

THE BOOK OF JOB AS A BOOK OF MORALITY

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The Book of Job is known for its exhaustive examination from every possible angle of the problem of *tzadik v'ra lo* [why do the righteous suffer].¹ It is generally assumed that the major issue addressed is an explanation for the unjust suffering of the righteous, and the conclusion is given in the last chapters: Namely, that man is not privy to the Creation of the world nor to its purpose. In fact, the entire issue is beyond man's limited comprehension. This is a valid answer, which Job reluctantly accepts. However, this may not be the only lesson to be learned from Job, for it is a book not only of theology and philosophy but also of morality, offering more practical and less philosophical insights.

Talmudic sages discuss both the book and the character of Job at some length. It is obvious from the entire discussion in Bava Batra 15-16 that there is no consensus whatsoever among them concerning anything about Job. There is no uniform opinion of his character, or even as to who he really was -- Jewish or Gentile, real or fictional. As to the time when he lived, opinions stretch from as early as the Patriarchs to as late as the Second Temple period or anywhere in between. These multiple and conflicting opinions allow us to choose whichever one we prefer, since the absence of a definite tradition about Job gives us the freedom to interpret his personality solely on the basis of the existing text of the book. Indeed, it even challenges and encourages us to do so. This applies not only to Job himself, but also to his friends, about whom very little is said in talmudic literature, though their arguments do fill half the book.

In Bava Batra 15-16, Rava compares the character Job to Abraham who, in his pleas on behalf of Sodom, argues in a much less aggressive manner and is therefore compared favorably to Job. It must be remembered, however, that Abraham was pleading on behalf of a third party and could afford to be more detached. Abraham, after all, was not in pain as Job was, as Satan points out: *And Satan answered God, and said: 'Skin for skin, all that a man has, will he give for his life'* (2:4). Abraham clearly was not in that situation,

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so the comparison is not really valid. The talmudic sage Rava points this out on behalf of Job: "a man cannot be held responsible for what he says when in pain" (Bava Batra 16b).²

INTRODUCTION AND EPILOGUE

Some critics³ have argued that the book originally started at the beginning of Chapter 3, when Job curses the day he was born, and ended without the Epilogue. They maintain that the Introduction in the first two chapters, describing a scene in the heavenly court, and the dialogue with Satan who urges that Job be put through a test, is a later addition to the book. Similarly, the Epilogue, where everything is put right again with a happy ending, is also a supposedly naïve later addition, to allow God to repair the harm that had been done to Job. The style of these two sections, written in simple prose as opposed to the poetry of the bulk of the book, might indeed suggest such a possibility.

However, omitting these two sections, the first – a truly masterful description of the heavenly scene – and then the Epilogue, would convert the book to an abstract philosophical or theological discussion. We also would then be missing two crucial pieces of information which are absolutely necessary to understand the protagonists, and which will allow us to umpire the debate.

It is because of the first two chapters that we are privy to the scene in heaven, and therefore can feel almost like the angels looking down on to the debate between these men on earth. Through the Introduction, God has allowed us to share His judgment of Job, and we therefore have an understanding of Job's innocence. After all, God Himself has stated to Satan: *'Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on earth, a whole-hearted and upright man, one who fears God, and shuns evil?'* (1:8). This same description of Job is given after the loss of his children and most of his wealth: *'... and he still holds fast to his integrity, although you [Satan] did move Me against him, to destroy him without cause'* (2:3). Because of the Introduction, throughout the debate we know with absolute certainty and have no doubts that Job's suffering is undeserved, and that his request for an explanation from God, or at least a meeting with Him, would appear to be morally justified.

Second, without the Epilogue we would not know for certain God's judgment of the friends. After all, it is the friends who appear to be constantly arguing on behalf of God, taking His side against Job.

In the Epilogue, God's judgment of the two parties, Job and the friends, is clearly stated: *Then God answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said . . .* (38:1) and *Then God answered Job, and said . . .* (40:1). The term *and He answered* [וַיֹּאמֶר -- *vayaan*] seems to be carefully chosen here. It is used only when God speaks to Job; and when *God answered Job* it implies that God was willing to answer the questions raised by Job. In fact, Job's main request had always been for just such an explanation from God, and this request was now granted to him. On the other hand, God's address to the friends is in the form of a declaration: *And it was after God had spoken these words to Job, God said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My anger is kindled against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me, as My servant Job has'* (42:7).⁴ It is this very statement in the Epilogue, wherein God sums up the entire debate and declares His judgment of the two parties, that is so crucial for the message of the book. I would like to emphasize that this is not an added-on passage but the conclusion and an integral part of the original text.

