

When Bad Things Happen

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

If God is good, why is the world so bad?

An excerpt from Rabbi Blech's new, trailblazing book that explores the traditional responses to suffering.

Much of what troubles us about God's ways should really be ascribed to the actions of man. But what about the times when evil stems directly from God?

What if a doctor informs you that your child has incurable cancer? Nobody has hurt your child. This evil seems to be coming from the One who supposedly does only good. If an evil person had hurt your child, you may not be able to forgive him, but you would at least know where to place the blame -- on human wickedness. But if God has hurt your child, that is simply too much to bear.

Yet little, innocent children suffer every day. And invariably we are led to ask: How can a good God be so utterly cruel?

What troubles us also troubled the greatest Jewish leader, Moses. He dared to ask this question to The One Who Knows the Answer. And that eternal wisdom is shared with us in the book of Exodus. It is here, the Talmud tells us, that the Bible first takes up the problem of why the righteous suffer.

At first glance the passage may appear cryptic:

Moses then said [to God]: "Please grant me a vision of Your Glory." He [God] said, "I will cause all My goodness to pass before you and will proclaim the name of the Lord in your presence. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate." And He said, "You cannot see My Presence and live." And the Lord said, "Behold there is a place alongside Me, and you shall set yourself on the rock. When My Glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My Hand until I pass by. Then I will remove My Hand and you will see My Back, but My Face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33: 18-23)

Most people who are reading this literally assume that Moses is asking to know what God looks like, and, in answer, God won't show His face, but lets Moses take a peek at His mighty shoulder blades.

That is, of course, absurd.

The Talmud (Brachot 7a) tells us that Moses was not asking to "see" God. Moses knew better. Moses knew that God has no body or any form for that matter and therefore cannot be seen with human eyes. Rather, Moses was asking to "see"

God's "glory," so that he could understand God's plan. In effect, Moses is saying to God, "God, I love, honor and respect You in every way. But there are things about You that I do not understand. When I see a child with infantile paralysis, when I see a baby with leukemia, when I see a little boy suffering great pain and I know he is going to die soon, I don't know what You are doing. And I would love to have a total understanding of Your ways so that I can give you the full honor You deserve."

It is very significant that this passage appears right after God's absolution of the Israelites for the terrible sin of the Golden Calf. God had led the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt; He had performed astonishing miracles before their eyes; He had spoken to them at Mount Sinai; and then, when Moses went up the mountain, the Israelites repaid all this goodness by rejecting God and building an idol. Yet when they atoned for this great sin, He had not only forgiven them, but also responded by describing His essence as being one of complete mercy and compassion.

That is when Moses chose to make his request, as if to say, "If that is true, then will You explain how Your glory is reflected in the suffering of children and in the gloating of the wicked? Can you give me the gift of seeing how that makes sense?"

In short, Moses wanted to know why bad things happen to good people.

God's answer contains what Moses, as well as all of us reading these words thousands of years later, have the right to know.

So let us look very carefully, point by point, at what God is telling us.

THE WHOLE PICTURE

"I will cause all My goodness to pass before you and you will proclaim the name of the Lord in your presence."

The names by which God identifies Himself are extremely important. Here, He uses the unique four-letter name known as the Tetragrammaton, which we are forbidden to pronounce; it is generally translated as "Lord" (*Adonai*). As noted earlier, this name signifies kindness and compassion, as contrasted with the name *Elohim*, which refers to God as the harsh but just judge. So it is the name of the merciful Lord that He wishes to proclaim to Moses.

We are told that "all" of God's goodness will be testimony to the merciful quality of the Almighty. And, by implication, that we will change our perception of pain and suffering once we have seen it "all." Seeing only half the story leads us to think God is cruel, but a fuller perspective will let us grasp why every strict judgment was really a necessary act of love.

Once we are able to understand the whole picture, we will see suffering as a manifestation of the compassionate side of God.

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate."

Is God saying, "I will do whatever I want regardless of what is just"? No, He is not saying that. But He is saying, "I will be gracious to the one I will be gracious to, and *not* to the one *you think* I should be gracious to. I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate, and not to the one you think I should be compassionate to."

