

Jeremy Master

Thesis Summary

**The Theology of Suffering in the Talmud**

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a greater understanding of the theological underpinnings behind the classical Rabbinic response to suffering as illustrated in Talmudic literature. This thesis works synchronically and only in relation to the classic documents of Rabbinic Judaism, the Bavli and the Yerushalmi. In addition, this thesis uses many secondary texts discussing Rabbinic theology. The thesis focuses on Rabbinic responses to *yissurin* and other instances of suffering as part of a complex of theological views, and takes a first step in understanding how the responses to suffering function as an integral part of the Rabbinic worldview. This thesis makes the contribution of examining Rabbinic responses to suffering by looking at the issue from a more theological perspective.

In examining suffering in the Talmud, this thesis is structured according to the major themes of God's justice system. This thesis has three chapters. The first chapter examines how suffering fits within God's system of punishment. Suffering is a means to punish people who commit sins. In the second chapter, suffering is discussed in terms of God's system of reward. Suffering can serve as a means to bring reward upon the righteous. The third chapter describes how there are texts that question the working of God's justice system. These texts explain that reality does not always correspond with the theological ideals of God's justice system.

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# **The Theology of Suffering in the Talmud**

by  
**Jeremy Master**

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
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Advisor: Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz

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## **Introduction**

The evidence from studying the statements and stories within the Talmudic literature regarding suffering indicates that there is no singular Rabbinic theology about suffering. Rather, based upon the evidence, the Rabbis appear to be presenting a range of different theological ideas and beliefs. Whenever the Rabbis produce stories and statements containing examples and references to suffering, they refer to suffering as a sub-category of the theological theme of God's justice. While much of the discussions and stories containing references to suffering can be characterized as examples of the divine system of justice, there is a wide range of variety within these theological ideas concerning justice.

In addition, due to the problem of theodicy, questions are raised as to whether suffering even fits within the divine system of justice. There are many examples of the Rabbis proclaiming that people can suffer unjustly. Even though these statements are questioning God's role in suffering, they are in direct conversation with the traditional concept of God's justice as explicated within the Bible. The examples of people suffering unjustly, considered along with the variety in texts portraying a strong belief in the concept of God's justice, presents the nuance and depth of Rabbinic beliefs. The Talmudic literature is comfortable with a variety of theological beliefs existing on a single theological topic.

The purpose of the thesis is to gain a greater understanding of the theological underpinnings behind the classical Rabbinic response to suffering as illustrated in Talmudic literature. David Kraemer's Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature attempts to explicate the history of the development of Rabbinic ideas about

suffering. This thesis, however, will work synchronically and only in relation to the classic documents of Rabbinic Judaism, the Bavli and the Yerushalmi. It will focus on Rabbinic responses to *yissurin* and other instances of suffering. As opposed to Kraemer's approach, this thesis will strive to re-examine Rabbinic responses to suffering by looking at the issue from a more theological perspective.

The Rabbis considered themselves the inheritors of the traditions of the Bible. As a result, a large part of the substance of their beliefs can be traced back to elements within the Bible. The Bible itself contains a wide range of beliefs about suffering and responses to the problem of theodicy.

The most dominant theological position for suffering posits that suffering is the result of God's punishment. From the beginning of the Bible, this message is made clear. In Genesis 1, God repeatedly calls creation "good". However, in chapter three, with the exile from Eden, the basic etiology for the presence of suffering in the world is provided. It provides an explanation for the incongruity between the intentions of God to create a world filled with goodness and the reality of a suffering world.<sup>1</sup> The woman and the man transgressed the one command God gave them and the exile and curse upon humanity that people shall toil for their sustenance is the punishment for this sin.

The concept that God punishes the Jewish people for their sins is the essential message of the pre-exilic prophets and the Deuteronomistic history. The pre-exilic prophets made a connection between the sins of the people, especially of the political, religious, and business leaders, and the national disaster which was coming. The people deserved what would happen to them, though there were righteous people who would bear the suffering along with those more deserving of it. In a time of national disaster,

there is no safe haven for even the most righteous.<sup>2</sup> The pre-exilic prophets were deeply concerned with moving the people to change their sinful behavior through threats of retribution. They promised that if the nation sinned, God would send horrific suffering because God would be compelled to act according to the dictates of justice.

The series of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 27 and 28 make clear the connection between following God's commandments and punishment and reward. Times of prosperity were the reward for faithfulness to God. Disaster and chaos were the result of sins committed by the people.<sup>3</sup> As a result, in the historical texts of the Bible, the story of Israel makes sense. God is at work to see that justice is done. People's decisions can determine what fate awaits them. In this view, suffering is an indication that wrong choices have been made.

In addition, to the concept that God brings suffering upon the people because of their sin, several texts describe how long this punishment will last. In Exodus 34:7, with parallels in Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 9, and Numbers 14:18, the idea is presented that the punishment for the sins of previous generations will be visited upon the generations that follow. Righteous people as a result of the guilt of their ancestors can experience suffering. There is a cause and effect where God brings punishment long after the sin was committed.

As a result of the suffering of the Israelite people in exile in Babylon, new theological explanations for suffering arose. The concept of punishment occurring upon children because of the sins of the parents is refuted by later texts, in particular, Ezekiel 18. Ezekiel confronts those who claim that their suffering is not because of their sins.

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<sup>1</sup> The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 6, p. 220

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

There is some tension between this movement by Ezekiel and the earlier understanding that one can expect to bear the sins of ancestors to the third and fourth generation. This statement is an attempt to fix the problems with the original doctrine of justice. Ezekiel's point is to say that the present situation should not be excused by claiming that it was hopelessly predetermined in the past.<sup>4</sup> This is a significant change from the previous theological position derived from the Torah.

In Second Isaiah, a different theological explanation for suffering is provided. Instead of suffering only being defined in negative terms as punishment, suffering can also have positive meanings. If the people have the faith to see it, they may discover that their suffering is part of God's work in the world. The discussion of the suffering servant and the suffering of the Israelite people for their sins provide an example of suffering providing a positive example. The Israelite people have received punishment, but this punishment will cleanse them of their sin and lead to their ultimate reward in the future when God will redeem them and protect them. Second Isaiah turns away from defining suffering only as punishment to a more hopeful, future-oriented understanding. God will work some greater good for others out of the suffering of the faithful.<sup>5</sup> This provides a justification for the problem of the suffering of the people of Israel who are God's chosen people and should be the people receiving earthly reward.

In addition to these changes in the theology of suffering due to the problem of the exile, the tradition of the lament became more prevalent during the exile. The tradition of the lament existed before exilic times, but in the time of exile, the lament was widespread as a response to catastrophe, meaninglessness, and delay in the redemption of the faithful

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 222

and judgment on the wicked. The lament complains about God's treatment of the people. God should act fairly and quickly by ending the suffering of the righteous and bringing punishment upon their captors, but this is not happening. The lament gives people the freedom to admit hostile thoughts and hurt feelings over a perception of undeserved suffering. The typical lament ends with assurances that God has heard and will save the people. The lament does not solve all of the sufferer's intellectual questions about the origin and meaning of suffering, but it does provide a structured way for the faithful to bring their suffering to God's attention and to cope with it.<sup>6</sup> The lament provides another theological response to suffering. It provides the possibility that suffering can be meaningless. Within the lament, people are unable to find the justification for why God brings suffering upon them, but they maintain faith that God will act to rectify this situation.

In a different manner than the lament, the book of Ecclesiastes presents the possibility that one can find any meaning behind suffering. As Kohelet proclaims in the beginning (1:1), "all is futile" because everything ends in death. For Kohelet, there can be no meaning found in life not just for suffering.

Another response to suffering in the Bible is eschatological and apocalyptic. To the apocalyptic mind, evil has the upper hand and God will have to intervene to bring the present world order to a close before justice can be done and suffering removed. While in current times, the righteous may suffer and the wicked may prosper, in future times, God will rectify this and the true judgment will be made. Even those who died will be redeemed because God will bring them back from the dead in order to execute the justice

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

that was not granted them during life.<sup>7</sup> This apocalyptic vision posits a different response to suffering. God does not judge in this world, but in a future world. This resolves the problem of theodicy by projecting a hope for the future for those who suffer in the presence.

The largest discussion of the problem of suffering exists within the book of Job. The central issue of this book is the problem of theodicy. According to the system of justice as described in the Torah, the Deuteronomistic history, and the prophets, Job should not experience suffering. Instead, God and the Adversary have a discussion and decide to challenge whether Job will reject God upon his suffering.

In the second chapter of the book, Job's three friends come to comfort and console him. These three friends serve as vehicles for the exposition of theological doctrine. They seek to comfort by justifying the ways of God.<sup>8</sup> For example, Eliphaz asks Job to accept his suffering as a form of discipline to learn from his sinful actions. Job is prepared to accept that he may have inadvertently sinned, but not enough to receive such heavy suffering.

Later on in the book, Job pleads his innocence, calls God to justice and thereby provides a framework for questioning all of the theological assumptions about reward and punishment.<sup>9</sup> Job wants some explanation from God for his suffering and through his receiving this, he will understand the reasoning for the problem of theodicy in general.<sup>10</sup>

Further on in the book, God appears to speak to Job. God offers no explanation why Job has suffered. All of Job's questions, framed in juridical terms of guilt and

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 223

<sup>8</sup> Hammer, "Two Approaches to the Problem of Suffering", p. 302

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 301

<sup>10</sup> Leaman, Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy, p. 19

innocence and court trials, were simply ignored. Rather, God proclaimed the wonders of creation, human inability to understand the complexities of the universe, and the assurance that God will take care of those matters which humans can neither comprehend nor control.<sup>11</sup> The book of Job presents the idea that, in terms of the reasoning behind suffering, God is inscrutable. Job seems to accept throughout that innocent suffering exists, and does not use it as an argument against adherence to belief in God. The book of Job seems to be an extended treatment of the idea that there is innocent suffering and no justification for it can be found.<sup>12</sup>

The Bible presents a variety of possible explanations for suffering. One author lists eight means that the Bible uses to reconcile undeserved suffering with belief in order and purpose. The Bible understands suffering as retributive, disciplinary, revelational, probative, illusory, transitory, mysterious, or ultimately meaningless.<sup>13</sup> All of these means to understanding the purpose behind suffering are in conversation with the overarching theme of God's justice. Each of these explanations within the Bible attempt to explain why suffering exists in a world where one omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God created and controls everything. Furthermore, the text of the Bible presents God as creating a universe that is ultimately good and that God acts in the world to ensure that justice exists.

However, the reality of human life illustrates that sometimes people suffer and there is no apparent reason why. The Biblical writers fashioned their answers to suffering as an attempt to create meaning in the face of something that threatens their sense of order and justice in the world. The most dominant explanation that people suffer

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<sup>11</sup> The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 6, p. 223

<sup>12</sup> Leaman, Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy, p. 24

because they are being punished for sins provides a sense that God is participating in the universe to ensure that goodness ultimately is victorious. Other answers arise to augment or provide alternatives to this dominant theological concept when it proves psychologically untenable as with the suffering experienced in the exile.

Since the Rabbis view the Bible as the basis of their belief system, much of their theological concepts are similar to the Biblical text. Like in the Bible, the Rabbis believe that God created a universe that is good and God acts in the universe with perfect justice. As in the Bible, the Rabbinic response to suffering is the struggle to find justification and meaning in suffering in light of the belief in a perfectly just God. The Rabbis further develop the theological concepts that exist within the Bible to fit their own experiences and ideas about suffering.

As a result of following the model of Biblical theology, the Rabbis explanations for suffering also have variety and nuance. By examining this range of ideas, this thesis will clarify the depth of the development of Rabbinic thought in terms of explaining suffering. This thesis will examine three major aspects of God's justice and discuss how the sub-category of suffering relates to each within Rabbinic thought.

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<sup>13</sup> Crenshaw, Theodicy in the Old Testament, p. 4

## **Chapter 1: Suffering and Divine Punishment**

In many aggadot within Talmudic literature, the Rabbis rationalize suffering as a means for God to effect punishment. The Rabbis have taken from the Bible the concept that suffering arises from the punishment for sin. They are trying to justify the traditional system in favor of the high religious ideal of God's justice. According to this theological explanation, there is no undeserved suffering. In different aggadot, the concept of God's punishment through the agency of suffering provides meaning to suffering. There are several different Rabbinic concepts that form the basis of the belief in suffering as a form of punishment. Suffering serves as straightforward punishment of individuals for their own sins. Suffering can also operate as a means for expiation of sin. In order to be a successful punishment, suffering must be accepted willingly. Suffering can be inflicted collectively in response to a community's shared sins. The punishment of suffering can come upon the righteous because of the sins of the wicked.

As a concept received from the Bible, the overarching classical Jewish theology of God's judgment posits that God judges perfectly in the world. According to Rabbinic theology, there are three levels of justice. Firstly, there is piecemeal justice that punishes individuals for specific sins. Secondly, there is the form of justice where a person's whole life is added up and judgment is rendered based upon the individual's behavior. Finally, there is collective justice upon the whole community of Israel.

The theological concept of piecemeal justice is clearly enumerated in Sotah 8b. The Mishnah begins by stating that "in the measure that a man is measured, so will the measure be meted to him." The concept of "measure for measure" justice is a sub-

concept of God's justice.<sup>14</sup> This Mishnaic formulation posits that for each transgression that a person commits, God sends an equal amount of punishment. This Mishnaic statement is an exaggeration intended to prove the perfect nature of God's justice. As illustrated by this text, the Rabbis are deeply concerned with propagating the belief that God's justice is perfect.

The editor of the gemara to this Mishnah immediately starts with a difficulty to the conception of this system. R. Joseph states that "although the measure has ceased, the principle of 'measure for measure' has not ceased." What R. Joseph means is that the obvious means of enforcing the justice system by Jewish authorities as in the case of sotah has ceased. Similarly, R. Hiyya states that "from the day the Temple was destroyed, although the Sanhedrin was canceled, the four modes of execution (that the Sanhedrin could punish a person with) were not canceled." The editor has a problem with R. Hiyya's statement. The modes of execution that the Sanhedrin utilized have actually ceased. The editor then clarifies the two amoraic statements by saying that the judgment of the four modes of execution did not cease. Examples are provided of how divine intervention ensures that the principle of "measure for measure" still exists in the world. For example, the text states, "He who would have been condemned to stoning falls from a roof or a wild beast tramples him." Even though Jewish authorities no longer perform punishment, the perfect punishment of sin still exists through God's intervention in the world. This gemara was designed by the editor to provide a rationalization that even though the Sanhedrin no longer exists, justice still exists. Furthermore, the concept of "measure for measure" is promoted here to show that God's justice is perfect. This is an exaggeration of how justice works, but the essence of this ideal illustrates the Rabbinic

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<sup>14</sup> Kadushin, The Rabbinic Mind, p. 140

faith in God's justice. The Rabbis were not concerned with the extent to which human actions and God's punishment truly correspond, but with the actual presence of reward and punishment in God's rule over the world.<sup>15</sup> According to this text, there can be no undeserved suffering. When a person dies prematurely, this is a sign of sin and this explanation provides a rationalization for the experience of suffering in the world.