JOB AND HIS FRIENDS

What then were the statements made by Job about God which are true, and what were the statements made by the friends which were not true?

Presumably, on the basis of the above quotation in 42:7, there were no truly incorrect statements made by Job. True, God rebukes Job's presumptuousness: *'Who is it who darkens counsel, by words without knowledge?'* (38:2) and *'Shall he that reproves contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God let him answer it'* (40:2). But in spite of these apparent rebukes, it is clear that God does not hold Job's attitude a major fault. In fact, the tone used suggests a mocking of Job rather than a serious reproach. God challenges Job to try his own hand at running the world, maybe he can do it better. Should Job have the power and knowledge to do so, then God would indeed defer to him: *'I also will praise you, if you have that power'* (40:14). Job is being made to realize man's ignorance and childish pretensions.

Relevant statements made by Job concerning God would be: *'Even if God does not forgive and I continue to suffer, I have one consolation, that I have not withheld my words concerning the Holy One'* (6:10). It is a difficult sentence linguistically, but the implication is clear: No matter how much Job may suffer, his one consolation is that he is always truthful and forthright in his statements about God: *'Even God shall be my savior, because a hypocrite cannot stand before Him'* (13:16). This is really the foundation of Job's faith, no matter whether one is right or mistaken, God will be on your side and your help, so long as your intentions are honest and genuine. Hypocrisy is the arch sin.

Again, *'You have hid their heart from understanding, therefore You shall not exalt them [or: you shall not be exalted by them]'* (17:4). There is some ambiguity in the text, but both meanings are probably intended. It is clearly a criticism of the friends, who naïvely use arguments that ostensibly favor God, ignoring the fact that many of their arguments are patently incorrect. Job argues that one cannot use untruths to further the cause of God, and attempts to do so result in a desecration of the Divine Name instead of in a sanctification of the Divine Name.

Furthermore, Job clearly states his deep conviction that, since he has the spirit of God in him, he will remain loyal to it all his life, and it is this very spirit that does not allow him to be deceitful, or to condone his friends' questionable arguments: *'As long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God in my nostrils, my lips shall not speak falsehood neither my tongue deceit. Far be it from me that I should justify you, till I die I will not deny my integrity'* (27:3-6). Even at the end, after Job is confronted by God Himself and is made to realize that God must be right, he does not pretend to understand God's rule of the world. In 42:1-5, Job admits his limitations and acknowledges that God the Creator of all, with His unquestioned superiority, does what is right. Job, however, does not admit that he understands the reason for his suffering, and indeed that this is as it should be, since even we who are witnesses to the scene in heaven with Satan, cannot claim that we really understand. What Job does accept is the fact that his own understanding is very imperfect. Job is not required to justify God, as the friends attempt to do. Indeed, any attempt to justify God would really imply passing a judgment on Him. This is not only an impossibility, but also would

be an impudence. Job merely needs to acknowledge man's limitations. This is all that is required; to claim more than this would be a lie and hypocrisy. Therefore, the title *avdi* [My servant] used twice before the test, is now confirmed by being repeated four times at the end of the book, after the trial. It is obvious that Job has passed the test.

The friends, who *have not spoken the truth about Me*, must ask Job to pray on their behalf. It is the concept that the *tzadik*, who has better access to God, can intervene on behalf of the sinner, and Job's prayer for his friends leads to the full physical restoration of Job himself. The Book of Job ends with *So Job died, old and full of days* (42:17) a terminology similar to that used in describing the deaths of the Patriarchs (Gen. 25:8; 35:29).

WHERE DO THE FRIENDS FAIL?

The statements made by the friends are characterized by God as *'You did not speak the truth about Me.'* It is more difficult to point with absolute certainty to the incorrectness of the arguments made by the friends. Not all their statements are inherently wrong, although they are wrong in the particular case of Job, as we, who are privy to heavenly information, know. However, what damns the friends is that they claim to understand God's method of governing the world, an understanding that is clearly beyond man's comprehension. Eliphaz starts out: *'Remember please, did an innocent ever perish, or were the upright ever cut-off'* (4:7). *'I have seen the wicked take root, but suddenly I beheld his habitation cursed'* (5:3). The same theme is elaborated more fully by Eliphaz in 15:23-35, where he proclaims, in a manner that allows no exceptions, that the wicked are **invariably** doomed to a miserable and insecure life. Bildad similarly asserts:

'So are the paths of all who forget God and the hope of the wicked shall perish. Whose confidence is gossamer, and whose trust is a spider's web. He shall lean upon his house and it will not stand, he will hold onto it but it shall not endure' (8:13-15).

