THE HEBREW ENCOUNTER WITH EVIL

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The Hebrew attitude toward the apparent existence of evil in the world has generally been to adopt the principle that the individual ought not to deny his own experience. Such a principle leads to the acceptance of evil as a fact of human existence. Consequently, the further problem is to understand human existence, informed by this recognition, in its relationship to God.

Abraham bar Ḥiyya expresses the classic orthodox view when he asserts that God is the author of both good (*tov*) and evil (*rah*). In fact the idea of God as creator is expressed for man through the notion of separation (*havdalah*). That there is a distinction between things and a separation of parts in the natural world, preparing the world for its inhabitation by man, lays the groundwork for the recognition of a separation made in the Law (*Torah*) between the holy and the profane, between good and evil. Further, as the heavens and earth are separated in the act of creation from primal chaos (*tohu va'bohu*) so it is suggested that good and evil are separated with each having real existence. Indeed, there is direct scriptural evidence for bar Ḥiyya's assertion: e.g., "Do not out of the most high come both good and evil?" (Lamentations 3: 38.)

With both scriptural assertion and the experience of human beings that not only good but also evil is a reality, the great problem turns on the relationship of God to evil, of man to evil, and of God to man and man to God in a world where evil exists.

Maimonides helps to focus the difficulty by distinguishing three categories of evil. First, there is physical evil, that is, natural calamities; second, personal evil, that is, self-indulgence and bad habits; third, social evil, that is, the chaos that besets the dealings of men with each other. This distinction helps to assign responsibility for evil. First, since natural calamities are beyond human control, God, "the Judge of heaven and earth," has the responsibility for the cosmic organization of the natural world. Second, if we assume freedom of the will, personal evil seems the responsibility of the individual human being. Nevertheless, man might plead the extenuating circumstances of environment, social role, etc., which as it limits his freedom limits his responsibility. Hence responsibility for this evil as well, or at least in some part, may be assigned to God. Third, again granting human freedom, social evil seems to demand mutual responsibility: men have some though limited control over the chaos of social and political relationships which leads to the question of God's responsibility for history, the most general category for social and political relationships.

Prophetic religion presents man's relationship to God, especially in the dimension of social evil, as based on the condition of trust (*emunah*). Trust is, as it is fashionable to say, an existential encounter between man and God: it allows for a meeting with God (*moade Hashem*): "Then shall thou call, and the Lord will answer: Thou shall cry and He will say, 'Here I am.'" (Isaiah

58:9.) "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth." (Psalm 145:18.)

This encounter is with God as Creator, conditioned by the aspects of divine creation which are justice (*mishpat*) and love (*hesed*) or mercy (*rachmon*). Such a view understands the creativity of God not only as extended to the physical world but also finds Him to be the creative force in the historical dimension and also, in an essential sense, creative in the personal dimension as well, forming the individual's character in the very meeting with God itself. Yet it must be understood that man's meeting with God, whose creativity encompasses all spheres, is concrete, speaking to the specific circumstance of the individual and his problems, that must be dealt with by action. Acts of righteousness (*tzedakah*), justice and mercy testify to the encounter; the individual has become "like" God and becomes an agent of God's goodness in the concrete specifics of his life.

The trust-relationship between man and God is scripturally signified by three covenants, speaking to the three categories of evil distinguished by Maimonides. God covenanted with Noah that the physical world will be spared destruction. The covenant of circumcision made with Abraham and his progeny is a sign—in the flesh and, as Jeremiah has it, in the heart—that the human individual has a relationship to God. Again, the covenant of Law made with the Children of Israel at Sinai establishes God as the foundation of social justice. In each of these covenants trust is a necessary component, relating man to God's power: "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth, saith the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:24.) Thus, trust in God guarantees that man's striving for justice—rooted as it is in his own nature, man

made in the "image" (*zal*) of God—is to be preserved in the creative aspect of righteousness: "The rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice. O God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and righteous is He." (Deuteronomy 32: 4.) "Righteous art Thou, O Lord, and right are Thy judgments." (Psalm 119: 137.) "Thus says that Lord to the house of Israel: Seek Me and live; . . . Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; . . . Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate." (Amos 5:4, 5: 14,15.) "In returning to God and in rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30: 15.)