The existence of piecemeal justice is echoed in Shabbat 31b-32a. Here the Mishnah starts by saying, "for three sins women die in childbirth: because they are not observant of niddah, challah, and kindling Shabbat lights. The editor immediately asks why a woman is punished in childbirth for these particular commandments. For example, R. Isaac connects niddah with death in childbirth by stating that "she transgressed through her womb and she is punished through her womb." As for why a woman is punished during childbirth, the editor quotes Raba who says, when the ox has fallen, sharpen knife. This and several other sayings following it are arguing that when danger is near, one's faults are remembered and punished. The Rabbis appears to have some difficulty with accepting this extreme punishment. They need to find some connection between the sin and the punishment as a form of justification of the suffering. In this situation, the text utilizes a strict interpretation of God's piecemeal justice system in order to provide a rationalization for the severe suffering of death in childbirth.

#### I. Suffering as a means of punishment

The concept of God's perfect justice acting in the world extends to suffering. The punishment of individuals with suffering provides a validation for the existence of suffering. In Sanhedrin 45a, there is a discussion about exposing a woman's body prior to undergoing the sotah ritual. R. Yehudah explains that there is a problem with this

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<sup>15</sup> Urbach, The Sages, p. 439

action because of concerns over lewdness. Rabbah states that on these grounds the sotah should be exposed in order to deter other women from her behavior. Rava then explains that the real reason the woman should not be exposed in the sotah ritual is because "there is no greater suffering than death." R. Nachman explains that bringing disgrace upon a woman in this situation is not proper because she is already going to die and this is the worst possible form of suffering. Thus, death is the highest level of suffering and serves as punishment for the most severe transgressions.

The correlation between death and suffering is also expressed in a series of sayings about the consequences of mocking people. In Avodah Zarah 18b, R. Shimon explains that "if one walks a sinful path, then one will end up standing and lingering in the sinful life and will eventually mock others." R. Elazar then states that "whoever mocks others, suffering comes upon him. Mockery is harsh because in the beginning, it leads to suffering, but in the end it leads to destruction." Thus, there is a gradation of suffering as a result of sin. The punishment begins with suffering, but if the person does not stop mocking and sinning, then the punishment will increase to the point that it leads to death.

In one instance, an aggadah illustrates that death can be the punishment for even a relatively minor transgression. In Shabbat 13a, there exists an aggadah about a student "who was learned in Mishnah, Tanach and spent time serving Torah scholars." This student appears to be righteous in every way, but he dies young. His wife, not accepting the fairness of his death, would take his tefillin, which is a commandment connected to the lengthening of days, and she would go to the house of prayer and question sages why he died so young. No sage would answer her for a long time until one sage asks her what

he did with her during her time of niddah. She replies that during the actual week of niddah, he did not touch her, but during the week after, which is rabbinically ordained that a man should not touch a woman, he would touch her. He died not because he transgressed an actual decree in the Torah, but because of a rabbinic decree designed to protect the Torah. The text seems to be struggling with how such a righteous man could die so young. The story admits the apparent injustices that punctuate everyday experience. The relatively righteous do seem to suffer and die before their time without receiving the reward that they should be due, but the admission is expressed only to be rebutted. As expressed in another aggadah, the Rabbis believe that dying at a young age is a death of punishment (Moed Katan 28a). The story concludes by declaring that the injustice is only apparent. The sage needs to find some transgression however small. They need to find justification for the reality that this righteous man suffered death at a very young age. One merely needs to look deep enough to discover that there is a sin behind every punishment.<sup>16</sup> If death at a young age is punishment, then the text does not want to remain silent as to why this person died so young. In this instance, the Rabbis cannot allow this man's death to have no meaning so they explain that God's justice is working in a piecemeal fashion.

Other aggadot illustrate that a lesser level of transgression can lead to a smaller amount of suffering. In addition, if the person learns from the punishment and changes his behavior, then the suffering will cease. In Brachot 5b, four hundred jars of wine belonging to R. Huna turn sour and he experiences the suffering of economic loss. R. Judah and several other scholars came to visit him and say to him, "You need to examine your actions." R. Huna asks "Am I suspect in your eyes?" They respond, "Is God

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<sup>16</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 157

suspect of punishing without justice?" This question implies that there could be no suffering without sin. This provides a justification for suffering. Any suffering that occurs in a person's life must be as a result of sin because God's justice is perfect and God acts in this world according to the dictates of justice. R. Huna then accepts the possibility that he transgressed and he seeks to find out what he did wrong. R. Huna must recognize that a sin was committed, accept the punishment, and repair the effect from the transgression. In the end, R. Huna finds out that he was not giving his tenant the right amount of leftover vines. R. Huna committed an economic transgression and he is punished through suffering in his economic world. R. Huna pledges to rectify the situation and "some report that his wine returned to its proper quality." Thus, by accepting the righteousness of God's judgment through his economic suffering and performing restitution for his actions, R. Huna's suffering ceases to exist. This story supports a strict interpretation of God's justice system. This story also has a peculiar place within the text. It appears as the end of a series of gathered sayings about suffering. This particular passage follows the story of the three sick rabbis being visited by three other rabbis. The story of the three sick rabbis provides an example of a real life experience of suffering that calls into question the ideology of God's justice. Juxtaposed with this passage, the story of R. Huna may indicate some discomfort with the previous story and allows the reader to recover more conventional views. Whatever the intent, this story serves as a very traditional aspect of a deep and complex struggle with the meaning and purpose of suffering.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in Brachot 5a, Rava states that "if a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct." This expresses a clear sense of the concept

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<sup>17</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 200

within God's justice that suffering is the direct result of a person's sin. Rava continues to state that "if the person examines his actions and finds that he did nothing wrong, then he should attribute it to the neglect of study of Torah." This illustrates the importance that the Rabbis place upon Torah study. A person could be righteous in every way, but the study of Torah is so essential that if the person does not spend significant time in Torah study, suffering will come upon him. The Rabbis are searching for rationalizations in order to provide reason to maintain faith in God's justice system. Even if a person is righteous in every action, they can be punished for neglect of Torah study.

Likewise, R. Shimon b. Lakish states, "If one studies Torah, painful sufferings are kept away from him." The study of Torah is such an exalted commandment that it has the power to keep away suffering. R. Yochanan responds to this assertion by saying, "even school children know this." For R. Yochanan, the role of study of Torah within the justice system is obvious. By studying Torah, a person will know how the justice system works and will be certain to follow God's commandments. R. Yochanan continues by saying what is not obvious is that "if one has the opportunity to study the Torah and does not, God brings upon him repulsive sufferings to disturb him." A person cannot say that they should not be punished because they did not know what the rules are. A person has every opportunity to study Torah and is required to do so. Even the situation of not knowing the rules is enough for punishment. This provides the rationalization that a person cannot get away from justice by saying they did not know the rule. Studying and knowing the rules is incumbent upon every individual.

The issue of punishing someone with suffering is even relevant to one who provides support to someone who lacks knowledge. In Sanhedrin 92a, R. Eliezer states,

"Whoever gives his bread to one who lacks knowledge will be given suffering." This statement seems to be stretching the idea of transgression. What is the transgression in this situation? In fact, if a person is sharing bread with another, it seems that the person is actually performing the positive commandment of tzedakah. However, this aggadah seems to be saying that a person can be punished for something as minor as giving support to someone who presumably does not know the commandments and will probably transgress commandments. It seems that the punishment is because the transgression is transmitted to the person giving the bread. The person donating bread is responsible for the actions of the person receiving the bread.

The connection of transgressing God's commandments and receiving punishment also applies to converts before they were Jews. Non-Jews are subject only to the seven Noahide commandments and not to all of the laws of the Torah. In Yevamot 48b, R. Hanania b. R. Gamiliel states, "Converts are oppressed and suffering because they did not follow the seven Noahide commandments." This provides a justification for why converts who are righteous receive suffering.

In interpreting the Exodus story, the Rabbis deals with specific examples of non-Jews being a part of God's justice system. In Sotah 11a, Pharoah is seeking advice on how to deal with the growing Israelite nation. R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Simai, "there were three involved in the planning, Balaam, Job, and Jethro. Balaam advocated slaying the male babies and was punished with death. Job was silent and he received the punishment of suffering. Jethro fled and merited having his descendants become a part of the Sanhedrin." The concept of different levels of piecemeal punishment for different levels of sin recurs. Balaam is the one who advocates killing

male Israelite babies and he receives the highest punishment. Job does not advocate this action, but he also does not say anything against it and therefore, he receives the lesser punishment of suffering. Jethro speaks out against this course of action and he is rewarded. This midrash serves as a way to explain the fate of each of these Biblical personages through the means of a God's justice system.

Elsewhere in the Talmudic literature, there is similar concern with Job's suffering. If the perfect justice system of God exists as described above, the Rabbis need to find some reasoning underlying Job's suffering. If Job suffers only because God wants to prove something to the adversary angel, then it presents a problem to the idea of the perfection of God's justice in the world. In addition, Job's complaints about his treatment by God present a serious questioning of God's justice system. As a result, the Rabbis are generally condemnatory of Job. Job is condemned for his hubris, for thinking too highly of himself, and he is called a blasphemer. As one midrash states, "Job was a pious non-Jew who thought that he had come into this world only to receive his reward and when God brought suffering upon him, he began to curse and blaspheme." As a result, to explain the end of the book of Job, "God doubled Job's reward in this world in order to expel him from the world to come" (Baba Batra 15b). For questioning God's justice system, Job is punished. However, this is not the whole picture. Even within this discussion, there are texts trying to protect Job from condemnation. Job's statements of protest are suggested to be a response to Satan and not an accusation of God. Job is said to lack understanding, which implies that he cannot be held responsible for his acts.<sup>18</sup> As this discussion illustrates, there is a great deal of variety in Rabbinic belief, even within a text that tries to prove that Job sinned by protesting God's justice system.

In another midrash, R. Shimon b. Lakish says that Job never existed at all. The editor clarifies this statement by explaining that it means that Job really did exist, but that the sufferings ascribed to him never really took place. The sufferings were ascribed to him to indicate that if such sufferings had come to him, he would have been able to endure them (YSotah 5:6). This text demonstrates that a righteous individual could withstand suffering without protest or complaint.<sup>19</sup> This illustrates an instance in the Yerushalmi that seeks to present Job in a positive light. This midrash also deals with the problem of God's justice and the seemingly unfair suffering Job endures by explaining that the sufferings never actually took place. God would never breach the perfect justice system. If Job suffered for no reason, then this would be a direct contradiction to God's justice system.

By examining the significance of suffering as punishment with God's justice system, it becomes apparent that the Rabbinical attitude towards God's justice is highly idealistic. Underlying each of these examples and discussions of suffering and punishment is a serious attempt to try and present reasoning for why people suffer that advocates for God working justly in the world. In these aggadot, there can be no possibility that premature death and suffering exist without sin. The Rabbis use the theological concept of God's perfect justice to explain why suffering occurs in the world.

## II. Suffering and Atonement

In addition to being straightforward punishment, suffering can also serve as a form of punishment that expiates sin. A person is not only punished, but the suffering wipes away the sin so that the person is returned to a state of moral purity. This softens

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<sup>18</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 168

<sup>19</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 237

the concept of God's justice presented above. If suffering only serves punitive purposes, then this would present a harsh vision of God. This rationalization of suffering states that God's justice is perfect, but God is also merciful and desires to help rehabilitate people in their punishment. Except for the irreclaimably bad, God's end in punishment was not to make the sinner suffer what he deserved, but through suffering to bring him to penitence and improvement.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Rabbis give meaning to suffering by making it expiatory as well as punitive.

In connection with Yom Kippur, a baraita discusses whether a person can be absolved from transgressing a negative commandment (Yoma 86a). R. Yishmael details four divisions of atonement. The first level explains, "If one transgresses a positive commandment and repents, he is forgiven immediately." The second level is if one transgresses a negative commandment. In this situation, "repentance and Yom Kippur atone for the person's sins." The third level occurs when someone commits a sin that is punishable by karet or judicial execution. For these sins, "repentance and Yom Kippur suspend the individual from punishment, but suffering purges the individual from the sin." The final level is when someone desecrates the name of God. When someone commits this level of sin, "repentance cannot suspend punishment, nor Yom Kippur atone, nor can suffering purge, but all of them together suspend and death purges the sin." Within this baraita, the principle of the piecemeal form of God's justice is adhered to; there are different levels of punishment and therefore, different levels of atonement for the different forms of sin a person can commit. God's justice system works according to a reasonable structure.

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<sup>20</sup> Moore, Judaism, p. 252

The means to atonement follows a particular order. Within this order, suffering is not only a way to punish a person, it also serves to wipe away the person's sins. Suffering can purge for the sins of *kareit* and judicial execution, but this does not mean that suffering cannot occur for lesser sins. Presumably, if one does not make repentance for transgressing a positive commandment or does not repent and perform the Yom Kippur rituals for transgressing a negative commandment, then suffering would occur for these sins. Rather, this baraita signifies that for sins as severe as these, repentance and Yom Kippur suspend punishment, probably of premature death, but the experience of suffering is the means that purifies the person of sin. In the case of desecration of God's name, even suffering cannot purge the sin, but death can actually lead to this severe sin being purged. The person who has rebelled against God can actually expiate their sin by seeking repentance, Yom Kippur, experiencing suffering, and then experiencing premature death. This is a subtle difference from straightforward punishment. This rationalization of suffering presents a more merciful vision of God's justice. God does not solely act to punish people, but also out of mercy, to rehabilitate people as well.

There is a halachic discussion about the efficacy of the goat sacrifice that occurs inside the Temple on Yom Kippur (*Shevuot* 8b). The discussion centers on a baraita that states that the sacrifice of the goat suspends punishment for a sinner who has received impurity through an inadvertent sin. The editor explains that the inner goat sacrifice is for inadvertent sins for which the sinner could eventually offer a personal sin offering. The problem that the editor has with this statement is why the goat sacrifice does not achieve complete atonement for the sin since *Leviticus* 16:16 states that the sacrifice effects atonement for all their transgressions. R. Zeira explains that the sacrifice on Yom

Kippur only suspends punishment until the person can bring a personal sin offering. If this is so, the editor proceeds to ask what the punishment is that the offering suspends. Rava states that death purges a person of all inadvertent sins and therefore, the purpose of suspension of punishment is to shield him from the suffering that he deserves on account of his sin. Once this person becomes aware of his sin, he would gain complete atonement by sacrificing a personal sin offering. This discussion adds in a subtle manner to the information described in Yoma 86a. The rituals of Yom Kippur can suspend punishment for certain forms of sin and since death expiates all of a person's inadvertent sins, then the Yom Kippur sacrifice must suspend suffering for such sins. The sacrifices on Yom Kippur only suspend this punishment. The person must also seek personal repentance by performing a sin offering when he recognizes that he is impure from an inadvertent sin. In this instance, the ideology of God's justice system and repentance are highly developed abstract concepts.

