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"The Significance of Illness of Biblical Personalities  
as Reflected in the Talmudic Literature"

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ILLNESS OF  
BIBLICAL PERSONALITIES AS REFLECTED  
IN THE TALMUDIC LITERATURE

by  
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## DIGEST

In the reading of the Bible we encounter a number of individuals who were made to suffer some form of illness. This sickness or affliction sometimes manifested itself by outward physical appearance while at other times it was not visible to the naked eye. In this paper a sincere attempt was made to find the reason or reasons for some of these illnesses by checking every biblical mention of sickness, illness, fainting, evil disease, blindness, lame, dumb, hunchback, wound, stripe, plague, and leprosy. In addition to these categories an effort was made to look into those situations which concerned themselves with reward and punishment, wickedness and sinfulness, and measure for measure. An effort was then made to ascertain what the rabbis had to say in regard to these afflictions and afflicted. The comments to these biblical references were checked and all Talmudic references were investigated.

One of the most invaluable guides in the process of this investigation was Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews. In this profound work a multitude of afflicted individuals, whose illness was not mentioned in the Bible, were found, as well as the rabbinic comments which elaborated on the illnesses of these biblical personalities.

Though there are diverging opinions, among the rabbis, it becomes quite clear after the researching of all the



material that it was the majority belief that sickness was considered to be retributory. Whatever suffering man was made to undergo, he was being subjected to this, in partial payment at least, for whatever transgressions he was guilty of. One is left with the feeling that in the scheme of things everything occurs with a definite purpose. If man is made to undergo some form of suffering, it is almost a foregone conclusion, that somewhere in the life of that human being he incurred the wrath of the Eternal.

## FOREWORD

A good many years have elapsed since the early childhood when I was first exposed to the book of Numbers, specifically the episode encountered in Chapter 12. It was here that I first was taught the story of Miriam's leprosy and the rabbinic view that leprosy was the punishment inflicted by God for slandering one's neighbor. Between these views which were indoctrinated in the Yeshivah classroom and my own father's (ה"ר אברהם) teachings that punishment must result from indulgence in חטא פה I was pretty much convinced for many years that Miriam must have been guilty of this sin of talking ill of others.

Many years later in another classroom, this time at the Jewish Institute of Religion - Hebrew Union College, New York, this verse again became the topic of conversation in one of our classes. Speaking with Dr. Ezra Spicehandler we discussed this rabbinic view, and wondered out loud about other illnesses of other biblical personalities. Were all biblical personalities, who were sick, smitten with illness because of some transgression? Did illness or affliction mean that the person so smitten had sinned in the eyes of his God? Did the rabbis in the Talmud hold this view?

The conversation was not carried to any further lengths, but from this there grew the idea for this thesis topic. I therefore wish to thank Dr. Spicehandler for his inadvertant

help. To Dr. Alexander Guttman, for his untiring and invaluable assistance in this undertaking, I most graciously express my deepest gratitude.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Is Retribution a Reality?

If there is any group of individuals as intimately associated with the suffering as is the medical profession it must be the clergy. The men of the cloth are invariably called to help alleviate the pangs of the afflicted, in mind, if not in body. They are called to help the stricken accustom himself to his difficult environment. Most difficult of all they are often asked the unanswerable query, Why, rabbi, Why? Why am I, or why is this particular individual burdened with the hardship of illness and suffering?

I doubt very much if this thesis will formulate an answer, but it may serve to help myself, to think through more thoroughly, the many facets of illness and affliction. In any event, being familiar with the many and varied rabbinic views can only help to understand a problem with which I will be faced for the remainder of this pastoral life, which is mine.

How does one approach the topic of suffering? Must all men inevitably be punished for their wrongs? and that the punishment always be manifested in bodily ailments? Can any man hope to go through life free from the sick bed? Maimonides remarks in פירוש המשנה, "Even the patriarchs and prophets were not entirely free from human failings", so they too, at least theoretically, would be

subject to punishment. Indeed this was the case. Some of the prophets were subject to illness as were some of the patriarchs. Whether this suffering was retribution or not remains to be seen. In the Legends of the Jews there appears the following story which would indicate that Abraham, our patriarch was made to suffer pain:

Abraham said to God: "If Thou hadst made known to the generation of the flood what pain is, they would never have rebelled against Thee."<sup>1</sup> This would indicate that sickness and suffering was so distasteful and unpleasant that the people would have refrained from wickedness for the fear of being stricken with some malady. The severity of illness it would seem was almost as grave as were the waters of the flood. But illness, not being a commodity which was then known to mankind, was not resorted to by God, at least, this was the rabbinic view. That illness was newly introduced to the patriarchs is further indicated by the conversation attributed to God and Jacob, where Jacob said to God:

O Lord of the world, a man dies suddenly, and he is not laid low first by sickness, and he cannot acquaint his children with his wishes regarding all he leaves behind. But if man first fell sick, and felt that his end was drawing nigh, he would have time to set his house in order.

And God said:

Verily thy request is sensible, and thou shalt be the first to profit by the new dispensation.<sup>2</sup>

This surely shows suffering by the patriarchs, but would we list this as retribution for wrongs committed? But amongst the sons of Jacob there are many indications that illness was retributive. Zebulon, before his death is supposed to have said:

All my brethren fell sick at one time or another, but I escaped without any illness.<sup>3</sup>

This was because Zebulon was blessed by the Lord because of his mercifulness. Zebulon was certainly stating a fact that God acted this way in return for his own considerate action. So too, retribution is indicated in the following. Joseph, who proclaimed in public that he was a Hebrew, was rewarded by being finally interred in the land of the Hebrews. While Moses, who had no objection to being considered an Egyptian, had to live and die outside the land of his people.<sup>4</sup>

Further credence to the theory of illness as punishment for sin is found in the Soncino edition of I Kings.

Commenting on chapter 8, verse 38 which reads: 26/1  
יִדְּעוּ כָל אִישׁ אֶת הַפְּלַג הַלֵּב הַזֶּה "every man shall know the plague of his own heart", the writer of the commentary says, "each individual, whatever be his affliction, will recognize that it is sent by God upon him for some misdeed committed by him."

Before we can even hope to see a clear picture of illness as retribution, if we are to see a clear picture

at all, the issue will be clouded many times. Proofs and views, both pro and con, will be cited. The entire idea of retribution seems strange in the light of a remark found in the Talmud, in the tractate Megillah. Pertaining to the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea into which they had pursued the Israelites, the angels of God were tempted to sing and rejoice before God, but they were reminded that God does not rejoice at the punishment of sinners.<sup>5</sup> Further indication that this is the attitude taken by God is found in the tractate Rosh Hashannah 1, 57a of the Talmud Yerushalmi where it states that God does not desire the destruction of the sinner, and He therefore judges the nations at night, the time of rest, when they cease from doing evil. However, lest one feel that this view is ascendent, then he should consider the contradictory statement which is given by Ginzberg<sup>6</sup> "as the wicked commit their evil deeds in the darkness of night, even so they receive their punishment at night."

The rabbis of old were wont to believe in the theory of retribution and it was just this which prompted the opposition to admitting the book of Ecclesiastes into the Canon. The tendency of Koheleth to negate the dogma of reward and punishment was almost enough to preclude the acceptance of Ecclesiastes as part of the sacred writings. This attitude might be considered an indication that the theory of retribution was of some significance, at least.



As one reads through the Psalms, again there is the strong indication, at least in some of the chapters, that retribution is something to be reckoned with. Psalm 37 which concerns itself with the problem of evil, states that God in His own time will punish the wicked. The evil doer though seemingly in the ascendancy, is sure to be punished. Verse 13 reads : The Lord doth laugh at him; For He seeth that his day is coming. Ibn Ezra comments on this verse, that the wicked one does not realize that God knows the future and He will therefore have the last laugh. The day of retribution is certain to come.

The following Psalm, Psalm 38, contains the words of a penitent individual who is sorely afflicted and in serious illness. This condition causes him to search his heart, since he acknowledges that his predicament is the result of sin. In verse 4 the penitent says:

There is no soundness in my flesh because of  
thine indignation;  
Neither is there any health in my bones because  
of my sin.

Again and again the speaker indicates that he is suffering because of his sin. Psalm 39 too would leave the reader with the same impression that because of sin the hand of God falls heavily upon the transgressor. In Psalm 64 the Psalmist utters the conviction that God will condemn the unscrupulous and they will be requitted for their evil deeds. In Psalm 73 the faith of the righteous is shaken because of



the suffering of the righteous, but faith is restored when assurance comes that Divine retribution is a reality.

But for all these references which would indicate that man must certainly pay for his transgressions, there is the persisting undercurrent which would negate this belief.

Biblically there are many indicants that retribution is in store for the evil doer. In Deuteronomy 11:16, 17 there is the warning of the consequences of not observing the ways of the Lord. Also in Deut. 28:15-68 there is set forth the devastating wrath which would befall the people if they chose to go against the laws of the Lord. This would certainly indicate the definite presence of Divine retribution. Whether illness of individuals, however, was a manifestation, of Divine wrath and retribution, remains to be seen. If it was, then who were the individuals so afflicted and in what way was their punishment meted out? How were they made to suffer, and was this suffering in direct consequence to their transgression?

