DISMANTLING DEUTERONOMY AND ADVOCATING ALTRUISM

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DIGEST

Judaism, like so many people and things that we love, is imperfect. This imperfection does not detract from its value as a belief system, but rather Judaism's flaws create an obligation and an opportunity for us to evaluate the merit of its ideas. Our textual and cultural tradition includes ideas that are problematic, undesirable, and even deleterious. In this thesis, I argue that the flawed notion of a God who doles out rewards and punishments commensurate with our cultic loyalty and moral behavior is one of these harmful ideas. I demonstrate the pervasiveness of this ideology throughout Jewish literature, elaborate upon its shortcomings and its adverse effects, and propose adopting an ideology of altruism, inspired by Buddhist thinkers, in its stead. I explain how the process by which I engage in this intentional syncretism is consistent with the work of generations of Jewish thinkers who have come before me. I explore how altruism can be incorporated into curricula of Jewish educational settings, such as Confirmation class. I highlight the importance of honestly addressing the problems of Deuteronomic ideology and the importance of cultivating altruism, beginning in childhood and adolescence. As a Jewish educator and rabbi, I will teach Jewish children and adults to reject Deuteronomic thinking, which relies on self-interest, and to embrace altruistic care, which relies on selflessness. I will encourage other Jewish educators and rabbis to do the same. This thesis represents the beginning of that work.

PREFACE

I do not remember the first time I learned the problematic teaching that God rewards us for acts of goodness and punishes us for acts of wickedness. Perhaps I first heard it when I was sitting in high holiday services reading responsively that "*teshuvah*, *tzedakah*, and *tefilah* would temper judgment's severe decree." Perhaps I learned it during a lesson in Sunday school, or maybe it was something my parents taught me. As a child, I attended Shabbat services and listened to my rabbi's simultaneous translation of any number of verses from the book of Deuteronomy without much context. I may have simply absorbed the message: follow God's mitzvot, do what you are supposed to, be good—*l'ma'an ya'arichun yamecha*—in order that your days will be lengthened. This is a matter of life and death, my life or my death. Regardless of the original source, I absorbed this Deuteronomic message and it stuck, and it stuck very firmly.

As a rule follower, an academic overachiever, and the product of a family that succeeded in America's capitalist system, I had a strong sense that people who worked hard, did what they were supposed to, and were basically good should and would be rewarded in life. Although my childhood had its ups and downs, my life was basically happy, and I had no reason to doubt this system. Sure, tragedies that happened around me (the death of a friend's parent, my favorite aunt's worsening illness, and a suicide at my high school), but I designated these as anomalies, tragic glitches in the system. When it came to large-scale tragedies such as September 11th or the Holocaust, I was content to admit that there are mysteries that humans could not understand but for which God had an explanation or plan. I even blindly accepted what a local Modern Orthodox rabbi had

taught me about the connection between the Holocaust and Israel—the victims of the Shoah had not died in vain, but to bring the beginning of our redemption.

Near the end of middle school, I also learned about the concept of Olam haBa, which seemed to account for any inconsistencies in the strict, karmic system I had come to put my faith in. When faced with suffering, I could reassure myself that it would all work out in another plane of existence somewhere. I quickly learned that Olam haBa was not actually a satisfying system or coping mechanism for dealing with suffering in this world. If we prayed to a God of compassion, why would that God want us to suffer at all?

Even at terrible moments in my adolescence, I would not allow myself to question this doctrine. In fact, every time something bad happened to me or near me, I would find a way to rationalize it or connect it to my behavior somehow. When I was in a car accident, I assumed that this was God's punishment for the fight that I had had with my parents earlier that morning. As a teen, I began to suffer from clinical depression and assumed it was my own fault. I deserved it, I had done something wrong, and God had punished me with seemingly unending sadness. Only when I started to go to therapy in high school did I realize how much damage adopting this tit-for-tat reward and punishment belief system had done to me personally. It had totally shaped my thought patterns and behavior in destructive ways that I continue to combat to this day.

I also experienced a false sense of responsibility and entitlement for the privileges I received. I believed that I survived a rocket attack during the Second Lebanon War because I prayed and because God approved of how I took care of my scared, crying friends while we waited for the attack to pass. These rationalizations gave me a false sense of control that truly did me no good. Reflecting back on this time, I am ashamed at

the extent to which I embraced this system because it also included a fair amount of blaming others for their own misfortunes and a fair amount of mistaking my own personal privilege for moral superiority.

Then again, this is what I was taught. I knew that at least a version of these ideas was in the Torah, in our liturgy, and often in the mouths of members of my Jewish community. I heard statements such as "she didn't deserve to have this happen," "what goes around comes around," "God doesn't give us more than we can handle," "hard work breeds success," "God helps those who help themselves," etc. All of these derive from extensions of classic Deuteronomic reward and punishment theology. While I can see how Maimonides' teaching that an individual dies as soon as their merits outweigh their sins might scare someone into obedience and therefore seems to have some utility, I do not believe that this is the best or most effective way to motivate behavior or construct a belief system. The implications of such a system are cruel, and far from consistent with the merciful God I envision in prayer. As a young adult, I began the process of abandoning this self-centered system, and I am still actively working on replacing it with more altruistic attitudes. I imagine that re-orienting my outlook will be a lifelong process. I do not want future generations of Jewish children to develop this destructive thought pattern. I feel a moral obligation to teach that the Deuteronomic equation is simply wrong and to replace it with a different system that motivates ethical behavior. This thesis is an attempt to do just that.

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INTRODUCTION

The Deuteronomic School of Biblical authors upheld a particular ideology in their writing. One aspect of this ideology is the concept of Divine reward and punishment, namely that God rewards those who are righteous and loyal to God's mitzvot, but punishes those who are wicked and disloyal. Although this ideology may originate in the book of Deuteronomy, it pervades much of Biblical and rabbinic literature.

Rather than confront the reality of a world in which righteous people suffer and wicked people prosper, most of our sacred texts uphold the notion of a just, powerful deity who acts predictably. The belief that one's suffering can be explained rationally creates an illusion of control that may have comforted the authors of these works. In the face of persecution or subjugation, imagining that *teshuvah* could ameliorate their situation or that God would exact retribution from their enemies may have made their pain more tolerable. They may have been engaging in an early form of what Victor Frankl would call logotherapy, in which individuals seek to make meaning out of their lives and their suffering.[1]

Alternatively, the authors of these texts may have been using Deuteronomic ideology as a form of religious coercion. By suggesting that cultic disloyalty would bring about suffering while fidelity would bring about reward, these authors and the officials who supported them could claim that failure to obey their demands would result in not just human but divine punishment. This threat served their goal of creating compliance, maintaining group unity, and casting aspersions on influences from the surrounding culture.

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[1] Viktor E. Frankl, *By Viktor E. Frankl - Man's Search for Meaning*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). 105.

The notion that God rewards those who behave righteously and punishes those who behave wickedly has dangerous implications. If every human action has a Divine consequence, either a punishment or a reward, God becomes the source of both one's prosperity and one's pain. Any positive event leads us to believe that we have done something that God deems "right," and any negative event leads us to believe that we have done something wrong. We might then assume that people who prosper are somehow more righteous or deserving than those who do not. We might also assume that people in pain somehow deserve their suffering. When we behave righteously but suffer anyway, we are left to wonder how we may have angered our Creator or what we did to deserve our pain. These ideas and their corollaries are harmful and unsustainable.

Upholding Deuteronomic ideology is liable to cause significant damage, both to individuals who adopt this thinking and to religious communities that advance or embrace it. In this thesis, I will advocate that Jewish educators and rabbis need to teach and preach against the Deuteronomic message. One's fate or personal life circumstances and one's ethical behavior are not linked but are radically separate. Altruism and not personal interest or fear of God needs to motivate ethical behavior. Developing a Jewish frame for this kind of selfless concern for the other requires a thorough examination of Deuteronomic ideology, analysis of Biblical and rabbinic texts which reject or problematize it, and a syncretistic approach to the doctrine of altruism as depicted in other religious traditions and secular philosophies. We must educate Jewish children and adults to pursue ethical behavior *lishmah* (for its own sake) and to understand suffering as a phenomenon that caring people can help each other navigate but cannot fully control.

