

Matan – Great Debates in Jewish History, Philosophy, and Halakha Part 6 – God, Satan, Iyov and His Friends

Primary Sources

Sefer Iyov Chapters 1-3, 4:7-9, 8:3-4, 11:4-6, 34:10-12, 38-42

Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim

פרשת איוב המופלאה והנפלאה היא מסוג מה שאנחנו בו, כלומר: שהוא משל לביאור השקפות בני אדם בהשגחה.

וכבר ידעת מאמר אחד מהם בפירוש: איוב לא היה ולא נברא אלא משל היה. ואשר חשב שהוא היה ונברא, ושהוא מעשה שהיה, לא ידע לו לא זמן ולא מקום.
אלא אחד החכמים אמר שהיה בימי האבות,
ואחד אמר שהיה בימי משה,
ואחד [שכא] אמר שהיה בימי דוד
ואחד אמר שהוא היה מעולי בבל,
וזה ממה שמחזק דברי מי שאמר שהוא לא היה ולא נברא.

כללו של דבר בין היה בין לא היה, הרי בכיוצא במאורעו המצוי תמיד נבוכו כל החוקרים מבני אדם, עד שאמרו בידיעת ה' ובהשגחתו מה שכבר הזכרתי לך, כלומר: מה שהאדם הצדיק השלם *3 ישר המעשים ירא החטא ביותר, באים עליו ייסורים גדולים תכופים ברכושו ובניו וגופו, לא בחטא המחייב כן
ולפי שתי ההשקפות - כלומר: אם היה או לא היה - אותם הדברים שהקדים אותם, כלומר: דבר השטן, ודברי ה' לשטן, ומסירתו בידו - כל זה משל בלי ספק אצל כל בעל שכל.

Rav Yaakov Medan – Avraham vs Iyov

The comparison between Avraham and Iyov raises another question. Earlier in our *parasha* we encountered Avraham's seemingly brazen words to God regarding the fate of the cities of Sedom and Amora. How is it possible that Avraham formulated his words in such a decisive manner? Avraham was required to teach his children "the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (*Bereishit 18:19*), and therefore he had to understand God's way, identify with it, and even judge it. Nevertheless, as much as we appreciate the need to examine the manner in which God governs His world so that we can educate our children in its light, it is hard to ignore the danger in such an examination. For it is but a step away from the path taken by Iyov, who momentarily lost his innocent faith in the justice of God's judgment and asserted: "It is all one; therefore I say: He destroys the innocent and the wicked" (*Iyov 9:22*). Elifaz too accuses him of this:

Is not God in the height of heaven? And behold the topmost of the stars, how high they are! And you say: What does God know? Can He judge through the dark cloud? (*Iyov 9:22*)

Who can guarantee a person that he will know how to distinguish between examining the truth of God's judgments for the purpose of teaching his children, as Avraham did in connection with Sedom, and examining the truth of His judgments because of doubts and uncertainties whether God is indeed a righteous judge, as did Iyov? Who can guarantee Avraham that the personal example that he provided his descendants when he cast accusations at Heaven will be a favorable example, and not, God forbid, open the door to the path taken by Iyov in the time of his afflictions, a path that was defined by *Chazal* (*Bava Batra 16a*) as blasphemy?

It seems to me that the *Akeida* comes to answer this question. In addition to the test of his readiness for self-sacrifice, Avraham faced another test, which may not have been any easier than the first: a test of his faith in a God of righteousness and justice. For Avraham could have asked: What will that God who sentenced Sedom to destruction for the cry of one girl answer regarding the cry of an old woman whose only child was taken from her to be slaughtered on Mount Moriya? Does the God of justice have an answer to this question? Is a God who made multiple covenants with Avraham, and promised the land to his seed, and now comes and rips it all to shreds with that awful command: "And offer him there for a burnt-offering" – is He the God of justice?

For three full days, God gives Avraham the opportunity to contemplate these difficult questions as he makes his way to the *Akeida*. But over the course of all three days Avraham says only one word to his Creator: *Hineni*, here I am. In the four hundred and eighty verses in the book of *Iyov* this word does not appear even once. Those three days of silence and acceptance of God's judgment during which Avraham headed to Mount Moriya, dispel any fear that the way that he was teaching the world's inhabitants was one of "blasphemy," as Iyov did. That single word of Avraham when he received the command – *Hineni* – establishes a tall barrier between Iyov, who examined God's ways of justice and judgment based on doubt about their existence, and Avraham, who lovingly accepted God's command with innocent faith and without any possibility of finding an answer to his questions about God's way.