It may therefore be best to turn to the rabbis and to delve into the Talmud to try to find, "The significance of illness of biblical personalities as reflected in the Talmudic literature."

But before we can undertake this task we must first look into the types of illness one encounters in the Bible and who were the individuals afflicted.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Types of Illness and Individuals Afflicted

The list of biblical personalities who suffered from some form of illness is quite extensive and formidable, having to its credit some of the reigning personalities of the Bible. It sometimes seems like practically everybody was sick at one time or another. Likewise, the list of maladies too is quite extensive, though not quite so. But there is a definite preponderance of one type of illness over most others. This illness being, leprosy. The prominent list includes the following names, who at one time or another were afflicted with this horrible malady. Aaron, Abimelech, Bithiah, Cain, David, Doeg, Gehazi, Goliath, Haman, Miriam, Moses, Naaman, Pharoah, Sammael, Shebnah, Uzziah, Vashti and the Daughters of Zion as well. There will occasion in the unfolding of this paper to cover more fully these individuals and their afflictions.

Another illness, or affliction to be more accurate, is blindness. Here again many prominent names are to be encountered. In Genesis 27:1 we read that Isaac's eyes grew dim, and the rabbis found many explanations for this, as we shall soon see. Sampson, as we know also lost his vision. In addition there are a host of sick individuals, whose illness is not specified, but mention is made that they were not well. When Hagar the bondwoman of Abraham was sent forth

(Gen. 21:15) her child Ishmael consumed all the waters in the water bag because he was sick and feverish.<sup>7</sup> In Gen. 48:1 we see that Jacob the father of Joseph is said to be ill. Abijah, the son of Jeroboam is described as being ill, as we see from I Ki. 14:1 which appears in the comment to this verse in the Soncino edition of the Book of Judges. While in II Ki. there are a number of ill people listed by name. In chapter 20:1 Hezekiah is described as being deathly ill; in chapter 8, Hazael inquires about Ben Hadad's chances of recovering from his present illness. He had hoped to be helped as was Naaman before him. (Soncino commentary to this verse.) A little further on in the same book chapter 17:17, the son of the widow for whom Elijah performed the miracle of the never ending jar of meal and the endless cruse of oil, came unto the prophet with the cry that her child was sick. Another incident very similar is the one where the child of the Shunammite woman grows sick (II Ki. 4:19) and she turns to Elisha for help. Elisha himself was subject to certain afflictions, as is obvious from the taunting haunts of "baldy, baldy", which the children hurled at him. (II Ki. 2:23). There will be additional opportunity to speak of other illnesses which came upon Elisha.

Ahaziah also was sick but this no doubt was as a direct result from the accidental fall through the lattice work. (II Ki. 1:2) There is also mention on Judges 3:15

that Ehud the son of Gera was an "ish iter" יֵשׁ אִתֵּר a left handed man, but the word יֵשׁ really means "a hand contracted by disease or mishap". Such is the explanation in the footnote which appears in the comment to this verse in the Soncino edition of the Book of Judges. Still another illness is described as a "stroke". This is in reference to I Samuel 25:37 where יָדוּתָהּ נִסְתָּרָה is interpreted as being a paralytic stroke. (Soncino footnote to this verse). While speaking of illness, should one overlook, the feigned illness of David by which Mical the daughter of Saul saved the life of her husband David. (I Sam. 19: 14)

If we follow the suggestion of the commentary of David Kinchi to verse 3 of chapter 31 in I Samuel, then we would also list "mental distress" as an illness attributed to a biblical character. Here we read that Saul was in great distress because of the archers יָחַד אֶת אֲנָשֵׁי הַחֹמֹת and Kimchi does not assume that Saul was already hit by the archers, but rather that he was distressed at the thought of being hit. Another verse which is similarly interpreted is found in Ecclesiastes 5:16 where the Soncino commentary on the words וְכֹל הַכֹּחַ וְהַחַיָּה יִפְּצוּ states, "the 'sickness' is primarily of the mind, but eventually the body is affected." This certainly sounds like shades of psychosomatic diagnostics, and the man must be admired for his very advanced thinking.

There are a number of instances in the Bible where one encounters drunks, but they are not referred to as sick individuals. Yet there is a verse in Hosea 7:5 where there is the strong indication that the coronation of Zechariah was marked by a drinking orgy and at least one noteworthy member of the party became "sick with the heat of wine",

הָרַקְנוּ כִּי־לֵחַם הָיָה לֶחֶם שָׂכָר.

Premature aging can also be considered as a form of affliction. Ginzberg remarks <sup>8</sup> "the evil ways of children cause the parents to age prematurely, as may be seen from what happened to Isaac, Eli, and Samuel."

As one encounters more and more instances of sickness and one reads the comments it does begin to become apparent that sickness is most often a consequence of some form of sin. Ginzberg attributes the knowledge of this process of retribution to Adam. When Adam was stretched upon his bed in sickness his children gathered about him very much confused by his illness. He then explained to them what sickness and pain were and that God had inflicted <sup>9</sup> these upon him as a punishment for his sins. Beginning with the first biblical man, there is a continuous pattern of suffering inflicted for sin. Cain, was responsible for the first murder, and we know from biblical details that he was condemned by God in these words: <sup>10</sup> "A fugitive and a wanderer shalt thou be in the earth." In addition to this punishment which Cain pronounced to be "greater than





Egypt and were faced by the attacking Egyptian soldiers, and by the threat of insufficient food and water.

As the pages of the Bible are turned we encounter the episode of the wife of Lot being turned into a pillar of salt.<sup>12b</sup> This particular punishment was directly resultant of her transgression. Rabbi Isaac said: "Because she sinned through salt."<sup>13</sup> More fully, it was through Lot's wife that the presence of the visitors became known to the people of the city. After the visitors were invited by Lot over his wife's protests, she went to borrow some salt from her neighbor. When asked by the neighbor why she could not provide herself with salt, she replied: "We had enough salt, until some guests came to us; for them we needed more."<sup>14</sup>

Illness, however, in addition to being an evil wished upon man, is looked at as an aid as well. Ginzberg adds the following statement:

Some, however, maintain that Isaac had prayed to God to send bodily ailments upon men, that they might atone for their sins, and his blindness was the first case of disease which came upon men.<sup>15</sup>

Whether illness is a blessing or a curse remains to be seen. How the rabbis thought about the matter may be some indication of its value and the role illness plays in the life of man.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Theological Implications of Sickness and Suffering

Though there are a number of instances where there is no indication whether or not the infliction of sickness is a form of retribution or not, they are outnumbered by far, by those which are indicated to be retributory. The specific illness most often resorted to as the instrument of chastisement is the dreaded leprosy. It will be the intent of the following pages to present an overall picture of the individuals so afflicted, and the many interpretations for this particular form of punishment. There is little doubt about the severity of this dreaded plague. In the Legends of the Jews there is the remark that, "there are four who may be regarded as though they were dead, the blind, the leper, the childless, and one once rich but who has lost his possessions."<sup>16</sup> Of these first two categories we shall have many examples. Of the two, leprosy is resorted to, for chastisement. There are thirteen sins listed which are said to be punished by God with leprosy.<sup>17</sup> These are blasphemy, unchastity, murder, false suspicion, pride, illegal appropriation of the rights of others, slander, theft, perjury, profanation of the Divine name, idolatry, envy, and finally the contempt of Torah.

In the Talmud we find, what the rabbis consider to be, a number of proofs for these allegations. For example in



the tractate Arahin 16a there is a comment upon the biblical verse <sup>19a</sup> וַיִּצְטַק אֱלֹהִים אֶת-פָּרָעֹה "and the Lord plagued

Pharaoh". It was the belief of the rabbis that this plague was of such a nature that it safeguarded Sarah's honor, and this was the proof that Pharaoh was punished for lewdness.

At this same talmudic location there is still another comment by the rabbis, this time on the verse <sup>19b</sup> וַיִּצְטַק אֱלֹהִים אֶת-פָּרָעֹה

"and the leprosy broke forth on his forehead". The person inflicted in this case was Uzzuah, and he was smitten because of his haughtiness. A third proof for the punishment of certain sins with leprosy is also found at this same

location in this tractate of the Talmud. Again the rabbis comment on a biblical verse <sup>19c</sup> וַיֵּצֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-גִּזְיָא מִלְּפָנָיו

"and he went out from before him with leprosy white as snow."

This refers to Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, who went against his master's wish in accepting gifts from Namaan the Aramaean general. For denying his action, Gehazi was guilty of taking a false oath, and for this he incurred the punishment of being smitten with leprosy. There is one slight difference between what we find in this tractate on 16a and what we read in footnote number seventeen. Whereas Ginzberg speaks of thirteen sins being punished with leprosy, here in the Talmud the rabbis speak of seven things which bring down this form of punishment.