The ideology of Reform Judaism encourages us to examine our faith and beliefs and to acknowledge that our sacred texts, while full of wisdom, are themselves imperfect and created by flawed humans. When we affirm this imperfection, we gain permission to build our belief system on the Jewish tenets that add value, depth, and meaning to our lives. We are also free to reject elements of Judaism that are out of line with our modern sensibilities or values. Even the rabbis of the Mishnah rejected or reframed outmoded practices such as stoning stubborn and rebellious sons or *lex talionis*. We too must repudiate elements of Judaism that are harmful and coercive such as Deuteronomic ideology.

The problematic elements of Judaism, such as Deuteronomic ideology, do not invalidate the tradition as a whole. Rather we acknowledge that like so many things and people we love, we can embrace something without expecting perfection from it. While many people seem able to tolerate the shortcomings of everything from sports teams to literature to elected officials, many are unable to tolerate these same shortcomings in religion. Instead, some clergy and religious zealots behave as if such shortcomings do not exist, which might cause other individuals to choose to give up on religion entirely. This mistaken impression that religion must be wholly accepted or rejected with no middle ground prevents these individuals from experiencing the beneficial aspects of religion including a system of morality, sense of purpose, connection to tradition, and supportive community.

In place of a system that teaches that you ought to behave ethically *l'ma'an ya'arichun yamecha u'l'ma'an yitav lach*, we can be better served by a system in which

ethical behavior derives from concern for the other, not concern for the self.[2] In his study of altruism, Tibetan Buddhist monk and scientist Matthieu Ricard explains that altruism is innate but must be cultivated in order to flourish on an individual or communal level.[3] He advocates teaching altruism to children as well as to adults. Ricard explains how altruistic attitudes and actions can benefit individuals, communities, and societies. Ricard's thinking is steeped in the language of Eastern religion, so incorporating it into a Jewish frame requires intentionality.

Throughout its history, Judaism has borrowed liberally from surrounding cultural and literary contexts. Mesopotamian Creation and Flood myths influenced the Biblical ones, Arabic philosophy influenced medieval Jewish theologians such as Maimonides, and ideas from the European Enlightenment influenced Jewish Enlightenment thought—just to name a few examples. In some cases, syncretism, the incorporation into Judaism of ideas or customs from surrounding cultures or religions, may have been a natural phenomenon, an unintentional byproduct of the proximity of these civilizations. Rabbi Louis Jacobs posits an alternate theory of syncretism, one which is very much intentional:

> This does not mean that Jews simply adopted uncritically the beliefs and practices of their neighbors. A kind of consensus has been at work in the history of the Jewish religion by virtue of which those elements that could be adapted to Judaism without in any way coming into conflict with essential Jewish beliefs were not totally rejected but given a Jewish interpretation. [4]

While Deuteronomic ideology is pervasive, it is not an essential Jewish belief. Ethical monotheism (or monaltry) may require certain beliefs and behaviors, but one can adopt

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[2] Deut. 5:16 "…in order that your days be lengthened and in order that it will go well for you…" Biblical translations in this thesis have been modified from the JPS 1985 translation in accordance with egalitarian principles unless otherwise noted.

[3] Matthieu Ricard, *Altruism: The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World*, Translation edition (New York, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015). 38, 208, 239-268.

[4] Rabbi Louis Jacobs, "Syncretism and Judaism," in *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/syncretism-and-judaism/.

these beliefs and behaviors without ascribing to Deuteronomy's reward and punishment system. An alternate motivation system, such as altruistic care, can be incorporated into Judaism and given a Jewish interpretation without compromising Judaism's essence. Jacobs concludes that "the evidence for syncretism is evidence of the Jewish genius that has made Judaism an undying faith."[5] Not only is syncretism a phenomenon which Judaism has experienced passively, actively engaging in syncretism is core to its survival. Judaism owes its ability to endure millennia of sea changes to its very willingness to borrow wisdom from surrounding cultures.

In his responsum on syncretism and the Passover seder, Rabbi David Golinkin concludes with the following blessing, "We are bombarded today by a host of outside influences from the Western world. May God give us the wisdom to selectively adopt some of their forms and to fill them with Jewish content as the Sages did at the Seder."[6] In this thesis, I explore outside influences from both the Eastern and Western world. While I do not think of Buddhist ideas as "bombarding," I do strive to blend these ideas with Judaism in a way that is wise, critical, and to the benefit Judaism.

As I searched for texts that came close to articulating a Jewish theology of altruism, I kept returning to Peah 1:1. I tried to frame *ocheil peiroteihem ba'olam hazeh* as "these actions beget their own rewards," hoping to argue that acts of justice such as leaving the corners of one's field for the poor ought to be undertaken for their own sake, without thought for any extrinsic reward. Then, I had to confront the continuation of the verse—*v'hakeren kayemet lo l'olam haba*—and acknowledge that my interpretation was stretching the text too far. The rabbis of the Mishnah were so trapped by the

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[5] Ibid.

[6] David Golinkin, "The Origins of the Seder," *The Schechter Institutes* (blog), April 17, 2006, http://www.schechter.edu/the-origins-of-the-seder/.

Deuteronomic system that they could not simply let these actions stand alone. The fact that a modified version of this text is included in *Mishkan T'filah* shows that this system also influences the Reform Movement. I believe that the Deuteronomic system is one instance in which drawing on wisdom from outside the Jewish tradition can help repair a problematic concept and its deleterious consequences. My goal in this thesis is to advocate a critique of the Deuteronomic system based on classical and contemporary Jewish sources, syncretization of Jewish ideas with ideas of altruism from Buddhism, and education toward altruism, beginning in childhood.

DEUTERONOMIC IDEOLOGY THROUGHOUT JEWISH LITERATURE

Deuteronomic Ideology in the Tanakh

The following quotes from Deuteronomy 6:18 and 27:26 encapsulate Deuteronomic ideology, which permeates not only the Torah, but also subsequent Jewish literature and even contemporary American culture. “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Eternal, that it may go well with you…” and “Cursed be anyone who will not uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them...” In essence, when you live according to God’s will, God will bless you. You will lead a life marked by health, wealth, power, and abundance. When you behave otherwise, God will punish you. You will suffer from poverty, oppression, sickness, and hunger.

Different permutations of this theme repeat throughout the book of Deuteronomy. As the two examples above demonstrate, this ideology can be stated in both the positive and the negative: God will reward loyal observance of mitzvot and righteousness, and God will punish disobedience and wickedness. The text describes both the blessings and curses that one’s religious behavior can engender.[7] These blessings can take various forms including fertility, agricultural prosperity, and military success. The curses include suffering from disease, helplessness, subjugation, and other hardships.[8] For the Deuteronomists, both suffering and prosperity are directly correlated with one’s religious observance.

In some instances, the Deuteronomic authors apply this doctrine to specific mitzvot. For example, the commandments concerning honoring one’s parents and sending away a mother bird before harvesting her eggs are promised to ensure long life

[7] Deut. 11, 27, 28, et al.
[8] Deut. 28.

for the one who does them.[9] In other cases, the authors apply this doctrine to more global concepts such as upholding Torah, listening to God's voice, doing what is right and good in God's eyes, or observing God's commandments and statutes as a whole.[10] The highest concentration of this material is in the Book of Deuteronomy itself, but this ideology is not limited to a single book of the Torah or the Tanakh.

The influence of the Deuteronomic school was so strong that its ideas made their way into the ideological overlay of the Torah. Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers include both narrative and legal material written by authors who embrace Deuteronomic thinking. Some of this material is well-integrated into the text, but in other cases it seems haphazardly appended. For example, the story of the bitter waters at Marah in Exodus 15:22-26 concludes with the injunction, "If you will heed the Eternal your God diligently, doing what is upright in God's sight, giving ear to God's commandments and keeping all God's laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I, the Eternal, am your Healer." This Deuteronomic insertion initially seems irrelevant to the narrative that preceded it. The people did not need to follow any of God's commandments in order to obtain fresh drinking water, but the Deuteronomist ties this episode back to the first of the ten plagues, blood, contaminated water. The author may be trying to claim that the way to stave off such plagues in the future is to observe law.

