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February, 2001

ברוך דין האמת:

Navigating Between the Reality of Despair and the Comfort of Meaning

A Theological Exploration of Suffering, Death and the Problematic Truth of God's Judgment(s)

Eric Linder

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Relgion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
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Dedicated to those whose pursuit of knowledge is framed by the pursuit of Truth.

Acknowledgements

Every journey begins with a single step. Until recently, I saw my footprints as random steps in the mud, with the occasional marked straight path. Many teachers and friends have helped me shape those footprints, always showing me a larger world in which to walk.

To Dr. Leonard Kravitz, whose serious thinking is couched in a demeanor of humor and *Yiddishkite*. Thank you for teaching me the important difference between necessary ideas and true ideas. May you reach your second bar-mitzvah with health and spirit intact. I look forward to "going out into the field" (like Esau), and I assure you that I will never, ever kick Rover.

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כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם
לֹא־נִפְלֵאת הִוא מִמְּךָ וְלֹא־רְחֹקָה הִוא׃ לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִוא לֵאמֹר מִי
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יַעַל
לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבָר־לָּנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקָּחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיַשְׁמִעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה׃
הִוא
כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ׃

This commandment which I gave you today is not hidden from you, nor is it far off from you. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, that may hear it, and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? The word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it."

- Deuteronomy 30:11-14

I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer the truth.

- Karl Popper, quoted in Wittengstein's Poker

Foreword

I have a file on my computer entitled "Coincidences." Every time some sort of fantastic convergence of events occurs, I type in a small blurb describing the incident, and add it to the file. I've been known to preface many a story with, "You won't believe what happened to me today!"

Someone told me that "Coincidences are God's way of being anonymous."

After a few years of rabbinical school, I realized the source of my fascination with coincidences. They are meaningful. If I am thinking about someone and run into her, I was *obviously* meant to see her. If I forget my wallet at home, go back into my bedroom and receive a phone call from a long lost friend, I was meant to leave the wallet.

I am still fascinated by coincidences, although I no longer believe that "things happen for a reason." I look back at the coincidences found in my computer file, and realize that all of life experience involves co-incidence; I have chosen to focus on specific experiences. I have decided which coincidences to add to the file. As I write these words at Starbucks, a college student sits next to me. This too is a coincidence. I choose not to ascribe meaning to it, however.

This thesis is not about the kind of fantastical coincidences that make for good storytelling. It does, however, have to do with meaning. Coincidences are a

touchtone between existing meaning and created meaning, reality and wish-fulfillment, nihilism and teleology. A few years back, I thought there was inherent meaning in coincidences, if only I could come to understand it. Now, I am a self-described post-modernist: meaning is *created* by the interaction between person and object, experience, or text.

This thesis is exactly about the interaction between man and God, and the meanings that we create regarding that relationship. Looking back over the past few months, I see that this process of research and analysis has been more meaningful than any of my crazy coincidental anecdotes.

This thesis has helped me continue to re-evaluate my relationship with what it is that I call God. Hopefully, it will stir you to question your theological beliefs, and thus find meaning therein.

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"Praised is God the True Judge?"

Bad things happen to good people. Suffering and pain are realities of life. In the movie Grand Canyon, Danny Glover's character bemoans, "You can always count on the terrible."

All of us experience unjust suffering. There is a large gap between the world that is and the world that ought to be. A person extends kindness and generosity throughout his life and is informed that lung cancer will end his life within six months. We can recount similar stories affecting those we love. Sometimes, suffering and pain occur immediately after actions of benevolence and righteousness. Upon such experience, one might ask, "How did I deserve this to happen?"

In just the past few years, natural disasters have swept away hundreds of thousands of people; people who had responsibilities, friends and families. Although these people undoubtedly committed errors of judgment, rationality and morality, could it be that they actually deserved to die?

These extreme cases, while clear examples of unjust suffering, are not the only examples. Just last week, I helped an elderly woman cross the street. Immediately afterwards, I tripped and fell. Whereas I would not use language of suffering in recounting this experience, it surely seemed unfair. I encountered pain and inconvenience directly after performing a *mitzvah*. It was not what I deserved; it was unjust.

Often times, one experiences suffering which retroactively turns out to be quite the opposite. I once heard the story of a boy who fell off of a horse and broke his arm. His father said, "Woe to me! What bad luck!" The next week, there was a war in the land and the army came by to enlist all healthy young men. Due to his broken arm, the son was not forcibly placed on the front lines of the war. The father said, "Thank the heavens! What good luck!" The father's life experience affords him the hindsight with which to re-interpret the meaning of the son's broken arm. Had he not broken his arm, his son would have woefully been taken into the army. The question is: Did the son's arm break so that he would not be forced into the army? The question is one of teleological[1] concern, and of significant import. Once the father was able to reframe the teleological cause of the son's suffering, what was perceived as injustice is now perceived as just. In this case, chronology implied teleology. But, wherein lay the difference between two events coincidentally linked and two events causally linked?[2]

Often, a number of events take place before making a teleological judgment with regard to a specific life experience.[3] Fortune, serendipity and reward can eventually be interpreted as suffering and unfairness. Likewise, unjust circumstances might be looked at as blessings in disguise. This sort of retrograde analysis occurs constantly, as we reflect on past events and the now-understood consequences of those events.

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[1] Teleology is partially defined as, "The study of design and purpose." http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=teleology

[2] Edmonds, Wittgenstein's Poker, 65.

[3] The movie Signs (Directed by M. Night Shyamalan) speaks to this issue, specifically with regard to God's power.

Things happen for a reason. Often, I have heard this proffered forth as an apologia for suffering. Ostensibly, the 'reason,' as such, is a form of higher wisdom that we do not, or perhaps can not, understand. Like the father in the story, we might arrive at a reason in retrospect, only after other events have come to pass. At point C in our lives, one might re-interpret (or perhaps even create) reason(s) for point A in one's life. The experience of A can then be seen as a necessary event. Writ large, one can perhaps then perceive *all* events in life as 'happening for a reason.'

We would like the chronology in our life events to demonstrate teleology; correlation (of chronological events) should reflect a meaningful causality. At the moment of suffering, pain, anger, or even inconvenience, one does not yet know the future experiences that a specific moment will help to engender. At point A, one does not yet have an experiential understanding of point C. Teleological understanding occurs only retroactively, as one is able to interpret a chronology of events.

Despite experience of unjust suffering and tragedy, we would like to believe in a system of divine justice. We hope that life experiences follow from just and meaningful consequence of our thoughts, deeds and morals. We want to narrow the gap between the world that is and the world that ought to be.

Sigmond Freud writes, "... and thus a store of ideas is created, born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable."[4] The claim that events happen for a reason is an example of such an idea. Through it, we can accept painful life experiences while also maintaining that there is in fact a meaningful reason and

[4] Freud, Future of an Illusion, 23.

necessary purpose for our suffering, even if that meaning is not immediately understood.

As human beings, our minds might not be able to fully comprehend the teleology for experienced and perceived suffering. Going back to our timeline for a moment, when moment A happens, we are ignorant concerning the time-frame that will bring about understanding of A's necessity. Our imperfect understanding cannot yet understand the reason(s) for our perceived suffering. Faith that such reasons exist, however, engenders a sense of hope and comfort, as against despair and anger.

The belief that everything happens for a reason, then, points to a system of teleological justice that is beyond the immediate comprehension of human beings. I may not understand the objective reason for something. Since the realities of life do not seem to correspond to an understood system of justice and fairness, we look to a higher source than our own limited understanding. We look to God as the source for justice and comfort. God is the True Judge, as humans conflate suffering with goodness, pain with blessing, ill-fortune with necessity. As the Bible states, "Woe unto them who say of evil it is good, and of good it is evil; that change darkness into light and light into darkness.[5]" Without benefit of hindsight, we cannot but conflate them. Faith that everyone happens for a just reason, however, can end our retroactive teleological musings.

Isaiah 45:7 states, "I [God] form the light and create darkness: I make peace and evil." According to Frederick Lindstrom, "Isaiah 45:7 is one of the *loci classici* of the exegetical literature as a witness to an Old Testament notion of

[5] Isaiah 5:20.

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divine pan causality with respect to misfortune."[6] David Kraemer, the author of Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinical Literature, writes, "... all suffering is understood as punishment [by God] of one sort or another."[7]

If this is the case, then *all* suffering (whether perceived or otherwise) has teleological meaning, as it stems from wisdom higher than ourselves. According to this theology, everything does indeed happen for a reason; a reason known to God, and only to God.

At this point, it is necessary to define our terms, as suffering is observer-dependant. One person may place import on one experience of pain, whereas another would construe the same experience differently.

What, then, qualifies as suffering?

Shalom Carmy quotes Tractate Arakhin from the Babylonian Talmud:

> What is considered pain in Jewish theology? Rabbi Elazar said: the discomfiture of ordering a garment that did not fit well. Rabbi Schmuel said: the annoyance of having one's drink prepared at a temperature not to his liking. Mar said: if he begins to dress and finds his garment turned inside out. Indeed: even if he reached into his purse to take out three coins and only grasped two, necessitating a second effort, this too, must be considered as pain.[8]

This seems like an extremely liberal definition of pain and suffering. Pain is likened to annoyance, as depending on the case, one needs to warm a drink, take off a garment and put it back on, or put a coin back into one's pocket. These three examples are categorically similar, in that the suffering ensued will cause one to spend more time on a task than originally intended.

God is the sole source for human suffering. Even the experiences in our lives in which we incur minor illness or inconvenience; these too are caused by God. If

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[6] Lindstrom, God and the Origin of Evil, 178,
[7] Kraemer, 62.
[8] Carmy, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, 91.

God is good, then our perceived meaningless experiences reflect teleology. Eliyahu Levin writes, "The Torah teaches us that there are no 'coincidences.' ... The day-to-day occurrences in your life – the simple, seemingly unimportant and insignificant details of each and every one of your activities, are controlled by Hashem."[9] And, even as we do not understand God's reasons for those activities, we assert their existence. Thus, there is a meaning to suffering in that although God's judgments (i.e. punishments) may seem unfair and unjust, it is only because we lack the wisdom and foresight to as yet understand their necessity.

"Everything that happens in this world is an expression of the intentions of an intelligence superior to us, which in the end, though its ways and byways are difficult to follow, orders everything for the best."[10] According to Freud, such ideas do not spring forth in the minds of human beings because they correlate to an ontological reality. Rather, they serve as a coping mechanism, faith in ideas such as this arise "... from the necessity of defending one-self against the crushingly superior force of nature."[11] Faith in such ideas changes ones nihilistic world-view and to one of meaning and order. Freud, however, is clear that although these ideas are quite powerful, they are in fact illusions. They are "fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes."[12]

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[9] Levin, Hashgocoho Pratis, 5.
[10] Freud, The Future of an Illusion, 23.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Freud, Future of an Illusion, 38.

These wishes are so strong because of our desire to construct teleological meaning from our autobiography. Faith in such ideas assures us that there is in fact a meaningful purpose to our perception of unjust suffering.

Death, however, is a unique category of suffering, not because of the possible intensity of grief held by mourners, but because of its finality. Death is final; unlike other experiences of pain and suffering, there is no future point of one's life wherein one can retroactively interpret the teleological meaning for one's death. Although at other times one might believe that everything happens for a reason, there is a problem here, as this faith is predicated upon some future event occurring that might help re-frame the meaning and purpose of the event in question.

Four years ago, my grandmother passed away. At the time, I had just finished my fourth year of rabbinical school. During the funeral, I paid a bit more attention to the liturgy than I might have otherwise. My grandmother's funeral was the first Jewish funeral I had been to, and despite my growing knowledge of Judaism, several funeral rituals were unknown to me. One of them concerned *kri'ah*, the rendering of the garment. Just before tearing the ribbon that the rabbi had given my family, we were asked to repeat the following line: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam Dayan HaEmet*: Blessed is Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, the True Judge.

My grandmother had lived a happy life. She was married for over fifty years, had children and grandchildren that she adored. Throughout her eighty-five years, she maintained fairly good health. All of that not withstanding, I refused to

believe that her death was deserved; that God had chosen to end her life, regardless of possible reason(s), if any. I would not recite these words. Parents of a baby that died of SIDS after seven days recite the same blessing.

Then, as now, I did not believe in a personal God that is omniscient regarding one's personal experience(s), and certainly did not believe in a God that acts (judged) based on individuals' actions.[13] Even if God does act in this manner, I refuse to believe that there is some sort of divine will that decided the circumstances of my grandmother's death. Anne Brenner writes, "It is hard to imagine being willing or able to praise a God who has just taken away a loved one."[14]

Four years ago while sitting in that funeral home, I sensed an important tension between life experience and the sentiments evoked from this liturgical response to suffering. At that time, I lacked appropriate theological language in order to fully articulate the issue involved, let alone a solution.

I imagined a family who was grieving the tragic and sudden loss of a child, or a teenager who loses his parents to a car accident. Surely a just and true God could not have desiderata to end these lives.

I began to look at the words of this blessing. It would seem to have made more sense if the blessing read along these lines: "Praised is God who returns us to the dust from whence we came" or "Praised is God who creates life, and Praised is God who takes life." Why refer to God as a "True Judge"?

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[13] I will discuss this issue of *Hashgacah Pratit* (individual providence) at length.
[14] Brenner, Mourning & Mitzvah, 113.

As a rabbinical student, I had studied a variety of names and epithets for God. Depending on specific prayers, life circumstance or various holidays, Jews refer to God by a multitude of names. God as a True Judge was not a reference I was familiar with. Having never come across this before at various *minyanim*, holiday celebrations and life cycle events, I paid even more attention to this seemingly unique epithet for God.