The first to suffer from this disease was Cain, who <sup>18</sup> was so smitten for the murder of his brother Abel. Thus



"He who is unyielding in a dispute violates a negative commandment." Rab Ashi says: 72 G3.8 1/42

"Such a one deserves to be smitten with leprosy." Since Moses was very insistent upon not fulfilling the mission for which God designated him, and he searched for many reasons for not playing the role which was assigned to him by God, he is regarded as "unyielding in a dispute", and therefore subject to the punishment of leprosy. Whether or not he was unyielding is really not of utmost significance. The fact remains that he obviously did suspect the children of Israel<sup>21</sup> of lacking faith. In this he followed the example of the slanderous serpent and he was therefore left exposed to the situation which followed.

Pharaoh too was the recipient of this punishment. For his cruelty towards the children of Israel, he was thusly afflicted. Pharaoh also received an extra dose of punishment for his evil ways, in that his leprosy later turned into boils, and he was in great agony until he finally expired. These boils which afflicted his body were extremely disgusting and they emitted an awful stench especially in the heat of summer. In this way Pharaoh was requitted for the evils which he heaped upon the people Israel.<sup>22</sup>

After the people had been led forth from the land of bondage by Moses, his own sister, Miriam was similarly made to suffer from leprosy.<sup>23</sup> We are given to understand that Miriam was exposed to this punishment, for the typical sin

of speaking ill of her neighbors. Her transgression consisted of speaking against her brother Moses because he had married a Cushite woman.<sup>24</sup> By speaking in this manner about her brother she had belittled the man and his importance and she was therefore punished by the accepted form of Providential punishment for slander. Aaron, who was also a party to this episode was similarly exposed to leprosy at that particular moment. The rabbis in the tractate Shabbat 97a conclude that Aaron too was smitten. This they derive from the scriptural verse

וַיִּכְרַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן בְּעֵינֵי כָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וַיִּכְרַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן בְּעֵינֵי כָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

"And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them," this teaches, according to the rabbis, that the use of the plural pronoun indicates that both of them were smitten.<sup>26</sup>

Another episode which deals with Miriam's affliction is discussed in detail in the tractate Sotah 11a. Here the rabbis tell us that when Miriam was afflicted with leprosy the entire camp of Israel waited seven days for her to recover and then they continued their journey into the wilderness. Israel waited for Miriam, so say the rabbis, because when Moses was put into the basket and placed in the river, it was Miriam who stood nearby and waited to see what would happen.<sup>26a</sup> This would almost certainly point out "measure for measure", but the rabbis believe that the reward for a good deed exceeds the actual merit of an action and is not merely a quid pro quo as is the case with a wrong deed.<sup>26b</sup>

If we continue with the people Israel in their journey we come across another incident which again prompted God to unleash this dreaded disease. When Moses failed to return from his mission on the top of the Mount, according to schedule, the people convinced Aaron to make unto themselves a golden calf which they could worship.<sup>27</sup> For this heinous crime they received this leprous punishment from the hands of God,<sup>28</sup> which forced them to be separated from the remainder of their people. And only leprosy compelled the afflicted to be entirely cut off from the people, and they who suffered from it, were forced to swell on the outskirts of the camp.

An example of this punishment being inflicted because of "reviling God" is found by the rabbis in the story of Goliath.<sup>29</sup> The story of Doeg, the Edomite presents still another story.<sup>30</sup> Doeg's transgressions were more than one. He informed against the priests at Nob, and he also made impious use of his knowledge of the Law, for which he completely forgot the Law, and in the end he died a leper.

One of the most popular of all the stories which deal with lepers is that which concerns Naaman, the captain of the host of the king of Aram,<sup>31</sup> who came to the prophet Elisha to be cured from his affliction. He, we are told, became a leper because he had grown arrogant because of his heroic deeds. As an outgrowth of the cure which Elisha had found for Naaman, we encounter Gehazi, Elisha's man who inherited the leprosy which had left Naaman. There are a number of



reasons given for Gehazi's punishment. The most obvious one is the one which we encounter in the story itself wherein Gehazi goes after Naaman to receive a reward after Elisha had refused to accept any payment whatsoever.<sup>32</sup> By this action Gehazi frustrated the purpose of Elisha, who would take nothing from Naaman, so that the cure might redound to the glory of God.<sup>33</sup> But Ginzberg finds additional reason for Gehazi's punishment. Based on the phrase<sup>33a</sup> וַיִּקְרַב גִּיזְבֵּג לְעִישָׁא

וַיִּקְרַב גִּיזְבֵּג לְעִישָׁא "And Gehazi came near to thrust her away",<sup>34</sup> he explains that when the pretty Shunamite woman came to Elisha in her grief over the death of her child, Gehazi took her passionately in his arms, under the pretext of forcing her away from the prophet.

Uzziah, the king of Judah, or as he is referred to in Kings II, Azariah was another one made to suffer from leprosy.<sup>35</sup> He was guilty of presuming upon the rights of the Priesthood. This we see in וְעַתָּה remark in Sotah 9b where it says that leprosy broke out on his forehead because he imposed himself on Priesthood and of continuing to worship in the high places and of offering sacrifices therein.<sup>36</sup> Another reason for his affliction is given by Ginzberg<sup>37</sup> who believes that he was punished because he devoted his life to the acquisition of possessions, as was also the case of Cain. In Sanhedrin 48b Rabbi Judah quoting R. Y. says that Uzziah was afflicted with the gout. וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה

וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה This וְעַתָּה is a

form of "gout in the feet".

As we progress more deeply into the views of the rabbis it becomes increasingly clear that in their views punishment is meted out "measure for measure". This applies not only to punishment in general but to "illness" as well. In the tractate Sotah 8b-9a there is very thorough enumeration which serves as an excellent example of this method of retribution. Here, the transgressions of the adulteress and her punishments are recorded. It is very clear that her acts are punished by a corresponding form of punishment. Such a view would be in full accord with R. Hamuna who says:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, does not exact punishment of a man until his measure of guilt is fulfilled." Further proof of measure for measure is found on the last line of 9b in Sotah where we read.

כל כמות עינו כמות שאלו' וכל כמות שאלו' כמות עינו  
כל כמות שאלו' כמות עינו וכל כמות עינו כמות שאלו'

"Whosoever sets his eyes on that which is not his, is not granted what he seeks, and what he possesses is taken from him." The exacting way in which the rabbis approach the subject of "measure for measure" is further illustrated in the section, "Moses Visits Paradise and Hell" beginning on page 309 of the second volume in Legends of the Jews. Here we read of Moses being taken by Gabriel to see Hell. He saw sinners suspended by their eyelids, ear, hands, tongues, and women were suspended by their hair and by their breasts. When Moses questions what he sees, the angel of Hell,

Nasargiel explained:

These hang by their eyes because they looked lustfully upon wives of their neighbors; by ears because they listened to empty and vain speech and turned their ears away from Torah; by tongues because they talked slander; by feet because they walked to spy on their fellow man, but walked not to Synagogue; by hands because they robbed their neighbors and committed murder; the women by their hair and breasts because they uncovered them in presence of young men and the men fell into sin.<sup>39</sup>

The second most prominent punishment encountered in the Bible is that of blindness. This, like leprosy, could strike anyone regardless of station in life, and many are the transgressions for which God finds just cause to inflict this dreaded darkness upon his children.

Of the many instances of blindness which we encounter, again we find the rabbinic view, that blindness was inflicted as retribution for sin. The first individual afflicted with blindness was the patriarch Isaac, whose eyes grew dim so that he could not see.<sup>40</sup> The accepted reason for Isaac's plight, we are told, was due to the appearance of the Shechina during the Akedah episode when the tears shed by the angels fell into Isaac's eyes.<sup>40a</sup> But if this was accepted by the rabbis there could be neither "sin" nor "punishment" attributed to this blindness. They therefore found other reasons for considering this darkness a punishment for sin. One of the reasons given is that Isaac preferred the wicked Esau rather than God fearing Jacob.<sup>41</sup> Because Isaac looked after



Esau, he was stricken with blindness.<sup>41a</sup> From this tractate Megillah 28a we get still another reason for Isaac's blindness. When Abimelech had taken Sarah, the wife of Abraham, God appeared unto him in a dream to forewarn him of the consequences should he take Sarah unto him.<sup>42</sup> When Abimelech awoke he returned Sarah to Abraham, and he gave her a thousand pieces of silver to be a נִדָּה "a covering". This was a form of indemnity for any ill will which the king may have engendered. The rabbis, however, read the Hebrew word not נִדָּה but נִדְּהָ which means blinding, and interpret this passage as a "curse of blindness" which Abimelech called down upon the children of Sarah.<sup>42a</sup> This is explained in greater detail in the tractate Baba Kama 93a. Here the rabbis explain what Abimelech really meant when he returned Sarah with the thousand pieces of silver and he said: "Behold it is for thee a covering of the eyes." What he really meant was, "since thou hast covered the truth from me and hast not disclosed that he was thy husband, and hast thus caused me all this trouble, let it be the will of Heaven, that there shall be to thee a covering of the eyes." And this was fulfilled, in that Isaac's eyes grew dim, and in his latter years he could not see.

One is tempted to wonder if the curses of a heathen when directed to one of God's chosen people can really be meaningful. Was it really possible for Abimelech to bring his evil intentions to fruition against the patriarch Isaac?