Bava metzia 58b

GEMARA: The Sages taught: It is written: “**And you shall not mistreat [tonu] one man his colleague; and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God**” ([Leviticus 25:17](#)). The *tanna* explains: **The verse is speaking with regard to verbal mistreatment.** The *baraita* proceeds: **Do you say that it is speaking of verbal mistreatment [be'ona'at devarim], or perhaps it is speaking only with regard to monetary exploitation [be'ona'at mammon]? When it says in a previous verse: “And if you sell to your colleague an item that is sold, or acquire from your colleague’s hand, you shall not exploit [tonu] his brother”** ([Leviticus 25:14](#)), **monetary exploitation is explicitly stated. How then do I realize the meaning of the verse: “And you shall not mistreat one man his colleague”?** It is **with regard to verbal mistreatment.**

הא כיצד אם היה בעל תשובה אל יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים אם היה בן גרים אל יאמר לו זכור מעשה אבותיך אם היה גר ובא ללמוד תורה אל יאמר לו פה שאכל נבילות וטריפות שקצים ורמשים בא ללמוד תורה שנאמרה מפי הגבורה

How so? If one is a penitent, another may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deed of your ancestors. If one is a convert and he came to study Torah, one may not say to him: Does the mouth that ate unslaughtered carcasses and animals that had wounds that would have caused them to die within twelve months [tereifot], and repugnant creatures, and creeping animals, comes to study Torah that was stated from the mouth of the Almighty?

הלא יראתך ([איוב 1,7](#)) אם היו יסורין באין עליו אם היו חלאים באין עליו או שהיה מקבר את בניו אל יאמר לו כדרך שאמרו לו חביריו לאיוב כסלתך תקותך ותום דרכיך זכר נא מי הוא נקי אבד

If torments are afflicting a person, if illnesses are afflicting him, or if he is burying his children, one may not speak to him in the manner that the friends of Job spoke to him: “Is not your fear of God your confidence, and your hope the integrity of your ways? Remember, I beseech you, whoever perished, being innocent?” ([Job 4:6–7](#)). Certainly you sinned, as otherwise you would not have suffered misfortune.

מורה נבוכים

It is the opinion which suggests itself as plausible at first thought, especially in the minds of those who meet with mishaps, well knowing that they have not merited them through sins. This is admitted by all, and therefore this opinion was assigned to Job. But he is represented to hold this view only so long as he was without wisdom, and knew God only by tradition, in the same manner as religious people generally know Him. As soon as he had acquired a true knowledge of God, he confessed that there is undoubtedly true felicity in the knowledge of God; it is attained by all who acquire that knowledge, and no earthly trouble can disturb it.¹ So long as Job's knowledge of God was based on tradition and communication, and not on research, he believed that such imaginary good as is possessed in health, riches, and children, was the utmost that men can attain: this was the reason why he was in perplexity, and why he uttered the above-mentioned opinions, and this is also the meaning of his words: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent because of dust and ashes" (42:5, 6); that is to say he abhorred all that he had desired before, and that he was sorry that he had been in dust and ashes; comp. "and he sat down among the ashes" (ii. 8). On account of this last utterance, which implies true perception, it is said afterwards in reference to him, "for you have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath."

beter^D and *biyyuv*^E and *p'tur*.^F We do not wonder about the ineffable ways of the Holy One, but instead ponder the paths man must take when evil leaps up at him. We ask not about the reason for evil and its purpose, but rather about its rectification and uplifting. How should a man react in a time of distress? What should a person do so as not to rot in his affliction?

The halakhic answer to this question is very simple. Suffering comes to elevate man, to purify his spirit and sanctify him, to cleanse his mind and purify it from the chaff of superficiality and the dross of crudeness; to sensitize his soul and expand his horizons. In general, the purpose of suffering is to repair the imperfection in man's persona. The halakhah teaches us that an afflicted person commits a criminal act if he allows his pain to go for naught and to remain without meaning or purpose. Suffering appears in the world in order to contribute something to man, in order to atone for him, in order to redeem him from moral impurity, from crudeness and lowliness of spirit. The sufferer must arise therefrom, purified, refined, and cleansed. "An hour of

God's bounty. In short, man must solve, not the question of the causal or teleological reason for suffering with all its speculative complexity, but rather the question of its curative role, in all its halakhic simplicity, by turning fate to destiny and elevating himself from object to subject, from thing to man.

Indeed! This is the answer that was given by the Creator to Job. As long as Job, as a slave of fate, philosophized about reasons, and motives, and demanded insight into the essence of evil, continually asking and murmuring: "Why and wherefore does suffering come," the Holy One answered him sharply with the pointed question: "Did you know?" (Job 39:1).