I was surprised to find that in its funeral service, the Reform Rabbi's Manual does include this blessing. One can say, "Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Judge of Truth." Importantly, however there is an alternative. One can say, "Blessed are you, who has implanted within us everlasting life."[15]

It seems as if the Reform movement has implicitly acknowledged the possible discomfort one might have with this blessing. The mere existence of an alternative serves as proof. This alternative blessing, like the *Kaddish*, makes no explicit reference to death. There is an implicit reference, as we take comfort that our loved one is bound up with 'everlasting life.' This alternative does not define God but rather draws attention to an action of God. This prayer does not draw attention to the finality of life, but quite the opposite! It is a prayer of comfort, whereas *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* is one of pain.

Although I had never been asked to recite *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* before, I had certainly recited *Kaddish Yatom* repeatedly. The two prayers are similar in that this *Kaddish* is recited as a remembrance for loved ones whom have died. According to *Halachah*[16], one in mourning[17] recites the Mourner's *Kaddish* three

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[15] Rabbi's Manual, 110.
[16] The corpus of Jewish law. Literally means "the path."

times a day for eleven months. In many liberal synagogues, the prayer leader will recite the names of the deceased aloud, followed by the reciting of *Kaddish*. The reciting of *Kaddish* focuses the congregation's attention on the lives and memories of deceased loved ones.

With this in mind, it is striking that the *Kaddish* makes no explicit mention of death. In fact, its first sentence contains petitions for the sanctification of God's name.[18] According to Talmudic sources, this in fact the very essence of the Kaddish.[19] The focus is not on the memory of individual lives, but the glory of God's kingdom. As Brenner suggests, it surely seems anathema to praise God during a time of sorrow and remorse.

It might seem that I would have problems reciting the *Kaddish* as well, as I would be praising God while simultaneously focusing my attention (both emotional and intellectual) on the anger and hurt stemming from my grandmother's death. Nonetheless, I believed then (as I do now) that the words of *Kaddish* are words of comfort.

There is no specific referent to death in the words of the Mourner's *Kaddish*; the words are comforting precisely because they do not mention death. Put differently, the *Kaddish* ameliorates emotional pain because it focuses shifts ones spiritual attention away from death. Just as Abraham "lifts up his eyes" to see the ram stuck in the thicket[20], the *Kaddish* helps a mourner experience life from a

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[17] According to Jewish law, a mourner is one who has lost a mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband or wife. Furthermore, they stand to recite the *Kaddish* if observing a *Yahrtzeit, Shiva or Shloshim*

[18] Elboken, Jewish Liturgy, 80-81.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Genesis 22:13.

different perspective; the recitation of the prayer can "lift up the eyes" of a mourner. The reality of death is still present, but the prayer helps one in realizing that it is not the only reality. There are still blessings within the world and in one's life. The act of praising God can cause a mourner to focus attention on blessing instead of despair; hope in place of anger. The *Kaddish* does not negate the loss of a loved one. It does, however, accentuate blessings that otherwise might not be seen or experienced. The alternative blessing mentioned in the Rabbi's Manual serves this same purpose.

Whereas I had a positive spiritual understanding of the *Kaddish*, there I was at the funeral home, obstinate in my refusal to acknowledge and/or praise God as the True Judge.

Unlike *Kaddish*, the words of this blessing are an explicit referent to death. Whereas with the *Kaddish*, one praises God's kingdom *despite* being mournful or upset, here it seems as if one praises God exactly *because* one is mournful or upset. By referencing God's true judgment of death, we are praising God for exactly the same issue for which we also feel anger and despair.

Why is one to recite this line when it seems to belie life experience? What's worse, why are these words *only* recited during moments of extreme suffering? The reference to God as a "True Judge" is not common in liturgy; the power of these words stands out exactly because the blessing is only recited during specific moments of suffering, making my discomfort that much more egregious.

Frederik Lindstrom writes, "'God is, after all, the creator, and though he brings about good things and bad things' ... This reference to his (Gods) creative

omnipotence is intended as comforting, because the creator and what he has made cannot in the final analysis be evil."[21]

If everything does indeed happen for a reason, unjust suffering is not an ontological category but an incorrectly perceived epistemological one. If all suffering has a teleological explanation, one is freed from the shackles of nihilism and randomness. Subjective perception of despair gives way to faith of meaning.

I have occasionally come across the suggestion that the Holocaust happened so that Israel could become a sovereign Jewish state. Although it is the kind of statement many will (and should) find offensive, it is exactly the kind of statement we often construct. This statement gives teleological import to the Holocaust. To rephrase Freud, statements like this make our suffering tolerable. The Foundation of the State of Israel certainly occurred after the Holocaust. Additionally, I don't think that it is unfair to argue that the Holocaust engendered world-wide support for the creation of a safe Jewish homeland. That does not mean, however, that the existence of the Holocaust was for the purpose of the creation of the state of Israel.

Statements like these can be comforting. They engender a sense of teleological meaning rather than uncertainty and doubt. To paraphrase Freud once again, these sorts of statements help make our pain and suffering tolerable.

Regardless, I tend to agree with Iris Murdoch contention that "Almost anything that consoles us is a fake."[22] Put simply, hope that might something would be so does not make it so.

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[21] Lindstrom, 216.
[22] Carmy, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, 10.

My life experience tells me that suffering is not caused by God; suffering does not reflect the judgment of God, thus displaying an ontological truth outside the realm of my understanding. Whereas it is certainly the case that I occasionally re-interpret moments of pain and suffering as ones of blessing and learning, I refuse to believe that they are causally linked to God's (just) actions. There is a large difference between causality and teleology. Chronological happenstance does not imply teleological reality!

I have stated my belief that the words of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* do not reflect an ontological reality of the universe, let alone the experience of individual lives. While at my grandmother's funeral, I could not recite words that were so egregiously anathema to my perspective of reality. Put another way, the True-'ness' of God as the True Judge does not correlate to my perception of reality. Frankly, I'm not so sure that God is a Judge, let alone a True Judge.

Sitting at my grandmother's funeral, I had assumed that the blessing reflected the notion that although I am upset and sad, I should find comfort in the fact that her death was God's judgment, and that God's judgment is True and good. It is now my opinion that this is not the case; the blessing is not meant to correlate to the reality of God and God's judgment. Rather, bit is meant to highlight the disparity between the world that is and the just world that ought to be. In this disparity, we do not justify God. We confront God.

Jewish Law and *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*: A Halachic Point of Departure

The Hebrew Bible makes no reference to God as a True Judge. The phraseology simply does not exist. Whereas there are many references to truth and judgment, there is no explicit reference to God as a *Dayan HaEmet*.

The Mishnah contains the first extant use of the language in question. Chapter nine of Mishnah Brachot lists specific blessings that one says depending on both circumstance and experience. Upon visiting sites wherein God performed miracles for the Jewish people, one says a specific blessing. There is a blessing over comets, earthquakes and lightning. There is a specific blessing that is recited upon viewing of the ocean.

The second *mishnah* in the chapter ends with two interesting blessings:

> Upon (seeing) rain and good tidings, one says, "Blessed is God who is good and does good."[23] (Contrarily) upon (hearing or experiencing) suffering, one says, "Blessed is god the True Judge."[24]

This is the first written account of God as a *Dayan HaEmet* – a True Judge. The experience for which these two are said, however, seem to be categorically different than the other blessings enumerated. Unlike the others, the qualifications for these depend on one's subjective evaluation of an event, as opposed to an objective experience dependent on the senses.

Taking the *mishnah* at face value, it seems that rain is categorically considered good. No other specific events are enumerated. It is incumbent upon each Jew, then, to determine the valence of an experience, deliberating whether an

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[23] Mishnah Brachot 9:2.
[24] *Ibid.* Both blessings do begin with the formula, "*Baruch Ata Adonai Elohenu Melech HaOlam*"

occurrence is good news, suffering or neither. The reciting of these blessings implies a certain consciousness. In order to recite either prayer, each person has to process the emotional affect of a specific experience.

Certainly, death is a form of bad news entailing (in the mornal course of things) personal suffering by those left behind. Death, however, like seeing a rainbow, is a specific empirical reality, whereas the attendant suffering is not: As alluded to above, suffering subjectively defined. Unlike death itself, it is not objectively given. Death is a specific experience, whereas suffering is a reaction to experience.

Both of these blessings, then, depend on one's subjective perspective. Upon te perception of goodness and blessing, one thanks God for goodness. If one perceives suffering, on the other hand, one recites a different blessing entirely. Rambam notes that one should attempt to recite the second blessing in the same emotional state as the first.

He writes:

> Our sages declared, "Everything God does is for good." Although many matters may originally look unfavorable, ultimately they will bring great good. Conversely, there are many things which, at the outset, appear good, and ultimately are very bad. Therefore an understanding person should not become aggrieved when beset with difficulties.

Rambam understood the manner in which one continuously re-interprets past events. The acknowledgement of God as a True Judge can be comforting, as it serves as a reminder that the present experience of suffering could actually be blessing. Therefore, one should attempt to recite the second blessing in the same emotional condition as the first. One's subjective perception does not necessarily accord to reality.

Rambam may have applauded a story told regarding the wisdom of King Solomon. A subject approached the wise king, seeking solace and comfort. His children had died. In his grief, he became sick and was unable to work. King Solomon motioned him up to the throne and displayed his signet ring. On the ring were written the words, "This too shall pass." The man left, comforted.

That very same day, another man sought audience with the king. On this occasion, the subject regaled him about the good fortune he had recently gained. He had married a beautiful woman a few weeks earlier. His income was steadily increasing, and his wife was already pregnant. King Solomon motioned him to his throne, and again pointed to the words on the signet ring; "This too shall pass."

It seems, from the Mishnah, that the reciting of the blessing upon hearing/experiencing bad news is meant as comfort. It is a reminder that situations change; all suffering is for the ultimate good. Although it might seem otherwise to human experience, God is the True Judge, whose wisdom and justice are unknown to mortal minds.

The Talmud's[25] exposition on this *mishnah* explains:

A good person is obligated to bless [God] for bad just as he blesses [God] for good, as it says: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart etc."[26]

Another exposition in the Talmud comments:[27]

Rava said: What it really means is that one must receive the evil with gladness.

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[25] Bavli, 54a. Unless otherwise noted, Talmudic sources are in the Babylonian Talmud.
[26] Deuteronomy 6:5.
[27] Brachot 60b.

Both comments support the notion that everything happens is for the best. We must receive suffering with gladness, because it is, in fact, for the good.

The text of Brachot 54a cites verses from *Torah* as proof-texts for the two blessings in question. These words from Deuteronomy are the beginning of the oft-recited *V'ahavta*, a prayer that begins with the command to love God. The *stam*[28] continues:

> 'With all of your heart' (refers) to both of your inclinations; the good inclination and the evil inclination. 'And with all of your soul' – even if he takes your life ... Another interpretation is that 'with all of 'm'odecha'' refers to whatever measure he (God) metes out to you, you are to thank Him.

The claim is that one should thank God regardless of circumstance. God is to be praised, regardless of how God decides to mete out judgment, reward and punishment.

A question arises, however. If everything is for the good (whether immediately or ultimately), why are there two separate blessings? King Solomon used the same message regardless of the apparent valence of experience; here, there are two distinct blessings. One blessing is chosen over the other depending on one's perspective. If God is a True Judge why not praise God as such regardless of experience?

Even upon death, mourners are to praise God as the True Judge. In Brachot 46b, there is explicit description of a historical occurrence in which news of one's death was followed the recitation of this prayer:

> Mar Zutra visited Rabbi Ashi when the latter had suffered a bereavement, and in the grace after meals he began and uttered the benediction: 'Who is good and does good, God of truth, *true Judge* [emphasis mine], who judges in righteousness and takes away in righteousness, who is Sovereign in His universe to do as pleases Him, for all of Gods ways are judgment; for all is Gods, and we are Gods people and his servants, and for everything we must give thanks to Him and bless Him.

[28] The word *stam* applies to the narrator of the Talmud's exposition.

We saw that the Mishnah states that the blessing needs to be said upon the hearing or experiencing of bad news. Here in the Talmud, there is precedent for reciting the blessing following the death of a loved one. Death seems to be a particular category of suffering.

Although its example is slightly more abstruse, the *stam* makes another mention of this blessing with regard to death.[29] Before looking at it, we need to understand another blessing listed in the Mishnah. In chapter nine of Tractate Brachot, one is taught to say a blessing upon entering places in which God performed a miracle. After listing several places in which God performed a miracle, the *stam* asks:

> Regarding these places in which a miracle was performed, it [the blessing involved] is understandable.[30] But, [what happened to] Lot's wife was a punishment!

Here, there is a question as to which blessing is said. On the one hand, because the transfiguration of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt qualifies as a miracle, one might think to recite the blessing over miracles. On the other hand, her punishment is the equivalent of death – death as punishment, moreover. The Talmud concludes: "One who visits Lot's wife says, *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*." In the case of death, even miraculous death, the recitation of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* trumps the other blessing in question.

Elsewhere in Tractate Brachot[31], the *stam* puts forth a question: What if a father dies, leaving his son as the heir to the family's fortune? The son first recites *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*. Only after saying this blessing, may he recite the

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[29] Brachot 54b.
[30] "Blessed ... who performed miracles for our ancestors in this place."
[31] Brachot 54b.

blessing thanking God for providing good fortune.[32] Here, the son recites the first prayer due to his grief and the second prayer because of his happiness at his newfound wealth. Although both blessings stem from the same experience (i.e. the father's death), they are recognized separately. The son is required to recite both blessings. Moreover, the lessons learned above regarding specific deaths that occurred to equally specific people is here generalized to everyone: any son, any father.

