

# When God Silenced Moshe: The Problem of Evil in Jewish Thought

## The Problem of Evil

- P1. An omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God exists.
- P2. Evil (or bad things) exist that should be prevented by an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God.
- ∴ An omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God cannot exist.

### 1. Babylonian Talmud, *Menaḥot* 29b

[Moshe] said before God: Master of the Universe, You have shown me [Rabbi Akiva's] Torah, now show me his reward. God said to him: Return. Moshe went back and saw that they were weighing Rabbi Akiva's flesh in a butcher shop. Moshe said before Him: Master of the Universe, this is Torah and this is its reward? God said to him: Be silent! This is my decree.

### 1. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף כט עמוד ב

אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם הראיתני תורתו הראני שכרו. אמר לו חזור [לאחורך]. חזר לאחוריו – ראה ששוקלין בשרו במקולין. אמר לפניו רבש"ע זו תורה וזו שכרה? א"ל שתוק! כך עלה במחשבה לפני.

ANSWER II: DENY THE CONCLUSION

### 2. Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, *Homosexuality and Judaism* ([www.yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org)) 6:45–7:35

The truth is that the question is an excellent question. You can add it to the list of questions we have about how the *Ribbono Shel Olam* runs His world. There are many, many questions ... humans beings suffer in a way that seems grotesquely unfair ... I have a whole host of questions to which I don't have an answer – but the *Ribbono Shel Olam's* infinite knowledge, compared to our finite knowledge is such that we don't have answers to all these questions.

### 3. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *The Source of Faith is Faith Itself* (1996)

Regardless of what issues – moral, theological, textual or historical – vexed me, I was confident that they had been raised by masters far sharper and wiser than myself; and if they had remained impregnably steadfast in their commitment, so should and could I. I intuited that, his categorical formulations and imperial certitude notwithstanding, Rav Hutner had surely confronted whatever questions occurred to me. Later, I felt virtually certain the Rav had, so that the depth and intensity of their service of God was doubly reassuring.

### 4. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny* (1992) 7

When [a person] suffers, he says in his heart, "there is evil, I do not deny it, and I will not conceal it with fruitless casuistry. I am, however, interested in it from a halakic point of view ... I ask a single question: what should the sufferer do to live with his suffering?"

### 5. Lord Sacks, *Letters to the Next Generation* (2009) 31

The oldest question in religion is: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” But there are two ways of asking this question. The first is, “Why has God done this to me?” Never ask this question, because we will never know the answer. God cares for us, but He also cares for everyone and everything. We think of now; God thinks of eternity. We could never see the universe from God’s point of view. So we will never find the answer to the question: “Why me?” But there is another way of asking the question. “Given that this has happened, what does God want me to learn from it? How is He challenging me to grow? How is He calling on me to respond?” Asking it this way involves looking forward, not back. “Why did God do this?” is the wrong question. The right one is: “How shall I live my life differently because this has happened?”

#### ANSWER III: REDEFINE GOD

### 6. Ralbag [Gersonides], *Milhamot Hashem*, III:4 (tr. S. Feldman, 1998) 118

The fact that God does not have knowledge of which possible outcome will be realised does not imply any defect in God, may He be blessed. For perfect knowledge of what the thing is in reality ... Hence, God knows these things in the best manner possible, for He knows them insofar as they are ordered in a determinate and certain way.

### 7. Genesis 1

<sup>2</sup>the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water— ... <sup>7</sup>God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so.

### 7. ספר בראשית פרק א (פרשת בראשית)

יְהִי־אֵרֶץ הַיִּתְהָ תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ... וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָרָקִיעַ וַיְבַדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לָרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לָרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן:

### 8. Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (1994) 97

The survival of the tamed agent of chaos, whether imagined as the Sea, Leviathan, or whatever, points to an essential and generally overlooked tension in the underlying theology of these passages. On the one hand, God’s unique power to defeat and subjugate His adversary and to establish order is unquestioned. On the other hand, those passages that concede the survival of the defeated enemy raise obliquely the possibility that his defeat may yet be reversed.

### 9. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (2005) 102–103

When God engraved and carved out the world, he did not entirely eradicate the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, from the domain of His creation. Rather, he separated the complete, perfect existence from the forces of negation, confusion, and turmoil and set up cosmic boundaries, eternal laws to keep them apart. Now Judaism affirms the principle of creation out of absolute nothingness. therefore, the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, and relative nothingness must all have been fashioned by the Almighty before the creation of the orderly, majestic beautiful world...

However, the forces of relative nothingness at times exceed their bounds. they wish to burst forth out of the chains of obedience that the Almighty imposed upon them and seek to plunge the earth back into chaos and the void. It is only the law that holds them back and bars the path before them...

However, this relative “nothingness” is plotting evil, the deep is devising iniquity, and the chaos and void lie in wait in the dark alleyways of reality and seek to undermine the absolute being, to profane the lustrous image of creation.