According to the comments of Ginzberg this would certainly seem to be the case. This view, no doubt, is derived from the passage in Megillah which was just quoted where we read

וַיֹּאמֶר ר' יצחק אֵל תְּהִי קְלָלָהּ כְּעֵיט בְּרִיטָה

"It was Rabbi Isaac who said, 'let not the curse of an ordinary individual be taken lightly'." He goes on to state that it was this curse which brought darkness to Isaac, as we stated above. In the same footnote,<sup>43</sup> quoting many sources, Ginzberg states that the evil ways of children causes parents to age prematurely and the wickedness of children brings blindness to the father or the master. That this does happen is illustrated by pointing to Isaac, Eli, and Samuel. This is also proven by the blindness of Ahijah the Shilonite.<sup>44</sup>

The blindness of Isaac, however, was a perplexing problem to the rabbis who sought to interpret it. They could not consider it outright retribution for sin, though, as we have seen, this too was the opinion of some. On page 328 of the first volume of the Legends of the Jews we see one opinion that Isaac's sight was impaired because he had to look upon the conduct of his daughters-in-law, whom Esau had brought into his house. Yet, upon this very page we see that the scourge of blindness came upon Isaac because of his love for Esau. "He (Isaac) justified the wicked for a bribe, the bribe of Esau's filial love, and loss of vision is the punishment that follows the taking of bribes."

In Baba Mezia 85b we see another description of

blindness coming upon a person as a consequence of looking where he was not supposed to have gazed. The quotation, as it appears in the Soncino edition of the Talmud, is as follows:

I saw one of the rabbis whom Elijah used to frequent, whose eyes were clear in the morning, but in the evening they looked as though burnt in fire. I questioned him.

The question was answered in this way. The rabbi had asked Elijah to show him the departed rabbis as they ascended to the Heavenly Academy. Elijah replied unto him: "Thou mayest look upon all, excepting the carriage of Rabbi Hiyya." But this individual could not control his desire and gazed upon the carriage of Rabbi Hiyya, and thus, two fiery streams issued forth and blinded him. He had been warned not to look, and having transgressed by looking, his vehicles of sight were therefore punished.

Ahasuerus, the Persian king of the Purim story, was also one who suffered from blindness (45). One searching to find the reason, given by the rabbis, for his predicament must turn to the story found in the tractate Megillah. Here we find that during the prolonged feast which the king tended for his visiting dignitaries the visiting rulers were discussing the respective beauties of their lands. At one point Ahasuerus spoke up and remarked ענין זה

היה זה

"The one with whom I have relationships has no peer not amongst the Medes nor the Persians." The visiting rulers then replied that Vashti should be exposed to them in her true beauty, וְהִרְאָהָ לְהַמְלָכִים עֲרוּמָה, that being in her state of nudity. It is possible that blindness was inflicted upon Ahasuerus because he brought the others to "look" upon the nakedness of his queen. Though there is no reason given for the king's blindness, or for that matter, no mention is made that he was blind. This point derives from Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews.<sup>45</sup> But in the tractate Megillah<sup>46</sup> we do witness the workings of "retribution" in the reason given for Vashti's being brought in a state of nudity to be exhibited before the kings. The Gemara adds לְהַמְלָכִים לְאֵלֶּיָּהּ  
מִיָּדָהּ הָיָה מֵיֻדְבִּין לִּי מֵלֶמֶד שֶׁיִּתְּנָה וְשֶׁתִּרְשָׁעָה  
מֵהֵימָּה בָּמֶה יִשְׁתַּלְּטוּן מַעֲשֵׂיֶיהָ וְהָיָה בָּהֶן מֵלֶמֶד  
לְהַמְלָכִים

In the manner in which a person measures, so it is measured against him. Because the wicked Vashti would have Jewish maidens brought before her, would strip them naked and have them perform work on the Sabbath...

כֵּן עָשְׂתָה בָּהּ מֵעַד הַיּוֹם

... as she herself did, so it was decreed against her

The Munich codex of the Talmud also adds that Vashti was put to death on the day of Sabbath, because of the work<sup>47</sup> which she made the Jewish maidens perform on this day.





in its entirety, with the principle of "measure of measure".

Sotah, Chapter 1, Mishna 8:

Samson went after his eyes, therefore the Philistines gouged out his eyes, as it is said,<sup>53</sup> "And the Philistines laid hold on him, and put out his eyes." Absalom gloried in his hair,<sup>54</sup> hence he was suspended by his hair;<sup>55</sup> because he copulated with the ten concubines<sup>56</sup> of his father, therefore they thrust ten javelins into him,<sup>57</sup> as it is said, "And ten young men that bore Joab's armor compassed about and smote Absalom and slew him"; and since he stole three hearts, the heart of his father, and the heart of the court, and the heart of Israel, therefore three darts were thrust into him.<sup>58</sup>

This Mishna, perhaps more than any other single unit lends itself to the rabbinic view that retribution was in fact a reality. The end which was Absalom's is the perfect illustration that God does punish in direct measure for the transgression perpetrated by the sinner.

In tractate Ketubot 105a,b, Rabbi Abbahu quotes from Ex. 23:8: "A person who taketh a bribe is blinded." The rabbis further elaborate on the scriptural verse from Deut. 16:19: For a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise וְ

פִּינֵי הַיָּדָיו וְהָאֵינָם that even a great sage who takes a bribe will not depart from this world without the affliction of a "darkness" of a sort. This could be a "dulling" of the mind as well as a dulling of the eyes. They further state that even he who is righteous in every respect but takes bribes will not depart from this world without the affliction of confusion of mind. There are but a limited number of

similar instances where the confusion of mind is mentioned.

The most prominent case of this illness concerns Saul the first king of Israel. The words <sup>59</sup> וַיִּשְׁכַּח אֶת הַיָּדָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּח אֶת הַיָּדָיו "and an evil spirit from the Lord terrified him" bears a remarkable comment in the Soncino edition of I Samuel. The Rev. Dr. S. Goldman does not indicate whether the comment is his own, or whether he is quoting from another source, but he indicates that Saul was certainly suffering from madness, and that this was sent by God.

Saul is afflicted by a form of insanity which is manifested in suffer fits of terror, unreasoning rages and, on occasion, homicidal violence. The symptoms suggest manic depressive psychosis. The belief that disease, and especially mental illness, was due to the agency of evil spirits was universal in antiquity; but to the Hebraic mind there was no power of evil independent of and opposed to God. Good and evil equally were in the power of God, and therefore the spirit which afflicted Saul is described as being sent by Him.<sup>60</sup>

Another comment on Saul, indicating that he was ill, is found in I Samuel 19:10 where the author uses the phrase "Saul's diseased mind." Unfortunately neither in the comments to the verse nor in the Talmud is reference made to Saul's suffering and the reason therefore. Though from a psychological point of view it can be surmised that Saul was greatly perturbed at David's successes against the Philistines. Saul had been chosen to rule over Israel and to free them from the yoke of the Philistines, yet it was David

who was meeting with more success in this venture than the king himself. Faced with these facts, it might have become a fixation with Saul that the death of David was the only solution to his predicament.

There are two other cases where we read of the illness of two of David's children. One was the child of Bathsheba who was begotten out of wedlock, who was sick for seven days, and then died.<sup>61</sup> In regard to this illness the rabbis have nothing to say. The second son was Amnon who feigned illness in order to lure his half sister Tamar into his bed.<sup>62</sup> After this forced relationship a great hatred welled up within Amnon against Tamar, and in the tractate Sanhedrin 21a Rabbi Isaac comments upon this idea that he "hated his sister exceedingly", אמנא כ' צחק נחא נקשה

ו' וצארתו כבוד שפכה וכי נקשה לו אידי נאי  
צדק אלא אמא קשה לו נחא וצארתו כבוד שפכה

This Hebrew quotation, roughly, would have us understand that Rabbi Isaac said "Because an entangled hair mutilated his privates, or that she (Tamar) entangled it and caused the mutilation." Could there be a more perfect example of having the "punishment fit the crime"?

If we would return, briefly, to the parent of the last cases, to David himself, we will be apprised of the rabbi's views concerning David's illness. In the Legends,<sup>63</sup> David is pictured as saying to God that the world is so beautiful and good, but there is one thing which prevents



it from being perfect. This one flaw, is the presence of insanity, which afflicts individuals. And God replies: "Verily, a time will come, when thou wilt supplicate me to afflict thee with madness." Later in life when David fled from Saul, he feigned himself mad, to receive sanctuary from Achish the king of Gath.<sup>64</sup> The very illness against which he had complained was the one which he had to resort to so that his life would be spared.

In Sanhedrin 46b we find another view for illness coming upon David. אמר כן יבואה אמי כן קללות  
שקלל בוא את יואב נתקיימו בנכחו של בוא  
Rabbi Judah said in Rav's name: "All the curses wherewith David cursed Joab<sup>65</sup> were fulfilled in David's own descendents."

This prompted the same rabbis to add the following which also appears on 46b of the same tractate, כ"י באמי  
איני של תבא עליה ולא תבא עליה  
"Thus people say, let thyself be cursed, rather than curse another." Rashi adds an explanatory note to the above quotation, stating, all curses always recoil on oneself or one's descendents.