This is further proof that the main qualification for these blessings are not sensory expereinces, but the emotional content stemming from experiences. The son's experience of his father's death engenders feelings of sadness as well as happiness. Thus, both blessings are said.[33]

The question still remains, however: Why two separate blessings? I contend that the second blessing exists specifically so that one focuses attention on the tension that exists between the reality of one's suffering and one's faith in a just and powerful God. The two blessings denote the two emotional states that the experience causes; despair and sadness on the one hand, and happiness with good fortune on the other. One calls God a True Judge only if he is in a specific emotional state of sadness. Texts found in the medieval *halachic* codes help explain this point.

The Beit Yosef[34] writes, "The custom is that when someone dies, the entire congregation assembles to go to his house. There, they recite *Tzidduk HaDin*.

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[32] Brachot 59b.
[33] Though few in number, there are several other instances in which the Talmud uses the phrase *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*[33]. These, however, are the most informative with regard to circumstances upon which one is meant to say the blessing.
[34] 340.

When they recite *Dayan HaEmet*, the mourner performs *kri'ah*." The Talmud forged an experiential identification of death with suffering; the Shulchan Aruch[35] codifies the connection halachically: news of death is now a *legal* sub-category of bad news and/or experiences. Appropriately, the Shulchan Aruch lays out the general conditions and stipulations for the recitation of the blessing.

Tziduk HaDin is the technical term for the funeral prayer that links together several biblical references to God's role as a True Judge, assuming that God's actions reflect both omniscience and omnipotence. Ultimately, however, they reflect God's goodness. Although one might not experience it or understand it, God is in fact a True Judge. It is within the context of this prayer that *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* is stated.

It is not the case, however, that the blessing must unilaterally be stated only upon the actual hearing of the bad news. Gesher HaChaim says that if one[36] does not recite the blessing immediately upon hearing the news of death, he has twenty-four hours to do so. If after twenty-four hours he has not recited the blessing, he no longer can. The reason does not have to do with chronology, but with emotion. The mere fact alone that time has passed is only a proximate reason for this ruling: After twenty-four hours, he may no longer be mourning; his grief has subsided. Another *halachah* permits the blessing for as long as three days after news of death, but again, this only applies to someone who is in

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[35] Orech Chayim 222.
[36] This does not apply to *avelim*, mourners as defined by *halachah*.

mourning.[37] At stake is how long grief can be assumed to remain. Recitation of the blessing depends only on one's feeling grief.[38]

Just as the Mishnah links the experience of rain to the emotional perception of goodness, so to does the *halachah* link the news of death to a specific emotional state.

I cannot think of another *halachah* that depends upon one's emotional state. There are of course certain *mitzvot* that only apply to mourners, just as there are *mitzvot* that specifically apply to specific celebrations. There is a subtle, but crucial difference, however. The conditions governing this latter kind of *mitzvah* are *not* subjective; they are specifically delineated and defined. So too is *Baruch Dayan HaEmet,* in that *halachah* ultimately encodes the rules objectively. But behind the coding is the general assumption that the recitation of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* in reference to death must correspond to the subjective experience of the emotional state of grief. Whereas it may seem that the conditions on which the blessing depends are based solely on the sensory experience of hearing news regarding one's death, they reflect an assumption regarding one's emotional state.

If the observance of a certain law depends on the emotive state of one about to observe the law, surely the observance of the *mitzvah* speaks to that emotive state.

There are three instances when one speaks of God as a True Judge. The first is upon the experience of bad news (death being a sub-category of bad news). The second is during the recitation of *Tziduk HaDin* in the funeral liturgy. The third is in the *birkat hamazon* at the meal of condolence during *shivah.* In all of these

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[37] I.e. an "official" mourner according to the laws of Judaism (son, daughter, husband, wife, sister, brother, mother, father)

[38] Goldberg, Mourning in Halachah, 295.

cases, one's recitation of the blessing reflects the presumption of a specific emotional state. One bemoans the current event in question while simultaneously praising God for that exact same event. Ironically, one says *Baruch Dayan HaEmet only* while distressed. No wonder these words to not appear more often in the Jewish liturgical oeuvre. The assumption of acute distress is not easily arrived at.

Given The fact that *Dayan HaEmet* only appears with reference to suffering, and given the fact that one *only* recites these words while in a state of emotional duress, I came to think that perhaps the words are not meant to reflect the reality of God's judgments. If the words of the blessing were meant to correlate to the reality of God, I would think that they would be said more often, and certainly not only in response to human suffering.

If the words were meant to reflect an ontological reality of God, why would one only say them during times of absolute distress? Ontological truth exists regardless of subjective experience, emotional state, or human perception.

The Theological Problem: The Struggle of Experience and Faith

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters of the Torah. Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, who compels you?' He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva ben Joseph by name who will spin out of each tittle heaps and heaps of laws.' 'Lord of the Universe,' said Moses, 'permit me to see him.' He replied, 'Turn you round.' Moses went and sat down at the end of the eighth row and listened to the discourses upon the Law. Not being able to follow their arguments, he was ill at east, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master, 'Whence do you know it?' and the latter replied, 'It is a law given to Moses at Sinai,' he was comforted.

Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said:'Lord of the Universe, You have such a man and You give the Torah by me!' He replied, '*Be silent, for such is my decree.*'

Then said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah; show me his reward.' 'Turn you around,' said He. Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. 'Lord of the Universe,' cried Moses, 'such Torah, and such a reward!' He replied, '*Be silent, for such is My decree.*'

- Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot 29B. Translated by David Hartman, A Heart of Many Rooms

מִפִּי עֶלְיוֹן לֹא תֵצֵא הָרָעוֹת וְהַטּוֹב.
Out of the mouth of the most high comes not evil as well as good?

- Lamentations 3:38

God's pan-causality implies that every event that happens is attributable to God and to God alone. "If the creator of evil and woe is God, there is no room left for a devil. But what kind of God is this?"[39]

"Much of the problem of evil comes from the very nature of monotheism and its postulates. Confronted with cool logic and remorseless evil, we must sacrifice one or another of these conflicting propositions: God is omnipotent; God is omniscient; God is wholly moral."[40]

If evil exists, God either:

- 1 – Can not do any better.
- 2 – Will not do any better.

In the first case, God cannot remove suffering from human experience. This could refer to a lack of God's knowledge and/or a lack of God's power. A Biblical example helps explain this point. Exodus 2:24 states, "And God heard their (the Israelites) groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." In order for God to end the Israelites' pain, God first had to hear it. In other words, God's power precludes a certain divine knowledge. God reacts, as it were, to a circumstance. Just as we need to understand a situation before taking action, God too requires knowledge before acting. Had God not known of the Israelites' suffering, God would not have been able to redeem them.

It is of course possible, however, that God is omniscient and not omnipotent. Perhaps God wants to act, but can not.[41]

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[39] Carmy, 178,
[40] Schulweis, Evil and the morality of God, 2.
[41] A postulation (among others) put forth in Jon Levenson's fantastic book, Creation and the Persistence of Evil.

The second case assumes an evil God. Here, God can ameliorate suffering, but refuses to do so. Louis Jacobs writes, "No representative Jewish thinker has sought to deny the first proposition – that God is wholly good."[42] Additionally, he put forth that "God is good in spite of contrary evidence."

Many see religion as making order out of disorder. Faith helps to create meaning in place of nihilism and doubt. Religion bolsters the claim that the cosmos is grounded in a single ultimate reality. Different religious traditions explain this in different ways, but agree that divine reality is beyond all conceptualization.[43] If religion helps order the universe, one will not subscribe to a faith in which an evil and unjust deity presides over the world. Neil Gillman, in his wonderfully illuminating book The Death of Death, quotes, "Religion is the 'relatively modest dogma that God is not mad.'"[44]

If God were evil, uncaring or the like, there would be no need for a theodicy, for unjust suffering would be explained, if not justified. As I hopefully demonstrated, however, religion has no need for such a God.

We have created a theological problem for ourselves. On the one hand, we demand a powerful and benevolent God. On the other, we have the experiential reality of suffering. The incongruity of these two propositions begs for a solution. Such a solution is called a theodicy; a theological solution to the problem of evil. A theodicy is defined as "a vindication of God's goodness and justice in the face

[42] Jacobs, A Jewish Theology.
[43] Haught, God After Darwin, 67.
[44] Gillman, The Death of Death, 19.

of the existence of evil."[45] The Hebrew expression for such a theodicy is a *Tzidduk HaDin* – a justification of God. Remember, this is the prayer that one says just after reciting "*Baruch Dayan HaEmet.*" The words of the prayer justify God's actions. Although the experiences causing recitation of this prayer may seem otherwise, we justify God's actions (judgments) as good, just and true.

Certain life experiences bring this problem to consciousness. During times of tragedy, suffering and unfairness, one might ask, "How can God allow this to happen?" Harold Kushner wrote a book that confronts the problem: Why do bad things happen to good people?

The recitation of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* confronts this problem. These three words refer precisely to the three conflicting propositions in question, namely those of God's power, God's knowledge, and God's goodness. These three theological claims only present a conflict when juxtaposed with the existence of suffering. Remember, this prayer is only recited during the affective emotional experience of suffering. And it is exactly this experience of suffering which serves as the pre-condition for the recitation of this blessing!

At first blush, it seems that the prayer attempts to erase the problem. As we have seen, if God is in fact a True Judge, suffering is really a problem of epistemological perspective; not ontological reality[46]. Thus, suffering would not really exist, and God's power, knowledge and goodness are preserved. Our theodicy would be one that denies the ontological existence of suffering.

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[45] http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=theodicy

[46] Epistemology refers to our knowledge, whereas ontology refers to what exists in the universe, regardless of our experience or knowledge.

Let me present another perspective. It is possible that the words of the prayer are meant to highlight the very incongruity that exists between the reality of suffering and the desire to justify God's power, knowledge and goodness. In as much as the prayer is said in response to suffering, the three words that end the blessing highlight these very three propositions in question. Thus, the recitation of the prayer does not solve the theological problem; it is not a theodicy. Quite the contrary, it raises its very necessity!

Baruch: This word, while meaning blessed, refers to the causal agent; God. God is the subject to which 'blessed' refers. Remember, the prayer begins "*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam.*" *Baruch* praises 'our God, ruler of the universe.' As such, God is powerful; God causes events to happen. God is the unmoved mover. God is the foundational point from which all action stems.

Dayan: God is a judge. God's aspect of judgment is the foundation for God's power. God's power is exercised according to God's judgment. In other words, God judges a person, situation or event, and then acts accordingly. For God to judge, God needs to have requisite knowledge of the subject in question. Thus, God as a *Dayan* relates to God's knowledge. God must have some sort of knowledge in order to proclaim judgments.

HaEmet: Literally meaning 'the Truth', this is the vaguest term in the blessing. Although the word appears many times in the Torah, there is no clear definition. Oftentimes, it seems that *Emet* refers to faithfulness (in God).[47] There are

[47] Genesis 24:27, Psalm 31:6, 146:6,

instances where the word may refer to kindness.[48] The term has no clear meaning, as it is used in different contexts throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Typically, we say that something is true if it corresponds to external reality. "This thesis is written by Eric Linder" is true if and only if Eric Linder authored this thesis. You could go into the library at the Hebrew Union College and see for yourself whether this statement corresponds to reality. This is an example of the correspondence theory of truth, as a proposition's truth value is dependant on the correspondence between the proposition and reality. Sitting at my grandmother's funeral, I refused to recite the blessing because I would not believe that the words correspond to reality.

Often, however, we use truth to convey a sense of moral valence or emphasis. We say that the Torah is true, even though we may not act in accordance to all of its laws and teachings. Feelings are true, even though there is no empirical proof of their existence.

What then does it mean that God is a God of truth?

Exodus 34:6-7 lists what are commonly known as the thirteen attributes of God. "And God passed by before him (Moses) and (he) said, 'God, the Lord God, is merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, showing mercy to thousands and forgiving sin and transgression. But this does not clear the guilty, as God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generation.'"

Moses experienced God's presence directly, without need of intermediary. Although other Biblical characters had powerful experiences of and with God,

[48] Genesis 24:49.

more verses are devoted to Moses than to any other Biblical ancestor. We call Moses *Mosheh Rabbeinu;* Moses our teacher. Maimonides writes, "The wisest man, our Teacher Moses, asked two things of God, and received a reply respecting both. The one thing he asked was, that God should let him know His true essence; the other, which in fact he asked first, that God should let him know His attributes."[49] Thus, the qualities that Moses enumerated in Exodus 34, serve as a pedagogic device when teaching about the qualities of God.

Rabbi Gedalia of Lunietz wrote about the quality of truth in his work, Teshu'ot Chen:

> The quality of truth is the vital force sustaining all Creation ... truth is the common denominator of all of God's qualities. It is the attribute that stands in the middle of God's thirteen attributes [listed above]. Regarding the mystery of "and truth"[50] – it signifies that truth is the common denominator of the six attributes that precede it as well as the six attributes that follow it.[51]

Just as God's judgments help to frame God's actions, so too does God's attribute of truth serve as the foundation for the other attributes. We still are faced with the problem of vagueness, however. What does it mean that God is truthful?