The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) teaches that in the World to Come everything will be turned upside down. Those who are on the bottom here will be on top there and vice versa. The point it makes is that very often our judgments about who is a saint and who is a sinner are far off the mark. The way the world offers honor is literally topsy-turvy. Only in the afterlife can we see who are the truly deserving.

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18-century founder of the Hassidic movement, explained what that means through this wonderful story:

In a certain house, there dwelt two Jews and their families. One was a learned scholar, the other a poor laborer. Each day the scholar would rise from his sleep at the break of dawn and go to the synagogue where first he would study a page of Talmud. Then as the pious men of old were wont to do, he would wait a short time, direct his heart to heaven and say the morning prayers quietly and slowly, drawing out his worship until almost midday.

His neighbor, the poor laborer, also rose early and went to work -- backbreaking work that strained the body and soul at once -- until midday, there being no time to go to the synagogue to pray with the congregation at the proper hour.

When noon arrived, the scholar left the synagogue to return home, filled with the sense of self-satisfaction. He had busied himself with Torah and prayer and had scrupulously performed the will of his Creator. On his way from the synagogue, he would meet his neighbor, the poor laborer, hurrying to the house of worship, where he would recite the morning prayers in great haste, in anguish and regret for his tardiness. They would pass each other.

When the poor laborer passed his neighbor on the street, he would utter a mournful groan, upset that the other had already finished his study and prayer in leisure before he had even begun: "Oh my, here I am just going to Shul. He had already finished. I didn't do it right. Ay ay ay!" Meanwhile the lips of the scholar would curl mockingly, and in his heart he would think, *Master of the World, see the difference between this creature and me. We both rise early in the morning. I rise for Torah and prayer, but he...*

So the days, weeks, months and years passed. Each of the two men's lives were spent in a different fashion, one in the freedom of Torah and prayer, the other in the slavery of earning a livelihood. When from time to time their paths would cross, the scholar would smirk, and the laborer would groan.

As it must to all men, death came at last to the scholar and, shortly afterward, to his neighbor, the laborer. The scholar was called before the heavenly tribunal to give an accounting of his deeds. "What have you done with the days of your years?" the voice from on high called out.

"I am thankful," replied the scholar with a firm voice, in which could be detected more than a little pride, "all my days, I served my Creator, studying much Torah and praying with a pure heart."

"But," commented the heavenly accuser, "he always mocked his neighbor, the poor worker, when they would meet near the synagogue." The voice from on high was heard, "Bring the scales."

On one side, they put all the Torah he had learned and all the prayers he had prayed, while on the other side, they put the faint smirk that hovered over his lips each day when he met his neighbor. Behold, the weight of the smirk turned the scale to guilty.

After the case of the scholar had been completed, they brought before the heavenly tribunal the poor laborer. "What have you done with your life?" asked the voice from on high.

"All my life, I have had to work hard in order to provide for my wife and children. I did not have time to pray with the congregation at the proper time, nor did I have the leisure to study much Torah for there were hungry mouths to feed," answered the laborer in shame and grief.

"But," commented the heavenly advocate, "each day, when he met his neighbor, the scholar, there issued from the depth of his soul a groan. He felt that he had not fulfilled his duties to the Lord."

Again, the scales were brought and the weight of the groan of the poor worker turned the scale to innocent.

The same point was made by the famed 12th-century Talmudist and philosopher, Moses Maimonides, in the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Repentance, 3:2). In his legal *magnum opus* he concludes that in God's eyes a person's good deeds and shortcomings are judged qualitatively, not quantitatively. One terrible sin may outweigh a lifetime of good deeds, or one special good deed may wipe out many sins. Only God truly knows what is in each person's heart as well as the real value of our actions.

So when God tells Moses, "I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate," He is saying, "I know better than you who is righteous and who is wicked, who is deserving and who is not. Don't presume to improve upon my judgment."

"And He [God] said, 'You cannot see My Presence and live.'"

What in the world does that mean?

Moses wants to "see" God, to understand God's ways. But God tells Moses, "As long as you are alive, you will never fully 'see.'" The entire picture is not visible from our limited perspective in this world.