Elisha who had the mantle of prophesy placed upon his shoulders by his master Elijah, was also visited with illness, because of the sins which he had committed. Elisha, as a matter of fact, was smitten with illness on three different occasions. In Sotah 47a we read ח"ו שלש חלאים חלה  
אליה אתה שגרה בוקים בתעמדת ומתה שחפן אהרן בלוי יבוי  
ומתה שחפן

Our rabbis taught: "Elisha was afflicted with three illnesses: one because he stirred up the bears<sup>76</sup> against the children; once because he thrust Gehazi away with both hands; and his final illness from which he died.<sup>67</sup> The identical quotation is also found in the tractate Sanhedrin 107b. In the first instance Elisha's severity against the children who mocked his baldness does seem to be extreme, and he was therefore punished. One wonders if baldness itself may not be considered a form of illness, and if so, was this too an additional punishment cast upon this man of God. His second illness was due to his extreme harshness towards Gehazi who had gone against the word of his master and had accepted a gift from Namaan. The sages explain the term "both hands" which describes the way in which Elisha pushed Gehazi away, to mean that he left him no alternative to repent and to return. What Elisha should have done is to push him away with "the left" and draw him back with the "right hand". That is to say, though punish he must, still be warm hearted enough to bring the person back to a useful life. Since Elisha did not give Gehazi this consideration, he was punished. We assume that Gehazi was never restored to a useful life from what Rabbi Johanan says<sup>68</sup> about the scriptural verse "and there were four lepers at the gate".<sup>69</sup> This he says refers to Gehazi and his three sons, who remained lepers in fulfillment of the curse cast upon Gehazi and his descendants, by Elisha.

The third and final illness has a reason all of its own. In the tractate Baba Mezia 87a we read, לפי היות חוליא אדם יצק ברא רוחו ויהיה חוליא  
 "Until Jacob there was no illness, then Jacob came and prayed, and illness came into being." Jacob complained to God that a man would reach a point and that he would die suddenly, without warning. This gave him no time to "get his house in order". But if man could have some forewarning of impending death, then he would have time to set everything in its proper order. Ginzberg remarks:

Sickness was the fourth great miracle since the creation of man; until Jacob's time people died suddenly without having been warned by illness of their impending death: they sneezed and fell dead. Hence the custom to bestow the blessing "Unto life" when a person sneezes.

When Elisha came he prayed for the sick and he recovered.<sup>71</sup>

עבד אלהים אשליש היה בן ישי  
ואת פתו אלהים ברא רוחו ויהיה חוליא

He is the first man, according to Ginzberg, to have survived a sickness,<sup>72</sup> which was, prior to this always accompanied by death.

This power of recovery which was granted to Elisha was surely a boon to mankind. It certainly gave King Hezekiah reason to be thankful since he, we are told, was sick unto death and then recovered.<sup>73</sup> Though one must wonder about this theory, since before Elisha, we have seen where King

David prayed to God for the recovery of the child born unto Bath-Sheba.<sup>74</sup> Evidently, at this point, illness was not considered as sure fire death. Had death been anticipated as a natural corollary to illness, it is hardly likely that David would have carried on in the manner which he did while the child was still alive.

In addition to David there were other kings, in the ruling families, who were subjected to the discomforts of illness. Asa, one of the early kings of Judah, who had a long reign became infirm in his old age.<sup>75</sup> Though there is no specific mention made of what his illness was, in the Legends we are given to believe that Asa's feet were infected in such a manner that he could only walk with the support of a cane.<sup>76</sup> Further in the same volume the remark is made that Asa suffered from the gout. This illness which afflicted his feet was so purposed since it was in his legs where Asa was supposed to possess super-human strength. This is explained more clearly in the tractate Sotah 10a where the following discussion is found:

Our rabbis taught: Five were created after the likeness of Him who is above, and all of them incurred punishment on account of the feature which distinguished them. One of these was Asa who was punished in the feet.

Raba expounded: Why was Asa punished in the feet? Because he imposed forced labor upon the disciples of the Sages. R. Judah added in the name of Rab: Even upon the bridegroom from his chamber and the bride from her canopy.

כָּרַס כָּבֵד מִפְּנֵי מַחְלֵי אֶסֶר מִפְּנֵי שֶׁלֶט  
אֲנִי רִיאָה בְּחִמְיָי חֲבָאִים ... מֵאֵי כָּד וְיִחְזֶה  
מֵאֵי כָּד אֲפִילֵי חֲתָן מִחֲדָר וְכִלֵּי מִקֻּשְׁתָּהּ

Jehoram who ruled Israel was smitten with an ignoble fate, this being, an illness in the bowels, which is translated as "an incurable disease" in the Soncino edition of II Chronicles 21:19. The commentaries to the verse give no reason for his affliction, nor does the Talmud find reason for his ignoble fate; Ginzberg, does however find a reason for Jehoram being struck by Jehu's bow, between the arms.<sup>77</sup> This was because Jehoram, "had stretched out his arms to receive usury, and had hardened his heart against compassion."<sup>78</sup>

We move further along the ranks of the kings and encounter Hezekiah who ruled over Judah and was also called to task by being made sick. His was a very grave sickness which carried him to the very portals of death.<sup>79</sup> Again, it is Ginzberg who finds reason for Hezekiah's illness. One reason given is that he showed no gratitude to God for the victory which he gained over the Assyrians, and for this failure to give praise to God, he forewent the opportunity<sup>80</sup> of becoming the Messiah, which had been planned for him. The sickness was also punishment for other transgressions.

He had "peeled off" the gold from the Temple, and sent it to the king of the Assyrians; therefore the disease that afflicted him caused his skin to "peel off". Moreover, this malady of Hezekiah's was brought upon him by God, to afford an opportunity for the king and the prophet



(Elijah) to come close to each other.<sup>81</sup>

The latter part of this reason would hardly fit in with the thesis that "illness is a form of retribution". But since Ginzberg makes mention of it at this point, it has been included. Though this thought would be more fitting with the theory which will be touched upon later that, "If the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is pleased with a man, he crushes him with painful suffering."<sup>82</sup> This opportunity to bring king and prophet together, came about in the following manner, according to the discussion in tractate Berakot 10a.

Isaiah and Hezekiah were not on speaking terms, so, what did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He brought suffering upon Hezekiah and then said to Isaiah, 'Go visit the sick'.

Isaiah, we are to assume, was aware of the importance of "bikkur cholim" and would surely not forego the chance to make this pastoral visit.

A further reason for visiting sickness upon Hezekiah makes the king himself out to be the hero. Again Ginzberg is our source. He credits Hezekiah with theorizing that if men smitten with an illness, could hope for the return of their health, then they would be induced to do penance.<sup>83</sup> Regretting their past actions and hoping to be restored to their former health man would turn unto his God in penance, and would be rewarded for this return, by being cured from their suffering. Hezekiah was extremely thankful for the



good fortune of his recovery and he expressed his thanks in the form of a psalm which is found in Isaiah chapter 38 verses 9-20. One wonders what other biblical personality reacted in this thankful manner after being cured for a near fatal disease?

Pain and suffering inflicted as retribution for sin? Surely this was not so in the case of Zedekiah. This king who was taken into captivity and blinded<sup>84</sup> suffered not for sin but for love. It was said that Zedekiah's eyes were endowed with super human strength - that they were the eyes of Adam - and the iron lances forced into them by his captors were powerless to destroy his sight.<sup>85</sup> But his vision left him because of the tears which he shed over the fate of his children.

There are also some individuals inflicted with suffering about whom nothing else is said. In I Kings 17:17 the child of the woman of Zarephath was gravely ill,

וַיָּבֵא אֶת הַיֶּלֶד אֶת הַיֶּלֶד אֶת הַיֶּלֶד and also in the book of Daniel chapter 8:27 where Daniel remarks וַיִּפֹּט וַיִּכְחַשׁ וַיִּשְׁכַּח "and I Daniel fainted and was sick certain days". There is nothing in regard to these ill individuals anywhere in the Talmud and one cannot even begin to surmise what these sicknesses were and why they were inflicted.

There are yet additional references to "illness" in the Bible, but no comments are found to describe their whys and wherefore and they are therefore not included in this

paper. Their number, however, is quite small. For example we read in II Samuels 12:15 the details of the affair between Solomon and the wife of Uriah. From this adulterous affair a child was born, and this child was then struck by God with a form of sickness. לך' / ... אלהי' נח' ז' ב' /

"God struck the child...and it was very sick." We need not search for the reason for the child's illness. Surely it could not have been anything which it had committed itself. This was clearly a case of retribution for the transgressions of the parents. But still, since it was of illness, it is being brought to light.

Try as hard as they might, still the rabbis could not always attribute sickness as being returned measure for measure. So we see that in regard to Jacob's illness, they could not attribute it to any wickedness or transgression. So his sickness is attributed to the fact that he had a very difficult life. He had worked extremely hard during the years which he spent with Laban. In addition, the conflicts which he waged incessantly with Esau and the encounter with the angel had taken their toll from him. Perhaps this may be an early example of the אכזב' / על' / "pains of love" by which God appears to some of his creatures.