Midrash Rabbah[52] relates a story purporting to occur just before God's creation of human beings:

> Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels s formed into groups, some of them saying, 'Let him be created,' while others argued, 'let him not be created.' Thus it is written, Love and Truth fought together, Righteousness and Peace combated each other[53] Love said, 'Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of love'; Truth said, 'Let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood'; Righteousness said, ' Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds'; Peace said, 'Let him not be created, because he is full of strife"' What did the Lord do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground" The ministering angels exclaimed before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You hate your seal? Let Truth arise from the earth!' Thus it is written, Let truth spring up

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[49] Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 75.
[50] The letter *vav* preceeds *emet*, the word for truth.
[51] The letter *vav* has a numerical equivalent of 6, as it is the 6th letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
[52] Genesis Rabbah, 8:5.
[53] Psalm 85.

from the earth.[54] While the ministering angels were arguing with each other and disputing with each other, the Holy One, blessed be He, created him (man). He said to them [the angels]: 'What can you do? Man has already been made!'

God's seal is Truth. Moreover, the creation of human beings was caused, in part, by this personification of truth. Perhaps this story is meant to imply that truth is inexorably bound up within the earth, and specifically within human beings. Humanity becomes the causal agent by which truth springs up from the Earth.

What kind of truth does that Truth symbolize?

It might appear that God did not listen to Truth's words, but actually, Truth's words are exactly what caused God to act. God did not ignore Truth; God hurled it to the ground, thereby utilizing it while also seemingly rebuking it. God's use of this attribute seems to belie the explicit message by that very same attribute!

Baruch Dayan HaEmet is often translated as 'Blessed is God, the True Judge.' This translation, while capturing the essence of the words, is not exactly correct. The word *Dayan* modifies the noun *HaEmet*. A more literal translation reads 'Blessed is God, the Judge of Truth.' In this *midrash*, God literally does just that. God makes a judgment on God's attribute of *Emet* – God's very seal!

Humanity is in part defined by mortality. Perhaps then it was necessary for God to hurl truth to the ground for humanity to exist. Death is the truth, so to speak of man's existence. Without this truth, as it were, humanity would be divine. God's judgment makes room for the creation of human beings.

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[54] *Ibid.*

By not heeding Truth's advice, God causes truth to exist, but it is truth of a different kind. Had God heeded Truth's advice, human beings would not have been created. As an obvious consequence, there would be no falsehood issued forth by men, because men would be non-existent! Thus, God demonstrated the truth of Truth's claim by deliberately acting against its advice.

In logic, if A implies B, B exists only if A exists. By ignoring truth, God creates the possibility for A to exist, A being the creation of human beings. The validation of Truth's statement requires the creation of human beings. Thus, God's hurling of Truth to the ground is important. Truth's words can only be shown to be true if God does **not** heed its advice! Truth is used in terms of corresponding to reality, but if I may construct a pun, this is not the only truth.

Jack Cohen writes that, "Society cherishes the virtue of truth as a cardinal precept of morality."[55] Truth represents a valence or value judgment upon an action. We look to God to be the source of truth.

When a loved one dies, a faithful practitioner of Judaism recites the line proclaiming God to be the True Judge. In causing a death, does God in essence throw the attribute of truth to the ground, abandoning it? Or, just as we saw in the *midrash,* is truth "springing up from the earth," albeit in a different context?

In another Midrash, we come across a passage which explains the reasons why truth is in fact God's seal:[56]

> May a Jew who has been appointed Rabbi or Judge of the community administer justice by himself? Our rabbis answered: Do not judge alone, for there is only One who judges alone, as it is said, 'But He is at one with Himself, and who can turn Him?'[57] What is the meaning of, 'But He is at one with Himself'? Resh Lakish said: God judges and seals the verdict alone. Rabbi Reuben

[55] Cohen, Tradition, 83.
[56] Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:10.
[57] Job 23:13.

said: And what is God's seal? Truth. *And why emeth*? Emeth consists of the following three letters, alef the first of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, mem the middle, and taw the last, indicating that, as Scripture says, 'I am the first, and I am the last, and beside Me there is no God'.[58] The Rabbis say: Come and see. When Moses was appointed over Israel he said to them: ' I am not able alone to bear your burden; appoint therefore judges who shall judge you,' as it is said, Get you wise men.[59]

This fascinating exploration begins with a question of *halacah*: can one judge by himself? The investigation contains several references to *Emet*, from which we might decipher some meaning.

We learn that "only One (God) judges alone." God alone judges and carries forth that judgment. God seals the verdict alone, and God uses the attribute of truth to seal that verdict.

The *midrash* alludes to the fact that the Hebrew word for truth, *Emet*, consists of three letters: *aleph*, *mem* and *tav*. *Aleph* is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *mem* is the exact middle letter, and *tav* is the last letter. Only God can judge alone, because only God possesses the complete truth, as opposed to humanity's limited truth. The truth that springs from the Earth is grounded solely in human experience. It is not the *Emet* which God, and God alone possesses. Maimonides writes, "This is implied by the prophet's statement, 'And God, your Lord is true.' God alone is true and no other entity possesses that truth that compares to his (God's) truth."[60]

This *midrash* speaks directly to our theological problem. God's sealed judgment represents the coupling of God's knowledge and God's goodness. Since God judges alone, human beings cannot know the process by which God comes to said judgments. As we saw, the rabbis teach that these judgments are

[58] Isaiah 44:6.
[59] Deuteronomy 1:13.
[60] Yesodei HaTorah.

created from within the standpoint of truth. If truth is God's seal, then any judgment of God cannot belie that truth, despite appearances and perceptions. "Since evil, as well as good, is determined by the Lord, and since God is just and beneficent, one must be patient."[61]

Ezekiel 9:4 states, "And God said to him (Ezekiel), 'Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and make a mark on the foreheads of the men that sigh and groan regarding the abominations that are done in the city's midst." The Talmud's exposition of this verse[62] comments on the command to make a mark on foreheads. The word for mark is תָּו. Phonetically, the word is pronounced as the letter *Tav*. The Talmud asks:

> What is special about '*tav?*' ... Reish Lakish said, "*Tav* is the conclusion of God's seal, may he be blessed. Chanina said, "The seal of God, Blessed be He is Truth. Shmuel bar Nachmani said, "These are people who observed the entire Torah, from *aleph* to *tav*.

The letter *tav* symbolizes Truth, as the word for 'truth' ends in the letter *tav*. Earlier, the *daf* explains that the letter *tav* is placed on the foreheads of the righteous in the city. If the letter corresponds to God's attribute of Truth, *Emet*, how might *Emet* correspond to righteous human beings? The Talmud confronts this question.

Nachmani's comment provides an answer. A *tav* will be placed on the foreheads of the righteous, because they observed the entire Torah, from *aleph* to *tav*. As God's seal, *Emet* represents a sort of completeness. Certain realities might reflect partial truth, but God's attribute of *Emet* is different. Humans can embody a sense of *Emet* by following the entirety of the Torah; of God's

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[61] Carmy, 216.
[62] Shabbat 55a.

teachings and laws. Even as human beings, we can embody a sense of *Emet*. Human *Emet*, however, while complete to a degree, does not reflect ontological reality, as we will now discover

Tractate Yoma[63] contains an intriguing case of God's use of the attribute of *Emet*. The narrative expounds upon Nechemiah 9:4, which states "They cried out in a great voice to Adonai their God."

> What did they say? ... "Woe! Woe! This is what destroyed the Temple and burned the Sanctuary, and killed all the righteous and exiled the Jews from their land, and it still dances among us! Did you give it to us for no reason? ... We do not want it!"

They are referring to the evil inclination. They are beseeching God to remove it, as it appears that it was given for no reason at all. According to their sentiment, it was the evil inclination which ultimately caused the destruction of the Temple, among other monstrosities.

The *stam* continues:

> A note fell down to them from Heaven, on which was written "Truth." (*Emet*) Rav Chanina said, "Learn from this that the sign of God, Blessed is he, is 'Truth.'"

Rashi, in his commentary to Sanhedrin 64a, says that when a king approves of a law drawn up by his subjects, he applies his seal to it. Here, the word *Emet* represents God's approval concerning humanity's desire for the removal of the evil inclination.

Later in the page, the *stam* recounts:

> It was delivered into their hands (the removal of the evil inclination) ... They [the people] imprisoned it for three days. They sought a day-old egg throughout the land of Israel, but could not find one. They said, "What should we do? If we kill it, the world will become desolate."

[63] 69b.

At the beginning of this narrative, the people bemoan the existence of the evil inclination. They beseech God to remove the inclination from their hearts. They have evidence that their prayers will be answered, because God sends a note from heaven to them; a note with God's seal. In this sense, their prayers were true; given their experiences, they thought that their wish reflected a complete truth.

Once the inclination is removed, however, the people recognize that they need the evil inclination. Without the evil inclination, animals will not multiply. Creativity and impulsiveness will languish.

This is yet another case in which God's attribute of *Emet* is used in ways that belie the nature of *Emet* as corresponding to an ontological reality beyond the reach of limited human perception. This is a textual case in which a circumstance viewed as nonsensical, nihilistic or even cruel is re-interpreted in hindsight. Just like the father bemoaning his bad luck, the Israelites change their perspective of reality once they have more information. At both points, however, they are true. They are true to themselves and to the reality that they experience.

Earlier, we saw that the Talmud commands one to "bless God for the bad just as he blesses God for the good, as it says 'And you shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, etc.'[64]

The Talmud continues:

> With all your heart refers to both of your inclinations – the good inclination as well as the bad inclination.

Rash comments on the word used for heart. Typically, 'your heart' would be

[64] Brachot 54A.

spelled לבך. The quote from the Torah, however, has it spelled לבבך, with an extra

bet.[65] He claims that the extra *bet* is symbolizes the evil inclination. One would have sufficed, but the second reminds us to love God with all of ones heart (i.e. both inclinations). It seems that the evil inclination is for the good, just as much as the evil inclination.

Robert A. Johnson explores the tension between creativity and suffering further. In his book, Owning Your Own Shadow, he writes about a painting entitled *Tree of Life and Death*. He writes:

> Here a stylized tree of knowledge, with its golden fruit, rises up from Adam's navel. Adam is looking a little sleepy as if he does not entirely comprehend what he has produced. Two women stand beside the tree, The Virgin Mary is on the left, clothed as a nun, picking fruit from the tree and handing out to a long line of penitents for their salvation. Eve, naked, stands on the right, picking fruit from the same tree, handing it out to a long line of people for their damnation. Here is vivid commentary on a single tree giving out a dual product. What a strange tree! Whenever we pluck the fruit of creativity from the golden tree our other hand plucks fruit of destruction ... We would love to have creativity without destruction, but that is not possible.

The people praying to God for the removal of the inclination eventually come to this realization, but not until they understand the consequences of its removal.

They beseech God to take away the inclination, saying "We do not want it!" As a symbol of God's approval, God does not tell the people that God will remove the inclination. God does not say, "Let it be so," or the like. Rather, God sends a note, upon which is written the one word that is God's seal; *Emet*.

If *Emet* reflected a larger truth, however, wouldn't it make more sense if God refused to hearken to their prostrations, responding only to their complaints with the word *Emet?* In this scenario, God's seal does indeed represent a kind of truth, but it is the truth as observed by human beings. It is an incomplete truth; it only

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[65] The Torah verse is Deuteronomy 6:5.

reflects epistemological experience. And yet, as God's seal falls from heaven, can it be that truth springs from the Earth, as embodied by human beings?

The Israelites change the valence given to the existence of the evil inclination as the story progresses. God gives God's seal of Truth to the peoples' desires, by removing the evil inclination. If God is omniscient, God knows full well that their decision will change once they understand the ramifications of its removal. In this case, God's seal of *Emet* is dependant on humanly perceived situations. It is observer-dependant, as it does not reflect the complete truth, which is only known later

Hearkening back to *Baruch Dayan HeEmet*, *Emet* can refer to humanity's conception of truth, in as much as it reflects a completeness of ***human*** experience. Although human truth is limited, it does reflect God's seal of *Emet*, as *Emet* is the *raison d'etre* for humanity's creation. During experience of death, perhaps *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* praises God for allowing us to experience a different kind of truth, namely, the truth that one *perceives and creates*.

"God is near to all who call upon God in Truth."[66]

[66] Psalm 145:18.

God's Judgment: Pushing Aside the Problem

לֹא הַמֵּתִים יְהַלְלוּ־יָהּ
The dead cannot praise the Lord.

- Psalm 115:17

For good tidings one says, 'God is good, and God does good', while for evil tidings one says, 'Blessed be the true Judge,' [whereas] in the world to come it shall be only 'God is good and God does good.'

- Pesachim 50a

Will the circle be unbroken
by and by, by and by?
In a better home waiting
In the sky, in the sky.

- Taken from the song *Will the Circle Be Unbroken,* lyrics by Ada Ruth Habershon

Death marks a particular problem regarding the theological problem of evil. Death is a unique category with regard to suffering, because it cannot be remedied. One can heal from sickness, one can regain wealth, etc. Human experience can modify one's perspective from moments previously perceived as suffering, bad luck and evil to ones that are necessary, good and beneficial. Death, however, is a terminus. Unlike other moments, there is no experience one can have from which to glean teleological meaning from death.

Death is a universal human experience; it is not limited to a specific group of people. Therefore, it is not seen categorically as evil in itself, but necessary. Earlier I discussed that death's existence is part of the truth of human beings.

Death is perceived as unjust suffering when it happens unexpectedly or seemingly undeservedly. The rabbis must, then, provide meaningful (i.e. teleological) explanations of one's death so that Jews continue to maintain faith in a powerful and benevolent God.

Whereas the Torah makes little, if any, mention of life after death, the Oral Torah is replete with references to the world to come, referred to as *Olam Haba*[67]; its authors frequently enumerate the desiderata by which one will have a portion of the world to come. The Mishna states, "All Israel have a share in the world to come."[68] It continues:

> These have no share in the world to come: he that refutes the resurrection of the dead.

There other behaviors and habits listed that will not allow entry into *Olam HaBa*, but this is the first enumerated.