Imagine yourself standing with your nose pressed to an impressionistic painting. In one place you see splotches of the most breathtaking royal blue, in another there is a big splotch of black, in another a splotch of white. It is not until you step a good dozen feet away that you see what the painting depicts -- it's Van Gogh's "Irises."

This is just as true when it comes to understanding God's plan. At times we see the colorful parts, at times the dark parts, but we can never step back far enough to see the whole picture. To step back far enough is to step into the next world.

Our existence here on Earth, and our comprehension of the real meaning of our lives, is very limited. This is God's message to Moses, the same message He gives Job when that long-suffering man asked for understanding. God says, "The facts at your disposal in the arena of life are insufficient for the kind of knowledge that you seek to possess."

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD

"And the Lord said, 'Behold there is a place alongside Me, and you shall set yourself on the rock.'"

To help Moses grasp the reasons for the presence of evil on Earth, God tells him to stand "alongside Me." This phrase echoes a similar idea from Genesis when man is first created in the image of God. Man is given a role to play in completing God's work, commensurate with his greatness. He is told that he stands as a partner alongside God up above; he is not a passive observer down below.

Why was Moses told to set himself upon a rock? Because the Hebrew word for rock, *tzur*, comes from a root that means to form, fashion or shape. The rock alludes to man's purpose on Earth. Just as God is a creator, so too is man.

Indeed, man is a co-creator with God, a partner in the completion and perfection of the world.

To give man a chance to exercise this function, God has purposely left the world unfinished. It was created incomplete. That is the meaning of God resting at the end of the sixth day. God was surely not tired. "God rested" means that He stopped mid-work. Why? So that man has the opportunity to have a hand in perfecting the world. God allows for sickness so man can play a role in inventing cures. God allows for famines so that man can have a part in inventing new methods of agriculture. God allows for droughts so that man can participate in bringing the world closer to its ideal state by inventing new irrigation methods and by building dams and desalinization plants.

So the evil in the world only points up the work we still have to do. Evil is a manifestation of a world that is still incomplete, waiting for man to do his part and finish the job.

"When My Glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My Hand until I pass by. Then I will remove My Hand and you will see My Back, but My Face shall not be seen."

It is here that the most important part of the answer is given. By telling Moses that he will not be able to see His face, but only His back, God is saying that it will be impossible for Moses to understand the events as they are happening. But later, in retrospect, it might be possible to make sense of what has occurred.

While you are confronting a crisis, while you are in the eye of the storm, you will not be able to understand God's purpose or logic. But once the crisis has passed, then, looking backwards in time, it will be possible to begin to understand God's ways.

We can all name events in our lives that appeared terrible when we experienced them, but when seen from a later perspective turned out to be good. A man is hurrying on the way to the airport. He gets a flat tire, and he panics -- he knows he is going to miss the plane. He is angry at fate. At that moment, it is a terrible thing. He fixes the flat, drives like mad to the airport, but to no avail -- the plane has taken off without him. An hour later, he finds out that the plane went down and crashed. So the flat tire, which he cursed a few hours ago, turned out to have been a blessing.

There is a memorable story told in the Talmud (Brachot 60b) that teaches the principle of "this, too, is for good":

The renowned first-century scholar, Rabbi Akiva, while traveling by donkey through a small village, could not find lodging at any inn. He took this in stride, assuming there was a divine purpose for his difficulties. He camped out in the

woods outside of town, happy at least that he had his lantern to read by and his rooster to wake him in the morning. But in short order he is visited by more calamities -- his donkey runs off, his rooster dies, and his lantern blows out. But being Rabbi Akiva, he patiently accepts his fate.

The next morning, when he goes back into town, he finds that a gang of marauders had massacred the entire population. Suddenly, he understands each and every difficulty he had faced: "Had I gotten lodging, I would have been killed. Had the lamp been on, they would have seen me. The rooster would have crowed, the donkey would have brayed. Everything that happened to me I now realize was all for the good."

THE ILLUSION OF GOOD AND BAD

When we ask the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" we are often making erroneous assumptions. What we perceive as "bad things" might, in fact, be the best things that could happen to them.