All these statements have validity in principle. But it flies in the face of human experience to assume that they invariably hold, as does Eliphaz in describing the inevitable good fortune of the just and the inevitable disaster awaiting the wicked: *'It is so, we have investigated it, indeed it is so, listen to us and you will understand'* (5:27). As Job points out, when the plague strikes

it does not distinguish between the just and the wicked: *'It is all one, therefore I say He destroys the innocent and the wicked. If the plague slays suddenly, He will mock at the calamity of the guiltless'* (9:22-23). Moreover, this apparent injustice does not occur by accident. It is God who rules the world in this manner, as in the following two statements by Job: *'The earth is given into the hand of the wicked, He covers the faces of the judges, if it be not He, who then is it?'* (9:24) and *'The tents of the robbers prosper, and they who provoke God are secure in what God brings into their hand'* (12:6). Job laments what is common knowledge, that the wicked are often both successful and happy:

'Why do the wicked live, they grow to old age and grow in power. Their children are established in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe without fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. Their bull genders and fails not, their cow calveth and does not abort. They send out their children like a flock, and their children dance. They sing to the timbrel and harp and rejoice at the sound of the pipe. They spend their days in prosperity, and peacefully go down to the grave. Yet they say unto God: "depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Your ways"' (21:7-14).

Job then "qualifies" these statements in verse 17: *'How often is the lamp of the wicked extinguished, that their calamity comes upon them, that He distributes to them [the wicked] their due?'* Truly, sometimes the wicked do suffer, but how often is that the rule?

Eliphaz, when unable to persuade Job to conform, uses an old argument. Even if you Job are right, admitting this would weaken faith in God, and this fact alone makes us right and you Job must be wrong: *'You [with your arguments] destroy fear, and impair devotion to God'* (15:4). To which Job counters: *'You have withheld from their heart wisdom, therefore you will not elevate them – or be elevated by them'* (17:4). Stupidity, falsehood and hypocrisy cannot be the means by which to achieve sanctification of the Divine Name.

The failure of Eliphaz, who as the most senior of the friends is their spokesman, is revealed in Chapter 22. He cannot come to terms with the facts as they are; that, indeed, some wicked do prosper and some righteous do

suffer. Therefore, in order to fit the facts to his theories, he resorts to outright lies and fabrications:

'Is your [Job's] wickedness not great, your sins are without end. You have taken pledges from your brother for naught, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have not given water to the weary, and withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power you have favored. The widow you have sent away empty, and the arms of the orphan you have broken' (22:5ff).

These statements are not based on any evidence, and we know from the Introduction that they are totally untrue.

Finally, to avoid defeat in further debate, Eliphaz decides to discredit Job. He calls him a non-believer, thereby placing him outside the pale: *'And you [Job] say: "What does God know? Can He judge through the dark clouds? He cannot see through the clouds, He is concerned only with the circuits of heaven - and by implication He is not concerned with lowly man"' (22:13-14).*

It is clear from the statements of the three friends that they are determined to justify God, using any argument, even if it is untenable.

Job ridicules this naïve concept of religion, the attempt to bribe God with flattery, a concept that goes back to idol worship, the attempt to curry favor with the supernatural powers: *'What is the hope of the flatterer, what will he profit, when God takes away his soul? Will God hear his cry, when trouble comes to him?' (27:8-9).* The implication is clearly negative, God does not like the flatterer.

FLATTERY: THE TRUE SIN

The term used predominantly in the Bible to describe the wicked is "*rasha*." But this is a general term, which does not specify the sin being committed. The dominant term used to refer to the sinner in the Book of Job however, is "*hanaf* [flatterer, hypocrite, sycophant]." It is used nine times in the Book of Job, synonymously with *rasha*, implying that the *hanaf* is the arch-sinner. We have here a book that clearly is not about Job alone but about Job and his "friends," and about two very different concepts of God. The outcome of the debate is decided by God: Job is correct, he is the righteous one; the friends are incorrect; they are the sinners. It is not merely that Job

passed the test, it is much more positive than that. True, Satan wanted to see whether Job would withstand the temptation of the "blessing" of God. But God, of course, well knew that Job would not fail that test. However, it can be argued that until the trial, Job's great character existed only in the potential. The trial and suffering were to demonstrate that God's characterization of Job was indeed warranted: *'My servant Job, there is none like him on earth, a whole hearted, upright and God fearing man, who shuns evil'* (1:8). The trial converted these dormant potential characteristics into actuality: Job not only did not sin, he spoke *the truth*, his searching to understand God, his intellectual honesty, is in fact what God in fact desires. Job has the character which earns him the title of *avdi* – My servant.