Nevertheless, despite God's covenants and repeated guarantees of justice, the question arising from human experience persists: "Why do the wicked prosper?" (Jeremiah 12: 1.) And even Father Abraham, whom Kierkegaard sees as the paradigmatic figure of the "knight of faith" asks, "Shall the judge of all the earth not deal justly?" (Genesis 18: 25.) We have the tension between God who proclaims His justice and asks man to trust in this despite the apparent suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. Can a religious answer resolve the difficulty?

One type of religious answer attempts to resolve the difficulty through speculative philosophy. Despite the array of distinguished Jewish thinkers who have chosen this path—e.g., Saadia Goan, Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Gabirol, Spinoza —this "going to the Greeks" has been looked upon with suspicion. Yehudah Halevi has it thus, "Do not be enticed by the wisdom of the Greeks, which only bears fair blossoms but not fruit."

The feeling of suspicion voiced by Yehudah Halevi is based on a philosophical answer to the problem of evil which would

deny to man his individuality and the authentic dignity of his experiences including his suffering, by sweeping his being into the Godhead. The philosophical tradition of Philo, Plotinus, St. Augustine, rejects the possibility of God as the cause of evil or, in fact, that evil exists. They see evil as an illusion of limitations, of human imperfection. God from Whom comes "both the evil things and the good" is only the common man's *figura* for the God of the philosophers for whom evil cannot be in a universe animated and arranged by a totally good Creator and Sustainer.

For the neo-Platonic philosopher the road to perfection, the *scala perfectionis*, ends "when thou hast transcended thyself and all things in immeasurable and absolute purity of mind, thou shall ascend to the superessential rays of divine shadows, leaving all behind and freed from the ties of all." (Dionysius, *Mystic Theology*, Ch. I.) This mystical unification is grounded in the metaphysical assumption that the more general a class, i.e., the more logically inclusive, the more real and perfect it becomes. God's "plenitude of being" logically includes lower existents. His power emanates (Plotinus) or flows as a *fons vitae* (Ibn Gabirol) or as a candle, shining its truth both for itself and for the darkness (Spinoza): it sustains and is the foundation of all existence.

The actualized perfection of the human being overcomes the logical and the ontological separation with God who is usually identified with the supreme metaphysical principle, Being. Sometimes, as with Plato and Plotinus, the supreme principle is on "the other side of Being," the One. St. Bonaventure provides a classic locus in medieval neo-Platonized theology of the God that "is that He is": "Being is most pure and absolute,

that which is Being simply is first and last and, therefore, the origin and final cause of all. Because eternal and most present, therefore it encompasses and penetrates all duration, existing at once at the center and at the circumference. Because most simple and greatest, therefore it is entirely within and without all things...." (*The Mind's Road to God*, Ch. 5,8.)

Modern Hebrew neo-Platonic thought presents the same characteristic tendency to sweep up all existence into a unity and identity with God. Ḥabad Ḥassidim's classic text, *Liqqutè Amarim* (*Tanya*), written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, employs the cabalistic doctrine of *ẓimẓum*, that is that God, in His infinite mercy, contracted his "plentitude of Being" in order to allow for the creation of beings, in order to allow for the possibility of the existence of something other than God. Compare Rabbi Joseph Schneersohn, *On the Teaching of Chassidus*, when he says, "In the process of creation, God being the absolute infinite, finite existence would be precluded without the initial great condensation (*ẓimẓum*). Innumerable subsequent condensations progressively conceal His infinity, making possible the existence of physical, finite creatures. The millenial goal is the improvement and elevation of creation to the point that it be fully conscious of, and united with, the infinite, while retaining its present character." (Trans. Z. Posner: Kehot, 1959, p. 14.)

