.
 Your words have kept him who stumbled from falling;
 You have braced knees that gave way.
 But now that it overtakes you, it is too much;
 It reaches you, and you are unnerved.
 Is not your piety your confidence,
 Your integrity your hope?
 Think now, what innocent man ever perished?
 Where have the upright been destroyed?
 As I have seen, those who plow evil
 And sow mischief reap them.

- What is Eliphaz saying to Job?
- Do you think his question to Job is righteous? Or...?

Babylonian Talmud, *Moed Katan 28a*, verses 8-13, with commentary from Steinsaltz Edition.

The Gemara discusses the significance of death at different ages: If one **dies when** he is **fifty years** old, **this is death through *karet***, the divine punishment of excision, meted out for the most serious transgressions. If he dies when he is **fifty-two years** old, **this is the death of Samuel from Ramah**. If he dies at the age of **sixty**, **this is death at the hand of Heaven**. **Mar Zutra said: What is the verse** from which this is derived? **As it is written: “You shall come to your grave in a ripe age [bekhelah]”** (Job 5:26). The word “**ripe age**” [bekhelah] has the numerical value of **sixty**, and it is alluded to there that dying at this age involves a divine punishment. One who dies at the age of **seventy** has reached **old age**. One who dies at the age of **eighty** dies in **strength**, **as it is written: “The days of our years are seventy, or if by reason of strength, eighty years”** (Psalms 90:10). **Rabba said:** Not only is death at the age of fifty a sign of *karet*, but even death **from fifty to sixty years of age is death by *karet***. **And** the reason that **all of these years were not counted** in connection with *karet* is **due to the honor of Samuel from Ramah**, who died at the age of fifty-two. The Gemara relates that **when Rav Yosef turned sixty he made a holiday for the Sages**. Explaining the cause for his celebration, **he said: I have passed** the age of *karet*. **Abaye said to him: Master**, even **though you have passed the *karet* of years**, **have you, Master, escaped the *karet* of days?** As previously mentioned, sudden death is also considered to be a form of *karet*. **He said to him: Grasp at least half in your hand**, for I have at least escaped one type of *karet*. It was

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related that **Rav Huna died suddenly**, and **the Sages were concerned** that this was a bad sign.

The Sage **Zuga from Hadayeiv taught them** the following: **They taught** these principles **only when** the deceased **had not reached** the age of **strength**, i.e., eighty. **But if he had reached** the age of **strength** and then died suddenly, **this is death by way of a divine kiss**. **Rava said**: Length of **life, children, and sustenance do not depend on** one's merit, but rather they depend upon fate. **As Rabba and Rav Hisda were both pious Sages**; one Sage would pray during a drought and rain would fall, and the other Sage would pray and rain would fall.

- In this text what points of view do we see?

Babylonian Talmud, [Yevamot 50a](#), verse 1, with commentary from Steinsaltz Edition.

If he is deserving, God completes his allotted lifespan. If he is not deserving, God reduces his lifespan; this is the statement of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva assumes one cannot outlive one's preordained allotted lifespan. **The Rabbis say**: If he is deserving, God adds years to his lifespan. If he is not deserving, God reduces his lifespan.

[Genesis 28:20-21](#)

Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the LORD shall be my God.

Babylonian Talmud, [Berachot 6a](#), verse 4, with commentary from Steinsaltz Edition.

Rav Huna said: Each and every one of us has a thousand demons to his left and ten thousand to his right. God protects man from these demons, as it says in the verse: "A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; they will not approach you" (Psalms 91:7).

Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People

"We may not ever understand why we suffer or be able to control the forces that cause our suffering, but we can have a lot to say about what suffering does to us, and what sort of people we become because of it. Pain makes some people bitter and envious. It makes others sensitive and compassionate. It is the result, not the cause, of pain that makes some experiences of pain meaningful and others empty and destructive."

[Exodus 3:7](#)

And the LORD continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings.

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Rambam's [Guide for the Perplexed Part 3 Ch 12:5](#) (selection)

The first kind of evil is that which is caused to man by the circumstance that he is subject to genesis and destruction, or that he possesses a body. It is on account of the body that some persons happen to have great deformities or paralysis of some of the organs. This evil may be part of the natural constitution of these persons, or may have developed subsequently in consequence of changes in the elements, e.g., through bad air, or thunderstorms or landslips. We have already shown that, in accordance with the divine wisdom, genesis can only take place through destruction, and without the destruction of the individual members of the species the species themselves would not exist permanently. Thus the true kindness, and beneficence, and goodness of God is clear.

[Derashot HaRan 8:38](#) Nissim of Gerona (Ran), 14th-century compilation of 12 discourses elucidating the fundamentals of Judaism alongside explanations of the Torah.

And herein is resolved the great dilemma in G-d's conduct of the world: "the righteous man who suffers, and the wicked man who prospers." For if the heavenly influences manifesting themselves in this terrestrial world were all specific, so that one star would attach to one man alone, the Blessed One assigning it to him individually to compensate him in accordance with his deeds, this would, indeed, be cause for wonder. But this is not the case, for **the ordinance of the terrestrial world is generic, so that it is impossible to expect continuous good uninterrupted occasionally by evil.** This would be *analogous to expecting the sun to ripen grain and fruits and not beat down on the head of the righteous man* walking on the road in the period of Tammuz so that he not contract the illness to which he is thus predisposed.