Of even greater significance is the unequivocal condemnation of the friends by God, Who instructs them:

'Now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job, and offer for yourselves a burnt offering, and My servant Job will pray for you, and to him will I listen, so that I do not do to you as one does to the base, for you have not spoken the truth about Me, as My servant Job has done' (42:8).

The friends have sinned because of their presumptuousness in claiming that they understand how God rules the world, in defiance of the fact that God Himself shows this to be beyond human understanding.⁵ When facts refute their theories, they refuse to acknowledge either the facts or their own ignorance, their fundamental sin is hypocrisy and thereby they reveal an underlying lack of true faith, the type of faith that Job demonstrates.

NOTES

1. There is also the related problem of "*rasha v'tov lo* [why do the wicked prosper]?" which is discussed during the second round of the discussions starting with Chapter 15, but this is not really Job's problem, neither is it as difficult to explain. After all, even the wicked man has some good deeds to his credit, and in any case God, "Full of Compassion" is willing to forgive and bring happiness even to the wicked. It is only man, with his imperfect nature and imperfect understanding, who might resent the good fortune of the undeserving.
2. The basis for this statement by Rava poses a problem. The Talmud quotes two statements in the Book of Job which are in conflict: (a) *Job speaks without knowledge and his words are without discernment* (34:35). (b) *for you have not spoken the truth about Me as My servant Job has* (42:8). The Gemara implies that there is a contradiction. However, it is difficult to see how

such an assumption can even be entertained. The second statement is made by God, the first is made by Elihu. There is clearly no need to reconcile them.

3. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941) pp. 660-707.

4. Some of the commentaries explain this statement as follows. The phrase *Job has spoken the truth* refers to the previous last statement by Job: *Therefore, I abhor my words and repent, seeing I am dust and ashes* (42:6). But the text does not really bear this out. It is God who says: *And it was after* (42:7). If indeed this is a response of God to Job's confession, the wording should be something such as: *And it was that after Job spoke*. God's address to the friends seems unrelated to Job's repentance. Moreover, the characterization of Job: *the truth, as My servant Job* is an unqualified endorsement of presumably all his statements. Similarly, some of the commentaries assert that God's criticism of the friends: *You did not speak about Me*, does not refer to their statements concerning God, but their harsh treatment of Job. However, the term used is *about Me*, the statements of the concerning God are wrong and which are referred to here, not those which were directed at Job. To say otherwise would be distorting a statement made by God. As both Metzudat David and Metzudat Zion point out, *eli* means "*ba'avur*," that is "concerning" or "on behalf of" God. It does not mean "addressed" to.

5. The long poem on the search for Wisdom fits in extremely well in this context. Some critics maintain it is not a part of the original book. However, since the message of the book is that knowledge of how the world is governed is beyond human understanding, this is exactly the message of this poem on Wisdom. The poem fits in perfectly. This, of course, is also the same message given in the story of the Garden of Eden, that Adam was driven out of the Garden so that he should not acquire this knowledge by eating from the *tree of knowledge*.

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Volume 34, 2006. We hope our loyal subscribers will enjoy their free subscription for 2006.

The Book of Job is a canonical work in both Christian and Jewish liturgy. In the story, Job, a man of faith, is tested by God through various horrible afflictions. Interpretations of this profoundly odd book are as many as the centuries of commentary it has undergone, but it is arguably one of the most beautifully-written books of the Bible - even the most secular of literary scholars still praise its pacing and profound wording. The Book of Job (/dʒɒb/; Hebrew: סֵפֶר יוֹב) addresses the problem of theodicy, meaning the vindication of the justice of God in the light of humanity's suffering. A rich theological work setting out a variety of perspectives, it has been widely and extravagantly praised for its literary qualities, with Alfred Lord Tennyson calling it "the greatest poem of ancient and modern times". It is found in the Ketuvim ("Writings") section of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and is the first poetic book in the Bible. The Book of Job is one of the most problematic portions of the Bible and has called forth a variety of interpretations. A major difficulty in understanding the meaning of the book is, what insight leads Job to submit so humbly to God at the end. (It should be kept in mind that Job is not the author, but the principal character.) Wild animals do not observe the tenets of human morality (38:15-16). Accordingly, God's speech can be construed to imply that material prosperity and misfortune do not constitute divine recompense or chastisement. Tsevat proposes that only the concept of a cosmic order that does not operate according to a built-in principle of moral retribution makes possible the selfless piety that was the first issue posed by the book of Job.