Rabbi Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, in his *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* (*Light of Repentance*), pointedly expresses a view of evil in the neo-Platonic orientation: "At the time that a man sins he is in 'the world of separation,' and then every detail stands by itself, and evil is evil by itself, and it possesses evil and harmful value. When he repents out of love, there immediately shines

upon him the existential light of the world of unity, where all is interwoven into one form.   In the general relationship there is no evil at all, for evil combines with virtue to facilitate and exalt even further the significant worth of goodness.   Thereby are intentionally evil deeds transformed into veritable deeds of merit." (Ch. XII, 5.)

However, does this not negate the suffering of righteous whom the rabbis consider the foundation of the world (*tzaddik yesod 'olam*).   Logically, their righteousness, if it involves suffering, is a less than perfect unification with the center of centers, Being. Their suffering testifies to separation from the Godhead whose perfect actualization (Aristotle) leaves no room for suffering. For this view, a deity who makes covenants and promises within the temporal dimension would be absurd.   Also, there is no room left for the human condition: its expression in qualities such as fear and relationships such as trust through a meeting with God: "That they may learn to fear the Lord and observe all the words of this Law."   (Deuteronomy 31: 12.)   "Happy is he who fears the Lord."   (Psalm 112: 1.)   "...And I will say to them who were not my people, thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God."   (Hosea 2: 23.)

By a nullification of the palpable evil that is the common experience of mankind, this "athenic perspective," to use a phrase of Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal), transcends and makes unnecessary the trust-relationship which is so fundamental to Hebrew thought: "Though He slay me I will trust in Him." Indeed, when the rabbinic tradition speaks words such as those of Rav Huna, "Always one should say, 'Whatever the merciful One does it is the good'" (Berakhot 69b), they should be under-

stood as asserting trust. So also the teleology of Rav Judah
is not logical but a stance of character molded by trust: "Of
all that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He
did not create a single thing without a purpose." (Sabbath 77b.)

The trust-relationship soes not blunt the poignancy of question-
ing God's toleration of evil, it increases it: "Thou who art of
purer eyes then to behold evil and canst not look on wrong, why
dost Thou look upon faithless men, and art silent when the wick-
ed swallow up the man more righteous than he." (Habakkuk
1:13.) Also, the trust-relationship does not smooth the tension
between trust and the intransigencies of human perception of
evil. Trust does not cut loose the logical impasse as in the
medieval Muslim doctrine of *biya kayla*, that is, though we reason
to logical incompatibles both nevertheless must be held. Indeed,
the trust-relationship is rather a psychological-historical response
than a logical response to evil. It is not the *scala perfectionis*
that refines the individual but rather Jacob's ladder.

The Hebrew attitude does not deal with logical classes, it
deals with events. Theophany, the meeting with God, is an
event. And, as an event, it provides the psychological strength
to act in concrete circumstances: the struggle with and toward
"the image of God" transforms a rudderless or phantastic-idola-
trous reaction to circumstance into one of justice whose dimensions
are as multiple as God's love and creativity: on the *baraita*, "Thou
shall love the Lord thy God," the rabbis say, "That the name
of God shall become loved by your behavior." (Yuma 86a.)

Consequently, the existence of palpable evil and suffering pre-
sent the opportunity for men to grow serious—"If I am not for
myself, who am I?" (Hillel, *Mishna Abot*)—and in seriousness,

for the Hebrew, there is a meeting with God in whose justice he must trust and who thereby demands and confirms that he must act justly: "I put on justice and it clothed me." (Job 29: 14.) And this clothe of justice is of a piece which is to be used in the pathways of the individual's life. Justice implies for the Hebrew the separating out that human choice makes for either doing the good and lawful or the wicked. Perhaps, as Rabbi Kook suggested, it is a turning and a returning—a repentance (*teshuvah*)—to the "light of life" (*orot ha-ḥaim*). Yet, such a light does not blind the individual to himself nor does it destroy human finitude: "To open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." (Isaiah 42: 6-7.)... "You are my witnesses!" (Isaiah 44: 8.)