

## Newsletters

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# A Traditional Jewish Approach to the Problem of Evil

*Jewish thinkers have long struggled to understand why the righteous suffer. Here are some of their answers.*

BY RABBI SHLOMO ZUCKIER

The problem of evil, or theodicy, is a straightforward but deeply challenging one: How can an all-powerful and all-good God be the steward for a world that is home to so much evil and suffering?

While some religions can resort to explanations that paint God as less than omnipotent or completely benevolent, that would seem to be beyond the pale for classical Jewish theology, which insists that God is both. The problem is compounded by the principle of *sakhar va-onesh* — literally “reward and punishment,” the notion that God rewards the good and punishes the bad. From this perspective, not only is the question of righteous suffering a challenge, but so is the prospering of evildoers.

Jewish tradition offers two general approaches to this problem. One is the retributivist approach, whereby all suffering is the result of a specific sin. The other general approach avoids taking this step, whether by locating the root cause of evil in something other than God, denying the existence of evil, or pleading an inability to understand God’s ways.

Throughout the Torah and the later rabbinic writings, the retributivist approach was the dominant one. Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy promise health and prosperity if God’s laws are followed, and destruction and even exile if they aren’t. As [Jeremiah 9:12](#) puts it, “Why was the land destroyed? ... Because they [Israel] left my Torah.”

While the Hebrew Bible does contain some other ideas about good and evil, including Job chalking up evil to God's inscrutable will rather than a consistent application of reward and punishment, the retributivist approach remains primary. And while some texts — including some among the Dead Sea Scrolls — entertain the possibility that evil stems from some force other than God, this possibility is not a mainstream idea in Jewish thought.

Rabbinic literature, which largely continues the retributivist approach, is forced to contend with the fact that divine justice often seems to falter. The ancient rabbis offered several explanations. One of which is that if the righteous suffer, it is so they exhaust their punishment in this world and can enjoy uncompromised bliss in the next one. Some sources take this further, asserting that there is no true reward and punishment at all in this world — only in the world to come.

Another explanation is that times of national crisis may be exceptions to the usual rule, where the saints suffer along with the sinners. Unnoticed failings, and possibly even missed opportunities for Torah study, may justify the punishment of the righteous. God may also show closeness to someone by imposing suffering on them, which the Talmud refers to as “afflictions of love.” While some sources take a more skeptical attitude toward our ability to understand why God rewards some and punishes others, other sources attempt to do precisely that.

Medieval philosophers were very much occupied with this problem as well, not least of them Maimonides. In seeking to explain why God allows for evil perpetrated by people, Maimonides leans on the central principle of free will, without which all human action is meaningless. But this doesn't explain natural evil, like sickness or natural disasters. Maimonides has several suggestions besides the traditional retributivist one. Either evil can be understood as a function of humanity's physical (and therefore flawed) nature. Or it is the result of a privation — that is, the absence of goodness, and therefore not an entity unto itself that is attributable to God.

The medieval and early modern kabbalists also offered versions of this latter explanation in moving to distance evil from God. Whether as a result of God's contraction from this world (*tzimtzum*, in the language

of Jewish mysticism), or certain worldly evil forces (like the *sitra achra*, literally “the other side”), the kabbalists pointed to certain things God created or left in the world that retain the autonomy to do evil. Offering a different explanation centuries later, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook took the perspective that all things come from God and thus must contain a spark of good, such that evil must be holy too.

In the 20th century, the massive scale of the evil perpetrated by the Nazis gave a new urgency to these ancient questions. In responding to the immense theological challenges posed by the Holocaust, some liberal Jews embraced the idea that God is “hiding,” or even that God is dead, effectively removing God from the question of what happens in the world. But the Orthodox approach has generally been to double down on retributivism, insisting that the abandonment of Jewish tradition, failing to immigrate to Israel, or some other religious failing was the cause of the Holocaust.

Taking a more moderate Orthodox approach, the theologian Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggested that the appropriate Jewish response to evil is not to attempt to understand it, but to respond to it — to fight human evil where it exists and to utilize human suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Soloveitchik developed not a metaphysic, but an ethic of suffering. The right question to ask about evil is not why, but what. This view can be seen as consistent with the longstanding Jewish tradition of formulating laments in response to national tragedy — beginning with the biblical book of Lamentations, written in response to the destruction of the ancient Temple. As it writes, “Let us search and examine our ways, and let us return to the Lord.”

Today, there is often little tolerance for attempts to reconcile the persistence of evil in the world with faith in a beneficent and all-powerful God, for suggesting that those who suffer are somehow deserving of their fate out of a desire to avoid the conclusion that God either cannot, or will not, relieve their pain. But retributivist theodicy is by no means dead, as can be seen from the many attempts to explain which sin was the cause of the coronavirus pandemic. The great Jewish debate over theodicy, over how to square a perfect God with an imperfect world, rages on.

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