In the same way, **when a certain malignant influence is released upon a place or clime, it will not manifest itself as the Blessed One's striking with rod or thong only specific individuals but as a generic maleficent force, which will cause injury even to him who does not deserve to be punished by it**, unless his merit be so great that the Blessed One save him through an alteration of nature.

Rambam's [Guide for the Perplexed Part 3 Ch 12:6](#) (selection)

The second class of evils comprises such evils as people cause to each other, when, e.g., some of them use their strength against others. These evils are more numerous than those of the first kind: their causes are numerous and known; they likewise originate in ourselves, though the sufferer himself cannot avert them. This kind of evil is nevertheless not widespread in any country of the whole world. It is of rare occurrence that a man plans to kill his neighbor or to rob him of his property by night. Many persons are, however, afflicted with this kind of evil in great wars: but these are not frequent, if the whole inhabited part of the earth is taken into consideration.

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Rambam's [Guide for the Perplexed Part 3 Ch 2:7 \(selection\)](#)

The third class of evils comprises those which everyone causes to himself by his own action. This is the largest class, and is far more numerous than the second class. It is especially of these evils that all men complain, only few men are found that do not sin against themselves by this kind of evil. Those that are afflicted with it are therefore justly blamed in the words of the prophet, "This hath been by your means" (Mal. 1:9); the same is expressed in the following passage, "He that doeth it destroyeth his own soul" (Prov. 6:32). In reference to this kind of evil, Solomon says, "The foolishness of man perverteth his way" (ibid. 19:3). In the following passage he explains also that this kind of evil is man's own work, "Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright, but they have thought out many inventions" (Eccles. 7:29), and these inventions bring the evils upon him. The same subject is referred to in Job (v. 6), "For affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground." These words are immediately followed by the explanation that man himself is the author of this class of evils, "But man is born unto trouble." This class of evils originates in man's vices, such as excessive desire for eating, drinking, and love; indulgence in these things in undue measure, or in improper manner, or partaking of bad food. This course brings diseases and afflictions upon body and soul alike.

[Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory Prayers, Asher Yatzar](#)

Praised are You, Lord our God King of the universe, who with wisdom fashioned the human body, creating openings and organs. It is known before your exalted Throne that should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to exist. Praised are you, Lord, healer of all flesh who performs wonders.

- How do we reconcile these last two texts?
- Can both of these have meaning at the same time?

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[Genesis 6:5-7](#)

יהוה saw how great was human wickedness on earth—how every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time. And יהוה regretted having made humankind on earth. With a sorrowful heart, יהוה said, “I will blot out from the earth humankind whom I created—humans together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.”

[Genesis 9:9-12](#)

“I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you—birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well—all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God further said, “This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come.

Babylonian Talmud [Avodah Zarah 54b](#), verse 14, with commentary from Steinsaltz Edition

The Sages taught: Certain **philosophers [filosofin]** asked the Jewish Sages who were in Rome: **If it is not your God’s will** that people should engage in **idol worship**, for what reason **does He not eliminate it?** The Sages said to them: **Were people worshipping only objects for which the world has no need, He would eliminate it. But they worship the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations. Should He destroy the world because of the fools? Rather, the world follows its course, and the fools who sinned will be held to judgment in the future for their transgressions.**

Babylonian Talmud [Avodah Zarah 54b](#), verse 15, with commentary from Steinsaltz Edition

Consider the case of one **who stole a se’*a* of wheat and went and planted it in the ground. By right it should not grow. But the world goes along and follows its course and the fools who sinned will be held to judgment in the future for their transgressions.**

Babylonian Talmud [Avodah Zarah 54b](#), verse 16, with commentary from Steinsaltz Edition

Consider the case of one who **engaged in intercourse with the wife of another. By right she should not become pregnant. But the world goes along and follows its course and the fools who sinned will be held to judgment in the future for their transgressions.**

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Genesis 8:22

So long as the earth endures,
Seedtime and harvest,
Cold and heat,
Summer and winter,
Day and night
Shall not cease.

Covenant: Parashat Noach 5781, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg (selection from)

...the crucial departure and revolutionary moral path of the Torah is expressed in the day after the Flood—which may well be the most transformative religious moment in Judaism’s history. God pledges never to inflict such a catastrophe again. Attributing a cataclysmic flood to willful action by God would define the Lord as a perfectionist who cannot tolerate the flawed and wayward human nature acting out badly, and so rejects the world and starts again. Alternatively, such a flood would reveal God as a punitive Ruler who ruthlessly wipes out those who disobey divine instructions to be good.