As the Wilderness Narrative progresses, God's providence becomes conditional upon the Israelites' religious observance. Similarly, the Book of Leviticus, consisting largely of apodictic priestly law, includes an entire chapter devoted to enumerating the

[9] Deut. 5:15 and 22:6-7.
[10] Deut. 13:19, 28:1, 28:45, 30:10, et al.

blessings and curses that will occur depending upon whether the Israelites accept or reject God's statutes.[11] This content seems far more consistent with the Deuteronomic than the priestly school of Biblical authors and demonstrates once again the extent of the influence of Deuteronomic ideology. The spies narrative in Numbers 13 and 14 also has Deuteronomic overtones. God's treatment of Caleb and Joshua and God's treatment of the other spies corresponds to God's judgment of their respective reports. Although those who offer a negative report of the land have not transgressed a specific commandment, they have stirred the people to seek to return to Egypt and speak against Moses and Aaron. Both actions are contrary to God's will and so God punishes them by forbidding the adults over the age of 20 from entering the Promised Land and killing the spies. Only the children and Caleb and Joshua receive God's favor, even after Moses intercedes on their behalf. The aforementioned examples demonstrate how Deuteronomic ideology becomes a frame for the entire Torah, not only for the Book of Deuteronomy itself.

This ideology also pervades prophetic literature, which generally ascribes to the notion of a powerful deity who regularly intervenes in our world according to human behavior. For instance, Jeremiah's message is highly consistent with the Deuteronomists'. He claims that the Israelites' exile and suffering is a direct result of their cultic disloyalty and their failures of justice.[12] God is punishing them for failing to uphold the rights of the poor, the widow, and the orphan—perhaps a metaphor for the most vulnerable members of society—and for worshipping other deities. Throughout the

[11] Lev. 26.
[12] Jer. 5:1-30; 16:10-13; 17:21-27; 21:11-14, 44:1-30, et al.

book, he continues to preach Deuteronomic ideology, exhorting his fellow Israelites to repent and return to God, and threatening destruction if they do not.[13]

Jeremiah upholds Deuteronomic thinking, even in light of his own suffering. He expresses his frustration at the misery of his own condition, despite his righteousness, as well as his frustration at the prospering of his enemies, despite their wickedness.[14] He acknowledges that his righteousness and loyalty often go unrewarded while his wicked enemies go unpunished. Still, he stubbornly clings to the hope that he will be redeemed and they will be punished. In Jeremiah 12, the prophet begins to question or lament what he perceives as failures of the Deuteronomic system, namely the prospering of the wicked and his own suffering. Yet, a few verses later, Jeremiah returns to espousing Deuteronomic ideology and promises that the wicked will get their due eventually.

Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah include a large cluster of post-exilic material that is also consistent with Deuteronomic ideology. In Isaiah 42:24-25, the prophet cites Israel's failing to walk in God's ways and listen to God's Torah as the direct cause of its destruction and exile. Israel failed to respond appropriately to God's anger and suffered disastrous consequences as a result. Elsewhere, Isaiah promises Israel that a return to God's ways and observance of mitzvot will result in the reversal of their fortunes and ensure their survival for generations to come.[15] Like Jeremiah and Isaiah, most Biblical authors largely uphold Deuteronomic thinking, despite their awareness of its imperfection.

Biblical Alternatives to Deuteronomic Ideology

[13] Jer. 3:11-15; 15:19-21; 17:24-27, 21:11-14, et al.
[14] Jer. 15:15-18, 17:14-18, 18:19-23, et al.
[15] Is. 48:17-21, 51:1-6, et al.

The two Biblical books that represent exceptions to this trend are Kohelet and Job, both of which largely reject Deuteronomic ideology. Kohelet, likely influenced by Epicureanism, claims that there is one fate or outcome for both the righteous and the wicked.[16] Because all is ephemeral, one should pursue wisdom, joy, and goodness regardless of any ultimate outcome.[17] In place of a theology of reward and punishment, Kohelet suggests that life simply happens. Life includes predetermined events such as giving birth, dying, loving, hating, speaking, and being silent. The fact that these events will occur over the course of one's lifetime is predetermined and unrelated to one's behavior, but the timing and particular circumstances of their occurrence is unknown to humankind.[18] Nevertheless, one ought to seek contentment and pursue goodness.[19] Kohelet is aware of Deuteronomic ideology but labels it as *hevel*, impossible to grasp, and explains that it fails to play out in life.[20] The inclusion in the canon of a book which so radically rejects an ideology that permeates most of the Tanakh is surprising. The rabbis of the Talmud and midrash even goes as far as to say that the book ought to be suppressed either because it is "contradictory" or "heretical." They conclude that its words are Torah and that it may be interpreted allegorically, but their discomfort with its ideas is apparent.[21]

The Book of Job depicts a God who is capricious, cruel, and directly involved in human affairs. Unlike the even-handed Deuteronomic God who rewards the righteous, for the majority of the Book of Job, God torments an innocent, righteous, loyal devotee.

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[16] Ecc. 9:2.
[17] Ecc. 2:24-6.
[18] Ecc. 3:1-8.
[19] Ecc. 3:11-2.
[20] Ecc. 8:11-14.
[21] bShabb. 30b and LvR 28,1.

The reader knows that Job has done nothing to "deserve" his suffering, yet his Deuteronomic-minded friends repeatedly seek to convince him that he is somehow responsible for his pain. The conclusion of the Book of Job disproves his companions' theories, as God intervenes and recompenses Job for all the he has lost. The absurdity of this outcome only serves to further highlight the fallaciousness of a system in which righteous individuals such as Job are rewarded for their righteousness. Like the Job of chapters 1-41, many righteous individuals suffer deeply, for no good reason, and unlike the Job of chapter 42, most do not experience supernatural reward following their suffering. The book does not acknowledge the lasting impact of Job's suffering or address the problem of a deity who would cause senseless pain as a test of loyalty.

Rabbinic Extensions of Deuteronomic Ideology

Rabbinic literature largely upholds Deuteronomic ideology but does include concepts that problematize or complicate Deuteronomy's simple equation of "goodness begets reward and wickedness begets punishment." One of these concepts that appears throughout rabbinic literature is *zekhut*. Although the exact translation varies depending upon context, the simplest way to define zekhut is "merit," specifically merit accrued on account of good conduct and which earns one special advantages, privileges, or rewards.[22] The concept of zekhut has considerable overlap with Deuteronomic ideology in that both posit that God rewards righteous; however, the system of zekhut includes loopholes that do not apply within the Deuteronomic system. For instance, zekhut can be accrued through one's own righteous acts or through the deeds of one's ancestors or

[22] Jacob Neusner, *The Transformation of Judaism*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 2011), 211-2.

descendants. Often these deeds are not tied to the performance of specific commandments, but rather to one's attitude, disposition, or willingness to do more than what has been commanded.[23] For instance, the Jerusalem Talmud relates a story about a donkey-driver who donated his donkey to a woman trying to free her husband from debt. As a result, she was able to free her husband and was spared from becoming a prostitute or any other terrible fate that she might have encountered as a married woman unable to access her husband's protection. Due to the zekhut accrued through this generous action, sometime later this donkey-driver's prayer for rain was answered.[24] Accrued merit, whether accrued through one's own or others' actions, precipitates divine grace commensurate with the actions that preceded it. This vision of zekhut empowers the ordinary individual, such as this donkey driver, to accrue merit for even a single righteous deed, or for a deed performed by an ancestor or descendant whom they might not ever meet.[25] Although zekhut gives one a claim to divine reward, the fact remains that one cannot coerce God to act in a certain way, which accounts for some of the unpredictability associated with this concept and its application.[26] In the face of seeming failures of the Deuteronomic system, such as the suffering of the righteous, the concept of zekhut can be applied to suggest that their suffering is allowing them to accrue additional zekhut or that their suffering is the result of another's bad actions.