[Did you know] [w]ho it is who darkens counsel by speaking words without knowledge? Gird up now your loins like a man, for I will demand of you and you shall declare unto Me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare if you have such understanding. . . . Do you know the time when the wild goats of the rock will give birth; when the hinds will calve?

—Job 38:2-4, 39:1

If you do not know the alphabet of creation, why be so impudent as to ask questions about the workings of the world? But once Job realized how strange his question was and how great his ignorance, and acknowledged it

and was not ashamed to say: "[T]herefore I have uttered that which I did not understand; things too wonderful for me which I know not" (Job 42:3), then God was able to reveal to this man of destiny the true principles which are concealed in suffering, as expressed by the halakhah. The Holy One said: Job! True, you will never understand the inner essence of the why, the reason for suffering and its purpose, but there is one thing that you are obligated to know: the basis for the repair of suffering. If by your suffering you are able to elevate yourself to the spiritual level that you have not heretofore attained, you will then know that your travail was intended as a device for your perfection in both spirit and soul. Job! When My graciousness engulfed you in the manner expressed by the prophet, "Behold, I will extend prosperity to [him] a like a river" (Isaiah 66:12) and you were well known and a man of influence ("And this man was the greatest of all the children of the East" [Job 1:3]), you did not fulfill the role that My grace placed upon you. You were a sound and just man, God-fearing and avoiding of evil. You did not use your power and wealth for ill. You gave much charity ("Righteousness I wore, and it robed me, my justice was a robe and turban" [Job 29:14]). You did not hesitate to offer assistance and support to others, and you stood by them in their hour of peril and distress ("Did I not deliver the poor that cried out and the orphan that cried out")

The Holy One said to the friends of Job, "Now, therefore, take unto you seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to My servant Job and offer up for yourselves a burnt-offering, and My servant Job shall pray for you" (Job

42:8). Behold, I will test Job yet another time. Let him be tested publicly. Does he now know how to pray for others and participate in their travail? Did he learn anything in the hour of retribution and divine anger? Did he adopt for himself a new style of collective prayer that encompasses the community? If he pleads for you, he will bring his salvation and yours; "For to him I will show favor" (Job 42:8). Then you shall know that Job was redeemed from the narrow straits of egotism and entered into the vistas of communal empathy; and that social isolation has ended and communal affiliation has appeared in its stead. A wonderful thing happened. Job suddenly understood the nature of Jewish prayer. He discovered in one moment its plural voice and the attribute of loving-kindness that sweeps man from the private to the public domain. He began to live a communal life, to feel the community's hurts, to mourn its disasters and rejoice in its moments of celebration. Job's sufferings found their true repair in his escape from the prison in which he had found himself, and God's wrath was assuaged. As it is written: "And the Lord changed the fortunes of Job *when he prayed for his friends*" (Job 42:10).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, To Hear A Fractured World

On trial in the book of Job is not Job but God. The very idea sounds blasphemous. That is why the book has consistently been read against the grain, and why, read thus, it is unintelligible. Why do the righteous suffer? asked Moses, and Jeremiah, and Habakkuk. That is assumed to be the question at the heart of the book of Job, and to it, it offers no answer. How could it comfort the afflicted to be told that bad things happen for no good reason, because the Accuser is tormenting us, because we are innocent and because we have faith?

The question most often asked by theologians and philosophers is: how, given what we know of the world, can we be sure that God exists? The question asked in the book of Job (as in later rabbinic midrash) is the opposite: how, given what we know of God, can we explain that humankind exists? Why did a wise, good, all-knowing, all-powerful Creator, having constructed a universe of beauty and order, introduce into it one form of life, *Homo sapiens*, capable of destroying beauty and creating disorder? This is a surpassingly strange question, yet until we grasp its logic and force we will not understand the proposition at the heart of the book, and of the Jewish vision of humanity's role in the world.

For philosophy the primary question relates to the existence of God. For Judaism the primary question relates to the existence of man. *Homo sapiens* is not simply an evolutionary variant of other forms of life. The use of language, the future tense, an ability to recall the remote past, self-consciousness, deliberative rationality – the powers that make *Homo sapiens* unique – are qualitative leaps, not quantitative developments. A lump of metal and a car may be composed of the same elements but they are not the same thing, or the same kind of thing. That we share many elements of our DNA with the primates does not mean that man is simply a naked ape or a gene-producing machine. This may be superficially plausible, but it is a fallacy none the less. Because we can conceive intentions and act on them, no purely causal explanation of human behaviour will ever be adequate. Creating humankind, God was taking a risk similar to that parents take when they give birth to a child, namely of bringing into existence something one cannot control. In making humankind God was taking the risk that one of his creations might turn against its Creator. Even for God, creation means the courage to take a risk.