Representing a similar concept to Yoma 86a, on Yom Kippur for R. Hamnuna Zuti and everyday for Rava, the conclusion to their Tefillah was to say, "may it be your will, God, that I sin no more, and wipe out the sins I have committed through your great mercy, but not through evil sufferings and disease." (Brachot 17a) These two sages are praying that God will be merciful enough that there will be no need for a punishment to serve as the expiation from sin. This signifies that they accept the idea that suffering as a punishment can purge sin. In addition to this ideology of suffering, this text explains that in reality, suffering is not desired, even if it can expiate sin. Suffering is unpleasant and these Rabbis are focusing on avoiding it.

In Sanhedrin 101a-b, R. Akiva performs a midrash to prove that suffering is precious because it is instructive. When R. Eliezer was sick, his four disciples came to visit him. Three of them praised R. Eliezer for his value to the people of Israel. When it was R. Akiva's turn to speak, he stated that "suffering is precious." R. Eliezer was interested to hear what R. Akiva meant so he asked to be propped up. R. Akiva gave a midrash on the story of King Menasseh. In the Bible, it is written that King Menasseh did wicked deeds and R. Akiva interprets that this happened even though his father, King Hezekiah taught him the Torah. In the Bible, Menasseh is caused to suffer by being carried off to Babylon. While in Babylon, Menasseh, "sought the Eternal, his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers... and God heard his supplication and brought him back to Jerusalem, his kingdom, and Menasseh knew that the Eternal was God" (II Chronicles 33:10). R. Akiva interprets that Menasseh only learned to have faith in God through the suffering of exile in Babylon. R. Akiva is telling R. Eliezer that suffering is precious because, through punishment, it instructs the individual to seek atonement for sin. In this manner, suffering exists in order to instruct the individual on the proper behavior.

A statement by R. Shimon b. Lakish presents the possibility that sufferings can wash away all the sins of man (Brachot 5a). He states that "the covenant is mentioned in connection with salt and with sufferings." The proof-text for salt is from Leviticus 2:13 and makes a connection between the salt in the sacrificial system and the covenant. The proof-text for suffering states, "These are the terms of the covenant" (Deuteronomy 28:69), which is at the end of the series of curses promised to Israel if they do not follow God's commandments. R. Shimon b. Lakish then states that "just as the salt mentioned

in connection with the covenant lends a sweet taste to the meat, so also the covenant mentioned in connection with sufferings, the sufferings purge all the sins of man." The relationship between the covenant of salt and the covenant of suffering is essential because Shimon b. Lakish is attempting to state that like the use of salt in the sacrificial system, sufferings can serve as a form of sacrifice that wipes away sin. In punishing people to cause atonement for their sins, God is acting with mercy while enacting the justice system as enumerated in the Torah. By giving suffering this sense of atonement, the Rabbis provide a more positive justification for suffering. God is acting out of the need to ensure justice exists and punishing individuals in order to purify them.

In certain situations, God's punishment is so severe, the suffering serves as atonement by itself. In an aggadah, R. Yochanan states that leprosy and the lack of children are not "sufferings of love" (Brachot 5b). Rather, these sufferings are an "altar of atonement." The editor has a difficulty with this and questions why lack of children is not "sufferings of love". The editor wants to know what R. Yochanan's statement means. The editor then points out that R. Yochanan would carry around the tooth of his tenth son. All ten of R. Yochanan's sons died and the editor says that he considers this "sufferings of love", which is an overabundance of suffering that God sends upon people who are righteous (see chapter two). Thus, never having children and leprosy are sufferings that effect atonement. These two forms of suffering appear to fit together because they are especially painful in their effect and treatment. Leprosy visibly decays a person's body and in the case of such skin diseases, the Torah commands that the person is required to reside outside of the settlement. In the case of someone who never had children, this is a punishment of suffering that is also visible and painful to experience.

R. Yochanan makes it clear that these are not sufferings that bring reward as with “sufferings of love”, but they are also not straightforward punishment. Rather, because they are so severe, they are sufferings that effect atonement.

In the Yerushalmi, the Rabbis present leprosy as such a severe form of punishment as suffering that the experience of leprosy atones for the person’s sin (YSotah 2:1). The discussion starts with R. Shimon b. Yochai asking “why the sin offering and guilt offering does not require a drink offering.” The editor explains that “the offering of a sinner should not be adorned in such a lovely way.” The objection is raised by the editor that “the offering of the metzora does require a drink offering and a person is punished for metzora for the sin of gossiping.” R. Isaac then explains that since the metzora has been afflicted with this terrible skin disease, “he has atoned for the sin of gossiping and is like one who is not a sinner any longer.” This illustrates that the punishment of leprosy is such severe suffering, it atones for the sin by itself. There is no need for repentance or a sacrifice to cleanse the leper, but the experience of leprosy itself is enough to purify the leper of sin.

Leprosy as a suffering of punishment that atones for sin is also discussed with regards to David’s punishment for the sin of adultery with Bathsheba (Sanhedrin 107a). God tells David that he is going to be punished for this great sin, but David pleads to God to pardon his sin completely. God quotes from Proverbs 6:27, telling David that a man that goes into his neighbor’s wife will not be innocent. God is informing David that even someone as great as he cannot escape God’s justice system. If a person commits a transgression, he must receive punishment. David complains, “Must I be so troubled?” God tells him, “Accept your suffering” and David accepts it. As a result, R. Judah

interprets a discrepancy in the calculations of David's reign to mean that David had leprosy. According to this midrash, David also offered up prayer asking for forgiveness. In this situation, it was not enough for David to only experience the suffering of leprosy. His sin is so severe he must also pray for repentance. The Rabbis clearly have a problem with David's sin. According to the dictates of God's justice, it is not enough for David's son to be put to death, but David himself must be punished. The Rabbis provide a justification for God's justice system by adding suffering to David's story.

There is clearly a subtle difference between suffering as simple punishment and suffering serving to atone for sin. In this case, suffering is still a punishment according to God's justice system, but there is an aspect of mercy contained within this concept. God will wipe away the person's sin if they will experience the suffering in addition to recognizing the sin they committed and repenting. In fact, there are some punishments that are so severe, they atone for sins without any need for repentance or special atonement sacrifices. These texts present a more positive justification for suffering. This concept of suffering as punishment does not present a theology of God as a cold and calculating judge without compassion. In these aggadot, God is certainly judging very strictly, but God makes the suffering not just a punishment, but rehabilitation as well. Thus, suffering exists in order to expiate sin.

### III. Acceptance of God's Punishment

Several aggadot point out that it is essential that a person accepts the punishment of suffering. As the example of the midrash about David's punishment illustrates, in order for David to have his suffering serve as atonement, he must accept these sufferings (Sanhedrin 107a). The concept of acceptance of suffering posits that God is the source of

everything in our world. If good or bad comes to a person, it is not for the person to question why, but to accept that God is a righteous judge. As a result, a person should accept the punishment of their suffering. This presents the concept of faith in God's justice system. The Rabbis believed in one omnipotent God. Both reward and punishment happen because of God's justice system. Acceptance is a central aspect of suffering because it provides the rationale that God is behind everything, even suffering.

This belief in acceptance is clearly stated in Brachot 54a where the Mishnah states, "it is required for a man to bless over the bad as well as over the good." The proof-text for this is from the first paragraph of the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:5, that states, "You shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart." In interpreting this verse, the Mishnah explains that "with all your soul" means even though God takes your soul and "with all your might" means in whatever measure God metes out to you. There is a clear connection between the concept of "measure for measure" piecemeal justice and acceptance of this justice. The same language is used in this instance to illustrate that loving God requires this faith regardless of an individual's fate. God judges perfectly and one must accept it because if suffering occurs, then God must be punishing some form of transgression. For this reason, the blessing that one is to recite upon receiving evil tidings is "Blessed be the true judge." Thus, people must bless over good as well as evil as acceptance of God's power over the universe because God always acts justly in the world. This provides the justification for suffering that ultimately the individual is responsible for his own suffering. The suffering should be accepted because God is simply acting out of a need for justice in the world. The person's suffering is not because of God, but because of the individual's own transgression.

There is an aggadah in the gemara pertaining to the meaning of this Mishnah. In Brachot 60a, a certain disciple was following R. Ishmael b. R. Yose in the market place of Zion. R. Ishmael noticed that the disciple was afraid and he said to him, "You are a sinner because it is written, 'The sinners in Zion are afraid (Proverbs 28:14).'" Having fear illustrates a lack of faith in the justice of God's system. Continuing this aggadah, "R. Judah b. Nathan would follow R. Hamnuna. Once he sighed and the other said to him, 'This man wants to bring suffering on himself.'" Because he exhibited a sense of fear, he does not trust God's justness and this transgression will lead to the punishment of suffering. God will act according to the dictates of justice and fear is rebellion against this rule. There is nothing a person can do to stop what God wants to happen except to act righteously and have faith.

In the Yerushalmi, Nahum ish Gamzu commits a transgression with regards to giving tzedakah (YShkalim 5:4). Nahum is on the way to his father-in-law's with a gift when a person with boils said, "acquire merit by giving me part of what is in your hand." Nahum told the man to wait until he came back, but when Nahum returned, the man was dead. The rejection of a man in need of tzedakah while Nahum is in a rush to give the gift to his father-in-law appears as a minor transgression. However, Nahum is guilt stricken by his actions and asks to receive suffering and he is afflicted with the sufferings he requests. When R. Akiva comes to him and says, "Woe is me that I see you in such a condition," Nahum replies by saying, "Woe is me that I do not see you in such a condition." Akiva exclaims, "Why do you curse me?" Nahum responds, "Why do you rebel against suffering?" Nahum is offended that Akiva feels pity for him because Nahum is experiencing the suffering that he feels he deserves. Since God judges

perfectly, God is bringing suffering on Nahum for his transgression. By lamenting his condition, Nahum thinks that Akiva does not accept God's judgment. For Nahum, pity is irrelevant because God is punishing him exactly as he deserves. The punishment of his suffering must be accepted.

In addition to these explicit statements expressing the need to accept the punishment of God's suffering, many aggadot implicitly support the need for acceptance of suffering. In the aggadah about R. Huna's wine becoming sour, he must accept that God punishes with justice and when he realizes this, he acknowledges that the way to solve his suffering is by changing his behavior. In the baraita about different levels of atonement in Yoma 86a, the concept of repentance and performing the Yom Kippur rituals assumes an acceptance of sinfulness. In order to have suffering purge sin, repentance and Yom Kippur must be completed. It would seem that if one is accepting that he has performed a sin, he would also need to accept the suffering that is punishment for the sin. Thus, acceptance of suffering is an integral aspect to many of the statements about God's justice. In order for the punishment to be efficacious, the individual must accept the suffering. In this manner, the person illustrates faith in God as the power over all creation and as the true judge.

This aspect of suffering also differs in a subtle way from other accounts of suffering as punishment. In other instances, suffering does not need to be accepted for it to serve as a proper punishment. For example, in Sanhedrin 45a, there is no need for the sotah to accept the suffering of death. Regardless of her attitude, she will be served the punishment of execution. Thus, in certain aggadot, a punishment can serve its purpose without the person experiencing the suffering accepting it. Since punishment serves as a

justification for suffering, one must accept suffering because one needs to have faith in the concept of God's justice.

#### IV. Suffering and Punishment of the Nation of Israel

The punishment of suffering does not only come upon individuals. Suffering can also serve as a punishment for the collective sins of an entire community. This is the dominant theology of suffering as found within the Bible. Following the theology of the Bible, the Talmudic literature is deeply concerned with understanding the reasoning underlying the suffering of the nation of Israel. The Rabbis need to find a theological explanation for the destruction of the Temple and the loss of power and exile of the Jewish people. There exist several aggadot that posit that Israel is being punished for its collective sins. One aggadah lists a series of transgressions that the nation of Israel committed that led to the destruction of Jerusalem (Shabbat 119b). The editor cites several sages as saying the Israelites desecrated Shabbat, neglected to recite the Shema in the mornings and evenings, the people diverted schoolchildren from studying Torah, and because they insulted Torah scholars. Kraemer points out that these are not trivial offenses, but they are tantamount, in rabbinic terms, to repudiation of the covenant.<sup>21</sup> Israel has been punished with the suffering of the destruction of Jerusalem because of the righteousness of God's judgment. The Israelites transgressed God's commandments and Israel is punished.

In another aggadah, the Rabbis search for a reason for why the Temple was destroyed (Yoma 9b). The editor asks, "Why was the first Temple destroyed?" and quotes R. Yochanan b. Torsa as stating that "three sinful things existed among the Israelites during that time: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed." The editor then turns to

explain why the Second Temple was destroyed. The Rabbis have trouble with this because according to R. Yochanan b. Torsa, the people followed the Torah, mitzvot, and performed acts of kindness. He explains that baseless hatred led to the destruction of the Temple. The Rabbis state that "the transgression of baseless hatred was greater than the sins that caused the destruction of the first Temple." The baseless hatred caused God to punish Israel with the suffering related to the destruction of the second Temple and the continued reality that the Temple was not rebuilt.<sup>22</sup>

In Gittin 55b-56a, there is an aggadah explaining the destruction of the Temple as the result of baseless hatred in the case of a man named Bar Kamza. This Bar Kamza was inadvertently invited to the party of an enemy. When the man told Bar Kamza to leave, he offered to pay for the whole party in order to not experience the shame of being told to leave. He was still expelled from the party and it says that since none of the Rabbis at the party spoke up about this incident, Bar Kamza went to inform the Romans that the Israelites were rebelling. As the text explains, "R. Eleazar said, 'Come and see how great is the power of shame, for God supported bar Kamza and destroyed the Temple.'" This story of Bar Kamza serves to illustrate that the Israelites were caused to suffer because of their mistreatment of this man. Bar Kamza and the Romans simply serve as agents of judgment to bring God's punishment of suffering to the Jewish people.

In one aggadah, the suffering of Israel also relates to the concept of punishment as a means for atonement (Menahot 53b). During a discussion about the destruction of the Temple, R. Yochanan asks "Why can Israel be compared to an olive tree? Because, just as an olive tree produces oil only after pounding, so Israel returns to the right way after

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<sup>21</sup> Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature*, p. 243

<sup>22</sup> Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature*, p. 178

suffering. Thus, suffering serves as a means to purify the Israelites. By punishing the transgressions of the nation, it causes the people to seek atonement and follow the proper commandments.

In many of the aggadot discussing the punishment of suffering, the focus is upon the behavior of the individual. With regards to the suffering of the entire nation of Israel, the punishment is explained by way of collective sin. According to the concept of the punishment of individuals, each person's transgressions are weighed against their positive deeds. In the case of the entire nation of Israel, how is it possible to judge the sins and good deeds for each individual? Could everyone have been equally guilty of baseless hatred? Rather, this concept of punishment seems to measure the collective sins of an entire nation and even if a person is not guilty of the particular sin, this person is punished with the rest of the nation. Thus, suffering can occur not just to an individual, but to an entire nation.