A rabbinic concept related to zekhut is the notion of *olam haba*, the World to Come. The rabbinic worldview included belief in the resurrection of the dead and a messianic (or post-messianic) World to Come. Similar to the Deuteronomists, the rabbis

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[23] Jacob Neusner, *The Theological Grammar of the Oral Torah*, *Volume I.* (Dowling College Press, 1998) 373-4.
[24] yTaanit 1:4.I, paraphrased in *The Theological Grammar,* 375.
[25] *The Transformation of Judaism,* 207-8.
[26] Ibid. 229.

believed that the deeds of one's life in "this world" influenced how one would be judged in the World to Come, and what kind of experience one would have there. Zekhut acquired in this world might be rewarded in the World to Come rather than in this world. There are also several examples in rabbinic literature that suggest that the righteous suffer in this world, but are rewarded in the World to Come, and that while the wicked might be rewarded in this world, they will suffer in the World to Come.[27] Thus, failures of the Deuteronomic system in "this world" can be explained away as temporary, allowing those who embrace Deuteronomic thinking to claim that in the World to Come, justice will be served.

According to the rabbis, the suffering of the righteous is not only temporary but purposeful: in order that they will be rewarded even more in the World to Come. They embrace the concept of *yissurim shel ahavah*, torments of love, as another explanation for the suffering of the righteous. According to this concept, individuals whose deeds are righteous, who study Torah, and yet suffer anyway are those whom God loves most.[28] The opposite principle holds as well: even when it seems that God is being lenient toward the wicked, God is actually only doing so in order to deal more strictly with them later in the world to come. This interpretation may represent an apologetic attempt to explain situations in which the rabbis' lived experiences failed to live up to the Deuteronomic world. For instance, the rabbis witnessed their Christian counterparts shirking the Torah's mitzvot and prospering anyway, while the rabbis themselves, who faithfully dedicated their lives to Torah, were suffering at their hands. In so doing the rabbis were able to

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[27] *The Theological Grammar,* 255-269.
[28] Yaakov Elman, "Righteousness as Its Own Reward: An Inquiry into the Theologies of the Stam," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1990): 35–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/3622654.and bBer. 5a-b.

justify their own actions as meritorious, rationalize their enemies' actions as merely ensuring that they encounter additional suffering in the World to Come, and still uphold Deuteronomic ideology.

In addition to the concept of olam haba, the rabbis also acknowledge that there are other extenuating circumstances which might interfere with Dueteronomic justice. For instance, the Babylonian Talmud relates the story of a boy who falls to his death while attempting to carry out his father's instruction to perform the mitzvah of shooing away the mother bird before gathering her eggs.[29] He is simultaneously performing the two mitzvot, *kibud av v'em* and *shiluach haken* for which the Torah promises long life.[30] Even in light of the painful irony of this situation, one which is said to have precipitated the apostasy of the rabbinic sage Elisha ben Abuyah, the rabbis try to preserve the Deuteronomic system. They speculate that this boy may have been contemplating sin or idol worship, and thus would have deserved this fate. After further discourse on whether his actions indeed should have protected him, the rabbis settle on the explanation that there was *keviyah heizakah*—an established danger. The boy was climbing on a rickety ladder and only a miracle could have preserved his life. Due to the rabbinic principle *ein somkhin al hanes*—the impermissibility of relying on miracles—the boy's death was inevitable.[31] The rabbis seem to acknowledge that even Divine Providence has limits. They also suggest that there are certain things that are unrelated to one's zekhut but rather depend on *mazal*, fate. These include length of life, children, and sustenance. By contrasting the experiences of two sages, Rabba and Rav Hisda, the rabbis explain that seemingly equally righteous individuals can have drastically different life experiences

[29] bQidd. 39a-b.
[30] Deut. 5:15 and 22:6-7.
[31] bQidd. 39a-b.

due to their different mazal.[32] These extenuating circumstances, keviyah heizakah and mazal, further complicate the Deuteronomic system.

In other cases, the rabbis acknowledge that parts of the Deuteronomic system are beyond their comprehension. For instance, in the case of the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva, a brilliant and pious sage is tortured to death at the hands of his enemies. In a midrash in which Moses learns of Akiva's fate, Moses questions God, asking "this is Torah and this is its reward?" God's cryptic reply to Moses is, "Be silent for this is the thought that arose before me."[33] The rabbis do not attempt to justify the suffering of the righteous, they simply acknowledge that some cases of reward and punishment are beyond the comprehension of humankind.[34]

The Deuteronomic system is tightly woven into the fabric of Biblical and rabbinic literature. Some of the authors of our tradition do acknowledge its flaws, amend the system, or posit alternative philosophies, but others uphold it at all costs. The rabbis are too deeply steeped in Deuteronomic thinking to reject it outright, but seem to acknowledge that they need to make it more believable, and do so by introducing ideas such as zekhut, olam haBa, yissurim shel ahava, keiviya heizaka, and mazal.

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[32] bMoed Qat. 28a.
[33] bMenah. 29b.
[34] Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. "Theodicy and Torah." In *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 189-191.

PROBLEMS OF THE DEUTERONOMIC SYSTEM

As discussed in the previous chapter, Deuteronomic ideology pervades Biblical and rabbinic literature. This simplistic theory that "God rewards goodness and punishes wickedness" or the non-theistic formula "good things happen to good people" also plagues our contemporary discourse and culture. Phrases such as "it couldn't have happened to a nicer person," "she deserves better," "he had it coming," or "God does everything for a reason" are all allusions to a mythic system in which people are—or ought to be—rewarded or punished according to their deeds. Even though these ideas are highly flawed, these versions of Deuteronomic ideology persist. Such a belief system is damaging to both individuals and communities that adopt it. To prevent or heal such damage, we must be honest about the pitfalls of Deuteronomic thinking and encourage the development of healthy theologies that present alternatives to the Deuteronomic system.

If the world were governed by the Deuteronomic system, we would expect to see righteous individuals thriving and wicked individuals suffering. Surely there are happy righteous people and miserable wicked ones, but in general, adversity and prosperity do not discriminate based on morality. The world's failure to live up to the Deuteronomic system points to one of the major issues of this system: the problem of scalability. Proponents of Deuteronomic thinking may claim that on average, most righteous people do well, while most wicked people suffer. Yet, when specific individuals try to apply this thinking to their own lives, the system breaks down. Righteous people suffer and wicked people thrive, seemingly for no reason whatsoever.

The reason that Deuteronomic thinking has been able to persist in our society despite its fallibility may be due to a phenomenon that Dan Sperber describes as "culturally transmitted misbelief." Many religious beliefs fall into this category. Such misbeliefs often lack appropriate grounding and are only partially understood by those that hold or transmit them. Nonetheless, these misbeliefs persist because of the authority attributed to the texts or individuals that teach them and because they contribute to the identity of the group that shares them. [35]

The Deuteronomic idea that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked fits this definition of a culturally transmitted misbelief. Like most religious beliefs, there is no empirical evidence that God acts in our world this way, or for any of God's attributes for that matter. The secular articulation of Deuteronomic ideology—that evil people suffer and good people prosper—is equally impossible to measure. Thus, the mechanism through which God punishes the wicked or rewards the good can only be partially understood at best. The rabbinic texts described in the previous chapter demonstrate the plethora of ways that the rabbis manipulate the idea of zekhut in order to attempt to account for failures of the Deuteronomic system, but in my opinion none satisfactorily justifies its shortcomings.

My experience has been that when pressed, individuals who do accept Deuteronomic ideology cannot give a thorough explanation of how this system works. Yet, when religious authorities present sermons or texts that uphold this thinking, their audience absorbs the Deuteronomic message. Because this ideology originates in the Tanakh, its authority is well-established, regardless of whether its readers believe the

[35] Dan Sperber, "Culturally Transmitted Misbeliefs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, no. 6 (2009): 534–35.