That essentially is what the Accuser says to God: 'This species you have created – humanity – has it repaid your trust? Has it reciprocated your generosity, honoured your name, heeded your word? Of course human beings worship you. Why should they not? They do so from selfish motives. They plant crops, therefore they pray for rain. They wage wars, therefore they pray for victory. They face a dangerous universe, therefore they pray for your protection. But where is the pure disinterested love of man for God to vindicate God's self-negating, self-effacing love for man?'

The author of Job sets out the problem with unparalleled boldness. He imagines the Accuser challenging God himself: 'Where is there even a single individual to justify the risk, the wager you took in creating humankind?' God's reply is Job. Here, he says, is a man without sin who loves God, keeps his commands, thanks him for the good and does no evil. The Accuser's reply is dismissive. 'How can Job be a vindication? You have blessed him, therefore he blesses you. But if you were to curse him, he would curse you. His is not disinterested love. It is egoism allied to good fortune. Remove his fortune and you will find that you will have erased his faith.'

Understood thus, the book of Job is not an anomaly in the Bible. It is neither out of place nor out of character. It focuses with laser-like intensity on the question God asks throughout the Bible, through the mouths of all his prophets. Given the love and blessings, rescues and redemptions he has bestowed on humanity, where is humanity's answering response? 'I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against Me,' he says through Isaiah (1:2). 'The house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to Me, says the Lord' to Jeremiah (5:11). Multiplying proof-texts is unnecessary: this is *the* theme of the Bible. One of its most poignant expressions appears early in Genesis, when God seems to lose faith in the entire enterprise of humanity: 'When the Lord saw that man had done much evil on earth and that his thoughts and inclinations were always evil, He was sorry that He had made man on earth, and He was grieved to His very heart' (Gen. 6:5–6). What makes the book of Job unique is that it detaches this question from a historical context and turns it into a metahistorical dialogue. It invites us, the readers, to engage in a role-reversal. It asks us to imagine history and humanity from the vantage point of God. Is there even one person on earth who justifies God's hopes when he created man?

The question posed by the Accuser to God is: Is there a single individual capable of loving you unconditionally? Of trusting you even though

On the surface, this means that God is just. It is human beings who act unjustly. To this day, the verse is part of the liturgy of the 'acceptance of God's justice' (*tzidduk ha-din*) that we recite when someone dies. However, one rabbinic interpretation of part of this verse sums up the entire argument of this chapter. The halakhic midrash *Sifre* states: "A God of faith – He who had faith in the universe and created it."¹³ Creation was an act of faith on the part of God. This idea is the most profound theological insight I have ever encountered. Even God's creation, when it involves endowing a creature with the capacity to act in freedom, involves risk and therefore faith. More than we have faith in God, he has faith in us. We are here because he wanted us to be, free because the Master-of-all made space for our freedom. We are at home in the universe to the extent that we make of our universe a home for God. To be sure, God's faith in humanity is often betrayed, yet God responds: 'Even to grey hairs I will forbear.' Though human beings inflict suffering on one another, God does not give up on his creation. We are here because of an act of supreme love on the part of the author of being. Despite the wrong we do, he does not relinquish faith that we will change. However lost, he does not cease to believe that one day we will find our way back to him. For in his word he has given us the map, the guide, the way of return. That is the theology of responsibility.

דברים פרק לב

(ד) הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט אל אמונה ואין עול צדיק וישר הוא:

ספרי דברים פרשת האזינו פסקא שז

אל אמונה, שהאמין בעולם ובראו

"מוֹדָה (מוֹדָה) אָנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִּים. שֶׁחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי נְשִׁמְתִי בְּחֶמְלָה. רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ:"

משנה ברורה

ותיבת בחמלה יהיה באתנחתא ורבה אמונתך בלי הפסק והוא מן הכתוב חדשים לבקרים וגו' שהקב"ה מקיים אמונתו להחזיר נשמות המופקדים בבוקר

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, God and Man According to Hellenism

As a point of departure, I have chosen one specific subject. This aspect - one of the most central ones - in the debate between our world and that of the Greeks can be highlighted by comparing the character of Iyov (Job) with, lehavdil, that of Prometheus (as portrayed both in mythology and in literatures, and especially in Aeschylus' work, Prometheus Bound).