This sense of collective guilt and collective punishment exists throughout the Bible. In both the Bible and the Talmud, the suffering of the nation of Israel at the hands of other nations poses a serious problem. Israel is God's chosen people, but they are suffering. Instead of allowing the suffering of Israel to threaten faith in God, the Rabbis provide a justification for the suffering of Israel. The nation is not being oppressed by more powerful nations, but rather, God is using these nations as a tool to punish Israel. The suffering of Israel is not the result of injustice in the world, but it is the example of God's justice because Israel sinned and brought the punishment upon themselves.

V. Righteous People and the Punishment of Suffering

The suffering of the righteous presents a serious problem to the concept of God's justice. If the ideology of God's justice system is applied to the suffering of the righteous, then how can the suffering of the righteous be explained when there is no reason to punish them. Some significant answers to this question to be explored in the following chapters is the concept that the righteous receive some form of reward for their punishment or that it is impossible to explain suffering at all. However, when the Rabbis apply the concept of punishment to the suffering of the righteous, they need a means to make sense of this problem for God's justice.

As has already been seen, one method of dealing with this problem is to search and ultimately find some transgression, however small it may be. In some situations, the Rabbis will not allow the justice system to be threatened and they will find some sins. This is the case for the Torah scholar who died prematurely in Shabbat 13a. His wife went searching for an answer why until someone found a small sin to explain the suffering of such a righteous man. Even though the major balance of deeds that this man performed are good, the aggadah must find at least one transgression that cancels out his righteousness and leads to the punishment of his premature death. This is a clear instance of using piecemeal justice to explain suffering when measuring a person's entire life would exempt them from punishment. The Rabbis need a justification for suffering so they use the concept of piecemeal justice.

However, what if a person is wholly good or what if the vast amount of a righteous person's acts far outweigh their sins and they are not judged to need the punishment of suffering? In these situations, the righteous are caused to suffer as punishment because of the sins of the wicked people of the generation. In Shabbat 33b,

an aggadah states, "when there are righteous men, they are seized for the sins of the generation; when there are no righteous in a generation, school children are seized by the generation." Thus, although the righteous would not be deemed worthy of punishment on an individual basis, they are punished because of the accumulated sins of the generation. Even school-children, who are presented here as the most innocent possible, are taken for punishment due to the sins of the entire generation. They are punished based upon the doctrine of collective retribution as traditionally enumerated in the Bible.<sup>23</sup>

In an aggadah in the Yerushalmi, Yehudah Ha-Nasi is sitting studying Lamentations before Tisha B'Av (YShabbat 16:1). As he leaves for home, he injures his finger and suggests that this was punishment for his own sins. R. Hiyya refuses to accept that such a righteous man could be punished for his own sins. The balance of his good deeds should outweigh the measure of his sins. Thus, R. Hiyya states that he is suffering because of the accrued sins of the generation. Yehudah Ha-Nasi is not personally responsible for his sins, but he is liable for punishment because of the sins of the people. In this situation, as with the punishment of the entire nation of Israel, judgment can be brought upon people who might be undeserving of punishment because of the collective judgment of the entire people.

In Baba Kamma 60a, an aggadah states, "suffering is in the world only when the wicked are in the world, but it initiates upon the righteous first." If the concept of God's justice were viewed strictly, as some of the aggadot presented previously present, then suffering would only come upon the wicked. However, the righteous do suffer and their suffering needs to be accounted for within the justice system. Thus, this aggadah points

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<sup>23</sup> Elman, "When Permission is Given: Aspects of Divine Providence", p. 29

out that the righteous are punished first for the sins of the wicked. This response to the suffering of the righteous posits that the people can be punished as part of a collective even though some sin more than others, but for some unclear reason, the righteous are punished first. This view, assuming collective punishment, echoes the corporate consciousness that characterizes most of the Bible. However, the problem that this text raises as compared to the Biblical text, which mainly views punishment in a collective manner, is that the righteous individual is being punished.<sup>24</sup> This text argues that the justice system successfully works in a collective manner, but the statement that it initiates upon the righteous first provides a serious question for the justice system.

In one aggadah, the punishment of suffering inflicted upon the righteous is because God knows that the righteous can handle the suffering and their suffering cleanses the sins of Israel (Sanhedrin 39a). In this aggadah, a heretic challenges R. Abbahu by saying, "God is a jester for making the prophet Ezekiel suffer." R. Abbahu responds by making a parable. He states, "If a king is cruel, he slays all of his subjects when they rebel. If a king is merciful, he slays half of his subjects if they rebel, but if the king is exceptionally merciful, he only causes suffering upon the righteous." God afflicted Ezekiel in order to cleanse Israel of its sins. According to a strict interpretation of God's system of justice, Ezekiel should not suffer, but the rest of the people should be destroyed for their sins. As the Bible explains, the people were punished with exile, but this aggadah implies that they should have been destroyed. Instead, Ezekiel is punished with suffering to vicariously cleanse the people. This aggadah utilizes the concept of suffering as punishment that atones, but applies it to the suffering of one individual who can wipe away the sin of the rest when the people should deserve to be destroyed. Thus,

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<sup>24</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 160

the punishment of the righteous can be explained as atonement for the people because God knows that the great people of each generation can accept the suffering.

In Bava Metzia 85a, R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi experiences suffering of punishment and during his suffering, the world needed no rain. Rabbi's punishment came to him through an incident of cruelty to an animal. A calf was being taken to slaughter and hid in terror beneath Rabbi. He said to it, "Go, for this is why you were created." In heaven, they said, "Since he has no compassion, let us bring suffering upon him." His suffering left him because of an incident where he showed compassion to an animal. His maidservant was about to sweep away some young weasels. He told the maid to let them be. As a result, they said in heaven, "Since he is compassionate, let us have compassion on him," and his sufferings left him. Then it is written, "During the time that Rabbi suffered, the world did not need rain." This implies that because Rabbi endured the punishment through suffering, his suffering led to reward for the people. Rabbi is being punished in a piecemeal manner for a single particular sin. The measure of the rest of his life is in favor of righteousness. The belief presented here is that suffering can have magical, beneficial qualities, offering protection to the generation as a whole if suffered by a single, more righteous individual.<sup>25</sup>

If the Rabbis are to argue in favor of God operating a justice system that punishes people according to their sins, the suffering of the wicked is easy to understand, but the suffering of the righteous is problematic. The suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked is a perplexing problem that the Rabbis struggle deeply with. In the situation where suffering is used as a punishment, it appears that the aggadot suggest that just as an entire nation can be punished for the sins of an entire people, so too can the

righteous be punished along with the wicked. In one aggadah, the suffering of a righteous man in place of the wicked suffering actually serves to cleanse the people of their sins.

Matthew Schwartz states that "the Rabbis concentrated not so much on the theological aspects of theodicy as on the more pragmatic questions of how shall and individual respond to the suffering which came upon him."<sup>26</sup> As the discussion of the rabbinic theology of suffering and divine punishment illustrates, this is not a correct conclusion. The Rabbis clearly have theological ideologies that they are deeply concerned with protecting. As this chapter illustrates, when the pragmatic questions of how individuals respond to suffering arise, the Rabbis often utilize their idealistic theological concepts to provide rationalizations as a response to the very real experience of suffering. These accounts that explain why people suffer represents a deep and complex struggle with the belief in a God who acts righteously in the world. The variety of views about suffering as punishment illustrates the openness with which the Rabbis are able to speak about theological topics. These aggadot about punishment represent the variety and range of Rabbinic ideas on the subject.

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<sup>25</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 158

<sup>26</sup> Schwartz, "The Meaning of Suffering: A Talmudic Response to Theodicy", p. 444

## **Chapter 2: Suffering and Divine Reward**

In addition to serving as a means for divine punishment suffering can also serve as a means for divine reward. In certain situations for the Rabbis, suffering poses a problem within the system of justice. Punishment is one form of justification for why people suffer. However, if people do not deserve punishment, but experience suffering, then within God's justice system, what can explain their suffering? The justification for the experience of suffering by the righteous is that suffering can actually cause a person to merit reward. This reward can be received in this world, but the essence of the concept of reward through suffering is the idea that the righteous will receive their reward after death in the world to come. In certain situations, righteous individuals experience an overabundance of suffering. One way the Rabbis deal with this problem of theodicy is by proclaiming a belief that this suffering is being inflicted from God's love for the individual. Another means the Rabbis use to deal with the problem of theodicy in terms of the martyrdom of the righteous is to explain that the righteous give their lives out of love for God.

### **I. Suffering and Reward in this World**

In several aggadot, God rewards the world because of the merits of suffering. These aggadot provide visible reasoning for suffering for which no sin can be found. The rationalization that these sayings provide is that righteous people suffer in order to receive a reward in this world.

Avot 6:6 explains that Torah is greater than the priesthood and royalty because Torah is acquired by more qualifications than the priesthood and royalty. One of the forty-eight qualifications that lead to the Torah being acquired is acceptance of suffering.

The significance of this statement is that the acceptance of suffering is essential to receiving the reward of Torah knowledge. Suffering serves as a means to the highly valued concept of Torah.

In Sanhedrin 93a, one of the special qualities of the Messiah, who will save the Jewish people in this world, is that he will bring reward through suffering. R. Alexandri interprets Isaiah 11:3, which states, "he will be inspired with the fear of God", to refer to the Messiah. He explains that this verse "teaches that God loaded the Messiah with commandments and suffering like a millstone." This teaching indicates that one of the ways the Messiah will merit to save the Jewish people is through experiencing suffering. The appearance of the Messiah will then be a reward to the Jewish people in this world.

In Gittin 36b, there is a saying that states, "those who are insulted, but do not insult, who hear their disgrace, but do not reply, who do (God's will) out of love and are happy in suffering," they will be as the sun going forth in its might. This teaching discusses actions that occur in this world. The saying explains the reward is that those who suffer will be strengthened in this world. Implied within the saying is that the suffering will emerge from their silence strengthened. This saying creates reasoning to support a particular life-style. By living a humble life and accepting suffering, a person will receive great reward.

The experience of suffering is also seen as being equivalent to other behavior when measuring whether a person deserves reward. In the Yerushalmi (YTa'anit 3:3), it is written that "rain falls because of the merit of three things: the merit of the land, the merit of kindness, and the merit of suffering." In this aggadah, suffering is measured as if it was equal to kind behavior and the merit of the land. This provides a rationalization

of suffering which states that the experience of suffering is one of the means that will lead to material enrichment through the proper amount of rainfall.

In Brachot 5a, R. Shimon b. Yochai states that "God gave three gifts to Israel through suffering: Torah, the land of Israel, and the world to come." The Torah and the land of Israel are essential to the life of the Jewish people and they were given through suffering. These are rewards given collectively to the entire people as a result of the suffering of the entire nation of Israel. In addition, the reward of the world to come signifies that Israel's suffering leads to reward in this world and in the next world. This aggadah provides an explanation for the suffering of the nation of Israel. The text implies that God has a special relationship with Israel and gives the essential gifts to the people in return for enduring suffering.

These aggadot express the belief that it might appear that suffering in this world serves solely as punishment in this world, but suffering can also serve as a form of reward in this world. In terms of the problem of righteous individuals suffering, these texts express the belief that this suffering will lead to some future reward.

## II. Suffering and the World to Come

The concept of the world to come provides a way to explain why sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper in this world. Since the classical Biblical theology argues that God is just and rewards the righteous, when they suffer in this world, it would seem to threaten the belief in God's justice. However, the Rabbis argue that God is just, but often the system of punishment and reward occurs after death. This concept contains a subtle difference from classical theology of God's justice found in the Bible. In that system of justice, judgment occurs in this world. Where judgment occurs

after death, it might appear that righteous people who are suffering are not being treated justly, but instead, their reward awaits them in the world to come. In fact, the suffering of the righteous in this life is interpreted in some aggadot as part of God's justice system in order to create merit for the righteous.

In Kiddushin 39b, the form of God's justice that describes how a person's whole life is added up is discussed in highly ideological terms. If a person's righteous deeds outweigh their transgressions, then they will receive reward, but if their sins outweigh their righteous acts, then they will be punished. The Mishnah states that "whoever performs one mitzvah is rewarded with good, his life is lengthened and he inherits the world. Whoever does not perform one mitzvah is not rewarded with good, his life is not lengthened, and he does not inherit the world." The editor finds this Mishnah problematic because it seems to imply that the performance of any one mitzvah will lead to reward. In contrast, the editor points out that in Mishnah Peah 1:1, it states that there are five special mitzvot that lead to receiving reward. The editor then quotes R. Judah as stating that this Mishnah means that "all who perform one mitzvah in addition to his merits is rewarded with good and is as one who observes the entire Torah." This signifies that if a person performs one more mitzvah than his sins so that his merits outweigh his sins, then he will receive reward. The editor brings a quote from R. Shemayah stating that "if they were equal, it tips the balance." For the argument, R. Shemayah's statement clarifies R. Judah's and brings in the essence of Peah 1:1. R. Shemayah is saying that if a person's sins and mitzvot are measured and are found to be equal, any of these five mitzvot tips the balance in favor of reward for the person.

The editor then brings in a baraita that seems to contradict the original Mishnah. This baraita states that "anyone whose merits outnumber his sins experiences evil and it seems as if he had not preserved the entire Torah and anyone whose sins outnumber his merits, it seems as if he had observed the entire Torah." The editor then quotes Abaye to explain the baraita, which according to this interpretation indicates that the righteous person suffers in this world, but receives reward in the world to come. At the same time, the sinner receives reward in this world and punishment in the next world. The editor brings a saying by Rava that provides another answer to the apparent contradiction to the Mishnah and baraita. He quotes R. Jacob as stating that "the reward is not given in this world; all of the commandments given in connection with reward depend upon the resurrection of the dead." The baraita in this section of the gemara raises a large problem with regards to viewing God's system of justice. According to the Mishnah, the righteous should be rewarded for performing mitzvot, but often the opposite appears to happen; the righteous suffer, but the wicked prosper. The response to this challenge is to reply that God's justice system is still intact except that the application of reward and punishment does not happen in human sight, but after death.

In order to provide proof for this statement, the editor quotes R. Jacob as saying that the promise of days being lengthened and it being good for a person is mentioned in the Torah in connection with the mitzvot of honoring mother and father (Deut. 5:16) and sending the mother bird away when taking the young birds (Deut. 22:6-7). R. Jacob brings the problematic situation of the story of a boy who honors his father by following his command to go up and get some eggs. The boy climbs up a tree and sends the mother bird away, but falls and dies on the way down. According to the literal meaning of these

two mitzvot in the Torah, this child should not have died. Based on the evidence of this story, it would appear that God's system of justice is not working. However, the promises from these mitzvot are interpreted so that the phrase, "it will be good to you", means "to the world that is entirely good" and the phrase, "so that your life will be long", means "to the world that is entirely long." The world that is entirely good and entirely long signifies the world to come. The editor concludes by saying that if Elisha ben Abuya had interpreted the verses in this manner, he would not have sinned. In this instance, denying belief in God's system of justice is apostasy. Even though this boy was killed in this accident, the interpretation of these two mitzvot implies that he still received reward for the performance of these mitzvot.