As we leave the realm of the Patriarchs and continue through the Bible, we have Joseph to be concerned with. Joseph too, was exposed to much suffering, if not exacting illness. For this too appropriate reason is found. Joseph

was sold into slavery because this was demanded to account for his transgressions. He had, so we are told,<sup>86</sup> charged his brethren with having called the sons of the handmaidens, "slaves". It seems an extremely harsh form of retribution for a seeming very slight wrongdoing, but still this remains the view. Still dealing with Joseph, we recall the difficulty which resulted from his refusal to consort with the wife of Potiphar who cast her eyes upon him.<sup>87</sup> But this too, Joseph brought upon himself because he threw suspicion upon his brothers by saying that they had cast eyes upon the Canaanish women.

In his second volume,<sup>87a</sup> Ginzberg devotes quite a section to what can be called "the last will and testament" of the Ten Tribes. Herein the brothers review their lives and point out their errors to their children, so they would not be ensnared by the same pitfalls. Throughout, we see the many instances of punishment and illness coming upon the brothers in direct consequence for certain sins committed. Reuben, before he died, warned his children against "walking in the follies of youth". He went on to state<sup>88b</sup> that because he had defiled his father's bed, the Lord had afflicted his loins with a terrible pain for seven months and he was sick unto death. But for his father's intercession, he would surely have died. His younger brother Simon suffered<sup>89</sup> from a withered right hand for seven days, this because he had favored killing his brother Joseph.

Gad, Jacob's ninth son, similarly spoke before his time to die came upon him.

My pittance (for wronging Joseph) came in consequence of a sickness of the liver that God inflicted upon me, for this was the organ with which he had sinned. As my liver had felt no mercy for Joseph, unmerciful suffering was caused unto me by my liver. My judgment lasted eleven months, as long as my enmity toward Joseph.<sup>90</sup>

Zebulon, on the other hand, spoke to his children before he died and pointed out to them the benefits of a righteous life. He told them:

Observe the commands of the Lord, have mercy on your neighbors, act compassionately. For on account of my mercifulness the Lord blessed me. All my brethren fell sick at one time or another, but I escaped without any illness.<sup>91</sup>

The years rolled on and a new Pharaoh arose in Egypt who knew not Joseph and the people who came to sojourn in Goshen found themselves deep in bondage. Driven by the taskmaster who filled the commands of Pharaoh, the overseers<sup>92</sup> began to put to death every male child born unto Israel. But there were those who stood up to Pharaoh, and one of these was Jochebed, a Jewish midwife, who continued to bring male children into the world. For this behavior she was rewarded by God by being healed from a grievous illness. (No mention, unfortunately, is made of why she became ill to begin with) God restored her youth and her beauty and she became a source of happiness unto her husband who had

been deprived of her love during her illness.<sup>93</sup> This indicates that the principle of "measure for measure" is applicable to reward for meritorious service as well as punishment for discreditable behavior. There are other examples of this cited.

The Egyptians, who were exposed to the Ten Plagues, were made to suffer these specific plagues, to correspond to the deeds which they had perpetrated against the children of Israel.<sup>94</sup> While the ultimate in destruction, that of the Egyptian hordes drowning in the billows of the Red Sea, was a direct consequence of the drowning of the male children born to the people while they were in bondage.<sup>95</sup> In Sotah 11a we find the opinion of one Tanna who states that Pharaoh himself was punished first because he was the first to suggest the enslavement of the Hebrews. This certainly seems to be in line with the theory of "measure for measure".

One reason which was encountered for the paucity of rabbinic comment in regard to sick biblical characters, is found in the Legends. The following quote is given by Ginzberg, "In rabbinic sources illness is not regarded as the direct consequence of the fall, very likely because it is considered as the beginning of death." This would surely explain why our rabbis did not always comment on sickness. Since this was almost an accepted prerequisite to death,<sup>96</sup> there was no need to comment.

Lest we become complacent and accept this reasoning,



we are taken aback, by other statements which would belittle this notion. Again in the Legends we read that "the number of diseases which come upon man in consequence of the fall amounts to seventy or seventy two." <sup>97</sup> Rab, too, certainly does not believe that most illness is a natural preceding stage of death. He comments in the tractate Baba Mezia in regard to the word "illness" which is under discussion

מאן נה נה 15 זין, אטעמיה דנה סליק לבי קברי.  
 דער מאן דערדאך אים תלפין ותלד בלען נדב.  
 ואם דערק אכר

Rab said, this is the evil eye. His reasoning: he went up to a cemetery, took care of what had to be done, and remarked ninety-nine have died because of an evil eye, the other one through natural causes.<sup>98</sup>

One cannot overlook the name Job as a personality who was afflicted with suffering. If any one biblical character suffered at the hands of God, surely it was Job, yet he is not mentioned at all in this paper. This has been done deliberately, since much has been written about this one particular individual, and I felt that to bring Job into the scope of this paper, would mean to relegate all other individuals to an almost secondary position. By omitting Job, we deal with those characters only, who suffered an almost normal dosage of illness, rather than a "double dose" as was Job's lot.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Some Additional Talmudic Thoughts on Sickness

There are yet some additional thoughts on illness which appear in the various tractates and in the following pages these views will be brought to light.

In the Pentateuch,<sup>99</sup> God speaks of visiting the ill of Egypt upon the people of Israel if they will not hearken to the word of God. In regard to these verses we find in Berachot<sup>100</sup> the following comment.

אמר כל שאפשר לו לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק  
פקדו מגיע אליו יסכין מנדרין ולחכין אמת  
"rather...if one has the opportunity to study Torah and does not study it, the Holy One blessed be He, visits him with ugly and painful suffering which stir him up." Very clearly this points to the belief that physical suffering is a direct consequence for not walking in the ways of God. Incidentally, in Scripture, when God speaks of visiting the sickness of Egypt upon the people, He is posing quite a threat. Pliny<sup>101</sup> describes Egypt as the "mother of the worst diseases".

The phrase למי פצע חנם<sup>102</sup> "who hath wounds without cause?" also elicits a comment in the Talmud.<sup>103</sup>

Here the Talmud enumerates not only bodily wounds but also woe, sorrow, contention etc. and the Talmud says למי כל אלה

"who is afflicted with all these?" The answer comes back,  
למאחרין הן...לכאין ולקרי ממין "they

that tarry long at the wine and they that go to seek mixed wine." Though wine, as a sacramental drink is considered most important by the rabbis, they were however, aware of its evil consequences when not controlled. In the same tractate on the following page (70b) the statement is found

אין דאס וואס מ'האט נישט געטראנק וואס מ'האט געטראנק  
 "for nothing else but wine brings woe to man."

One shudders at some of the reasons given for the visitation of suffering. Again in the Talmud we see the following remark. וואס מ'האט געטראנק נישט געטראנק

אין דאס וואס מ'האט נישט געטראנק וואס מ'האט געטראנק 104

Rabbi Elazar also said: "whosoever gives of his bread to one who lacks knowledge will be assailed by suffering." This almost sounds foreign to the lofty ideals which were normally espoused by these learned sages. Yet among the voluminous works of the rabbis, there is enough room to find a wide variety of opinion. Including this one which limits aid to those only who are in the ranks of the scholars. There is little doubt that this opinion held by Rabbi Elazar was honored more in the breach than otherwise.

That sin was subject to bring pain and suffering to the person committing the transgression is further illustrated in the Talmud. Commenting on the verse in Proverbs 105 on the meaning of wounds and stripes, it was Rabbi Oshai who said: אין דאס וואס מ'האט נישט געטראנק וואס מ'האט געטראנק

אין דאס וואס מ'האט נישט געטראנק וואס מ'האט געטראנק 106

"He who devotes himself to sin, wounds and bruises break out over him... moreover, he is punished by dropsy"... Rabbi Nachman the son of Isaac taught, dropsy is a sign of sin.

If we continue the reading on this page in the Talmud and then turn to 33b we will find even further proof that at least some of the rabbis felt that pain and suffering is a direct result of sinful living. The following discussion is encountered. ת"כ' א"י הדבוקין בן, של ערירי ערה

"Our rabbis taught: There are three kinds of dropsy; that which is a punishment for sin is thick."

ת"כ' א"י סימנין בן, סימן לערירי הדבוקין, סימן לשטות חמא  
יבבן, סימן לשטות רבוי דגויות, סימן לשון הרע, אסכרה

"Our rabbis taught: there are four signs 1) dropsy is a sign for sin; 2) jaundice is a sign for causeless hatred; 3) poverty is a sign of conceit; 4) croup is a sign of slander."

There may not be universal agreement amongst the rabbis on the theory of "pain and illness for sin" but there is not an extreme lack of individuals who propound this theory. The Talmud does not stop after these few cases but we find even more.

תנאי' ר' נחמיה אמר ביהן שטות חמא מריקת רגל ביהן ביתו  
של אבא, משת מפת רבא ובעי ורבותא של אבא מתא  
בשן קטני 107

Rabbi Nehemiah said: As a punishment for causeless hate, strife multiplies in a man's house, his wife miscarries, and his sons and daughters die young.

We find yet other passages which would lead us to believe that sin is surely followed by punishment, sometimes in the form of illness.