These stricter definitions allow the rabbis to maintain a hold over the Jewish community. If all of Israel has a share in the world to come, then one's behavior in this world does not matter with respect to divine consequences. Human beings need to be appropriately and fairly judged according to their actions while on Earth. Thus, the fore-knowledge of God's future judgment prompts one to think about (and possibly change) in light of future consequences meted out in the world to come. A heretic is primarily defined, then, as one who refutes the very belief in *Olam HaBa*, as its existence engenders an ordered system of behavior. The recitation of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* can serve to engender this belief.

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[67] Literally, 'the next world.'
[68] Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1.

The rabbis' teachings regarding *Olam HaBa* have become standard belief in Judaism. "The world we live in is viewed as a corridor that leads to still another world. The belief in an afterlife, in a world to come where man is judged and where his soul continues to flourish is imbedded in Jewish thought."[69] Zerahyah ha-Yevani understood the widespread acceptance of this belief:

> It is well known that one ought to believe that when man dies full of good deeds and having lived a pious life God will love him and in the nature of this love is the reward beggaring description.[70]

There are exactly two instances in Torah in which God gives a promise of long life in exchange for the observance of specific commandments.

- Deuteronomy 5:16

Deuteronomy 5:16 כַּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמֶּךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְמַעַן | יַאֲרִיכֻן יָמֶיךָ וּלְמַעַן יִיטַב לָךְ עַל
הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ:

Honor your father and mother, as your God has commanded you, so that your days will be prolonged and that [life] will go well with you, in the land which Adonoi your God gave to you.

- Deuteronomy 22:7

Deuteronomy 22:7 שַׁלֵּחַ תְּשַׁלַּח אֶת־הָאֵם וְאֶת־הַבָּנִים
תִּקַּח־לָךְ לְמַעַן יִיטַב לָךְ וְהַאֲרַכְתָּ יָמִים:

But you shall let the bird [mother] go, and take the young for yourself, so that it [life] may be will with you, and that you will prolong your days.

According to these passages, God has the power to lengthen one's days; to extend life. These two verses infer that God has power over death, as the

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[69] Donin, To Be a Jew, 296.
[70] Zerahyah ha-Yevani, Sefer Ha-Yashar.

lengthening of one's life holds the arrival of one's death in abeyance. Given these laws, one's death can be seen as a failure to please God.

In these two passages, there is an implicit assumption of both God's power and God's knowledge of individual actions. These promises are given to individuals, not to the entire Israelite community. God's fulfillment of the promise to lengthen one's days is in response to the adherence of certain *mitzvot*. If one fulfills God's desires, one is rewarded.

The Talmud explores further:[71]

> In connection with honoring ones father and mother, it is written, "so that your days will be lengthened and so that it will be good for you." In connection with sending a bird away from the nest it is written, "so that it will be good for you and that your days will be lengthened." What of one whose father said to him, "Climb up the tower and fetch me some birds." He [the son] climbed the tower and drove the mother bird away[72] and took the offspring. On his way down he fell and died.

The *stam* then posits the obvious question:

> Where is his (the son's)good life and where is his long life?

God's promise has gone unfulfilled. The irony is unmistakable; immediately after following the very two commandments for which God promises the lengthening of one's days, the son dies. God's promise does not exhibit quantitative certainty; if the son had died years later, or even a few days later, one could still maintain that God did in fact lengthen his days. The chronology surrounding the son's fate evokes a certain world-view; undeserved suffering (e.g. death) occurs.

The question, "Where is the son's long life?" can be seen as the *sina qua non* for nihilism. The commandments that the son obeyed were not vague; upon

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[71] Kiddushin 39b.

[72] The *mitzvah* is as follows: If one happens upon a nest, one must shoo the mother bird away before taking the eggs of the younglings.

observance, they promise the length of days. The son observed the exact two commandments for which long life is promised! If one were to observe this occurrence, it would certainly cause one to doubt God's justice, and possibly God's power. God's providence might not exist: observance of *mizvot* is for naught as there is not appropriate reward given their observance. In fact, it seems that the consequence for following *mitzvot* is quite the opposite – namely, death!

What of God's promise? The Torah (i.e. God's word) seems to be incommensurate with the realties of life. Surely, however, the Torah must be correct. The *stam* continues:

> Evidently, "so that it will be good for you" is the world that is entirely good and "so that your life will be long" refers to "the world that is entirely long."

The understanding of the *stam* is the following: Since the Torah is perfect, the problem lies with our understanding of God's promise, not with God. Therefore, the Talmud delimits what is actually meant by the Torah's words. The qualification is meant as exegetical, as the Talmud attempts to explain away the discrepancy. By adding "entirely" to God's promise, the Talmud justifies the certainty of God's promise.

> The reward for fulfilling a *mitzvah* is not given in this world. It was taught in a *Baraita*: Rabbi Ya'akov says, 'Of all of the commandments written in the Torah of which there is a reward, there is not one [commandment] upon which the resurrection of the dead is not dependent.

The author of this *daf* understands that life experience belies divine reward and punishment. The existence of an afterlife removes the theological problem of God's seeming failure to comply with God's own promise. The afterlife, then, is what is meant by "the world that is entirely good". The Torah's exposition of

God's assurance, "so that it will be good for you" relates not to the days of one's mortal life, but rather to the days still to come in *Olam HaBa*.

The theological creation of an afterlife serves a utilitarian purpose, in that it connects the words of Torah with the realities of one's life. Its existence is an example of *Tziduk HaDin* – a justification of God's actions. The rabbinic emphasis on the world to come is the creation of a theodicy; a solution to the problem of unjust suffering. It allows the rabbis to maintain that the theology present in the Torah is in fact commensurate with life experience. Otherwise, there is no justification for the suffering experienced within ones lifetime, death being an example of unjust suffering. The existence of *Olam HaBa* preserves the system of *mitzvot*, as it continues to engender faith that human behavior is appropriately rewarded (or punished) by God. The rabbis maintain order by preserving faith.

Saadia Gaon, in his great work entitled The Book of Beliefs and Opinions proffers that belief in the world to come is a necessity, "on the basis of rational arguments."[73] He admits that "well-being in this mundane world is bound up with misfortune, and all happiness with hardship, and all pleasure with pain, and all joy with sorrow."[74]

Thus, "Only the prospect of future existence reassures us that after all in the end, justice is done."[75] The words *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*, caution us against looking at death as the terminus of God's relationship. Justice (*Din*) will eventually occur. This *sichah* of Kiddushin 39b speaks to this issue:

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[73] Book of Beliefs and Opinions, 323.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] Carmy, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, 109.

Anyone whose merits outnumber his sins is afflicted with suffering [in this world]... and anyone whose sins outnumber his merits is rewarded with good [in this world].

As noted previously, the circumstances surrounding the son's death seem to represent the most egregious case of divinely caused suffering. The Talmud uses this tale as a case study for our own experience of life: as we see that who are righteous seem to suffer, while many who are not righteous seem to prosper. Just as the *stam* asked, "Where is his good life," we too question the unfair suffering experienced in life. The Talmud does not negate the human experience of suffering. It too notes that the righteous suffer. In this vein, the *stam* continues:

The mode of punishment is different for a righteous person than a wicked person. The time in which a punishment [or reward] is receivcd is different.

Rashi's exposition expounds on this idea:

God punishes him [one whose merits outweigh his sins] in this world thereby cleansing him from his sins so that he can receive his full reward in the next world.

Going back to the earlier story, we know that the son fulfilled the very two commandments which promise long life. It would seem, then, that at that moment, certainly his merits outweighed his sins. God punishes him, therefore, so that the son can immediately enter *Olam Haba.* Death is a reward, not a punishment.

The Talmud might presuppose another perspective as well. The Talmud postpones the chronology separating human action from appropriate divinely-sanctioned reward and/or punishment. *P'nei Joshua* concludes that God's system of justice is concealed from mortals and known only to God. There is, however, a system of justice. "Rabbi Yishmael comments that if forty days have passed by and one has not experienced a single untoward event [pain] ... it means that he

has received all of his reward for the future."[76] Carmy posits that the experience of pain and suffering is a mode of communication from God. Minor untoward events occur as stimuli from God, not as a punitive consequence but as an educational impetus to "renew his lifestyle and behavior patterns, and attempt to rise to a higher plane of ethical and moral perfection.[77]

It would seem that the very experience of suffering then, might be a blessing, as one has then *not* received his full reward (in the world to come). Those that suffer have reward awaiting them, while those that have not incurred any sort of pain in a forty day period have none.

Faith in such ideas serve as motivation for observance *mitzvot* and fear of God.

Aaron Twerski, in his introduction to Moses Maimonides' Treatise on Resurrection, paraphrases the work of Moshe Luzzatto. Luzzatto maintains that physical death occurs in order to cleanse the body of original sin.[78] In this conception, the period between physical death and the Resurrection allows for the embellishment of the soul's spiritual powers.[79] Death's existence, then, is not an unfortunate evil, but the means to a better future in the world to come.

The existence of *Olam Haba* is necessary in order to maintain both the power of God and God's goodness. Otherwise, God's judgment (i.e. death) is cruel or worse, nihilistic. This brilliant (and useful) theological creation allows God to be a True Judge, as one's death is no longer the final judgment: Death marks the

[76] Carmy, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, 92.
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] Rosner, 4.
[79] *Ibid.*

entry of the deceased into *Olam Haba*. God's judgment remains true, in that death may no longer be seen only as suffering or evil. The observance of *mitzvot* will lengthen one's days, albeit in the world to come. Thus, the obedient son in the story did not experience unfair suffering at the behest of God, because God's judgment is true. Thus, even this story reflects a God that is the True Judge.

Seemingly untimely or undeserved death has a teleological explanation. Divinely rewarded rewards and punishments will be meted out in the world to come. The *daf* can still maintain divine pan-causality and benevolence. God did cause the son's death, and there was a just and meaningful reason for God's judgment of death. Neil Gillman writes, "Eschatologies are resolutions: they bring closure to the in-between-ness of our lives."[80]

There is a problem, however. The theological innovation of life after death does not stem from human experience, but from hope. It is a theological innovation that gives meaning to unjust suffering and despair. When someone beloved passes away, it fosters hope that he/she really is in a better place.

Torah makes no reference to resurrection of the dead. This rabbinic creation, however, allows the blessing of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* to correspond to a truthful reality, albeit a future reality. The ideological penumbra surrounding *Olam HaBa* solves the theological problem that *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* confronts. It preserves the pan-causality of God, as God does indeed have power over one's death. It also preserves the Truth of God, as there is a just teleology just outside the reaches of human understanding. There is no basis, however, for its reality, either in Torah or human experience. *Olam HaBa* is a justification for the

[80] Gillman, The Death of Death, 24.

meaninglessness that each of us experiences and observes. *Olam HaBa* may reflect our hope for teleological justification. Does it, though, reflect our experience?

We will now examine the possibility that God does not have total control of one's death. In these cases, God does not have control over death. This conclusion is also a theodicy, albeit one in which God is not omnipotent, at least with regard to death. In this case, God does not have pan-causality over the world.

According to Emanuel Feldman, the Bible portrays God as exceedingly active in the affairs of human life. God's many interactions with human beings seem to point to a divine omniscience of human individuals. God, however, is notably absent from human death.

Perhaps God does not have supreme power over the universe; one's death might be outside the boundaries of God's power.[81]

"We read that when Rabbi [Rabbi Judah the Prince] was very ill, approaching death, the Sages proclaimed a fast and made an appeal for Divine mercy."[82] The Talmud continues[83]:

> The maid of Rabbi went up to the roof. She said, 'Those on high are seeking Rabbi and those below are seeking Rabbi. [Those below, Rabbi's students are praying that he live, even as the powers on high are moving that he die]. May it be God's will that those below conquer those on high!' [However] when she saw how many times he [Rabbi] would take off and put on his *tefillin* as he would enter the privy and how he was suffering, she said, 'Would that those on high would win against those below.' However, the rabbis did not cease imploring God's mercy. She, then, took a vase and threw it from the roof. They [the Rabbis] were interrupted in their prayer [lit. they were silenced in their requesting God's mercy] and Rabbi's soul departed.

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[81] Feldman, Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology, 17.
[82] Kravitz, Death and Euthenasia in Jewish Law, 15.
[83] Ketubot 104a (translation supplied in Kravitz, Death and Euthenasia in Jewish Law, 15)

Human action can cause death. The maid's action caused a cessation of prayers. The cessation of prayer caused Rabbi Judah's death. The prayers of the sages prolonged Judah's life. Rabbi Judah's death was dependant solely on the continued prayers of the rabbis. At the very moment that the prayers stopped, Rabbi Judah died. The maid's action caused the rabbis to turn their attention elsewhere. Here, human action has a role in someone else's death. If God here is a Judge, it is upon the actions of the rabbis and the maids, not Rabbi Judah!

Tractate Hagigah puts forth the following question[84]:

> Is there anyone who passes away before one's allotted time?

Assumingly, this refers to a person who has not committed any sins that would merit (according to *halachah*) the shortening of life. The question posed is subtly different than the question of "Where is his good life" that we examined earlier. According to the logic of the earlier passage, the son did not die before his allotted time, because God's true judgment will be meted out in the world to come. Put another way, the son died precisely *because* he fulfilled certain specific *mitzvot*. His death guaranteed him entry into *Olam HaBa*. The question posed here, however, is not one attempting to understand God's motive for the judgment of death. Rather, it concerns God's power over death. The *stam* answers:

> Yes, as in the story [heard] by R. Bibi b. Abaye who was frequently visited by the Angel of death. [Once] the latter [the angel of death] said to his messenger: Go, bring me Miriam, the women's hairdresser. He went and brought him Miriam, the children's nurse. He said to him: I told you Miriam, the women's hairdresser.