Tanakh's authorship is Divine or human. When authoritative individuals present a concept from an authoritative source, their influence is powerful, even if the congregation has an incomplete understanding of the concept.

Deuteronomic ideology has been a persuasive tool for religious authorities throughout Jewish history. For instance, many of the prophets attempted to use this Deuteronomic thinking to inspire social action, to try to motivate their contemporaries toward justice. The Deuteronomists used it to centralize worship in Jerusalem and ensure cultic loyalty. The rabbis used it to dictate observance of mitzvot and validate their religious behavior. Authorities who make the claim that behaving a certain way will ensure prosperity wield tremendous power, which can lead to coercion. However, their strategy had in it a major flaw: when you promise that righteousness will generate rewards, people expect to collect on those rewards; and when you promise that wickedness causes suffering, people expect to see the wicked punished. Neither the prophets nor we can guarantee the functioning of such a system. Every day righteous people suffer and wicked people prosper. The prophets' vision of a perfectly just world that operates according to a system free of such "errors" represents a hypothetical ideal, a reality that has never been actualized.

Another problem created by Deuteronomic ideology is the issue of misplaced motivation. When righteousness is no longer pursued for its own sake but for the sake of the rewards it generates and the harm it preempts, it cannot be sustained. For instance, someone might donate to a charity in hopes that doing so will improve his chances of receiving a favorable outcome on an upcoming medical test. Rather than make the donation because the charity helps promote justice or helps the needy, he is doing so for

personal reasons. If the test results are unfavorable, his motivation for engaging in righteous behavior disappears. If morality no longer engenders the rewards promised by God, or by religious authorities speaking in God's name, why embrace it?

In our culture, this Deuteronomic ideology also manifests itself in the false notion that we can control our fate in the world. We assume that every good or bad thing that happens to us is a direct result of our behavior and God's attitude towards us. If we were only to try harder to behave according to God's will, we could be wealthier, smarter, or live longer. We celebrate individuals who prosper in these areas as if they are somehow better than those who do not, as if they are the ones whom God favors and who ought to be emulated.

Communities that embrace Deuteronomic thinking stigmatize individuals who are suffering instead of offering them support. Rather than seeing someone's pain and figuring out how to help, they see someone's pain and wonder what she did to deserve it. The community may even avoid her or cast her out of the community as a result. Deuteronomic ideas and their corollaries are harmful to these communities and to their individual members.

When someone who has been educated according to Deuteronomic ideology suffers a tragedy, she is left with two possible explanations for her misfortune. The first explanation is that she has done something to deserve her suffering. If she chooses the first explanation, her faith will make her feel worse, not better. This is illustrated by the following example from Harold Kushner's When Bad Things Happen to Good People:

> This middle-aged couple had one daughter, a bright nineteen-year-old girl who was in her freshman year at an out-of-state college. One morning at breakfast, they received a phone call from the university infirmary. "We have some bad news for you. Your daughter collapsed while walking to class this morning. It

> seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We're terribly sorry."
>
> Stunned, the parents asked a neighbor to come in to help them decide what steps to take next. The neighbor notified the synagogue, and I went over to see them that same day. I entered their home, feeling very inadequate, not knowing any words that could ease their pain. I anticipated anger, shock, grief, but I didn't expect to hear the first words they said to me: "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur."
>
> Why did they say that? Why did they assume that they were somehow responsible for this tragedy? Who taught them to believe in a God who would strike down an attractive, gifted young woman without warning as punishment for someone else's ritual infraction?[36]

Congregants often raise issues of theology and theodicy in pastoral settings such as this one. When they or their loved ones are suffering, they typically use pre-established beliefs to make sense of their situation. If someone has been taught that God punishes us for our misdeeds, she will assume that her suffering is a punishment. Since the bedside or house of mourning is far from the ideal setting to reorient a person to a healthy theology, it will be difficult for the rabbi convince the individual that her pain is not a punishment from God. An alternate but equally appalling explanation of her tragedy is that the religion, which she has embraced her entire life, is not only wrong but has deliberately deceived her. She was misled to believe that her piety and morality would stave off tragedy such as this. She may even draw the dangerous conclusion that piety and morality serve no purpose and reject Judaism entirely.

When we teach Deuteronomic ideology to children and those children experience tragedy, they can also experience a sense that their Jewish educators have deceived them or reach the conclusion that God is cruel and uncaring. This is why it is so important that we explain the flaws of and teach alternatives to the Deuteronomic system from a young age. We must teach classes and deliver sermons that urge members of our community to

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[36] Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. 10.

understand that our suffering is not “our fault,” but that striving to alleviate others’ suffering is our responsibility. When we educate this way prior to rather than in light of tragedy, we help our community build an ethic of altruistic caring shared by individuals who understand that suffering is not a price we pay but an inevitability that we will all face at some point in our lives. We engage in this caring not to try to obtain rewards but because this is how we begin to repair a broken world.

REPLACING THE DEUTERONOMIC SYSTEM WITH ALTRUISM

Dismantling Deuteronomy

Despite its many flaws, Deuteronomic ideology and its reward and punishment system pervade the Jewish textual and cultural tradition. Based on my analysis of various Deuteronomic texts, I believe that the authors with whom this system originates were trying to devise a way to motivate or deter certain behaviors, inspire loyalty, and create a functioning, unified society. In doing so, they built a system based on fear of a harsh Divine Judge who executes judgment according to cultic loyalty and moral behavior. The system they created, though elaborate, is faulty. For those who are able to maintain the cognitive dissonance and culturally transmitted misbeliefs required to uphold Deuteronomic ideology, the Deuteronomic system may indeed succeed in influencing behavior. For others, the system is wholly ineffective.

I do believe that one of the purposes of religion is to motivate ethical behavior, but I believe that fear is ultimately an ineffective and unsustainable source of motivation. In *Standing Again at Sinai*, Judith Plaskow describes the unsustainability and other negative consequences of a theological system that includes a transcendent God who doles out reward and punishment commensurate with one's behavior.

> …this utterly Other God is a being outside and over against the world who controls the world "in a way that inhibits human growth and responsibility." Unlike the wise parent who encourages children to develop autonomy and self-reliance, God insists that humans obey him, that they concede their limits and God's overwhelming superiority. As with authoritarian parents, God enforces obedience through a combination of bribes and punishments, a mixture of 'domination and benevolence,' both of which discourage independent activity.[37]

[37] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, First Edition (Harper San Francisco, 1990). 130-1.

The most effective way to create a generation of adults who *do* behave ethically, without the promise or threat of bribes and punishments, is to educate toward a system of morality that promotes autonomy and self-reliance. Our religious communities can better nurture empathy, kindness, and compassion when we shift our emphasis away from self-interest and currying the favor of a harsh, authoritarian God and toward altruistic care and compassion for others. By being honest about the flaws of the Deuteronomic system and the strengths of an altruistic system, we can promote the development of healthy, sustainable theologies, especially beginning in childhood. In the system I am proposing, rather than one's behavior being motivated by fear of a deity who will exact punishment when one is disloyal, behavior becomes motivated by genuine care for the other who is created in God's image. Acts of kindness become selfless expressions of love for both one's fellow and for the God in whose image she is made.

The shift in emphasis from self to other also necessitates a revision of the vocabulary we use when we talk about Jewish morality or Divine Providence. We do not act a certain way because of "fear of God," we do not succeed or fail because "God is willing," and while we might express a desire for "God's help," this phrase connotes a plea for help from God's human partners, rather than supernatural intervention. Instead, our language becomes less fearful and more empowering. We act with "love for God," "as God's partners," or "in order to actualize God's kindness in our world."

The first step in dismantling Deuteronomic ideology is to disabuse its adherents of the notion that one should undertake any behavior, even a righteous one, for the sake of the rewards it might engender. Kohelet is the Biblical author who comes the closest to articulating an ideology in which one's fate is separate from one's behavior. He claims

that there is one fate or outcome for both the righteous and the wicked.[38] In place of a theology of reward and punishment, Kohelet suggests that life simply happens and includes predetermined events such as giving birth, dying, loving, hating, speaking, and being silent.[39] The fact that these events will occur over the course of one's lifetime is predetermined and unrelated to one's behavior, but the timing and particular circumstances of their occurrence are unknown to humankind.[40] His ideas stand in stark contrast to the Deuteronomists' and their ideological descendants who claim that one's experiences, either in this world or in a future one, are directly tied to one's behavior.