אמר ר' אלעזר א"ר חייא בר אבהו אין בחורבן עומד מחלן  
עד שמוחקו לו כל עוונותיו 109

Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Chiya the son of Abba: 'a sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven.'

Can we state any more clearly this sages opinion that sickness must be a direct consequence of some form of sinful behavior.

In the tractate Abodah Zarah we encounter a rabbinical foursome who stand back to back and express their beliefs that unrighteous behavior is the cause for evil visiting mankind. Here they speak of "mockery" or some form of "devilish" behavior as being the agent for calling down the punishment upon themselves and their fellow. 110

א"ר אליעזר כל המתלוצץ יסורין באין עליו  
א"ר קטינא כל המתלוצץ מביא עליו מיתאבדין  
א"ר שמעון בן לקיש כל המתלוצץ נופל בידיהם  
א"ר מנאסי כל המתלוצץ אכזר כל"ה עולם

Here we have four of the sages all speaking of the same form of misbehavior, yet each attributes another form of punishment, to the guilty party. The first, Rabbi Eliezer believes that pain will overtake the guilty party. Rabbi Katina thinks that he will suffer from hunger, while Simon ben Lakish has

the culprit winding up in purgatory. The fourth, Rabbi Chenilai, places much more responsibility upon the man by accusing him of causing the destruction of the world because of his misbehavior.

In Pirke Aboth, where a number of sayings are attributed to Hillel, we read אין פה רצח אלא רצח <sup>111</sup>  
אין פה רצח אלא רצח <sup>112</sup>  
 "Moreover, he saw a skull floating on the surface of the water: he said to it, because thou drownedst others, they have drowned thee; and at last, they that drowned thee shall themselves be drowned." In the Hertz edition <sup>112</sup> the commentar to this verse is most explicit when it says:

They who resort to violence become victims of violence. Hillel and the rabbis after him, clung to the biblical belief of retributive justice. 'With the measure wherewith a man measures, so shall he be measured.' Repentance alone, they held, could counter act the operation of this rule.

This retributive justice of which he speaks is evidenced in many places throughout the Bible. In the book of Psalms, chapter VII, verse 16, is clear in its meaning,

הוֹכַח כְּכֹחַ וַיִּקַּח פִּתְיוֹ וַיִּפֹּל בַּחֲדָרְוֹ וַיִּפֹּל

He hath digged a pit, and hollowed it, and it is fallen into the ditch which he made

Could this be understood to mean anything other than exacting retribution?



If we return to the Pirke Aboth, the sayings of the Fathers we find yet additional indications of this same belief. In the first chapter Nittai the Arbelite used to say, "Neityer do thou abandon faith in divine retribution." In the third chapter we read

וְכָל הַיּוֹם וְכָל הַלַּיְלָה מִן הַבֹּקֶר מֵעַתָּה וְעַתָּה  
וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה

But the collectors go round regularly every day and exact dues from man, either with his consent or without his consent. <sup>113</sup>

The commentary to this verse explains, "whether or not he realizes it, or acknowledges that the visitations coming upon him are in punishment for his sins." <sup>114</sup>

Also in Aboth we read שֶׁבַע מַלְכֵי שְׁלֵמָה בָּאִין עַל הָעוֹלָם <sup>115</sup>  
וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם כְּעוֹלָם שְׁלֵמָה

"Seven kings of retribution come into the world for seven cardinal transgressions." There is further enumeration of the various punishments and determinants, which leave one with the impression that man is definitely called to account for his actions.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### And in Conclusion

The doctrine of reward and punishment is gone into in great details in the last of the five books of Moses, the book of Deuteronomy. Here, in the final discourses of Moses, we are taught that obedience to the will of God brings reward, while disobedience to his teachings brings punishment in its wake. In this book of the Bible, chapter XI, verses 13 to 21, which forms the middle portion of the Shema, the doctrine of retribution is proclaimed. Though this portion deals with agricultural rewards and punishments, which do not fall in the domain of those punishments with which we are concerned, the idea is still ever present. Still further in the book, in chapter 28, verses 15 to 68, we encounter the "warnings of the awful power of God and the devastating effects for transgressing His code. Again, this section differs from the theme of this paper somewhat, in that the curses enumerated refer to the nation and not the individual. But the idea behind the punishment is what is important at the moment. Not so much as to whom it pertains, as that, which shows the presence and power of retribution. For their transgressions the nation is warned of being visited by epidemics and plagues, consumption, fever, and inflammations, blindness and mental blindness, confusion of the mind. Other than these

physical afflictions there are yet many more forms of punishment listed.

In Proverbs chapter 11 we have two additional verses which point out the doctrine of retribution. אִם יִשְׁקֶה כֶּסֶף<sup>116</sup> "the evil man shall not be unpunished" and the second verse, כִּי יִשְׁקֹךְ הַיָּדָאִת הַיָּדָאִת<sup>117</sup> "behold, the righteous shall be requitted in the earth". The commentary which appears with these verses explains in regard to the first, "A cardinal teaching of the book of Proverbs is that 'Retribution overtakes the wicked'", and to the second, "Even the righteous man is not perfect and the faults of which he is guilty are judged by God and punished."

There are many other indications that retribution can be counted on as being a certainty. In the story in Genesis where Abimelech takes Sarah into his house,<sup>118</sup> he explains his actions by saying that he thought Sarah was Abraham's sister. God then answers לָכֵן אָמַרְתִּי כֵּן "therefore I suffered thee not to touch her", but the implication is very clear, that had he touched her, he surely would have suffered for his act.

In the book of Psalms, there are also a number of verses which would lead one to theorize that one could certainly expect to be repaid for one's behavior. As soon as one begins to read the opening verses of the Psalms one reads the following words, כִּי יִשְׁבַּד לִי צָדִיק

וְצָדִיק וְשֹׁמֵר תִּתְּנֵנִי

For the Lord regardeth the way of the righteous  
But the way of the wicked shall perish.<sup>119</sup>

In the Soncino edition of Scripture the comment to this verse, is very explicit.

A fundamental teaching of the Bible is that ultimately the good are justified and the wicked receive their due retribution. It is endorsed by a modern historian in the verdict: 'One lesson and only one history may be said to repeat with distinctness: that the world is built somehow on moral foundations: that in the long run it is well with the good: in the long run it is ill with the wicked'. (Froude)

This, of course, remains the belief of all who have beheld some form of punishment come upon those who have lived unrighteously throughout their lives. History has very often dealt harsh blows to those who, by their actions, have been guilty of stirring up hurt, hatred and violence. Perhaps this has not always been the case, but the assurance is given that this must be the ultimate end. Does not the Psalmist say

כפרת רשעים כח עשב וצמח  
כדור אש ודור אש

When the wicked spring up as the grass  
And the workers of iniquity do flourish  
It is that they may be destroyed forever.<sup>120</sup>

This is something which we are almost forced to accept, for how else can we hold the belief in the just God? This theme of God being just and intolerant towards injustice appears also in the seventh chapter of the book of Psalms. Here in verses 7 to 11 we hear the echoes of

Abraham's

כִּשְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הָאֱלֹהִים

"Will the ruler of all the world act unjustly?" Psalm 94 is but one more psalm which speaks of this quality of God. We must recognize righteousness to be an essential quality of the Divine nature, and this would therefore make it impossible for the penal activities of God to be overlooked. In the Divine scheme of things where justice is of the essence, there must be a place for the accounting of all man's actions. In another of the books of the Bible, in the Soncino edition, the author comments upon the phrase

כָּל נֶגַע וְכָל חֲמָצָה

<sup>121</sup> "every plague and every sickness" in this manner. "Each individual, whatever his affliction, will recognize that it is sent by God for some misdeed committed by him."

This very idea, though it is not drummed at consistently, does make itself felt time and time again. Certainly it appears sufficiently frequent to leave one with the sense of Divine retribution firmly entrenched. No where does it appear more clearly stated than in the tractate Sanhedrin <sup>122</sup> where we read the following statement

אִם תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹל דְּבַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

אֲנִי אֶפְרָא אֶת כָּל הַחֲמָצָה אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיכֶם

"If thou wilt hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God; If thou wilt hearken I will not bring it upon you, but if thou wilt not, I will bring it upon you." The "it" of the quotation is spoken of, in a previous statement, as being the illness which were visited upon Egypt. Clearly the meaning

is the one which we have come to realize is the belief of the rabbis. Good will be rewarded with good, while evil will bring in its wake evil.

This then can be accepted as the final say of the sages. Man does not live in a vacuum and he is not free to do as he pleases without due consideration for his fellow man. If he does choose to act in such a way that he hurts his fellow man or goes contrary to the ways of God then surely he can expect to be punished for his activity. But lest we accept this theory with no reservations, we must first look into one other area, of rabbinic teachings.

The following passage is found in the tractate Berachot.