[84] The text examined will be Chagigah 4b-5a.

Here, a case of mistaken identities is responsible for the untimely death of Miriam the nurse. There is no teleological meaning given to the angel's mistake. God's judgment revolved around Miriam the hairdresser, not Miriam the nurse. Miriam's death was a coincidence; it reflects a world-view of nihilism.

Feldman writes that "... it does seem that He [God] has no dominion over death and that His [God's] power comes to an end at the grave."[85] God does not have omnipotence with regard to death. In this specific case, God did have a judgment of death in mind; the reality of it, however, is not actualized. God is dependant on messengers; messengers who may misinterpret God's command. As the Talmud continues, "Why would God allow such slipshod administration?"[86] God's judgment is not meted out as directed.

Rava said[87]

> Length of life, children and sustenance depend not on [individual] merit but on luck. [As an example] Rabbah and Hisda bothe were righteous rabbis. One master prayed for rain and it came, and the other prayed for rain and it came. Hisda lived to be 92. Rabbah only lived to be 40. In Hisda's house, there were 60 marriage feasts. In Rabbah's house, there were 60 bereavements.

The two rabbis were equal in merit, and yet experienced different realities in their life. This comparison forces a critical look at God's judgment of death. Why did the two rabbis, both of whom were equal in merit and righteousness, experience such discrepancy with regard to God's providential action?

Rava's answer is that one's length of life does *not* depend on righteousness, but on luck. God's judgment is no longer the centerpiece for thought, because God's judgment is non-existent. Thus, the Talmud links this *sichah* to Proverbs[88]:

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[85] Feldman, Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology, 16.
[86] Hagigah 5a.
[87] Carmy, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, 166.

רַב־אֹכֶל נִיר רָאשִׁים וְיֵשׁ נִסְפֶּה בְלֹא מִשְׁפָּט׃

"There is that which is destroyed without judgment. Death can occur without a decree from God. "

[88] Proverbs 13:23.

The *Emet* of Suffering: A Theodicy

רֵאשִׁית חָכְמָה יִרְאַת יְהוָה שֵׂכֶל טוֹב לְכָל-עֹשֵׂיהֶם תְּהִלָּתוֹ עֹמֶדֶת לָעַד.

- Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. They that follow all of God's commandments have a good understanding. (Psalm 111:10)

Amalek is one of the most hated enemies in Judaism. Emphasis is put on his cruelty, as his name appears twenty-three times in the Hebrew Bible. Soon after escaping Egyptian slavery, Amalek comes upon the Israelites and kills the weak and feeble. His surprise attack is condemned by the Torah and later, by the rabbinic authorities.

Deuteronomy 25: 17-19 relates this account:

> Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came out of Egypt when *he met you* by the way, and smote the hindmost of you, *even* all *that were* feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and *he feared not God.*

The Hebrew words אֲשֶׁר קָרְךָ בַּדָּרֶךְ can mean "when he met you by the way." Rav Mendel Weinbach writes "Amelek 'happened upon you' because Amalek's entire approach to earthly affairs is one of things "just happening" and not Divinely determined. This is what he set out to prove with his military challenge to Israel."[89]

The story of Amalek is pedagogical. It is meant to foster fear of God, lest we turn into Amelek. As believers, we are not to think that things happen simply by

[89] http://ohr.edu/ohrnet/5761/shmos/terumah.pdf, page 3.

circumstance, or by the random conjoining of events. Weinbach continues, "Miracles can be seen either as an expression of a Divine force in control of worldly affairs or as the random manifestation of coincidence."[90]

If the world is run completely by coincidence, there is no divine providence. If there is no divine providence, there is no evident teleological reason for observance of *mitzvot*. Simply put, a world of coincidence relegates God to a philosophical idea, not an ontological reality. The rabbis make a link between Amalek's nihilistic world view and the fact that Amalek did not fear God.

These three Hebrew words can also mean 'who cooled you off.' The Hebrew root for 'come upon' is the same for 'cold.' Midrash suggests that Amalek 'cooled off' other nations, by attempting to remove their fear of God. Amalek negated the reality of God's miracles, thus removing their fear of God. "In other words, the battle between the Jewish people and Amalek is about how we look at the world: is it all coincidence ... or does Hashem really run the world?"[91]

One last point dealing with word-play: The gemmatria[92] for עֲמָלֵק, Amalek is equivalent to that of ספק, the word for doubt. Thus, one can claim that the essence of Amalek was his doubt, and his denial of god's providence. His doubt led him to "fear not God."

Midrash Rabbah makes a connection between Amalek and Haman.[93] Both tried to wipe out the Jewish people. Both did so with cruelty and remorselessness.

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[90] *Ibid.*
[91] http://www.isralight.org/assets/Text/RBF_tzav05.html
[92] Gemmatria is the numeral worth of a word. Each letter in the Hebrew alphabet is assigned a number. *Alef* is 1, *Bet* is 2, *yod* is 10, *caf* is 20, *etc*
[93] Numbers Rabbah, 14:1, Esther Rabbah 4:12, Esther Rabbah 7:11, Esther Rabbah 10:13, Lamentations Rabbah 3:23.

There is another connection, however. Amalek "happened upon" the Jewish people. Haman cast lots to determine when the Jews would be destroyed. Both enemies believed only in chance. They did not have faith in divine providence. Thus, both are seen as quintessential enemies of Judaism. Faith in providence leads one to fear God. Why, though, is fear considered the beginning of wisdom?

Exodus 19:17 states, "Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain."

The Talmud chooses to focus on the words "at the foot of the mountain." Given the rabbinic precept that each word of the Torah is necessary, adding layers of meaning that would otherwise not exist, there is a problem of possibly redundancy: What does it mean that the Israelites were standing on the foot of the mountain?

> R. Avdimi bar Hama said: The verse implies that God overturned the mountain [Mount Sinai] upon them [the Israelites], like an inverted cask, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, your grave will be right here.[94]

Granted, there are other *midrashim* that also attempt to explain the giving of Torah in teleological terms.[95] For our purposes, however, we shall examine this *midrash* in terms of understanding the chronological relationship between Israelite action and God's reaction. In this text, there is no ambiguity; teleology and chronology are perfectly commensurate with each other. There is not a vague timeline separating human act from divine response. The Israelites understood with perfect clarity the divine consequences of their decision.

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[94] Shabbat 88a.
[95] A completely different exposition is given in Sifrei Deuteronomy 343.

In Exodus[96], Moses reads part of the Torah aloud to the Israelites. Immediately after, the Israelites respond, "We will do and we will hear."[97] The Talmud's exposition attempts to explain why the Israelites accepted Torah. It was a necessary action, as the alternative was death. The Israelites have no choice but to "do and hearken." As stated in the last paragraph, God's punishment is as visceral and immediate as possible.

I don't want to stretch this *midrash* too far, but for our purposes, it is interesting to note that God's threat relates specifically and exactly to the giving of the Torah. The Israelites' motivation for acceptance Torah was fear; fear of God actualizing God's immanent and immediate threat. If the Torah was accepted out of fear, it is fair to postulate that its teachings and *mitzvot* are practiced out of fear as well. The fear of the Israelites relates directly to the immediate consequences imposed by God. These consequences represent divine providence, exactly which Amalek and Haman eschewed.

> And it will come to pass that if you continually follow My commandments that I command you today, to love Hashem, your God, and to serve Him, with all your heart and with all your soul – then I will provide rain for your land in the proper time, the early and later rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. I will provide grass in your field for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied. Beware lest your heart be seduced and you turn astray and serve gods of others and bow to them. Then the wrath of Hashem will blaze against you. He will restrain the heaven so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce. And you will swiftly be banished from the goodly land which Hashem gives you. [98]

This section is taken from the Deuteronomy, This text is part of the second paragraph of the *V'ahavta*[99]. Here too, the text is exclusively descriptive of God's reaction(s) concerning the actions (or inactions) of the Israelite people. Its theological message, however, is subtly different than the *midrash* quoted above.

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[96] Exodus 24:7.
[97] Often taken as "we will do and then we will understand."
[98] Artscroll Daily *Siddur*, 93.
[99] Earlier we looked at part of the text from the first paragraph.

According to the Talmud's analysis, the impending death of the Israelites[100] is God's doing. It is an ontological certainty, as God first handedly explains the connection between the peoples' failure to accept the Torah and the immediate chronological consequence.

The text from Deuteronomy, however, bears no such connection. The punishments enumerated (and for that matter, rewards as well) do not follow with the urgent immediacy found in the *midrash.* The chronological link between human action and divine re-action/retribution is vague.

Like the *midrash*, God addresses the Israelite community in unison. As a reward for

following *mitzvot*, God promises "rain in your lands." The Hebrew word for "your lands" is ארצכם. This Hebrew word is plural; God is addressing the community. So far, this is similar to the previous *midrash* in that God's promised action affects the entire community. There is a subtle, but large difference, however. Previously, the Israelites were making a unilateral decision (i.e. acceptance of Torah). This makes sense, as God's impending punishment would affect the entire community, as the choice to accept Torah was a community decision. Here too, God speaks to the community regarding the categorical observance of *mitzvot*.

Mitzvot, however are not relegated to community observance. Many, if not most of them depend instead on individual observance. The entire first paragraph of the *V'ahavta* is spoken to individuals, as each person is commanded: You shall love *your* [singular] God with all of *your* [singular] heart and with all of *your*

[100] "Your grave will be right here." See above.

[singular] soul. The emphasis is important, as it highlights a difficulty when taken with the second paragraph of the prayer. Whereas God's injunctions in the first paragraph are delivered to individuals, God's promises of divine reward and punishment are directed to the entirety of the Israelite community.

In that second paragraph, the image of rain is used for both reward and punishment. God will cause rain to fall as a reward, and God will withhold the rain as a punishment.[101] Like other rewards and punishments that are delineated, rain affects a community. Rain falls over an area – over the righteous and the wicked[102]. Depending on individual perspective, rain can be viewed as reward, good luck or forgiveness. One's perspective can interpret a lack of rain as appropriate punishment in one case, and unfair cruelty in another. Here, there is no ontological certainty with regard to God's providence. The teleological interpretation of God's actions is observer-dependant; depending on one's observance of the *mitzvot*, there will be different interpretations for rain, lack of rain and the like. This is perhaps why the Reform movement has decided not to include this paragraph in its liturgy; it does not reflect the observed (or perhaps desired) reality of God.

The problem lies in the tension between the two paragraphs of the prayer. God enjoins individuals to observe the commandments, but God's providence[103] affects only the entire community.

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[101] Remember, rain is categorically viewed as a blessing stemming from God (See Chapter two).
[102] An appropriate analogy is found in Genesis 18:23, in which Abraham confronts God regarding the impending destruction of Sodom and Gemmorah: "Will you destroy the righteous along with the wicked?" If an individual is righteous, he will perceive the teleology of the destruction entirely different than one who is wicked.
[103] As enumerated in this paragraph.

The *midrash* describing the Israelites' acceptance of Torah is extremely clear with regard to the chronology and causality between Israelite action and divine consequence. The text, from Deuteronomy, however, is much vaguer.

There is no certainty as to the chronological time-line separating one's action from God's reaction. As we saw, God's reaction could be reward, punishment, or possible co-incidence. This paragraph assures us, however, that there is in fact divine reaction. Limited human intellect can not comprehend the link between chronology and divine causality. Nonetheless, Divine providence is a reality.

Faith in divine providence seems to be the card upon which the system of *mitzvot* depends. Without providence, the system completely breaks down. It no surprise, then, that the rabbis make an example out of Amalek by declaring his sin to be one of faithlessness – faithlessness that there is divine providence; faithlessness that there is divine teleology.

God's providence attests not just to God's power, but to God's reasoning. As we now understand, God does not always communicate the reasons for God's providential interference in ones life. It is up to human beings to navigate the tension between the supposed just logic of God's action(s) and the experience of suffering or pain that God's providence brings to the life of its recipient.

"For certainly the belief in individual providence is a cornerstone of Judaism, both from the perspective of Halakhah and from the perspective of philosophical inquiry." [104]

[104] Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, 123-4.

A few years ago, twenty-two children were coming from *Petach Tikvah*, a city outside of Jerusalem. A train collided with the bus, killing all of the children aboard. Rav Peretz, a Shas minister at the time, put forth a possible reason for this tragedy. He postulated that the children were killed because affixed to the children's homes were faulty, non-kosher *mezuzot*.

Although extremely disturbing, this thought stems from faith in the pan-causality of God. If God rewards and punishes individuals based on their observance of *mitzvot*, then statements like this might indeed reflect reality. This specific statement is an instantiation of the general belief that everything is caused by God.

Let's assume that the world-view of Peretz's comment is correct, if not the exact details. No circumstance of human life, then, is nihilistic. One might not enjoy the demands that God enjoins upon himself. One's subjective preference, however, need not reflect the will of God. God's is the True Judge precisely because God's judgments are not based on subjective human will or preference. If they were, people would not know how to act, as morality, ideas and behaviors change depending on changing social conditions and norms.

Divine law stems from a singular source; the existence of one God negates competing sources of authority. If there is only one deity from which laws and standards issue forth, one must observe them or face the relevant consequences. A Monotheistic deity reflects a singular standard of behavior; a standard to be upheld.