This selection from the Talmud explains that if a person performs more good deeds than bad, they will receive reward, especially in the world to come. Thus, according to the Talmud, in certain situations, suffering in this world can be the tool that leads to a person meriting reward. The essential message is that one must have faith in God. This justification of suffering proclaims that it leads to reward. This explanation provides a means to cope with suffering that might appear to be undeserved. The righteous must trust that even when God brings suffering and it seems that it is undeserved, the reward for faith in God and acceptance of this suffering will eventually come. David Kraemer expresses the opinion that the gemara wishes to present the future reconciliation of the accounts of justice as a belief to be taken for granted.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Kraemer has difficulty with Yaakov Elman's interpretation of this gemara. Elman argues that the statement in the gemara that the inability of even the performance of mitzvot to protect the doer where danger is well established is one consequence of the rule that

“there is no reward for mitzvot in this world.” This raises a serious question with the Torah’s promise of this-worldly reward and punishment.<sup>28</sup> Kraemer explains that the confrontation between the reality of suffering and God’s justice system is far less significant than what Elman makes it out to be. For Kraemer, “questioning the reality of apparent injustice and emphasizing that such anomalies are a fact of life serve only to disabuse the reader of a naïve picture of divine justice that had long ago been replaced by more serviceable alternatives.”<sup>29</sup> However, Elman’s argument about this gemara is a significant aspect of the text. As Elman points out elsewhere, the text is stressing the lack of reward in this world. The text turns the question into a dour contemplation of the frailty of human life, even under the watchful eye of a benevolent God.<sup>30</sup> The reality of the dangers inherent to life creates questions for the traditional Biblical theology of suffering and the literal meaning of the original Mishnah on Kiddushin 39b, which state that reward and punishment happen in this world. These questions do not simply serve solely as a means to show the reader that there are other alternatives. These are serious questions for faith in God’s justice. This issue caused the sage, Elisha b. Abuya to become a heretic. Instead this gemara serves to provide the ideology of the world to come as a response to such questions of God’s justice. The Rabbinic belief in the world to come provides a justification for continued belief in God’s justice because, as this text illustrates, belief in God’s justice existing in this world is sometimes untenable.

In Kiddushin 40b, R. Eleazar b. R. Zadok compares the righteous “to a tree standing completely in a place of cleanness except a branch stretches into a place of

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<sup>27</sup> Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature*, p. 173

<sup>28</sup> Elman, “When Permission is Given: Aspects of Divine Providence”, p. 33

<sup>29</sup> Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature*, p. 175

<sup>30</sup> Elman, *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, p. 176

uncleanness. When the branch is cut off, the tree stands completely in a place of cleanness." R. Eleazar explains that this situation is comparable to the righteous because "God brings suffering upon the righteous in this world in order for them to inherit the world to come." He then explains that "the wicked are compared to a tree standing completely in a place of uncleanness except a branch stretches into a place of cleanness. When this branch is cut off, the tree is standing completely in a place of uncleanness." Thus, "the wicked are made to prosper in this world in order to banish them and cause them to inherit the lowest step."

The analogy of the tree implies a distinct attitude towards life in this world as opposed to the world to come. The place of cleanness is a state of being that is devoid of sin while the place of uncleanness is a state of complete sinfulness. For the righteous, the branch that stretches into the place of uncleanness refers to the necessary sins and minor transgressions that a righteous person commits in this world. On the other hand, the wicked exist mainly in a place of sinfulness, but they contain a little piece of righteousness. The tree branch being cut off is analogous to a person's death. When the branch is cut off for the righteous, they are judged by the fact that they exist mostly in a state of purity and when they die they no longer are tempted by transgression nor are they affected by suffering, but they live completely in a state of purity in the world to come. When the wicked die, they are judged based upon having lived in a place of wickedness and are punished after death.

The ideas within this aggadah appear as a response to the baraita that raises the problem of theodicy in Kiddushin 39b, that people who are righteous experience evil, but the wicked prosper. This aggadah follows the argumentation of Abaye, Rava, and R.

Joseph on Kiddushin 39b. They argue that real reward happens in the world to come. Within the world, it might appear that the righteous are suffering unfairly and the wicked are prospering unfairly, but judgment actually takes place after death. In this aggadah on Kiddushin 40b, as opposed to God punishing the wicked in this world for their transgressions as in the traditional justice system, God actually provides the wicked with greater reward. The apparent unfairness of judgment in this world is actually part of God's justice system. The righteous are suffering in order for them to inherit the world to come while the wicked prosper in order to banish them from the world to come. Even when it appears that God's justice is not working in the world, it still is; now suffering is not being used to punish the wicked, but rather to reward the righteous in the time when reward really counts, in the world to come. The problem of theodicy is no longer an issue because this aggadah provides justification for the Rabbis that proves that God is even controlling the apparent unfair treatment of the righteous and the wicked in order for the proper judgment to take place after death.

In the Yerushalmi, there is a similar aggadah with slight differences (YPeah 1:1). In this aggadah, it is written that "one who performs many good deeds and few transgressions, he is punished in this world for the least of the minor transgressions he committed in order to give him a full reward in the world to come." On the other hand, "one who performs many transgressions and few good deeds, he is rewarded in this world for the few good deeds he did, in order to exact full punishment from him in the world to come." As compared to Kiddushin 40b, this aggadah explicitly states that the suffering a righteous person experiences is actually punishment for minor transgressions. However, this is a punishment that serves to completely purify the person and allow them reward in

the world to come. This concept is similar to the idea of suffering as punishment that atones, but in addition, the suffering brings reward. Unlike in the traditional justice system, the wicked are rewarded in this world in order to save the punishment for their sins for the next world. Thus, the idea of reward and punishment is carried into the concept of the next world. In this aggadah, in order to explain the problem of the righteous suffering, the concept of punishment and reward are combined. The suffering that the righteous experience is punishment, but they are punished in order to receive reward. This description of the justice system is an exaggeration that intends to prove the ideal that God rules over everything. The apparent unfairness of the righteous experiencing suffering is actually a part of God's justice system that leads to the righteous receiving reward.

On a collective level, there exists the problem of the suffering of Israel as a nation. Israel has a special covenant with God, yet during Talmudic times, the nation of Israel was experiencing national suffering at the hands of the Romans. Elsewhere, a person coming to be converted is to be told that "Israel is persecuted, oppressed, despised, harassed, and overcome with suffering" (Yevamot 47a). As previously mentioned in the chapter on suffering as punishment, Israel's suffering was viewed by many aggadot as the result of their transgressions. In Avodah Zarah 4a, there is discussion about how God judges Israel in a different manner than the other nations. R. Abba states that "God thought that Israel should be deprived of monetary possessions in order that they will merit the world to come." According to this statement, God's special judgment of Israel causes them economic suffering, but leads to the reward of the world to come. The editor brings another similar statement that "God thought Israel would

experience suffering in this world in order to merit the world to come.” The suffering of Israel and the prosperity of the other nations present a serious question to God’s justice system. Israel is God’s chosen people, but they are subject to other nations. In order to provide explanation for why Israel as a nation is suffering, this aggadah posits that Israel experiences suffering because God judges them differently. Since God has a special relationship with Israel, God causes Israel suffering in order for Israel to merit the world to come. Elsewhere, the justification for Israel’s suffering is that Israel sinned and is being punished. This explanation presents a different justification for Israel’s suffering that offers the possibility that Israel is suffering in order to receive merit for the world to come.

The concept of suffering leading to reward in the world to come provides a means to explain God’s justice in a world where sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. In order to continue to have faith in God’s justice, it becomes essential to also believe in the concept of the reward of the world to come. This concept is given its strongest expression in sayings and examples of suffering experienced in love.

### III. Sufferings of Love

The term, *yissurin shel ahavah*, “sufferings of love”, denotes a special form of suffering that comes upon the righteous. This form of suffering is an overabundance of suffering brought upon the righteous out of God’s love. This suffering does cause the righteous to receive merit for the world to come, but the essence of “sufferings of love” is the message that the surplus amount of suffering that a righteous individual experiences is a sign of God’s love. As Yaakov Elman points out, “sufferings of love”, which God brings on the righteous for no reason other than to increase their reward in the world to

come, are a confirmation of merit rather than of the reverse, but they are certainly not an example of "measure for measure".<sup>31</sup> This form of suffering is different than measuring a person's deeds and giving them reward or punishment because of their deeds. In this instance, there is too much suffering for the righteous. As a result, this form of suffering exists partly outside of God's attribute of justice, but instead it comes mainly from God's attribute of love. This concept provides a powerful justification for the extreme suffering of the righteous. God loves an individual and brings extreme suffering upon the individual to show this love. The individual who experiences this suffering must embrace it since it is a sign of God's love.

Within the Talmud, the usage of the term, *yissurin shel ahavah*, only occurs on Brachot 5a-b among a series of sayings by various Rabbis on the topic of suffering. Rava states: "if a person sees sufferings come upon him, he should examine his actions. If he finds that he did no wrong, then he should attribute it to punishment as a result of neglect of the study of Torah. If he examined his Torah study and did not find it lacking, then it is *yissurn shel ahavah*, 'sufferings of love'." Thus, "sufferings of love" are a form of suffering that occurs in the absence of sin. If a person is completely righteous, then suffering comes upon this person because of God's love for the person. This text is stating that "sufferings of love" are partly outside the justice system. It might be that "sufferings of love" serve as a catchall for any suffering that does not fit within the confines of the concept of God's justice system.<sup>32</sup> If the person is suffering and it is not from punishment, then it must come from the divine attribute of love and not mainly as a

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<sup>31</sup> Elman, *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, p. 186

<sup>32</sup> Elman, *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, p. 197

result of measuring a person's deeds. The divine justice system works in "sufferings of love" because God will only show this level of love to those who are righteous.

Rava states in the name of R. Sahorah who stated in the name of R. Huna that "if God is pleased with a man, he crushes him with suffering." Rava continues by saying that a man must accept these forms of suffering with love. If the man does accept these sufferings, then Rava uses a proof-text to say that "the man's days will be increased" (Isa. 53:10). Thus, if God is pleased with a man, he brings upon him "sufferings of love" as a sign of love. If he accepts this suffering out of love, then the suffering endured in this world will lead to the merit of the world to come. Suffering will be "sufferings of love" only if it is accepted out of love. If there is hesitation on the part of the sufferer, then it is not "sufferings of love". Implicit in this statement is the recognition that such acceptance might not be easy; even the most pious individuals might not be able to accept suffering.<sup>33</sup> Viewed in this manner, these "sufferings of love" are brought as a reward because of God's love for a person's righteousness and this person, understanding that these are "sufferings of love", will accept them out of love. This serves to explain that the righteous man who is suffering is actually receiving a form of love from God. Even though the suffering is beyond what is necessary to bring reward for an individual, by accepting God's love through "sufferings of love", a righteous individual merits reward. The righteous person is not receiving reward because of a measurement of deeds, but because of God's attribute of love.

The sayings in Brachot 5a-b about "sufferings of love" that follow Rava's statements are concerned with defining what sorts of suffering should be considered "sufferings of love". R. Jacob b. Idi and R. Aha b. Hanina differ in their categorization of

“sufferings of love”. One says that “‘sufferings of love’ do not involve the canceling of Torah study”, but the other says that “‘sufferings of love’ do not involve the canceling of prayer”. The logic of these two statements fits the definition of “sufferings of love”.

Torah study and prayer are two of the highest ways to communicate with God. If God is bringing this form of love upon righteous people, then God would not stop a person from performing these righteous acts and showing their love of God. These could not be “sufferings of love” if they get in the way of a person’s relationship with God. By insisting on these exceptions, these opinions open up the possibility that certain extreme forms of suffering might go searching for, but not find, a ready explanation. At this point in the text, there needs to be an explanation for this extreme suffering. For this reason, the final opinion rejects these exceptions.<sup>34</sup>

R. Hiyya b. Abba states in the name of R. Yochanan that both of these are “sufferings of love”. This signifies that even when suffering stops a righteous man from being able to study Torah and pray, if the person is righteous, this still counts as “sufferings of love”. The editor then brings a problem with the rejection of the first two statements. The editor asks if these are both “sufferings of love”, why does it say in the proof-text for canceling Torah study, “the man You instruct in your teaching”? The editor is questioning how the canceling of Torah study can be “sufferings of love”. The editor goes on to explain that this verse really means that God teaches in the Torah the conclusion to this in the law of eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth: “These body parts are only one limb of a man and yet, if they are hurt, the slave obtains freedom because of them. How much more so with sufferings that cleanse the entire body of a man.” This

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<sup>33</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 192

<sup>34</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 192

indicates that even though sufferings that cause a righteous man to stop praying and studying Torah are very harsh, as a result of these being such heavy sufferings, they lead to a man receiving freedom. The “sufferings of love” do not come upon a man only in order to bring him reward. The reason for initiating this suffering is outside of the justice system because it comes from God’s love. According to this analogy, regular suffering is when one limb is injured upon a man, but when the suffering takes hold of a righteous man’s body, this is a result of God’s love. As compared to the aggadot above that detail that suffering comes upon individuals in order to receive the world to come, this reward of freedom is not the reason for the person receiving “sufferings of love”. However, even though this overabundance of suffering is far beyond what is fair according to God’s justice system, “sufferings of love” still lead to reward.

The discussion of “sufferings of love” concludes on Brachot 5b with R. Yochanan explaining that leprosy and the lack of children are not “sufferings of love”. Rather, these are a different category of suffering. They are sufferings that lead to atonement. As the discussion of this sugiya in chapter one in the section on atonement illustrates, this sugiya is trying to distinguish between never being able to have children and having children die. R. Yochanan is saying that never having children is atonement, but experiencing the pain of children’s death is “sufferings of love”. As R. Yochanan explained above, “sufferings of love” are the most severe forms of suffering that a righteous man must endure. R. Yochanan himself, a righteous sage, experienced the death of all ten of his sons. The death of children is such a severe suffering, it poses a highly difficult problem. How can R. Yochanan explain such severe suffering? The concept of “sufferings of love” serves to provide a sense of God’s love in the face of such

undeserved suffering. Kraemer expresses the opinion that the author of this deliberation intentionally asks us to reconsider and ultimately to reject his conclusions here. R. Yochanan cannot mean what he is saying by stating that children are not “sufferings of love” because he was accustomed to say that “this is the bone of my tenth son.” The author of this text is interpreting R. Yochanan as saying that loss of children is “sufferings of love”, but R. Yochanan himself does not say this is the case. In fact, as Kraemer argues, by bringing R. Yochanan’s statement about his tenth son into this discussion, the author causes the reader to question whether losing children is too severe to be considered “sufferings of love”.<sup>35</sup> In spite of Kraemer’s assertion, the author of the text clearly seems to be trying to interpret R. Yochanan’s statement so that there is an explanation for this extreme suffering. This provides powerful justification for faith in God’s justice even when facing suffering as severe as the death of children. God loves R. Yochanan and sometimes suffering for the righteous is too much for even the two-world system of God’s justice system. This is an exaggeration of the issue of “sufferings of love” in order to illustrate that even when there is an extreme amount of suffering, it can be a sign of God’s love and God’s closeness.