Several rabbinic texts come close to uncoupling action and consequence though they are often cited as minority opinions or stop short of truly supporting this idea. For instance, mAvot 1:3 cites Antigonos' teaching "Do not be like servants who are serving the master in order to receive a reward. Instead, be like servants who are serving the master not in order to receive a reward, and may the fear of Heaven be upon you."[41] The first part of the mishnah seems to advocate the removal of reward as a motivation for behavior. The second part, indicating that fear of God is still a component, dilutes this message. Even if the text explicitly states that external rewards should not motivate one's actions, the mention of fear of God implicitly suggests that avoidance of punishment ought to influence one's actions. In bPesachim 50b, the stam cites a teaching in the name of Rav Yehudah (in the name of Rav) that one should engage in Torah study and mitzvot even if only for ulterior motives (*lo lishmah),* because they might one day lead to mitzvot

[38] Ecc. 9:2
[39] Ecc. 3:1-8
[40] Ecc. 3:9-11
[41] mAvot 1:3

that are performed for their own sake (*lishmah*).[42] That the latter is upheld as the ideal suggests that one should pursue for Torah and mitzvot without expectation of reward or fear of punishment, even though the former is an acceptable stepping stone. In bNazir 23b, Rav Nachman bar Yitzhak teaches that a sin committed for its own sake is better than a mitzvah committed for an ulterior motive.[43] This teaching would support the separation of behavior and reward or punishment. Later in the gemara, however, the stam cites the above Rav Yehudah teaching, and then goes on to state that actually sins performed for their own sake and mitzvot performed for an ulterior motive are equal. Although these rabbinic texts come close to separating behavior and reward or punishment and advocating righteous behavior for its own sake, they still maintain that there is some connection between the two.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz offers a compelling, modern alternative to Rav Yehudah's teaching. In an interview near the end of his life, he discusses the difference between *emunah lishmah* (faith for its own sake) and *emunah lo lishmah* (faith for ulterior motives). He compares the difference between the two kinds of faith to one who obeys traffic laws because of the presence of a police officer and fear of getting a ticket to one who obeys traffic laws because he is disciplined citizen who respects the law. The former only obeys the law because of the threat of punishment, but the latter obeys the law because of a recognition of its importance. The former is acting in order to satisfy a specific need, in order to receive something, but the latter is acting out of a recognition of the value of the action itself, out of a desire to give. He concludes that moral values

[42] bPesah. 50b
[43] bNaz. 23b

require the mindset of the latter.[44] In this interview Leibowitz does not explicitly state whether faith or actions performed lo lishmah will lead to those performed lishmah as described in the Rav Yehudah teaching. In his 1977 article "Lishmah and Lo-Lishmah," he begins by citing bTa'anit 7a which states "whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake, his learning becomes and elixir of life to him…But whoever occupies himself with the Torah not for its own sake, it becomes to him a deadly poison."[45] Actions that are undertaken in order to obtain a reward or avoid a punishment are not only inferior but toxic. The metaphor may be hyperbolic, but it emphasizes the negative impact that actions undertaken lo lishmah can have upon our lives.

Later in the same article, Leibowitz advocates for the separation of the notion God's existence and the events of the world entirely. He writes, "A recognition of God which is dependent on what man conceives as His manifestation in nature or in history is egocentric and bound to collapse."[46] Liebowitz acknowledges the flaws of the Deuteronomic system as a foundation for belief. Instead, Liebowitz advocates "belief in the existence of God and in His kingship as independent of the world [which] may lead man to recognize his duty to serve God unconditionally, and such a decision might withstand all the trials to which man may be put by the nature of things."[47] Performing mitzvot lo lishmah is selfish and flimsy, *not* a stepping stone to observance lishmah. Leibowitz goes on to argue that even the Torah shows that having "evidence" of God's existence and providence actually has no relationship with one's observance of mitzvot.

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[44] Yeshayahu Leibowitz Tribute Page, *Yeshayahu Leibowitz on "Emunah Lishmah" vs "Emunah Shelo Lishmah,"* accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fKYR5Py_No.
[45] bTa'an. 7a qtd. in Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Lishmah and Not-Lishmah (1977)," in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Harvard University Press, 1992). 61.
[46] Ibid., 75.
[47] Ibid.

He cites the Wilderness generation to support his point. After living through the Red Sea, Sinai, et. al., they were still prone to apostasy. On the contrary, in other periods of Jewish history, Jews endured terrible persecution and still continued to be loyal to God. Liebowitz writes, "there is no correlation between what occurs in nature or in history, even if it is recognized as the finger of God, and man's faith in God and his willingness to serve him. Faith and worship are born of the resolve and decision of man to serve God, which is the whole of Judaism."[48] Once we accept that we should not undertake any action for ulterior motives, even a righteous one, we must also re-examine our understanding of suffering. If suffering is not a punishment for disloyal or immoral behavior, then what is it? If suffering cannot be mitigated by righteous behavior, then how do we cope with it?

[48] Ibid.

Reframing Suffering

In his writing, Jewish Buddhist Norman Fischer presents a radical reconceptualization of suffering. He writes:

> The most astonishing fact of human life is that most of us think it's possible to minimize and even eliminate suffering. We actually think this, which is one reason why it's so difficult for us when we're suffering. We think, "This shouldn't be this way," or "I'm going to get rid of this somehow." I think many of us believe that since suffering is so bad and so unpleasant, if we were really good and really smart, it wouldn't arise in the first place. Somehow suffering is our own fault. If it's not our fault, then it's definitely someone else's fault. But when suffering arises, we think we should surely be able to avoid it. We should be able to set it to one side and not dwell on it. We should "move on," as they say, go on to positive things, do a little Buddhism, meditate, get around the suffering, and go forward. We shouldn't allow the suffering to stop us, not allow it to mess us up. We believe that if only we play our cards right, we could have a positive life without much suffering. We constantly come back to that way of thinking.[49]

Fischer seeks to destabilize the notion that suffering is something we should be able to avoid. Even though we have no evidence for this belief, we are so captivated by the Deuteronomic message that we actually think we should be able to avoid suffering if we are careful enough. This belief is born of a desire to control our world and a false hope that we can prevent suffering from occurring in the first place.

To maintain this belief, like Job's false friends, we seek rational explanations for our own or others' suffering even when there is none. This phenomenon is exemplified by the aforementioned midrash about Moses and Rabbi Akiva in which Moses observes Akiva's brilliance and then learns of his martyrdom. After witnessing Akiva's teaching,

> He [Moses] said before [God], "Master of the Universe! You showed me [Rabbi Akiva's] Torah. Show me his reward." [God] said to him, "Turn around."
> He [Moses] turned around. He saw them weighing his [Akiva's] flesh in the meat market (after Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans).
> He [Moses] said before [God]: Master of the Universe! This is Torah and this is its reward?

[49] Fischer, "Suffering Opens The Real Path -- Norman Fischer."

> [God] said to him, "Silence! Thus arose in thought before me" (i.e., thus I have decided)[50]

In accordance with Deuteronomic ideology, Moses believes that Akiva should not suffer because Akiva is righteous and wise. When Moses sees that Akiva does suffer greatly, Moses questions God, and God compels him to be silent. The authors of this midrash seem to be teaching that Akiva's suffering is not his fault, but even God offers no explanation of this fate. There simply isn't one.