Instead, the Torah reveals that God is a loving Lord who is deeply distressed at the sight of widespread devastation and death. To wipe out people for the sin of disobedience and violence is so coercive that even if people do the right actions thereafter, there is no dignity or genuine morality in their behaviors. A loving God wants people to be good out of free will and love of others. Therefore, God permanently renounces the threat of inflicting catastrophe: All powerful but loving God *self-limits* and offers humanity a covenant or partnership.

In this committed partnership of love, humans will join with the Divine in building a better world and filling it with life. But they will do so out of free choice and doing their best, not out of terrorized submission to divine dictates. In the covenant, there is full allowance for human weakness in the form of lower, “compromised” expectations—at least along the way to the final goal. Even bad behaviors are provided for by mechanisms of repentance, milder punishments, and Divine forgiveness. God still wants Creation and society to be perfected. However, God loves humans and wants them to mature and become fully images of God—that is, independent creatures who are infinitely valuable, equal, and unique. God wants humans to live lives of dignity and creativity in partnership. That is more important than humans building God’s desired paradise while living lives of robotic conformity to divine instructions.

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Covenant: Parashat Noach 5781, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, selection, continued

In entering covenant, omnipotent God self-limits, out of love, to allow humans their freedom and the chance to grow into full dignity. How? First God establishes the natural order as independent and irrevocable process, never to cease or be disrupted ([Genesis 8:22](#)). The Talmud explains: “*Olam ke-minhago noheg*, the world follows its custom” ([Avodah Zarah 54b](#)). The objectivity of the natural order means that nature will not differentiate between stolen and honestly acquired seeds—both will germinate. The sperm of adulterous intercourse can conceive a child just as much as sperm emitted in moral or legal sexual relations. Nature will not hound or punish those doing evil. In God’s world, humans freely choose to do good or bad. By choosing to do good, humans exercise—and earn—their freedom. This means that God upholds human freedom (with the risks of bad behavior) ahead of obedience or guaranteed preferred outcomes.

[Ecclesiastes 9:1-3](#)

For all this I noted, and I ascertained all this: that the actions of even the righteous and the wise are determined by God. Even love! Even hate! Man knows none of these in advance—none!^b For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure; for him who sacrifices, and for him who does not; for him who is pleasing, and for him who is displeasing; and for him who swears, and for him who shuns oaths.

That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all. (Not only that, but men’s hearts are full of sadness, and their minds of madness, while they live; and then—to the dead!)

Babylonian Talmud [Shabbat 55b:1](#), with commentary from Steinsaltz edition

The Gemara **raises an objection** from the following *baraita*: **The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, why did You penalize Adam, the first man, with the death penalty? He said to them: I gave him a simple mitzva, and he violated it. They said to Him: Didn’t Moses and Aaron, who observed the whole Torah in its entirety, nevertheless die?** The Holy One, Blessed be He, **said to them**, citing the verse: “All things come alike to all; **there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him who sacrifices, and to him who does not sacrifice; as is the good, so is the sinner; and he who swears, as he who fears an oath**” (Ecclesiastes 9:2). Apparently, death is not dependent upon one’s actions. Everyone dies.

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- **But wait!!! There's more.**

Babylonian Talmud [Shabbat 55b, continued](#)

The Gemara answers: Rav Ami **stated** his position **in accordance with this *tanna*, as it was taught** in a *baraita*: **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Even Moses and Aaron died due to their sin, as it is stated:** “And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron: **Because you did not believe in Me**, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation in to the land which I have given them” (Numbers 20:12). **Had you believed in Me** and spoken to the rock as commanded, **your time would not yet have come to leave the world.** Apparently, even Moses and Aaron died due to their sins.

The Gemara **raises an objection** from what was taught in the following *baraita*: **Four people died due to Adam's sin with the serpent**, in the wake of which death was decreed upon all of mankind, although they themselves were free of sin. **And they are: Benjamin, son of Jacob; Amram, father of Moses; Yishai, father of David; and Kilab, son of David. ...**

The Gemara now clarifies the matter: **Who** is the *tanna* of the *baraita* that states that four people did not die due to their own sins? **If you say** that it is the *tanna* who taught the conversation between **the ministering angels** and God, it is difficult, **as weren't there also Moses and Aaron** who did not die due to their own sins? **Rather, it must be Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar**, who holds that even Moses and Aaron died because of their own sins. **Learn from it** then that, in principle, he agrees that **there is death without sin and there is suffering without iniquity, and** this is a **conclusive refutation** of the opinion of **Rav Ami**. The Gemara concludes: Indeed, it is a **conclusive refutation**.

[Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 12](#)

Do not presume that in the Messianic age any facet of the world's nature will change or there will be innovations in the work of creation. Rather, the world will continue according to its pattern. Although [Isaiah 11:6](#) states: 'The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat,' these words are a metaphor and a parable. The interpretation of the prophecy is as follows: Israel will dwell securely together with the wicked gentiles who are likened to a wolf and a leopard, as in the prophecy [Jeremiah 5:6](#): 'A wolf from the wilderness shall spoil them and a leopard will stalk their cities.' They will all return to the true faith and no longer steal or destroy. Rather, they will eat permitted food at peace with Israel as [Isaiah 11:7](#) states: 'The lion will eat straw like an ox.'