The suffering of R. Elazar b. R. Shimon described in Bava Metzia 84b-85a is a form of suffering of love. Even though the term *yissurin shel ahavah*, is not actually used, the text does say about his suffering that it “came through love and left through love.” The text implies that his suffering serves to merit the reward of the world to come, but it also serves to reward all people in this world. R. Elazar begins to bring suffering upon himself because he was made a marshal and he was very strict in ensuring that God’s justice was carried out in the world. One time, even though he was proven to be

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<sup>35</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 195

correct in his judgment, R. Elazar felt guilty and his conscience could not be put at rest. He was fearful that he had put an innocent man to death, so he "accepted physical suffering upon himself". R. Elazar welcomed his suffering because he was concerned that he deserved punishment, but he was actually free of sin. As a result, his suffering is brought upon him through love and they are accepted in love.

The text goes in depth into the severity of the suffering he brought upon himself. For example, they would draw sixty basins of blood and pus from his bed linens, but then in the morning, his wife would feed him and he would regain his strength. At night, he would say to his sufferings, "My brothers and friends, come upon me," but in the morning, he would tell them to go so that they would not cancel his Torah study.

The fantastic and bizarre account of R. Elazar's suffering continues even after he is dead. He tells his wife that after he dies, "lay me to rest in my attic and do not be afraid of me." The text relates that his dead body lay in his attic from eighteen to twenty-two years. People would come to his house seeking judgment and his voice would emanate from his attic declaring his ruling. During the years that R. Elazar lay in his attic, "no evil animals entered their city." Finally, the Rabbis sent people to take his body and bury him with his father, the great sage R. Shimon b. Yochai.

In terms of providing reward for all humanity, the text makes an explicit distinction between R. Elazar's suffering and R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi's suffering as described in the chapter on suffering as punishment. R. Elazar's suffering came and went through love, but, as was illustrated, R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi's suffering came through the transgression of cruelty to an animal and left through kindness to another animal. However, both the suffering of love that R. Elazar experiences and the suffering of

punishment that Rabbi experiences lead to reward for the people. As previously explained, the suffering of the righteous can atone for the sins of the people and both of their sufferings lead to this occurring. Even in the atonement they affect, there is a distinction due to the differences in the form of their sufferings. As the text explains, "During the years that R. Elazar suffered, no man died prematurely." Part of this reward is mentioned earlier in the R. Elazar story that while his body lay in his attic, "no evil animal entered the city," signifying that no animal came to kill people prematurely. As was explained previously, premature death occurs through punishment of sins. Thus, R. Elazar's suffering of love was so extreme, it actually led to the atonement of all of humanity's sins. In this text, when comparing the Rabbi and R. Elazar accounts of suffering, different levels of suffering are evaluated with relation to one another, placing suffering that comes out of love at a higher level. In addition, the notion that suffering's benefits are so valuable that suffering could be invited upon oneself is made explicit.<sup>36</sup>

As compared to the very realistic problem of death of children that R. Yochanan discusses, R. Elazar's suffering is outrageous and unrealistic. The account of R. Elazar's suffering and the reward that comes from his suffering are highly miraculous. Instead of grappling with the very real issue of the suffering of the righteous, the fantastic nature of R. Elazar's suffering seems to provide a compelling paradigm of accepting suffering through love. The example of R. Elazar promotes a severe lifestyle. A person must live a life free of sin and willingly accept suffering. Here is a man who lived a very strict life and lived with incredible faith in God's justice and all of these awe-inspiring incidents happened to him. The Talmud presents him as an exalted model of a person accepting

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<sup>36</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 158

suffering through love and his example proves that this life-style leads to incredible reward.

The usage of the concept of "sufferings of love" provides powerful justification for faith in God's love in the face of the perception of extreme and unjustified suffering of the righteous. According to the Rabbis discussion of this concept, the suffering of the righteous is a problem if one is to have faith in God's justice system. As Rava points out, if a man finds himself to be without sin, then why would he be experiencing suffering? The answer that justifies the suffering of the righteous is that God brings extreme suffering upon those whom God loves. The incredible example of R. Elazar b. R. Shimon provides a powerful paradigm for this form of suffering.

#### IV. Martyrdom

The suffering of death from martyrdom is because of love for God. The idea of death out of a love for God represents complete faith in God. The martyr believes that their death is a form of service to God. The martyr lives their entire life with faith and love in God and the death of the martyr is the ultimate expression of this love. Rather, than give up what they love and believe, the martyr would rather die in the name of love of God.

R. Akiva, one of the most revered sages in the Talmud, died at the hands of the Romans. In YBrachot 9:5, as R. Akiva is being tortured by a Roman official, Tinnaeus Rufus, the time to recite the Shema approaches. R. Akiva "began to recite the Shema and smiled." The Roman official says, "Either you are a sorcerer or you mock your suffering." R. Akiva denies being either. He continues saying, "All my life I have recited the verse: 'And you shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart, with all

your soul, and with all your might' (Deut 5:6). I have loved God with all my heart and I loved God with all my might, but until now, 'with all my soul' was not demanded of me. Now that the time has come for me to love God with all my soul, so also has the time come to recite this verse in the Shema. For this reason I am now reciting and smiling." Just as he said this, R. Akiva's soul departed. There exists a deep significance between this phrase from the Shema and R. Akiva's suffering. Now that he is dying as a martyr, he is loving God with all his soul. His death is a form of showing his love for God with his entire life. The fact that he is smiling at the instance of loving God with all his soul and saying this verse implies that he believes that he is willing to serve God out of love even unto the very end of his life. R. Akiva lived a life of faith in God and he is willing to die for this faith.

E. E. Urbach argues that the conventional doctrine of reward and punishment underwent a grave crisis in the period of Hadrian's religious persecution which led to a change in Rabbinic thinking on theodicy. Urbach argues that the bitter outcry from observing the commandments leading to suffering was the cause of this transformation. He looks to R. Akiva as the individual responsible for this transformation. According to Urbach, in this aggadah, R. Akiva proposes a new doctrine as a response to suffering which regards the acceptance of suffering with love as the highest goal of him that serves God, performing the commandments in the spirit of "with all my soul-even though he takes my soul".<sup>37</sup> Urbach's case seems hard to support. Urbach seems to assume that this incident happened just as it is written and R. Akiva actually uttered these words. However, just looking at the highly stylized nature of this text and the fact that it appears in a slightly different form several other places throughout Talmudic literature, it is

possible to discount the possibility that R. Akiva actually said these words. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to definitively state that there is a change in Rabbinic theology caused by R. Akiva and due to the Hadrianic persecutions.

In the Bavli, in the story of R. Akiva's death, a connection between his death and his reward is made explicitly (Brachot 61b). In this version, while he is being tortured to death, "he was accepting upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." In this version, R. Akiva dies while prolonging saying the last word, *echad*, of the first line of the Shema. This story seems to focus upon R. Akiva testifying to the oneness of God. He is proclaiming that even though he is dying, God is one. He is willing to die serving as a testament to God's glory. Even though it might appear that God is not with R. Akiva at this moment, R. Akiva expresses his faith and love for God through his death. This expression of faith is essential to the symbolism of R. Akiva's death.

As opposed to the Yerushalmi version, the story continues after his death. A heavenly voice proclaims: "Happy are you Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *echad*." After the ministering angels question R. Akiva's fate, the heavenly voice proclaims: "Happy are you Akiva, that you are summoned to the world to come." This second proclamation by the heavenly voice provides the explicit significance of R. Akiva's martyrdom. At its core, his death is a form of love for God. Because he loves God and has faith in God, he receives his reward.

The death of such a great sage at the hands of the despised Romans poses a problem for faith in God's justice system. Essentially, R. Akiva's death serves as a symbol for how to love God. One should love God and maintain faith in God even if this leads to death. As a result, these stories provide a justification for the apparently unfair

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<sup>37</sup> Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 442-443

suffering that R. Akiva experienced and the suffering of every righteous person at the hands of the enemy. If this great sage received reward for his suffering, then so will all who are righteous and suffer.

The suffering and martyrdom of R. Chanina b. Teradyon is another example of suffering brought upon a person in love and accepted in love (Avodah Zarah 17b-18a). Within this story, there occur numerous different instances of the struggle to explain the nature of suffering. The story begins with Chanina and another sage, R. Elazar b. Perata, being seized by the Romans for teaching Torah. R. Chanina turns to R. Elazar and tells him that he will be saved because he engaged in study of Torah and acts of loving kindness, but R. Chanina believes that he will die because he only engaged in Torah study. Thus, from the beginning of this story, R. Chanina believes that he has committed a transgression and he deserves punishment. This illustrated that the Rabbis are searching for a reason for R. Chanina's suffering. In several instances in this story, they turn to the traditional explanation that R. Chanina is being punished for sin.

After some discussion that elucidates R. Chanina's transgression and an explanation of how R. Elazar escaped prosecution, the text turns to the trial of R. Chanina. He admits to the Romans that he taught Torah and they sentence him to death by burning, his wife to death, and his daughter to live in a brothel. The editor then goes into a short discussion that explains that R. Chanina is actually being punished for uttering the divine name in public. His wife is sentenced to death because she did not protest against this action and his daughter is sentenced to live in a brothel for paying attention to her steps when some Roman officials notice her beauty. Next, the three members of the family who are punished make exclamations of acceptance of the

righteousness of God's judgment. R. Judah Ha-Nasi exclaims, "Great are these righteous individuals" for acknowledging God's judgment. This illustrates the principle that it is essential that a person accept suffering as punishment. Up until this point in the story, the concern is with providing clear reasoning that R. Chanina and his family are punished due to sin. The Rabbinic interpretation of his martyrdom is trying to provide justification for his suffering.

However, even with committing a severe transgression and being punished in a piecemeal manner, the text cannot allow such a great sage to be punished for this one sin and not receive reward for the measure of the acts of his whole life. The text needs to also provide reasoning for why R. Chanina will merit the world to come. The text provides a previous incident when R. Chanina goes to visit R. Yosi b. Kisma when he is ill. R. Yosi chastises R. Chanina for continuing to teach Torah in public when "from heaven they have imposed as rulers this (the Roman) nation". R. Chanina proclaims with faith that "from heaven they will have mercy on me." R. Chanina is expecting heaven to intercede and protect him. R. Yosi tells him that he will "end up getting burned with the Torah scroll." R. Chanina asks R. Yosi where he stands with regards to the world to come. R. Chanina wants to know that he will receive the ultimate reward. R. Chanina tells R. Yosi about an incident where he made a mistake with *tzedakah* funds and then provided restitution. R. Yosi tells him that he will receive his reward.

Finally, in addition to certain righteous deeds he performed, R. Chanina receives his reward due to the suffering he experiences in his death. R. Chanina is wrapped in the Torah and burned and the Romans place pieces of wool soaked in water over his heart so he would die slowly. His daughter felt saddened over seeing him like this and R.

Chanina said that because they were burning the Torah scroll with him, "God, who will seek retribution for the insult on the Torah scroll, will also seek retribution for my insult." Thus, according to God's justice system, the people who kill the martyr will themselves be punished. This helps provide a sense of faith that those who commit wicked acts against other people will not continue to prosper, but God will eventually punish them.

As R. Chanina is dying, his executioner asks if he makes his death less painful, will R. Chanina bring him to the world to come. R. Chanina says yes and the executioner jumps into the flame and they both die. As this happens, a heavenly voice proclaims: "R. Chanina b. Teradyon and the executioner are prepared for the world to come." Thus, in this story, R. Chanina is being punished piecemeal for a severe transgression, but he has committed numerous positive deeds that the measure of his entire life allows him to receive reward. The punishment of his suffering in death atones for his sins and leads to his receiving this reward. In addition, R. Chanina dies out of his love for God. He has faith in God and he is willing to give his life as a way to show his love.

Ultimately, the story of R. Chanina's martyrdom provides a powerful symbol that when a person lives a righteous life and accepts God's punishment, even in a situation of punishment, the suffering serves to reward the person. In this instance, the promise of reward expresses reasoning for people to have faith in God's mercy. The problem of a righteous person suffering is solved through the explanation that R. Chanina sinned. R. Chanina lived a righteous life and died serving God. Even though he was punished for sin, the text needs a reason to explain how this righteous man still receives the world to come.

The issue of martyrdom provides a test case for the problem of the righteous suffering. The righteous leaders of Israel, along with the rest of the people, are visibly suffering at the hands of a more powerful nation. This might lead people to question their faith in God's justice. God has a special covenant with the Jewish people, but now they are suffering. However, the stories of martyrdom present the belief that in the end, the people must continue to love God even if it leads to death. Even though two of these stories discuss the reward that the martyr receives, the issue of God's justice system is secondary. In these stories, martyrdom is a form of service of love to God.

### **Chapter 3: Questioning Suffering**

In the two previous chapters, texts from Talmudic literature illustrated that instances of suffering fit within God's justice system or demonstrated God's love for an individual. These previous chapters established that the Rabbis were concerned with the problem of suffering. Since they believed that God is just, they needed to provide justification and a sense of meaning behind the experience of suffering. The texts that will be examined in this chapter will demonstrate that there are also instances when the Rabbis could not find justification or meaning behind the experience of suffering. There are theological statements about suffering that either deny or admit an inability to explain suffering as a part of God's system of justice. For the Rabbis, there is a conflict between theory and realism. Yaakov Elman explains that the Talmud provides a number of mechanisms of divine governance that in their simple sense violate the strict sense of God's justice system. These include the astrological sources of the human condition, "sufferings of love", vicarious atonement, situations of negligence in the face of danger, or the workings of a hereditary curse.<sup>38</sup> Several of these topics have been discussed in the previous chapters as different ideas of how punishment and reward occur. The topics that question the working of God's justice system will be examined in this chapter. These texts that question suffering exemplify the high degree of nuance within the Rabbinic belief system. The previous two chapters examined the theoretical attempts to explain suffering. In the material in this chapter, the Rabbis bring examples showing that sometimes the theological theories do not fit the reality.

In Beitzah 32b, there is an explicit statement that even though suffering may be punitive or redemptive, but the reality of suffering as it is experienced is not a pleasant

existence. A Baraita explains that “there are three whose life is no life and they are: one who is dependent upon the table of his fellow, he whose wife rules him, and one who experiences suffering of the body.” In this text, suffering is not a theoretical concept that needs to be explained so that its implications fit within God’s justice system. Here, suffering as it is actually experienced takes away from life. Suffering is a terribly unpleasant reality.