Fischer describes suffering as inexplicable but essential to the human condition. He writes,

> Suffering is not a mistake. It's not a problem. It's not your fault; it's not my fault. It's not the government's fault. You and I and the government may make plenty of mistakes, but the question of suffering is much bigger than that. Suffering is pivotal for human life. It's what gives us the incentive, the vision, and the strength to really take hold of our lives spiritually. [51]

I agree with Fischer; suffering is bigger than mistakes, but I have a hard time reading the story of Akiva or reports of other senseless tragedies and believing that suffering is pivotal for human life. Furthermore, sometimes humans *do* cause suffering, but we would not suggest that we do so in order to inspire someone to take hold of their life spiritually. We may cause suffering by accident or we may do so intentionally to somehow serve our own purposes. Fischer also writes, "But suffering can also bring us to the deepest possible sense of meaning for human life. We can all likely recall a story of someone who, due to tremendous suffering, found a beauty and meaning in life that they never would have seen without that experience."[52] While I accept the possibility that suffering *can* have this outcome, I believe that Fischer's thinking here comes too close to the

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[50] bMen. 29b qtd. in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "Theodicy and Torah," in *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 183.
[51] Fischer, "Suffering Opens The Real Path -- Norman Fischer."
[52] Ibid.

apologetic "everything happens for a reason," which is simply an offshoot of the Deuteronomic message. If suffering can transform into beauty or meaning without causing the sufferer further pain, this is wonderful, but this transformation process is precarious. Especially when we seek to help others transform their suffering into meaning, we risk creating false justifications of their suffering and causing them further pain. As in the case of Job's friends who seek to convince him that, for one reason or another, Job *does* deserve his fate, such a task is often clumsily undertaken and botched, resulting in additional suffering.

I differentiate between two different categories of suffering, which here I call Category 1 and Category 2. Category 1 is suffering which is inexplicable and beyond our control. Category 2 is suffering which does have preventable, human causes. Category 1 suffering includes suffering caused by natural phenomena: disease, death, accidents, etc. While unfortunate, these events are unavoidable. As Kohelet teaches, in due course, they happen to us all.[53] Category 2 suffering includes suffering that originates with humans and is caused by governments, hatred, imbalances of power or wealth, etc. The story of Akiva's suffering includes elements of both categories. Akiva was murdered at the hands of his Roman persecutors whose hatred for Jews had human origins (Category 2). Akiva was powerless to prevent his pain (Category 1), but he was the victim of a violent regime (2). Other human actors could have chosen not to hate or harm him, though they also were coerced to do so (2). Moses also experiences both categories of suffering in this tale. Although the text does not explicitly state as such, he experiences grief over Akiva's death (1). Mourning falls into Category 1 because, in most cases, we cannot control matters of life and death. They are natural phenomenon, regardless of the circumstances

[53] Ecc. 3.

of the death. The text instead highlights Moses' Category 2 suffering: he is distressed by the injustice of the situation—that this is Akiva's "reward." Moses' suffering is created by the Deuteronomic system. God does not comfort him by disavowing the Deuteronomic system, but merely tells him to shut up. As Jews, we have a responsibility to be a source of comfort to those who are experiencing Category 1 suffering and to seek to alleviate causes and mitigate the effects of Category 2 suffering. The Deuteronomic system itself can be a cause of Category 2 suffering, and I believe we have a moral obligation to denounce it.

Advocating Altruism

So far, I have described the problems of Deuteronomic ideology, argued for the separation of reward and punishment from ethical behavior, and reframed our understanding of suffering. The next step in my work is to formulate a model for ethical behavior that serves as an alternative to the Deuteronomic system. Instead of the Deuteronomic system, in which motivation is grounded in self-interest (whether national or personal), I propose a system of altruism, in which motivation for behavior is grounded in care for the other. In this model, all categories of suffering, while painful, serve as opportunities to care for the other. As I described in my introduction, my search for classical Jewish texts that advanced a notion of unselfish altruism with which I felt comfortable, came up short (e.g., "honor your father and mother" is paired with "in order that your days be lengthened"). This unsatisfactory search lead me to search for an alternative to the Deuteronomic model outside of the Jewish corpus. Looking at work by Tibetan Buddhist monk and scientist Matthieu Ricard and then by Zen Buddhist priest,

Jewish meditation guide, and poet Norman Fischer led me to language and ideas that I found helpful and inspiring. I believe they promote healthier, more sustainable theologies than the Deuteronomic message. Other elements of their thought troubled me or contradicted my Jewish sensibilities. Nevertheless, I decided to incorporate those ideas which spoke to me into my thinking in accordance with Judaism's long-standing tradition syncretism, of adopting wisdom from other cultures to its benefit.

The classic Jewish example of Judaism's tradition of intentional, critical syncretism is the Passover Seder. The seder includes a great deal of overlap with the Greco-Roman symposia including drinking wine, reclining on cushions, conducting discussion, and incorporating the various items on the seder plate. Despite these Greco-Roman elements, the retelling of the Exodus, the association of the symbolic foods with the Biblical narrative, and the theological content of the Hagaddah make this custom incontrovertibly Jewish in character as well. In a responsum explaining the origins of the seder, Rabbi David Golinkin describes this phenomenon as follows:

> The Jewish people throughout the generations did not live in a vacuum; it absorbed much from its surroundings. But it did not absorb blindly. The Sages absorbed the form of the symposium from the Hellenistic world, but drastically changed its content. The Greeks and Romans discussed love, beauty, food and drink at the symposium, while the Sages at the Seder discussed the Exodus from Egypt, the miracles of God and the greatness of the Redemption. The symposium was meant for the elite, while the Sages turned the Seder into an educational experience for the entire Jewish people.[54]

The example of the Passover seder demonstrates how external influences can have a positive impact upon Judaism. Far from diluting or detracting from the Jewish content of the holiday, the syncretization of a Biblical ritual and these Greco-Roman elements saved and enhanced the Passover ritual. Without adopting the seder model, the Biblical ritual of

[54] Golinkin, "The Origins of the Seder."

Passover could have fallen by the wayside in post-Temple Judaism. Instead, it has become one of the most widely practiced Jewish rituals. This process of intentional syncretism was essential to its survival. As a future rabbi, one of my goals is to ensure that Judaism not just survive but contribute value and meaning to the lives of critical-thinking individuals and communities. To guarantee this contribution, I recommend replacing the Deuteronomists' philosophy of suffering, prosperity, punishment, and reward with alternative philosophy, such as Ricard's and Fischer's.

Fischer describes suffering not as a punishment for moral failure, but as a source of inspiration and motivation to seek justice. He goes as far as to say "I want more suffering. I want to feel more suffering of the people who are suffering everywhere. I want to feel that suffering more, care about it more, and do something about it more."[55] In contrast, communities that adopt the Deuteronomic system can ostracize those who experience suffering, whether by implicitly suggesting that their suffering is their own fault or by intentionally avoiding the sufferer as if their plight is somehow "contagious." Communities that adopt an altruistic attitude embrace those who are suffering, seek to be with them in their pain, and help however they can. For Fischer,

> This is the origin of the concept of justice, I think, the sense that those who suffer are the same as us, and deserve, deeply, to be treated the same way we are treated, to receive whatever advantages and help anyone else would receive. The idea of justice is not obvious or self-evident. There are still today people who will say, "Well, the poor are poor because they deserve to be poor; they haven't worked hard like we have." Or, criminals are criminals because they have decided to do wrong, they are rotten evil people, so why should they have any protection or special rights in the law. Even now, many people think like this, and, in the past, thinking like this was just something obvious. If harm befell you, it was because you deserved it, because you were marked for it, and it was just too bad. The idea of justice means, to the contrary, that people who suffer deserve dignified treatment and sympathy because they are us, and we are them. Their hearts and

[55] Fischer, "Suffering Opens The Real Path -- Norman Fischer."

> our hearts are built in exactly the same way, and are entwined with one another and with the heart of the world.[56]

Rather than blaming the victim or justifying their suffering in some way, Fischer calls upon us to acknowledge our similarity to the sufferer. We share a common humanity irrespective of our life circumstances, and this humanity ought to evoke empathy and compassion.