123 אמר רבא ואיתיה רב חסדא אמר כיון דאמר שישורין באו  
עליו יפסדו במדעו, וטמא נחפשו בדיניו. ונחפשו  
ונחפשו עד ד'. פסדו ולא מצא יתרה בקאלי תורה  
שטמא אשני העזר אשני תיכונ. ד' ומחורתך תלמודי. ואם  
תלה ולא מצא ביבול שישורין של ארבעה הם שטמא  
 124 כי את אשני יאבד ל' יבין

Ravs said, other say it was Rabbi Chisda, if a person beholds suffering come upon him, he should examine his conduct. If he examined his conduct and found nothing let him attribute it (the suffering) to the neglect of studying Torah, for it says Fortunate is the man whom God reproveth, teach me from Thy Torah. If he attributed it to the lack of study of Torah, but could find no fault, let him be certain that these pains are the expressions of the love of God, for it says, the Lord afflicts those whom He loves.<sup>124</sup>

At the same location in this tractate we have



the same thought expressed in the following conversation.

אמר רבא אמר רב שמריה בן עקיבא חסדא דאורייתא  
ביתא דאורייתא דאורייתא דאורייתא דאורייתא

"If the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is pleased with a man, he crushes him with painful suffering."

This doctrine of "affliction of love" is not grasped very readily. The sages of course never accepted suffering as such. They were always prone to interpret suffering as God's expression of displeasure, and a call to repentance. Suffering was an indication that man had sinned and this was God's way to point out the need to return to the proper path. Though one could also express the belief, that since God visits the sick,<sup>125</sup> it hardly seems plausible that God would visit the sinner. So perhaps there may be some credence to the belief in "Yesurin shel Ahavah". Yet it is strange, unless one can draw a parallel between this and a "love tap". Perhaps a little loving tap as an expression of "fatherly love" is more readily acceptable than what the term אהבה של אב would connote.

God does not wish his people to be subject to any illness, or so we would be led to believe from a passage in Ginzberg's Legends.<sup>126</sup> Here we read of a reason for the forty years wandering in the desert. We are told that God hesitated to give His Torah to a nation of lame, blind, and sick people. So during the period between the exodus and the receiving of the Torah the blind regained their sight, the



lame became whole and the sick became healthy. A people healthy in both body and mind was what God desired, just as would any loving parent.

That God loves his people to be healthy is also indicated by a passage in the tractate Megillah. מִן הַקִּבְיָה

מֵהָ אֵת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵלֶּיךָ בּוֹרָא לְפָנֶיךָ נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה... אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַחַי וְהַקָּי כִּי מֵהָ אֵת אֵלֶּיךָ בּוֹרָא לְפָנֶיךָ נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה

"The Holy One Blessed Be He does not afflict Israel unless he has created first a remedy for the ill. But not so with the heathens, for them, he first afflicts and then creates the cure." Perhaps then the "יְסִינֵן לְ אֲבֹתֵינוּ" do fall into such a category, and when they are imposed upon one of His own children, it is with the knowledge that this is but temporary and the cure has already been decreed.

Perhaps this then is note upon which this paper should be concluded. When man is chastised, it is only for his own good, and he can rest assured that that the cure for his malady is surely in the hands of God. In our limited mental capacity we cannot always grasp the deeper meanings of life nor are we aware of the reasons for all that comes upon us but in the scheme of things there must be reason for all.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Ginzberg, L., Legends of the Jews, Vol. V. p.258, n.272 quoted from לבי קרבן תנחומא ed. Buber, Wilna 1885.
2. Ibid., Vol. V. p.364, n.357. This sickness was the fourth great miracle since the creation of man; for until Jacob's time people died suddenly, without having been warned by illness of their impending death: they sneezed and fell dead. Hence the custom to bestow the blessing "Unto life" upon a person who sneezes.
3. Ibid., Vol II, p.205
4. Ibid., Vol II, p.293, quotation is based on note 92 of Vol. V, section on Moses.
5. Megillah 10b א"י קרי הקב"ה במלות של נשים... לפי  
א"י קרי הקב"ה במלות של נשים  
"And does the Holy One blessed be He rejoice in the destruction of the wicked?... For the Holy One Blessed be He does not rejoice at the destruction of the wicked."
6. Ibid., Vol. V, p.240, n.170. The source of this is Yelammedenu in Yalkut II:723 on Psalm 85.
7. Ibid., Vol I, p.264, bottom  
"Ishmael was made sick and feverish by the evil glances which Sarah cast upon her step-son. Because of this condition he drank often and the water was consumed."
8. Ibid., Vol. V, p.282, n.74
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., Vol. I, p.93; Vol. V, p.119, n. 111,112
11. Genesis 4:12
12. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. I, p.159; also Vol. V, p. 178, n.26
- 12a. Baba Mezhiah 86b
- 12b. Genesis 19:26
13. Midrash Rabbah, Bereshit, 51:5
14. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. I, pp.253-54

15. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. V, p.282, n.74
16. Ibid., Vol. I, p.364
17. Ibid., Vol. III, p.213
18. Ibid., p.214
19. Ibid., Vol. I, p.324
- 19a. Genesis 12:17
- 19b. II Chronicles 26:19; also, I Kings 15:23
- 19c. II Kings 5:27
20. Shabbat 97a
21. Exodus 4:1
22. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. II, pp.296-9
23. Numbers 12:10 "behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow"
24. Numbers 12:1
25. Numbers 12:9
26. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. III, p.259
- 26a. Ibid., p.261
- 26b. Sotah 11a
27. Exodus 32:1
28. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. III, p.213
29. Ibid., p.214
30. I Samuel 21:8; also 22:9
31. II Kings 5:1
32. II Kings 5:21ff
33. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. III, p.214
- 33a. II Kings 4:27

34. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.244
35. Ibid., Vol. III, p.214; also Vol. IV, p.262
36. II Kings 15:4,5
37. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. V, p.141
38. Sotah 8b-9a
39. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. V, p.418 n.118
40. Genesis 27:1 וַתֵּיטֵן אֵת הַכֶּסֶם  
 40a. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. V, p.328
41. Ibid., Vol. V, pp.281-2, n.74
- 41a. Megillah 28a פְּרַק דְּאוֹסְתָא בְּרַשׁ הַרְשָׁא וְהָא גְרָמָא לִיה  
 "Because he (Isaac) gazed upon Esau, the wicked one,  
 this caused it (the blindness)"
42. Genesis 20:6ff
- 42a. Megillah 15a bottom
43. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. V, p.282, n.74
44. I Kings 14:4
45. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. VI, p.474, n.149
46. Megillah 12b top
47. Footnote to Megillah 12b in Soncino edition of Talmud
48. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. VI, p.474, n.149
49. Numbers 22:21,22
50. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. III, p.359
51. Ibid., Vol. VI, p.126, n.730
52. Judges 13:25
53. Judges 16:21
54. II Samuel 14:26
55. II Samuel 18:9
56. II Samuel 16:22

57. II Samuel 18:15
58. II Samuel 18:14
59. I Samuel 16:14
60. This comment appears to verse 14 of the 16th chapter of I Samuel in the Soncino Books of the Bible.
61. II Samuel 12:15ff
62. II Samuel 13:5
63. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.89
64. I Samuel 21:14
65. II Samuel 3:29
66. II Kings 2:24
67. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.240; also pp.245-6
68. Sotah 47a, and Sanhedrin 107b
69. II Kings 7:3
70. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. V, p.365, n.357
71. Baba Mezi'ah 87a
72. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. II, p.131
73. Isaiah 38:9
74. II Samuel 12:16ff
75. I Kings 15:23
76. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.127 bottom
77. II Kings 9:24
78. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.190 top; Vol. VI, p.345 n.7
79. II Chronicles 32:24
80. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, pp.271-2
81. Ibid., Vol. IV, pp.272-3

82. Berachot 5a
83. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.274
84. Jeremiah 39:7; 52:11; also II Kings 25:7
85. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. IV, p.293
86. Ibid., Vol. II, p.5
87. Genesis 39:7ff
- 88a..Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. II, p.190
- 88b. Ibid.
89. Ibid., p.192
90. Ibid., p.217
91. Ibid., p.205
92. Exodus 1:16
93. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. II, p.253
94. Ibid., pp.341-345
95. Ibid., p.256
96. Ibid., Vol. V, p.119, n.112
97. Ibid., Vol. V, p.123, n.129
98. Baba Meziah 107b
99. Exodus 15:26; also Deut. 7:15
100. Berachot 5a
101. Comment to Deut. 7:15 as found in Hertz edition of the Pentateuch
102. Proverbs 23:29
103. Sanhedrin 70a
104. Ibid., 92a
105. Proverbs 20:30



106. Shabbot 33a
107. Ibid., 32b
109. Nedarim 41a
110. Avodah Zorah 18b
111. Mishna, Seder Nezikin, Avoth Chapter II, Mishna 6
112. Sayings of the Fathers, published Behrman House, Inc. New York, 1954. Commentary by Dr. Joseph H. Hertz
113. Mishna Avoth, Chapter III, Mishna 16
114. Sayings of the Fathers, op.cit., commenting on Chapter III, Mishna 16
115. Mishna Avoth, Chapter V, Mishna 8
116. Proverbs 11:21
117. Proverbs 11:31
118. Genesis 20:6
119. Psalms 1:6
120. Psalms 92:8
121. II Chronicles 6:28
122. Sanhedrin 101a
123. Lamentations 3:40
124. Isaiah 53:10
125. Genesis 18:1
126. Ginzberg, op.cit., Vol. III, p.78
127. Megillah 13b

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