In Arachin 16b, the minimal level of suffering is defined as it occurs in real life. The editor asks, “At what point does suffering begin?” Various rabbis offer several answers. R. Eleazar says, “when a garment woven for a man to wear does not fit him.” Rava states, “Even if it had been intended to serve him hot wine, but it was served cold, or it was intended to serve him cold wine, but it came out hot.” Mar says, “Even if his shirt gets turned inside out.” Rava says, “Even if he puts his hand into his pocket to take out three coins and he takes out only two.” These real experiences clearly are the minimal level of suffering. In fact, these seem to be nothing more than minor annoyances and could hardly be placed in the same category as bodily suffering. This text is clearly meant as hyperbole to make a point. The editor then asks why such information is provided. A lesson from the school of R. Ishmael states that “anyone who goes forty days with no suffering has received his world.” Another lesson from Palestine explains that if one has not experienced suffering for forty days, then “retribution is prepared for him.” These two answers imply that suffering is a normal and natural part of life. It would be abnormal for someone to go a length of time without suffering, even if it is a minor annoyance. Thus, if one goes this length of time without suffering, then it is a sign of either reward or punishment. The obvious question is why the gemara wants

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<sup>38</sup> Elman, *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, p. 192

to reduce the definition of suffering to such extremes of insignificance. It is possible that the author of this text, understanding the traditional demand that suffering be a punishment for sin, wishes to pay lip-service to that demand while reducing the requirements as much as possible. They do not want to grant the need for genuine suffering.<sup>39</sup> Since this explanation takes suffering to such insignificant levels, the text is questioning the need for suffering. This text wants to make suffering built into the structure of life, even as minor annoyance because it wants people to receive lesser levels of suffering as punishment. This text questions the need for severe suffering as punishment within God's justice system. The reality of suffering is too much to bear and this text reduces the level of suffering within the justice system in order to decrease the need to turn to the justice system as an explanation of suffering.

Even though the reality of suffering can prove to be arbitrary and meaningless, this does not negate the theoretical belief in suffering as an aspect of God's justice. Rather, the Rabbis are comfortable presenting the theoretical and the realistic discussions of suffering together within the same text. This represents an openness to a variety of theological concepts and responses to suffering.

#### I. Questioning the Justice System

There are examples of suffering that call into question the place of suffering within God's system of justice. The questioning of finding justification for suffering within the justice system takes three forms. Firstly, there are instances where suffering occurs arbitrarily. Secondly, there is an inability to comprehend why suffering appears to occur unfairly. Thirdly, there is a refutation of the theological statement that there is no iniquity without suffering. It is significant to note that these instances of questioning do

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<sup>39</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 162

not represent a lack of faith in God. In each of these examples, there remains faith in the ultimate justness of God. Rather, what these examples question is theological assumptions about God's justice. Sometimes God's justice system does not work as an explanation for suffering.

Baba Kamma 60b presents the possibility that people can die arbitrarily due to the inherent dangers of life. A person does not die because of God's justice in the world or because of God's love for an individual, but simply because life is inherently dangerous. The editor brings a Baraita that states, "When there is a plague in a city, a person should stay indoors because on the outside the sword of the angel of death causes death." This implies that even though a person may not deliberately experience death, because of the dangers inherent to plague in the world, the angel of death has the power to kill anyone arbitrarily. The text brings the example of Rava who "would seal the windows at a time of wrath, or plague." This signifies that Rava understood that death can come upon an individual in times of danger regardless of whether it is the time for a person to die. Rava's actions indicate that he understood that the angel of death could act at any time and for unspecified reasons. Individuals, even righteous ones, may not survive such an outburst because the angel of death is a phenomenon whose regularity can be compared to the operation of natural laws.<sup>40</sup> Like natural laws, the angel of death can act without regard to a person's deeds. For this reason, like Rava, a person must protect himself.

Further on, the editor brings another statement about behavior during a plague. The text explains: "if there is a plague in the city, a person should not walk in the middle of the road because the angel of death walks in the middle of the road." This statement is interpreted to mean that the angel of death "has been given permission to proceed in the

open.” This signifies that the angel of death has authority to kill anyone in his path even if the person is not due to be punished or rewarded. According to these statements, God gives the angel of death the power to act without regard to a person’s behavior and to kill without distinguishing. This text provides a different possibility for why death and suffering occur. Instead of God dictating when a person should die based upon a person’s deeds, this situation explains that on occasion people die because the angel of death is given power to kill arbitrarily. This is a significant difference from the explanations for death provided in chapters one and two. Death and suffering are arbitrary dangers inherent in life.

In Moed Katan 28a, Rava says that “a person’s life, children, and sustenance are not dependent on his merit, but rather is dependent on planetary influences (this refers to the Rabbinic belief in the power of astrology and conveys the sense that the planets have influence upon a person’s destiny).” This represents a different approach to understanding why events happen in a person’s life. As chapter one and two illustrated, God’s accounting of a person’s merits is the key aspect of what happens to a person in life. According to Rava’s statement, the length of a person’s life, their children, and their wealth are based upon arbitrary factors. In terms of comparison, looking at Brachot 5b, R. Yochanan explains that lack of children is a punishment that atones and the death of children is “sufferings of love”. According to Rava’s statement, what happens to a person’s children is arbitrary.

To prove this point, Rava brings the example of two rabbis, Rabbah and R. Chisda, whom Rava says were both righteous rabbis. However, “R. Chisda lived ninety-two years, but Rabbah lived forty years. R. Chisda celebrated sixty celebrations, but

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<sup>40</sup> Elman, “The Suffering of the Righteous in Palestinian and Babylonian Sources”, p. 333

Rabbah suffered sixty bereavements. R. Chisda fed fine flour to their dogs and they did not need the flour, but Rabbah fed barley flour to his family and not enough of it could be found.” While these examples are clearly hyperbole, the point of Rava’s statement provides a serious problem of suffering. Both of these men are righteous individuals who, according to their merits, should receive equal treatment, but one prospers while the other suffers. Rava brings this example to point out that there are situations where suffering occurs due to other forces besides God’s judgment. The Rabbis seem willing to admit that in many cases the righteous do not receive just treatment in this world. The merit they accrue, which should protect them from life’s difficulties, does not influence significant aspects of their lives. These include three factors that make up the greater part of the human condition: length of life, offspring who will survive the parents and sustenance.<sup>41</sup> In this instance a person’s fate is not in the hands of God’s accounting; it is not clear how God plays a role in the disposition of a person’s life.

The text goes deeper into this issue of arbitrary death by providing a series of encounters with the angel of death. In these encounters, there is an assumption that one can intercede with the angel of death and postpone death, but only for a short time. Eventually, death will get every person. In one story, Rava is sitting with his brother, R. Seorim and he appears to be dying. Rava asks his brother to tell the angel of death not to hurt him. R. Seorim asks, “Are you not his friend?” Rava replies, “Since my destiny (*mazal*) has been delivered to the angel of death, he will pay no attention to me.” Rava then appears to R. Seorim after death and tells him that death hurt very little. In this story, Rava’s death is not a matter of his merit. Instead, the planetary forces affecting

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<sup>41</sup> Elman, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, p. 163

Rava's life have been given to the angel of death and it is time for him to die, like every other person, regardless of his deeds.

In a similar story, Rava is sitting with R. Nachman who is dying. R. Nachman requests that Rava tell the angel of death not to hurt him. Rava asks R. Nachman "Are you not an important person?" R. Nachman replies, "Who is important, who is respected, who is exalted (before the angel of death)?" As with the previous story, R. Nachman appears to Rava after death and tells him that death was not painful, but in this story he continues to say that he would not return to live as before because the fear of the angel of death is so great. This story implies that no person, no matter how righteous, can escape the angel of death. A person's deeds become unimportant before the angel of death. This story also acknowledges the psychological power that death has over a person's mind. Death is a constantly present fear that can come upon any person at any time. This text proclaims that the righteous person should not be so foolish as to imagine that their deeds will protect them in all situations.

In another story, for some unknown reason, the angel of death could not come and take R. Chiya's life. The story continues: "One day the angel of death disguised himself as a poor person. He went and knocked on R. Chiya's door and said to him, 'bring me some bread,' and they brought him some bread. He said to R. Chiya, 'You have mercy upon the poor, but why do you not have mercy upon the angel of death?' He then revealed himself, showing a rod of fire and R. Chiya gave his life to him." This story presents death as an inevitable part of life. The angel of death is not cruel, but is given a task to fulfill within the world. He wants R. Chiya to understand that he should respect the angel of death's role within the world.

There is another discussion of premature, unjust, and arbitrary death from the actions of the angel of death in Chagigah 4b-5a. Within the text, there is a discussion of verses in the Bible that the Rabbis would weep when reading. The text explains that R. Yosef would weep when he read, "there are those who find their end without judgment" (Proverbs 13:23). The text continues with R. Yosef asking, "Are there people who do not die at the proper time?" and the text responds, "Yes". The text then moves into the story of the angel of death taking the wrong person. The angel of death told his messenger, "Bring Miriam the hairdresser, but the messenger brought Miriam the caretaker of children." The angel of death said that since the messenger brought her, let her be numbered among the dead. The text asks how the angel of death was able to take her if it was not her appointed time to die. The angel explains that "she was holding a poker in her hand and she was extending it and sweeping out the oven . She removed the poker and rested it on top of her foot. She burnt herself and the planetary influence over her (*mazal*) was damaged and so I brought her." The text asks if the angel is allowed to act in this way and the angel responds by quoting the verse that would make R. Yosef cry. In its use of exaggeration, this story explains that there can be premature death and God's justice is not always done. In this instance, Miriam's death was arbitrary and based upon astrological forces and not upon her merits. Here as in the previous stories of the angel of death, God is absent. Instead, God requires the angel of death to take all human life. The angel is actually using an explanation from the Bible to prove that he has the right to take a person's life prematurely and without just cause. God is not an actor in this story because the text is calling into question the possibility that there is always justification for suffering. The opinion is stated that this death, at least, has nothing to do with God.

Since God is removed from the scene, this text illustrates just how insecure justice is.

This text is responding to the problem of suffering by stating that a person's existence in this world is arbitrary and subject to the whims of the angel of death. In an extreme and explicit way, this narrative eliminates all of the many rationalizations of suffering that came before it.<sup>42</sup>

These series of statements and exaggerated stories illustrating that death can be arbitrary do not appear in order to challenge the justness of God. Instead, God's influence is pushed into the background. According to this idea, God does not act in the world to reward or punish a person according to their merits, but the movement of celestial bodies causes the person's fate. God does not actively kill people or bring suffering upon people, but God appoints the angel of death as his messenger. Thus, it is the nature of life that all human being will one day succumb to the angel of death. This presentation of how death and suffering occur presents a subtle and important difference from the justifications for suffering and death presented in chapter one and two. Death and suffering are a reality that presents the possibility that the justice system does not always work. These stories present the possibility that occasionally there is no clear justification or meaning applied to death except that the angel of death must act in this world and do his duty.

The concept that suffering and death are beyond comprehension is expressed explicitly in Avot 4:15: "R. Yannai said, 'It is not in our power to explain the prosperity of the wicked or the sufferings of the righteous.'" According to this statement, the suffering of the righteous is not arbitrary, but a part of God's order that is outside the human ability to understand. This statement is presenting God as inscrutable. Why God,

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<sup>42</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 203

who has a justice system, allows these things to happen is beyond human comprehension. The prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous represent a tremendous problem and R. Yannai's statement provides the answer that this problem is a part of the Divine order. As compared to God, the finite human capacity cannot understand why these things occur. In the texts presented in the previous chapters, the Rabbis were consciously attempting to provide a clear and reasonable justification for suffering, but in this example, R. Yannai is proclaiming that such explanations are impossible because people cannot understand the Divine order.

There also exists an aggadic sugiya that presents the possibility that God's justice system does not necessarily explain suffering (Shabbat 55a-b). This sugiya begins with a clear statement of the place of death and suffering within God's justice system: "R. Ammi said, 'There is no death without sin and there is no suffering without transgression.'" This statement presents the situation as described in chapter one that suffering serves as a tool to effect punishment upon the wicked. As a justification of God's justice system, this statement goes even further. R. Ammi is saying that suffering and death only exist in the world because of the transgressions that people commit. R. Ammi did not intend to explain the general phenomenon of death, its source and origin, but rather its place and function in the life of each individual person.<sup>43</sup> God's justice works through a direct causal relationship between sin and suffering. If one commits a sin, then it will lead to the punishment of death or suffering. This statement implicitly explains that if a person commits no sins, then the person would not suffer or die. This argues for a very strict interpretation of God's justice system. The problem of theodicy,

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<sup>43</sup> Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 431

encountered elsewhere, would be explained through this statement as suffering due to some form of sinful act.

After R. Ammi's statement, the editor raises an objection. The angels ask God, "Why did you pass a judgment of death upon Adam?" God replies and refutes the angels' objection, "I gave him an easy command and he transgressed against it." The angels respond by presenting another situation of righteous individuals who died, "But Moses and Aaron observed the entire Torah and they died." God replies by quoting Ecclesiastes 9:2, "The same fate is in store for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and pure and the impure." The editor states that God is expressing the same opinion as R. Shimon b. Elazar who teaches that "Moses and Aaron also died through their sin" because they did not believe in God. This text is stating that Moses and Aaron would not have died if not for their sin. Their sin is established and the angels' objection is refuted. In this portion of the sugiya, the statements by the angels use them as a tool to present the opposite viewpoint of R. Ammi. The editor brings this unit of material to begin the dialogue to discuss the validity of R. Ammi's statement. Even though the angels' discussion has not fully proved the point, they begin the dialogue and then the editor brings another objection with material from elsewhere.

The text continues to state that "four people died due to the influence of the snake: Benjamin the son of Jacob, Amram the father of Moses, Jesse the father of David, and Caleb the son of David." The reference to the snake refers to the Garden of Eden story. This signifies that these people died due to the sin of Adam and Eve who caused death and suffering to come into the world. This text is implying, due to the sin of Adam and Eve, the human condition requires that every person will suffer and will die

regardless of whether they sin or not. This objection is stating that there are four people in the Bible who only died because of the sin of Adam and Eve. This means that they died without having sinned themselves. The text continues to state that this information is known from teachers except for Jesse the father of David whose situation is explained in the Bible. The text then makes a midrash based upon the same name, Abigail, found in two separate texts. In I Chronicles 2:16, Abigail is explicitly called the sister of David and therefore, the daughter of Jesse. In II Samuel 17:25, there is a reference to Abigail the daughter of Nachash. The text makes a connection between the use of the same name and states that Nachash is referring to Jesse. According to the midrash, the Bible is referring to Abigail as "the daughter of one who died through the influence of the snake." This part of the sugiya is highly difficult to accept as providing an example that is an exception to R. Ammi's original statement. Firstly, three of the four examples do not come from the Bible, but from traditional Rabbinic teachings. The final example is not explicitly from the Bible, but is a midrash on the Bible. The editor is bringing into the dialogue a suspect argument in order to prove R. Ammi wrong.

The text has refuted R. Ammi's statement by bringing this example of people who died without sin, but because of the first sin, which caused the human condition to have death as a part of life. The text continues by seeking to find the attribution of these objections. The editor ascribes all of these statements to R. Shimon b. Elazar, the only sage quoted in the material brought as an objection to R. Ammi's statement. The editor then states that because these objections come from this Tannaitic sage, it "proves that there is death without sin and suffering without transgression. This refutation of R. Ammi is a definitive refutation." Since these two objections are not attributed, the editor

needs to attach these examples to a rabbi in order to refute the statement of another rabbi especially since these objections are weak.