Matthieu Ricard asserts that altruism, an authentic desire to improve the welfare of another and alleviate her suffering, is innate, evolutionarily beneficial, and can be cultivated, even in settings in which altruism is counter-cultural. In his tome on the subject, he describes different aspects of altruism including loving kindness, compassion, and empathy, which he believes can be taught to students of all ages.[57] Ricard asserts that altruism is the natural manifestation of human kindness and is advantageous to both individuals and societies that embrace it. The benefits of altruism, unlike those described in the Deuteronomic system, are built in to the altruistic acts themselves. For instance, making someone else happy can prevent me from having a somber worldview. Unlike in the Deuteronomic system, I do not merit any kind of divine reward for this action, only the benefit inherent in the actions that allowed me to bring joy to that person's life. Although antithetical to Deuteronomic ideology, altruism itself is not antithetical to Judaism. Especially when framed in terms of its constituent elements such as lovingkindness and compassion, altruism overlaps with Jewish ethical teachings.

In a somewhat circuitous way, Fischer's and Ricard's thinking inspired me to look to the writing of Emmanuel Levinas as a possible Jewish articulation of the

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[56] Fischer, Norman, "Suffering in the Bible and in Zen Buddhism" (2000), http://www.chzc.org/zoketsu2.htm.
[57] Ricard, *Altruism*. 26.

philosophy of altruism. Levinas writes that we care for the Other in whom we see the trace of God's image. For Levinas, "to be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God but to find oneself in his trace…To go toward Him is not to follow his trace, which is not a sign; it is to go toward Others who stand in the trace of illeity."[58] We do not behave ethically toward others in order to curry divine favor or avoid divine retribution as the Deuteronomists would suggest. Rather, we behave ethically out of a duty to others who are similarly created in God's image. As summarized by Levinas scholar Michael Morgan,

> To draw close to God, then, is to respond to the face of the other person… When we speak of encountering God or of God revealing Himself to me, this is an expression of my desire to respond to the other person with kindness and generosity, my sense of being called by the other and being obligated to her. Indeed, doing the latter is the only way one can experience the former. One cannot know God or encounter God directly; all religious experience is ethical action.[59]

Ethical action becomes both a means and an end. We respond to the other with kindness in order to approach God, but ethical action itself becomes a religious experience. In this way, the obligation to care for the other is both personally meaningful to the religious individual and beneficial to the community whose members embrace altruism.

Because Ricard comes from a Buddhist background, not a Jewish one like Levinas, much of Ricard's writing is steeped in the Buddhism to which he has devoted his adult life. He frames altruism as a stage-by-stage process in terms of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. Ricard describes these truths as follows:

> The first Noble Truth is the truth of suffering which must be recognized for what it is, in all its forms, visible and subtle. The second is the truth of the causes of

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[58] Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*. 64.

[59] Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). 149.

> suffering, ignorance, which leads to anger, greed, and many other mental obscurations. Since these mental poisons have causes that can be eliminated, the cessation of suffering—the third Noble Truth—is thus possible. The fourth Noble Truth is that of the path that transforms this possibility into a reality. This path is the process that puts into play all the methods allowing us to eliminate the fundamental causes of suffering.[60]

Like the intrinsic benefits of altruism described earlier, the causes of suffering are inherent to the suffering itself. One's ignorance might beget anger, but anger is not detached divine punishment for one's ignorance. This third truth, the cessation of suffering, is one of the instances at which my understanding of suffering differs from Ricard's. I do not believe in a state of Enlightenment in which examples of Category 1 suffering such as disease, tragic loss, or natural disasters have causes that can be eliminated or reframed. I believe these are misfortunes which cause suffering that randomly afflicts both the righteous and the wicked (i.e., *mikreh echad l'kulam*). With altruistic care and the passage of time, there may me a path through which all categories suffering may be safely navigated. The sufferer benefits from the support of a caring other, which may mitigate the effects of her suffering, and lead her toward coping and healing.

The altruistic methods which allow us to mitigate the effects of suffering can and should be cultivated from a young age, including in Jewish settings. Ricard describes altruism as innate in human beings and cites several studies that demonstrate how altruism manifests itself in children of various ages and stages of development.[61] His analysis indicates that

> on the one hand, the child is naturally altruistic from the earliest age; on the other, the child learns to moderate altruism only after having internalize the social norms. So a wise education should consist of preserving natural inclinations to

[60] Ricard, *Altruism*. 36.
[61] Ibid., 208-224.

> cooperate while still protecting oneself, and should do so without inculcating in the child selfish, individualistic, and narcissistic values."[62]

We may hope to preserve these natural, altruistic inclinations but accidentally do just the opposite. Unfortunately, we educate children away or out of their altruistic habits when we apply discipline in an authoritarian manner or by withdrawing love. Instead, Ricard advocates induction or

> "calmly explaining to the child why it would be better for him to change his behavior…The child is urged to adopt the perspective of the other and especially to realize the harm he may have caused to the other…It also turns out that children are more sensitive to calls for empathy than to reminders of abstract moral norms."[63]

If to be Jewish is to seek to alleviate the suffering of another who is also created in the image of God, including education toward empathy in our curricula is essential.

In addition to the obligation to cultivate altruism, we have a moral obligation to be honest with children about the flaws of the Deuteronomic system from a young age. This honesty prevents the necessity for children to un-learn the Deuteronomic message and break the habit of relying on extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation. Ricard cites research by Michael Tomasello and Felix Warnekan that demonstrates the long-term ineffectiveness of extrinsic motivation as an influence upon behavior. Their study showed that

> if children obtain a reward from the experimenter [for intervening, without being prompted, to help an experimenter struggling with a simple task], their propensity to help is not increased. Quite the contrary: it was observed that the children who were rewarded offer their help less often than those to whom nothing was given. As Warneken and Tomasello note: "This rather surprising finding provides even further evidence for the hypothesis that children's helping is driven by an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic motivation."[64]

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[62] Ibid., 214.
[63] Ibid., 219-220.
[64] Ibid., 212-213.

This research contradicts the sentiment of the teaching from bPesachim 50b that mitzvot undertaken lo lishmah will eventually lead to mitzvot undertaken lishmah. By this logic, mitzvot performed in order to receive a reward will be performed less frequently, thus leading to less observance or fewer mitzvot. Teaching children that God rewards them for their righteous behavior might even discourage the behavior we seek to promote. Instead, Warneken and Tomasello's research supports teaching ideology similar to Kohelet's—that because all is ephemeral, one should pursue wisdom, joy, and goodness regardless of any ultimate outcome. [65] These ideas are more likely to endure, motivate goodness, and create a collaborative, altruistic culture than the Deuteronomists' ideology. Incorporating them into our Jewish discourse and curricula is essential to building communities, whose members are compassionate, generous, and sensitive to the needs of others.

[65] Ecc. 2:24-26 and 3:11-12.

CONCLUSION

Deuteronomic ideology has served a very real purpose throughout Jewish history. For some Jews, the belief that God rewards loyalty, morality, and religious observance (and punishes the opposite behaviors) has helped them live pious lives as ethical members of society. For others, this belief and its corollaries have caused them additional suffering at times of serious pain, caused them great anger and disillusionment, or even caused them to abandon their faith.

Without cultivating the empathy required to live altruistically, ethical behavior becomes very difficult to sustain. As Ricard suggests, this education toward altruism is most effective when it starts at a very young age. Jewish pre-schools and religious schools should include socio-emotional learning in their curricula, even making use of Jewish literature to do so. A curriculum strand that focuses on altruism will have the greatest impact when it is integrated throughout the curriculum, over the course of a child's Jewish education.

When children, adolescents, or adults have already internalized the Deuteronomic system, we have a moral obligation to teach them about its flaws and dangers in order to prevent the harm that it is liable to cause, especially in cases of suffering and tragedy. This too can be part of the curriculum of Confirmation classes, adult education sessions, and sermons. Presenting philosophies of altruism using Jewish language and concepts, such as the notion of *emunah lishmah*, will help uproot entrenched Deuteronomic ideology. By advocating actions undertaken *lishmah* in place of actions undertaken *l'ma'an ya'arichun yamecha,* we can create a culture of intrinsic motivation, ethical

behavior, and compassionate caring which enriches the lives of its members and the wider world as well.

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