Such a world-view engenders specific and habitual behaviors. If there is only one God, and if that God rewards and punishes, surely one will follow whatever rules God wants us to observe. In some ways, Rav Peretz's comments are comforting, because they reflect an order – the belief that the universe indeed behaves according to the divine will of God. Some would rather hold onto this teleological hope than nihilistic realism.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal put forth an argument for observance of religious doctrine:

> If you erroneously believe in God, you lose nothing (assuming that death is the absolute end), whereas if you correctly believe in God, you gain everything (eternal bliss). But if you correctly disbelieve in God, you gain nothing (death ends all), whereas if you erroneously disbelieve in God, you lose everything (eternal damnation).[105]

This argument has come to be known as Pascal's Wager. The wager can be viewed as a grid, in which there are two factors. One factor is dependant on human behavior. One acts according to religious doctrine or one does not. The other side is dependant on God. Either there is a God (i.e. Divine Providence) or there is not a God. This grid represents the wager:

	GOD	**NO GOD**
RELIGIOUS LIFE[106]	Reward: Heaven	Reward: Status Quo
NON-RELIGIOUS	**Reward: Hell**	Reward: Status Quo

Using this logic, Pascal demonstrated that it is pragmatic to live according to religious doctrine, regardless of personal belief. This analysis seems to demand

[105] http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theism/wager.html
[106] As defined by church doctrine.

religious observance, because the possible punishment of eternal damnation is not worth a lifetime of apostasy.

Given beliefs such as this, one behaves accordingly. Going back to the grid above, one would live their life *as if* God does exist. The other option (to live a non-observant life, thus gambling on the consequence of eternal punishment) is not really an option at all, if considers the possible consequence.

Pascal's argument is not one of teleological concern, but of economics. The wager is a cost-benefit analysis; the personal sacrifices of living an observant religious life as against the possible consequences for not doing so.

Peretz uses statements of faith in his argument, whereas Pascal's reasoning stems from pragmatic economic thinking. Although different in tone, acceptance of either argument results in observance of religious law.

Maimonides writes:

> ... if you are asked whether this (a) land has a king, you will undoubtedly answer in the affirmative. 'What proof have you?' 'The fact that this banker here, a weak and little person, stands before this large mass of gold pieces, and that poor man, tall and strong, who stands before him asking in vain for alms of the weight of a carob-grain, is rebuked and is compelled to go away by the mere force of words; for had he not feared the king, he would, without hesitation, have killed the banker, or pushed him away and taken as much of the money as he could.' ... This is proof that this country has a ruler and his existence is proved by the well-regulated affairs of the country, on account of which the king is respected and the punishments decreed by him are feared.[107]

Observance of law creates order. If there was no king, the poor hulking beggar would take the money from the tiny banker. The existence of the king assumes a structure not only of laws, but of consequences to the infraction of those laws. Importantly, the actual existence of those consequences is irrelevant – it is the perception of consequences which is crucial. It is the fear of punishment that

[107] Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 59.

engenders adherence to rules. Theologically, the fear of God's punishment motivates one to bind oneself to religious laws.

Rav Peretz's theology clearly reflects such a paradigm. Rambam admonishes:

> When one teaches, one should teach them (children) to serve out of fear and in order to receive a reward."[108]

If it is the case that the "protagonist of the religious drama, according to Judaism, is the individual, responsible for his actions and deeds,"[109] does God punish an individual in accordance with the fears and beliefs that are present when an individual observes religious law? The real question is one of divine providence. Who is correct, Amalek or Rav Peretz?

Hashgacha Pratit is the notion that God intervenes in the lives of individual human beings. God's ability to do so implies both divine knowledge and divine power.

Maimonides reflects upon God's knowledge in his 13 Principles of Faith. The tenth principle states, "I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, praised be Your name, knows every deed of the human race and all of their thoughts, as it is said, 'It is You who fashions all of their hearts, who pays attention to all their deeds."[110] God's knowledge of human actions is a prerequisite for God's just interference in peoples' lives. It serves only as a pre-requisite for a just God, because an immoral or nihilistic deity could interact in peoples' lives without any foreknowledge of their actions or thoughts.

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[108] Rambam, Hilchot Tsuvah, 12.5.
[109] Carmy, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, 118.
[110] Olitzky, I Believe, 147.

Rav Solovietchik writes that there can be no divine responsibility or accountability without God's providence.[111] Put another way, one cannot blame God for one's suffering (e.g. death), if God is unable to interact in the affairs of one's life.

In the last chapter, we saw that the human perspective of suffering might reflect the divine seal of *Emet*[112]. Suffering is real. Given the existence of suffering, there are two possibilities:

- Suffering happens for a divine reason; it is warranted and deserved
- Suffering is not warranted (nihilism)

In the first case, God is a True Judge. In the second, there is no judge. There are problems with both viewpoints. The first requires one to sacrifice his own truthful perspective, so to speak, whereas the second sacrifices meaningfulness. We flinch at the nihilism of Amalek, and are disturbed by the strict determinism of Peretz. Might there be a way around the problem?

As we have seen, few if any theodicies are willing to emendate the benevolent nature of God. Most choose to modify God's omnipotence or God's omniscience, so to allow for the existence of suffering. The perception of suffering is true: suffering exists. Its existence, however, comes at the cost of a powerful and just God. The existence of *Olam HaBa*, while comforting, is incommensurate with the truth of human existence and perception.

Louis Jacobs entitled his theodicy the 'free will defense.' "For the world to be an arena for the emergence of moral worth and value requires a world in which

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[111] Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, 124.
[112] N.B. This truth might be ontologically incorrect, but it still reflects God's seal.

there is evil to overcome that this value might emerge."[113] This statement is the crux of Jacob's argument, as he believes that "... even God cannot create such a world without evil, *not because there are limits to his powers but because a contradiction would be involved* [emphasis mine]."[114]

Louis Jacobs does not qualify God's power or God's knowledge. He claims that God cannot end suffering, as that would entail a logical impossibility.

Jacobs takes as an assumption that the world is an "arena for the emergence of moral worth and value." This postulation is regarded as highly as God's omnipotence and benevolence, and is considered as real as evil itself. If we call this proposition four, it seems as if Jacobs believes a paradox would exist if proposition three did *not* exist. To illustrate, here are the four propositions:

- **1. God is benevolent (relating to God's motives).**
- **2. God is omnipotent & omniscient (relating to God's power).**
- **3. *Evil is real.***
- **4. The world is an arena for the emergence of moral worth.**

Jacobs claims that God is omnipotent, but is unable to perform a paradoxical act. He proffers that the elimination of evil would create a logical incongruence, since its non-existence would then negate proposition four Thus, Jacobs preserves the omnipotence of God by maintaining the *logical necessity for the existence of evil.*

The crux of Jacob's argument is this:

"The apparent random element in nature is essential, for if it were always possible to discover the teleological necessity of each kind of suffering this would interfere with man's free choice. This does not mean that God sends the diseases, earthquakes and so on to provide opportunities

[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.

for sympathy and help but only that an environment in which these are possible serve as a vale of soul-making."[115]

This is a free will defense, because if reward and punishment were meted out to human beings according to an ordered system, there would be no choice. Free will vanishes. There would then be a "theological problem of relationship – between God's freedom and a possible consequence of man's actions."[116]

Jacobs' argument is that moral worth s can only exist given man's free will. If one's main motivator for action is fear of punishment, there is no free will, either on the part of man or God. Although there will be conformity of behavior, there will be no moral growth. It would be as if God is holding Mount Sinai over one's head, threatening punishment lest proper behavior be observed.

This theodicy concerns God's free will as well as humanity's: "... Can God act as he [God] does without surrendering his freedom? Does not God become a servant of human wish-fulfillment when he commits himself to the programme which orders all existence and according to which correct human action is materially rewarded?"[117]

Carmy asks a related, albeit different, question: "Does disinterested piety exist?"[118] If the utilitarian logic of Pascal's Wager lies behind one's religious observance, religious serves a pragmatic, and ultimately selfish purpose; one lives a religious life so as to avoid punishment and receive reward.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz contends that fear should not be the source of Jewish observance. One's religious life should not depend on self-interest.

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[115] A Jewish Theology, 134.
[116] Carmy, 143.
[117] *Ibid.*
[118] *Ibid.*

> The only genuine reason for the mitzvot is the worship of god and not the satisfaction of a human need of interest. If, for example, the meaning of the Sabbath were social or national, it would be completely superfluous: The secretary of the labor union takes care of workers' needs for rest. The divine Presence did not descend upon Mount Sinai to fulfill that function. If the Sabbath does not have meaning of holiness – and holiness is a concept utterly devoid of humanistic and anthropocentric meaning – then it has no meaning at all.[119]

It seems like Jacobs and Leibowitz are saying the same thing. God's actions can not follow a logical formula. If Rav Peretz is correct, we do not live in a world of human free will. On the flip side, if one received divine reward for specific actions, God would not be man's Lord, but his servant![120]

Everything can not happen for a reason, because this would undermine God's freedom as well as man's freedom. There is not teleology to each and every historical occurrence. Whereas suffering may be divinely caused (whether actively or passively), it may not reflect teleological reality. According to Jacobs, this does not make for a cruel God, however, as unjust suffering is logical necessary in order to have a world in which man is free to worship God, freed from the constraints of rewards and punishments.

In the book of Job, Satan makes a bet with God. "Satan really doubts whether there exists a form of piety which is unconcerned with personal gain, which does not exist because of the blessings such piety may secure for man. In other words, the Satan doubts whether man serves God for his own sake."[121]

God describes Job to Satan: "There is none like him on the earth. He is a perfect and upright man."[122] Job is the paradigm of human piety. If Satan can

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[119] Leibowitz, Contemporary Jewish Thought, 71.
[120] Carmy, 142.
[121] *Ibid.*
[122] Job 1:8.

demonstrate that Job's piety is motivated out of concern for personal gain, then Satan would prove all piety to be ultimately selfish.[123]

God proceeds to cause all sorts of suffering to Job; God kills Job's cattle and servants. God destroys his home. God causes boils to appear on Job's body. Through all of his suffering, however, Job remained pious. "Job did not sin, or charge God."[124]

Job's friends tried to console him. They each put forth possible justifications for Job's current situation of suffering. These justifications created teleology for Job's actions. Just as we might try and justify one's suffering, so too were Job's companions. One can imagine Rav Peretz being among the consolers of Job, consoling him that yes, everything indeed happens for a divine reason; even extreme suffering.

We saw what would happen if we lived in such a world; there would not be moral growth. Here, the words *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* would correlate to reality, as God actions would reflect a divine pan-causality. According to the argument presented, however, a dysteleological element must exist in order to foster moral development.

In this case, the words of the blessing do not correspond to the way God issues forth judgments, but to the way that God does not. We recite the blessing during times of unjust suffering and pain. Those moments remind us that worship of God is based on free will. If I endure unjust pain, my observance of the *mitzvot* is certainly not motivated by reward or punishment by God.

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[123] Carmy, 143.
[124] Job 1:22.

Earlier, I quoted Maimonides' pedagogy in teaching *mitzvot* to children. Children should be taught through fear, as the child desires reward and eschews punishment, and will act accordingly. Ramban continues:

> As their wisdom increases, they begin serving God out of love.[125]

As a child grows up, he gains experiences and insights. He begins to realize that God does not reward and punish in the same manner as teachers, parents and other authority figures. The system of *mitzvot* can still be observed, however, if the framework for observance changes. Instead of being fearful of God, one is to love God.

The second paragraph of the *V'ahavta* might motivate one to observe *mitzvot*. The first paragraph, while lacking in rewards and punishments, presumes human free will. The second paragraph, while deterministic, preserves teleology. Is there a way to have both?

[125] Rambam, Hilchot Tsuvah, 12:5.

Reclaiming the Blessing: A Higher Truth

חֶסֶד־וּמִשְׁפָּט אָשִׁירָה לְךָ יְהוָה אֲזַמֵּרָה
I will sing to you God, I will sing to you regarding your mercy as well as your judgment.

- Psalms 101:1

Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

- Shakespeare, Hamlet.

The Kotsker Rebbe was asked, "Where is God?"

His reply: "Wherever you let him in."

- Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk

Sanhedrin 10:1 lists those who have a share in the world to come (*Olam HaBa*) and those who do not. Included among those who forfeit their share in the world to come is the *apikoros*. There is debate concerning the word's etymology[126], but it seems that the word stems from the Hebrew '*hefker*', meaning abandoned.

Maimonides distinguishes the *apikoros* from a non-believer or atheist. In Yad Tshuvah[127], Rambam defines an *apikoros* as one person who denies prophecy. Prophecy is equivalent with divine providence. Maimonides also defines an *apikoros* as one who denies God's knowledge of the deeds of man. These are related, as divine providence implies God's awareness of one's deeds.

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[126] See Encylopedia Judaica.
[127] 3:8.

According to this definition, a Jewish apostate is one who denies any and all divine teleology. If God does not act in the affairs of man (prophecy) or if God is not knowledgeable of worldly affairs (judgment), then there is no divine justice regarding human behavior; God is not a *Dayan HaEmet*.

Elisha Ben Abuyah is known the name *Acher* – 'other.' The Talmud illustrates various occurrences which justify this name. Upon seeing the tongue of the exalted Rabbi Judah HaNachtom in a dog's mouth, he bitterly commented, "Is this the Torah and this its reward?"[128] Upon seeing the tongue of another *Tzaddik*, Chuzpit the Meturgeman (translator), he explained: "The mouth that once uttered pearls now licks the dust."[129]

Each of these is given as justifications for Elisha's apostasy. In both of these instances, Elisha's comments refute faith in divine reward and punishment. In these two cases, he witnesses the tragedy of two *Tzadikim* (righteous ones) and questions God's justice. The Jerusalem Talmud asks:

> Why did all this happen to him?
>
> Once Elisha was sitting and studying in the area of Gennersaret, and saw a man climb to the top of a tree, take a mother bird with her young and descend safely. The following day he saw another man climbing to the top of the tree. He (the man climbing the tree) took the young birds but released the mother. When he descended a snake bit him and he died. Elisha thought, "It is written, (If you come upon a bird's nest, you shall not take the mother with the young.) You shall let the mother go, but the young you shall take, that it might go well with you, and that you may live long. Where is the welfare of this man, and where the length of days?