The editor appears to be directing the dialogue to refute R. Ammi because the editor finds R. Ammi's statement highly problematic. The sugiya concludes with a resounding refutation on the basis of the fate of these four biblical personalities, who probably constitute the only such cases in all of human history. It is as if the sugiya is carrying on a polemic against R. Ammi and his position.<sup>44</sup> The editor is not saying that the justice system never works in our world. The examples of Adam and Moses and Aaron show that there are people who die because of sin. The editor is dealing with the problem of the suffering of righteous people who have not committed sins that would lead to death and suffering. This issue is significant enough that the refutation is announced in a formula usually reserved for halachic refutations.<sup>45</sup> This text is calling into question the possibility that a justification for suffering can always be found. There are instances where the traditional rationalization does not apply.

The editor is also silent in terms of explaining why suffering and death occur if not from sin. There is no justification of suffering in this instance, but only the editor stating that there are situations where there is death without sin and suffering without transgression. The possibility exists that the reasoning underlying suffering is ultimately indeterminate. In the end, for many cases, the reality of suffering and the theoretical discussion of God's justice are two separate discussions. According to Kraemer's

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<sup>44</sup> Elman, Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering, p. 172

<sup>45</sup> Kadushin, The Rabbinic Mind, p. 76

opinion, perhaps the message it finally wishes to communicate is that there are no ready explanations.<sup>46</sup>

The texts presented above are questioning the traditional theological belief in God's justice system. These texts question the ability to find justification and meaning in the experience of suffering. They explain that suffering can be arbitrary and based upon astrological forces. They present the possibility that suffering occurs for reasons beyond our comprehension. These texts do not represent a rejection of God's justice system. They are portraying alternative possibilities and alternative theological beliefs. In these texts, God does not decide when a person suffers or God is inscrutable and it is impossible for the human mind to give meaning to suffering.

## II. Questioning God's Reward

The issue of suffering is especially difficult with regards to the rewards that, according to God's justice system, the righteous should receive for their merits. As previously described in chapter two, a two-world system developed and many statements exist to explain that the righteous will actually receive their reward in the world to come. . In several aggadot, there is a questioning of the reward God is bringing to the righteous who suffer through the statement, "This is the Torah and this is its reward", and in one aggadah, several rabbis do not accept suffering, even when it leads to reward. These aggadot present a questioning of the manner in which God brings reward upon people who are righteous.

In one of the accounts of Elisha b. Abuya's heresy (YChagigah 2:1), he sees the tongue of R. Judah the baker dripping blood, in the mouth of a dog and he proclaims, "This is the Torah and this is its reward. This is the tongue that was bringing forth the

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<sup>46</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 188

words of Torah. This is the tongue that labored in Torah all its days. This is the Torah and this is its reward. It seems as though there is no reward for righteousness and no resurrection of the dead.” Elisha b. Abuya is questioning the justness of the fate of R. Judah. According to God’s justice system, this righteous man should be rewarded for his merits as a teacher of Torah, but instead he experienced suffering and death. According to the text of this passage, Elisha b. Abuya’s questioning leads to his going beyond the limits of Rabbinic belief. He does not just question the justness of R. Judah’s fate or state that sometimes the justice system does not appear to work, but he rejects the entire structure of the Rabbinic justice system. In addition, he rejects the concept of the resurrection of the dead that is central to the Rabbinic concept of reward for the righteous. The primary purpose of including this story is to serve as an example that rejecting faith in God’s justice is wrong, but it is still significant that a heretical statement should be included in the Talmud.

In the martyrdom story of R. Akiva in Brachot 61b, the angels question the justness of R. Akiva’s suffering by proclaiming to God, “This is Torah and this is its reward.” A heavenly voice then comes forth to proclaim that R. Akiva “will receive the world to come.” The suffering and martyrdom of R. Akiva poses a problem to God’s justice system. This great sage should receive reward instead of suffering and the angels are questioning why R. Akiva is suffering. While the heavenly voice ultimately proclaims that R. Akiva will receive reward in the world to come, the voice of the angels presents a questioning of the seemingly unfair suffering of righteous individuals. Crucially, God responds without condemnation-admitting the force of the challenge and

offering contextually a reasonable answer.<sup>47</sup> The angels are saying that the reality of suffering is sometimes in conflict with the theoretical aspects of God's justice, but the heavenly voice states that this is not the case.

In addition to the angels protesting R. Akiva's suffering, Moses also questions R. Akiva's fate. In Menachot 29b, Moses is shown the greatness of R. Akiva's teaching and now Moses wants to see R. Akiva's reward for his Torah knowledge. Moses sees them "weighing out R. Akiva's flesh at the market-stalls." Moses says, "This is the Torah and this is its reward." God replies, "Be quiet for this is my plan." In this story, Moses serves as the voice questioning the role of God's justice in R. Akiva's suffering. Based upon Moses' statement, he believes that R. Akiva should receive reward for his knowledge of Torah. Moses is stating that the reality of R. Akiva's suffering is in conflict with the theory that God's justice should lead to R. Akiva receiving reward. The response by God to Moses that he should be quiet implies that there are aspects of the Divine order that are beyond human comprehension, even for Moses. God is inscrutable and works in ways that people cannot understand. People can question their fate and feel that the reality of their suffering does not fit the theological concept of God's justice, but they must still have faith in God's plan.

On Brachot 5b, after a series of aggadot about the topic of suffering, there occurs a story of three separate episodes of rabbis experiencing suffering and denying their suffering and its reward. Each of the episodes of the rabbis getting sick follows a similar pattern. One rabbi is sick and another comes to visit him. The visiting rabbi asks, "Is your suffering precious to you?" The sick rabbi responds, "Neither they nor their reward." Then the visiting rabbi gives the sick rabbi his hand and cures him through his

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<sup>47</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 170

touch. In the first episode, R. Hiyya b. Abba becomes sick and R. Yochanan visits him and the story follows the pattern exactly. In the second episode, R. Yochanan becomes sick and R. Chanina visits him. The difference in this episode is that the editor asks why R. Yochanan could not cure himself. The response is that "a prisoner cannot free himself from jail" which means that the patient cannot cure himself.

The third episode has the greatest variety: "R. Eleazar becomes sick and R. Yochanan visits him. R. Yochanan noticed that he was lying in a dark room, so he bared his arm and light came from it. (R. Yochanan was considered to be so beautiful that light radiated from his body. (Baba Metzia 84a)) R. Yochanan saw that R. Eleazar was crying. He said to him, 'Why do you cry? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? We learn that it makes no difference whether one does much or little so long as they direct their hearts to heaven. Is it because of sustenance? Not every person merits two tables (which means that not every person merits reward in this world and the world to come). Is it because of children? This is the tooth of my tenth son.' R. Eleazar replied, 'I am weeping because of your beauty which will rot in the earth.' R. Yochanan said, 'Certainly you have reason to cry' and they two of them cried together." Finally, R. Yochanan asks R. Eleazar if his suffering is precious to him and he responds, "Neither they nor their reward." R. Yochanan gives him his hand and cures him.

These highly stylized and exaggerated stories present the conflict between the reality of the actual experience of suffering and the theoretical explanation that the suffering of the righteous leads to reward. In chapter one and two, the idea that suffering must be accepted in order to be efficacious was examined. When these rabbis do not accept their suffering as precious, they are not questioning God's justice system where

suffering can lead to the reward of the righteous. These three sufferings could be termed as "sufferings of love" except unlike in "sufferings of love", these rabbis do not accept their suffering. These rabbis do not accept the added suffering above what they should receive from God. The statement in response to the question of whether their suffering is acceptable, "Neither they nor their reward", implies that they accept and believe in the concept that suffering can lead to a person receiving merit for reward. Rather, they are protesting against the very real physical suffering that they are encountering in the moment. The reward of the world to come is not enough of a comfort or a justification for these rabbis. The psychological and physical pain that they are experiencing is too much for them. They do not accept this experience as precious even though it will lead to their reward. These rabbis appear to be bitter towards their suffering. They do not want to accept the suffering and they would forgo their suffering if they could avoid the suffering.

When examining the exchange between R. Elazar and R. Yochanan in the third episode, it is possible to see the depth of the conflict between the reality and theory of suffering. R. Yochanan tells R. Eleazar not to cry because it does not matter whether he studied Torah enough so long as he directed his heart to heaven. This is in opposition to the statement by Rava on Brachot 5a that neglect of Torah study leads to suffering. Next, R. Yochanan asks if it is because of R. Eleazar's rewards in this world and the next. R. Yochanan states that this does not matter because R. Eleazar merits reward in both worlds. This implies that his suffering does not relate to R. Eleazar's merits and that in any case, he will ultimately receive reward. Finally, R. Yochanan asks him if it is because of a lack of children and R. Yochanan shows the tooth from his tenth son which

implies that lack of children is not nearly as terrible a suffering as losing children. This statement appears to be in direct response to the discussion that occurred with R.

Yochanan prior to this aggadah. As discussed in chapter two, R. Yochanan says that lack of children is suffering of atonement while loss of children is "sufferings of love". Based upon the final part of this episode where he questions whether the suffering is acceptable, it appears that R. Yochanan is not accepting the loss of children as "sufferings of love". It seems that this aggadah asks the reader to reevaluate the previous statement. Loss of children may be a form of "sufferings of love", but it does not take away the bitterness and pain. It is this aspect of suffering that R. Yochanan rejects.

Ultimately, R. Eleazar is crying because the real life beauty of his friend will one day cease to exist. This is a protest proclaiming that the reality of suffering causes real psychological and physical pain. Grander theological concepts such as God's justice system are irrelevant and, at the very least, inscrutable in the face of the direct experience of suffering.<sup>48</sup> While these rabbis understand and believe in the many justifications for suffering, in the moment of suffering, these justifications provide no meaning to the rabbis. The only thing that can heal them is the miraculous and immediate touch of their fellow rabbi.

The fact that the conflict between the reality and theories about suffering are presented within the same text as the justifications for suffering provides insight into the Rabbinic mindset. The Rabbis are comfortable with allowing a variety of theological concepts to exist. As the example of Elisha b. Abuya illustrates, there are limits to how far one is allowed to go in terms of presenting ideas that question more dominant

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<sup>48</sup> Kraemer, Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, p. 199

concepts. However, the fact such variety exists presents a powerful picture of the nature of Rabbinic theology.

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated from studying the theological statements and stories within the Talmudic literature regarding suffering, there is no singular Rabbinic theology about suffering. The Rabbis present a range of different theological ideas and beliefs. Whenever the Rabbis produce stories and statements containing examples and references to suffering, they refer to suffering as a sub-category of the theological theme of God's justice. While much of the discussions and stories containing examples of suffering can be characterized as examples of the divine system of justice, there is a wide range of variety within the theological ideas about justice. In addition, due to the problem of theodicy, questions are raised as to whether suffering even fits within the divine system of justice. There are many examples of Rabbis proclaiming that people can suffer unjustly. Even though these statements are questioning God's role in suffering, they are in direct conversation with the traditional concept of God's justice as explicated within the Bible. The examples of people suffering unjustly, considered along with the variety in the examples presenting a strong belief in the concept of God's justice, presents the nuance and depth of Rabbinic beliefs. The Talmudic literature is comfortable with a variety of theological beliefs existing on a single theological topic.

God's punishment, through the use of suffering, relates to a variety of different Rabbinic beliefs. Suffering serves as straightforward punishment of individuals for their own sins. Suffering also functions as a means for expiation of sin. In order to be a successful punishment, suffering must be accepted willingly. Suffering can be inflicted collectively in response to a community's shared sins. The punishment of suffering can affect the righteous because of the sins of the wicked.

The concept that a person can merit reward through the experience of suffering provides justification for the experience of suffering by the righteous. This reward can be received in this world, but the essence of the concept of reward through suffering is the idea that the righteous will receive their reward after death in the world to come. Righteous individuals can experience an overabundance of suffering. This problem is given reasoning by proclaiming that the individual experiences suffering out of God's love. The Rabbis cope with the problem that martyrdom poses to God's justice system by explaining that the righteous experience suffering and die from their love for God.

There are also instances when the Rabbis could not find justification or meaning behind the experience of suffering. In certain situations the reality of suffering leads the Rabbis to either deny or admit an inability to explain suffering as a part of God's system of justice. In addition, the reality of the extreme pain of suffering leads some Rabbis to reject the experience of suffering even when they believe it will lead to their receiving reward. These texts that question suffering exemplify the high degree of nuance within the Rabbinic belief system. The Talmudic literature allows for problems arising within the real world to question the theoretical aspects of Rabbinic belief without nullifying these abstract theological concepts.

This Rabbinic approach to suffering was at first difficult to accept. I found myself wanting a consistent, singular, logical explanation for suffering. I originally thought that I needed to have my theoretical and abstract ideas be consistent with the empirical data I encounter. Suffering always proved to be a difficult issue and a serious problem for my own theological beliefs. I want to believe in a just God, but in reality, there is an overabundance of suffering in the world. How can I reconcile this? As I

discovered, this is not a problem for the Rabbis. The Rabbis do not need to be systematic with their theology. They are comfortable with many explanations for suffering occurring within the same text. The fact that contradictions exist within their theological system does not prove to be a problem and the reality that sometimes suffering is undeserved does not negate their theological beliefs.

As a result of this study, I have gained a more profound appreciation for the genius of the Rabbis. Within my own theological beliefs, I am more comfortable with the inevitable inconsistencies and contradictions that occur. I do not feel the need to be systematic because there exists a variety of explanations and possibilities. I can believe in theories and also recognize that reality does not always fit my beliefs. I can have ideologies while being sensitive to the realities of life.

In terms of my theology of suffering, I am deeply uncomfortable with any possibility that suffering serves as punishment or reward. How can I say that a person deserves suffering because of some form of sinfulness? On the other hand, how can I justify a person's suffering by claiming that their suffering will lead to their reward? In our modern world, such beliefs seem insensitive and out of touch with reality. In spite of my difficulties with these explanations, I still believe that a just God exists. However, I believe that the manner in which this just God works is a mystery.

In terms of the texts that this study examined, the two texts that ring most true for me theologically are Avot 4:15 and the story of the three sick rabbis in Brachot 5b. Like R. Yannai's statement in Avot 4:15, I do not believe that it is in our power to explain theodicy. This is a problem that cannot be given a definite explanation. Our human minds cannot begin to fathom the reasoning for why God works the way God does. Even

if I knew that suffering led to reward, like the rabbis in the Brachot 5b, I do not think that I would accept my suffering. There are some aspects of life for which no meaning can be found. Yet, the story in Brachot 5b does provide the realistic response to suffering of bikur cholim that forms the core of my personal sense of how we must respond to suffering. There may be moments where suffering is meaningless, but the experience of human contact and personal relationship will always prove meaningful to me.

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