The myth of Prometheus presents him as a bold individual who went up to heaven and stole fire from the gods in order to bring it down to mankind. For this he was punished by Zeus, who chained him to a rock for the rest of his life. While chained to the rock he sings and declares his objection to the actions of the gods, thus expressing his sovereignty and independence. This presents a certain similarity to Iyov (a comparison already dealt with by many) from two points of view: firstly, as regards the subject - a person who is controlled by a higher force, and secondly - from the point of view of the book's structure. Sefer Iyov is quite unique among the books of Tanakh in terms of its outstanding dramatic structure. It contains almost a classic Greek drama: each "character" expresses himself in turn: "monologue," "response," etc....

Prometheus represents the tragic situation in which a man suffers despite his innocence. At the same time, there certainly exists a possibility that some day Prometheus may succeed in freeing himself of his chains, as presented in Shelley's play of the early 19th century - "Prometheus Unbound."

How great is the disparity between this description and the one we find in Sefer Iyov! The question of the relationship between power and justice runs through Sefer Iyov, too. According to certain opinions among Chazal, sharp criticism is leveled against Iyov's stand. At the conclusion of the first chapter of [Bava Batra \(15b\)](#), very serious accusations are

raised against his blasphemy and cursing. At the same time, these opinions must be seen within a broader context: Iyov knows his place in relation to the Holy One. It never enters his mind that he is engaging in battle against an "equal opponent" with a chance of emerging victorious. Within the very depths of his being he may await Elihu's response, but he is conscious throughout of the fact that the Power concerned is not within his understanding.

Even nearer to the end of the Sefer, God does not provide a real answer to the questions which Iyov raises. The essence of the Divine response is "Lav ba'al devarim didi at," Iyov is not a legitimate claimant of God: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understanding. Do you know who fixed its dimensions, or who measured it with a line?" ([Iyov 38:4-5](#)). In other words, we are talking about a different dimension of reality. It is as if God is telling him, "You don't know, you don't understand. After all is said and done, you are a mortal, and are not capable of debating with Me." The very most a human being can say, in fear and trembling, is: "You will be in the right, O Lord, if I make claim against You, yet I shall [nevertheless] present charges against You" ([Yirmiyahu 12:1](#)). In short, Iyov is not - and does not perceive himself as - an equal opponent or partner for discussion with God.

Two fundamental principles are involved here. One pertains to the relationship between God and man, the other to the nature of the reality in which man lives. With regard to the first point, in the Greek perception there is no fundamental difference between man and his gods. The gods may perhaps be wiser, stronger and richer, but the difference is not a qualitative one. From this point of view, it is the humanistic outlook of Greek culture which represents both its greatness and its weakness.

Other religions which had preceded it had not perceived the gods as being in any way on a par with man. They perceived their gods as being hostile to man, laying in wait for him and threatening him. Their gods were depicted in grotesque form (as we see from their sculptures) as something inhuman and completely dissimilar from man. These philosophies highlighted the fear and terror which characterize man's relationship with his gods.

The world of the Greeks, on the other hand, displayed a considerable rapprochement between the transcendent world and that of mortals. The fear and terror which had surrounded the gods in other cultures diminished, to a large degree, and in its place came a closeness between man and his gods. Thus the Greeks largely succeeded in overcoming much of the primitive instinctual fear of the gods, attaining a position of relative peace of mind and equilibrium, a belief based on logic rather than primitive fear. Obviously, what we describe here refers to a long process. Anyone examining early Greek culture can see that it was much closer to the general pagan world. F. M. Cornford's book, "From Religion to Philosophy," which deals with the transition from Homer to Aristotle, describes both periods.

As mentioned above, this progression represented a great achievement. The Greeks perceived their existence in the world as being under the aegis of forces which could be understood and which one could deal with. This perception allowed for some of the self-assurance characterizing Greek culture, which was so distant from the primitive feelings of other pagan cultures which preceded it.

Indeed, this very point is the source of the main weakness inherent in Greek culture, when viewed from a religious standpoint. Toynbee was correct when he wrote, in his book about Greek culture, that the cardinal sin of Greek culture - from the Christian point of view - was its humanism. On one hand, this was an achievement: a culture with a profoundly humanistic basis. They held man in high esteem and viewed the world through human lenses. On the other hand, the achievement in no way diminished the problematic nature of this philosophy. Together with abandoning all the primitive feelings of fear associated with paganism, the transition to Greek humanism also did irreparable harm to the concept of holiness.

The sense of awe - not the primitive fear of the early pagans, but true religious fear, the awe associated with "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts," the God on High - this diminished and disappeared. When we see gods as humans (only slightly more sophisticated, perhaps) or as philosophical abstractions, then there is no longer any room for a sense of fear, awe or majesty.