This narrative is a variation of the tale we examined earlier. In this story, Elisha B. Abuya observes the man fall down the tree. This example seems much more disturbing, as the first person climbed the tree and took the mother bird, an act explicitly forbidden. The first man climbed down the tree safely. . The

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[128] JT Chagigah 15B.
[129] Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 39.

second not only acted in accordance with the *mitzvah*, but in accordance to the exact law which promises prolonged length of days! Upon seeing the man die, Abuya utters, "Where is the welfare of this man?" If observation of *mitzvot* leads to unjust suffering and tragedy, there is no motivation left for observation of *mitzvot*.

An *apikoros* is one who "throws off the yoke of the commandments, or who derides the Torah."[130] This repudiation of divine providence is the most dangerous threat to the rabbinic authorities, because an *apikoros* denies the very justification for observance of *mitzvot!* Without a fixed set of behaviors, there is no order. Without order, the rabbis lack managerial control. Thus, Elisha becomes Other – *Acher*.

Abuya looked at reality and saw a world of meaninglessness, injustice, suffering and nihilism.

Haman and Amalek sought to destroy the Jewish people. They were not Jewish, and it is easy to view them as 'other', as enemies whose memories we should blot out. We easily follow the Torah's dictum to "blot out the remembrance of Amalek."[131] On Purim, we scream and use groggers so as to not hear the name of Haman. Their faithlessness in God's providential powers marks them as quintessential enemies.

Elisha B. Abuya, however, was not an enemy of the Jewish people. He was a faithful practitioner of the Jewish faith, observant of *mitzvot* and fearful of God.

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[130] Encyclopedia Judaica.
[131] Deuteronomy 25:19.

Like others, he experienced the reality of suffering. He became *Acher* when he refused to construct a *Tzidduk HaDin*.

It seems that these two philosophies represent an either/or dualistic approach to reality. We experience suffering and react in one of two ways:

- God is a True Judge (pan-causality)
- There is no judge(ment)

The world is either one of ontological meaning or it is not. One answer seems to point to experiential understanding, whereas another points to hope, meaning and comfort. One answer reflects that everything does indeed happen for a reason, but the other affirms our free will.

Many of us have experiences that lead us to Elisha's conclusion. I think that it is all too easy for each of us to become *Acher*. I do not believe that God is a judge. Even now, I often believe that events in the world happen by chance.

In the movie Signs, two brothers witness alien spacecraft above planet Earth. The older brother is a priest who lost his faith several months before, when his wife was killed in a car accident. Upon watching the news reports regarding alien ships in the atmosphere, the younger brother beseeches him, "Give me some comfort."

He responds, "People break down into two groups when they experience something lucky. Group number 1 sees it as something more than luck; more than coincidence. They see it as some sort of sign, evidence that there is someone

out there watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck, a random turn of chance. You have to ask yourself, what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, that sees miracles, or do you believe that people just get lucky? Is it possibly that there are no coincidences?"

The younger brother relates an incident that happened at a high school party. He was about to kiss a very beautiful girl when he realized he had gum in his mouth. He turned to the side, threw away the gum, and upon turning back, saw that the girl had vomited all over herself. He says, "I would have been scarred for life." If he had not had gum in his mouth, he would have kissed her when she threw up. As we now understand, he retroactively attribute teleological meaning to an otherwise un-noteworthy event. He then says to his brother, "I'm a miracle man." Someone or something was watching out for him.[132]

The older brother has experienced tragedy and loss. As a pastor, he followed in God's ways. His life was one of love and compassion. Watching the movie, I become an observer to his tragedy, just as Elisha observed the man's death. Seeing this man's suffering, we too ask, "Where is his reward?"

This conversation reflects the bifurcated views described in the last chapter. The conversation is disturbing because we can empathize with both arguments. It seems that one's life – one's autobiography, creates an answer. It is observer-dependant. Its ontological truth is not just unknown; it is irrelevant.

Theology is not something that we think about; it is something that we think with.

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[132] Dialogue taken from the movie Signs.

We would like to think that we are spiritual archeologists of sorts. Our minds are the containers for the tools of the trade; the Bible, commentary, Talmud, Midrash, modern scholarship – all of these are in the tool box. We grow and learn and are able to put more tools into the box, so that we can glean discoveries that much more carefully.

This is not the case, however, although our theological musings are passed off as such. We have it backwards. We are not archeologists: we are architects. Theology is the container in which we put all of our tools. If a tool does not 'fit' into the bag, we throw it away. Theology is eisegetical, not exegetical.

One's theology, then, is a framework by which one both sees and constructs the world. Depending on theology, one can see despair and meaninglessness, or one can see hope and meaning. It is a lens through which one sees the world. The right question does not have to do with a correct lens, but with the effects that that lens has on life.

The important question to ask is not one of correlative truth. We do not need to choose an answer to the earlier dilemma. We should not choose between free will and meaninglessness on the one hand, and determinism and teleology on the other. This false dichotomy is based on the wrong question. The correct question to ask is, "Which theology is true *for me*?"

Ultimately, I am not concerned with which theology is correct. As I learn and experience life, I will continue to add new tools to my theological tool-kit. I am convinced, however, that no amount of tools can accurately reflect the world that is. They might, however, reflect the world of my perceptions. Thus, my ultimate

theological concern revolves around whether my theology *works*. What effect does it have on my life? What effect does it have on the lives of those that I come into contact with?

Earlier in Tractate Yoma[133], we noted a story in which God sent down a note from heaven containing God's seal of truth – of *Emet*. A bit further down, the *stam* relates:

> Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its completeness.

The Talmud is going to relate how the men of the Great Assembly restored the crown of divine attributes.

> Moses said, "The great God, the mighty and the awesome."

This is taken directly from Deuteronomy 10:17. It is a teaching of Moses, as this is how Moses experienced God. This line is contained in the first blessing of the *Amidah*, a blessing that is included in all three daily prayer services. The blessing, *avot*, refers to our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our personal prayer to God reminds us (and God!) that we are historically linked to Abraham, and that God's covenant applies to us as well. This line reflects how we relate to God, and likewise, how God relates to us.

> Jeremiah came and said, "People are destroying his Temple. Where, then, are God's awesome deeds? Therefore, he omitted the word 'awful.'[134]

Many generations later, Jeremiah witnessed exiled Jews being killed in the Temple. The question of the *apikoros* becomes Jeremiah's question. It is our question. Where are God's awesome deeds? We were taught by our greatest

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[133] Yoma 69b.
[134] Jeremiah 32:17.

teacher, Moses, that God is awesome. If that is the case, why are pious Jews being slaughtered in the Temple? As a proof-text, the rabbis use a text from Jeremiah in which Jeremiah describes God as great and mighty, but not awful. Given the precept that the Torah is completely perfect, this Talmudic exposition relates a historical reason for Jeremiah's claim.

Daniel came and said, "People are enslaving God's sons. Where are God's mighty deeds? Therefore, he omitted the word 'mighty.'[135]

Daniel's experiential reality was also different than Moses. He saw enslaved Jews and asked, "Where are Gods mighty acts?" Here, the rabbis make use of a text in Daniel in which Daniel refers to God as great and awesome, but not mighty.

Daniel and Jeremiah were not apostates; they were not *apikorsim*. Yet, their experiential reality caused them to modify how they described God. Individual experiences changed the lens through which they constructed reality. They were taught that God is great, mighty and awesome, but experience told them otherwise. Daniel and Jeremiah's observer-dependant experience changed not only their perception of God, but by extension, their relationship to God.

But how could the rabbis abolish something established by Moses?

These two men modified Moses' experience of God. As our great prophet, Moses saw God correctly and fully. Therefore, it seems inappropriate to question Moses' authority. Perhaps Daniel and Jeremiah did not fully understand how it is the case that God is in fact mighty and awesome. With limited knowledge, how could these two act accordingly?

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[135] Daniel 9:4.

Rabbi Eleazar said, "Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe falsity to Him.

Daniel and Jeremiah are justified. Their words about God accurately reflected their experience. Whereas these words did not reflect the reality of Moses, they did reflect the reality of other faithful Jews. Daniel and Jeremiah did not have the same theology either, although they were certainly more contemporary with each other than Moses. Despite their different prayers, Daniel was true and Jeremiah was true, just as Moses himself was true. *Their words were true to their life experiences.*

These words, "the great, mighty and awesome," appear in the *avot*, the first of eighteen blessings found in the *Amidah*. Immediately following these words are the words "God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob." The translation reads, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, the great, powerful and awesome God."

Why is the word 'God' repeated three times? Judaism is a monotheistic religion. Surely there were not three separate deities that spoke to our patriarchs.

The repeated phrasing teaches the importance of unique relationships. God had a unique relationship with Abraham, a unique relationship with Isaac, and a unique relationship to Jacob.

In middle school, I had a friend who I thought was incredibly funny and exciting. Another friend of mine thought she was utterly boring. Who was right? Neither of us. And both of us.

If Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had different relationships with God, surely they experienced God differently. Each of them probably described God differently,

as their observer-dependant realities forged different viewpoints of theology. Perhaps Abraham saw God as great, whereas Isaac saw God as awesome. The uniqueness of relationship implies the uniqueness of characteristic.

Each Jew, then, has the mandate to describe God in accordance with one's true experience. We should not accept Moses' words as ontological truth, but as truth for Moses. They serve as an anchor, not as reality. Our individual experiences cause us to have a unique relationship with God, just like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and also like Jeremiah and Daniel. The words *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* serve to cause us to think about that relationship, and perhaps to modify it.

Jacob was renamed Yisrael after he wrestled with an angel. Yisrael is a theophoric name, literally meaning "he will struggle with God." The future tense is important. As the people of Israel, we are meant to constantly struggle with our relationship with God, as we continue to bridge the gap between the world that is, and that world that might be. The traumatic and powerful experience of mourning could easily cause one to end the struggle. Instead, the words of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* force its continued presence.

To the chief musician, a Psalm of David.
How long will you forget me, O God? For ever? How long will you hide your face from me?
How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Look and answer me, O Lord my God; lighten my eyes, or else I will sleep the sleep of death.
My enemy will say, "I have prevailed against him." Those who trouble me rejoice when I am saddened.
Yet, I have trusted in your love and kindness. My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt well with me.

- Psalm 13

Suffering causes great pain. The expression of God as a True Judge does not ameliorate the pain, nor should it. Instead, the pain is added it to one's theological tool-kit – it does not negate God's presence; it does, however, force us to re-evaluate God's presence.

In the last line of the Psalm, the Psalmist praises God, despite experiential evidence to the contrary.

The world that I experience – the world that is, can shape my theology into one of nihilism. I can easily find myself like the older brother in Signs. I empathize deeply with Elisha B. Abuya. Ultimately, however, I am not interested in ontological reality, especially given that my limited epistemological 'tools' can never come close to representing this reality. I am, however, interested in meaning, hope and comfort.

Religion serves this purpose. Through religion, I can put on a different pair of theological glasses. Suddenly, I see the world differently, and act differently. I act with more joy and more compassion. Theology serves me, as I'm able to find meaning in a meaningless world. Like Tertullian said, "I believe because it is absurd."

Earlier, I described that the word *Emet* is composed of the exact first, middle and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We learned that God's truth is a complete truth, demonstrating ontological reality as against limited, incomplete human experience. God's truth is observer-independent, whereas our truths (linking back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) are observer-dependant.

Now, I'd like to take a look at the word for falsehood, or lie. The Hebrew word *sheker* is made up of the letters *shin*, *kuf* and *resh*. These three letters are three letters that are directly next to one another at the end of the Hebrew alphabet.[136] Thus, a lie is a very narrow perspective of reality. In this sense, a *sheker* is not a lie per se. It is not a complete representation.

The refusal to refer to God as mighty or awesome is not a lie, just as a refusal to recite *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* is not a lie One can respond to suffering like Elisha B. Abuya, or like the fallen pastor in Signs. This response is true in that it reflects epistemological perception, but it is not the complete truth, as it doesn't help us move to a different reality of hope and comfort.

The complete truth takes into account how our beliefs and our words shape how we behave in this world. The complete truth brings us a bit closer to the world that might be, as we continue to struggle with God, continually earning the name Yisael. The complete truth is not the correlation to life experience, but a tool through which we both find and construe meaning and hope. This complete truth should lead us to new life experiences, rich in meaning. This *Emet* helps us move away from the world that is, toward that world that might be.

In the movie Contact, Jodie Foster's character experiences great unfairness and injustice. Upon getting passed over, her employer says, "I know you must think this is all very unfair ... I wish the world was a place where fair was the bottom line ... unfortunately we don't live in that world." Foster's character responds, "Funny. I always believed the world is what we make of it."

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[136] *Kuf, Resh, Shin* is the order.

The recitation of *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* reminds me that my actions create the world. The words of the blessing bridge the gap between reality and hope, and between despair and meaning. The blessing forces me to reevaluate my relationship with my God, thus reevaluating my relationship to the world outside of me.

God is not a True Judge. But I will pray *as if* God is that very thing. I won't claim that God's Law is Just, but I *will* use language of God to justify the law. I am like an archer who shoots arrows haphazardly across a field, only to run to the arrow and paint a bulls-eye around it. My bulls-eye is one of meaning and hope. My God is one of meaning and hope. *Baruch Dayan HaEmet.*

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