I know a multimillionaire who lost his first job as a mail clerk. Unable to find employment, he was forced to start an enterprise of his own. He now says, "It is only because I got fired that I made it."

I know of one young man who as a student was so distraught over a breakup with a girl that he became suicidal. He clearly thought that this was the worst trauma of his young life. I spent a whole night with him, talking sense to him, comforting him.

Twenty years later, I ran into this young man again. "Remember me?" he grinned.

"Sure do. You owe me a night's sleep," I said.

"I came back to tell you the end of the story," he responded. And he shared with me what had happened to him since that time. His life had been filled with blessings. He had a beautiful wife and children and was very happy. Meanwhile, the girl he considered ending his life over had become an alcoholic, and by last count had been married and divorced three times.

So ultimately, with hindsight, he realized that because of his "tragic" breakup he turned out to be much better off. Of course when he was suicidal and I tried to tell him that everything would turn out for the best, he could not listen, much less understand why it was better this way.

The Zohar, the chief work of the Kabbalah, the body of Jewish mysticism, comments that when God created the world He pronounced it *tov me'od*, "very

good." But when we look at the world, when we study history, when we watch World News or CNN, we find it very hard to agree with this divine judgment.

So the Zohar points out that God gives us a clue in the name he chooses for the first man -- Adam. In Hebrew, Adam is spelled using the same letters as the word *me'od* -- *mem, aleph, daled* -- but in different sequence: *aleph, daled, mem*. Furthermore, the Zohar says, Adam is an acronym standing for the three milestones of human history. *Aleph*, as the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, represents the very beginning of the story of mankind with Adam. *Daled*, for David, represents the high point of Jewish history. *Mem* stands for *Moshiach* (Messiah), who will bring the world to its longed-for state of fulfillment.

When we finally reach that stage of history alluded to by the *mem*, the days of Messiah, we will be able to look at *everything* that ever happened before throughout the course of all time, from the *aleph* of Adam through the *daled* of David, and together with God, we too will be able to proclaim that the world is not only good, but indeed very good - *tov "me'od."*

As Søren Kierkegaard so powerfully put it, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward."

IN SUMMARY

The Biblical exchange between God and Moses teaches us to beware of assumptions that are incomplete and erroneous, assumptions that lead us to question the goodness of God.

Moses says to God, in effect, "God, I want to honor you totally, but my lack of understanding of Your ways interferes. How can I honor you completely when I see good people who have it bad and bad people who have it good?"

God says, "Hold off, I question two of your premises."

"Which premises?"

"Number one, don't be so quick when you call some people good and others bad, because you don't know for sure. Number two, when you say they have it bad or they have it good, are you sure of your definitions? Are you sure you know what you are talking about? You are not positive. And you can't be positive because you can't see My face. You will only be able to see it in retrospect. In retrospect a terrible thing could be the best thing. Sometimes it will take you years to see. Sometimes you will never see, not in your days on Earth anyway."

What troubles so many people, however, are the many times when even the gift of retrospect seems to give us no greater clarity. Looking backwards at one's life can be illuminating, but it can often still leave us with many unresolved questions.

What can we do then? Does it mean that we will end our lives on Earth with problems never to be resolved, injuries never to be healed, cruelties never to be explained, injustices never to be set right?

It is easy to say, "Okay, he lost his job. He will find one that he likes much better - it's not so bad." But when we are watching someone slowly dying from cancer, suffering with every breath, it is not so easy -- in fact, next to impossible -- to say, "This, too, is for good."

A wife says to me, "My husband got sick, he remained sick for the rest of his days, and then he died. Where is the good in that? Don't tell me to wait for the end of the story. I have seen the end of the story. He died."

Yet God tells us, "Man cannot see Me and live." We don't have the entire picture even at the time of death. Death is the gateway to the great beyond -- and that very description reminds us that there is more after our earthly passage. What is still not clear during our finite existence, God seems to be saying, will be possible to comprehend once we are blessed with the divine perspective of eternity.

Mourners for their loved ones may have a difficult time viewing death in any positive light; for them it represents an excruciating loss. But for the deceased, death is not a problem, but rather a solution to the problem. For the person involved, death is the beginning of all the answers, as we will see next.