

# INTRODUCTION

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Schwartz*

An explanation of major themes within the Book of Job based mainly on the writings of the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim) with important additions from the Ramban (Nachmanides) and the Biur HaGra (commentary of the Vilna Gaon).

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The *Malbim*, in the introduction to his commentary on this holy book, explains that the main purpose of the Book of Job is to expound upon one of the most perplexing phenomena in the human experience; the apparent lack of justice throughout history. All too often the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. The underlying pain in this question has bothered the great thinkers in every generation including the greatest of all prophets, Moses.

It is the confusion which results from considering this paradox that led many people to reject the path of belief and faith in a righteous and living G-d.

Job was a devout and righteous man, yet his suffering was terrible and came for no apparent reason. As a man of unwavering faith, Job could not reconcile his belief in a merciful G-d with the tragedy of his own lot. Therefore, he felt it was reasonable to surmise that in fact, G-d does not concern Himself with the welfare of human beings. He neither rewards nor punishes according to our deeds. G-d is too exalted and man is too lowly for Him to be bothered with our behavior and needs.

He concluded that the fate of mankind is out of our hands, that we are subject to mechanical forces beyond our control set irrevocably in motion at the time of creation. The results of our decisions and actions deceptively appear to be the outcome of our own free will. In reality they are a product of celestial prescripts. If our deeds are the consequence of predetermined design we cannot be rewarded or held accountable for them. Job's answer to his own suffering is that he is the victim of fate, until his friend Elihu finally convinces him otherwise.

Before we begin a conceptual analysis of this holy book it will be helpful to clarify four things:

1. Who wrote it?
2. What is its content?
3. In what form is the material presented?

#### 4. What is the purpose of this book?

Let us consider each these questions:

##### 1. Who wrote it?

From *chazal* (our Sages) z"l, it is clear that the authorship of this book is attributed to *Moshe* (Moses) *Rabbeinu* (our teacher). This point is discussed in the tractate *Bava Bathra* page 14b. The *Malbim* explained that *Moshe* wrote it to console the Hebrew nation when they were enslaved and suffering under Egyptian oppression.

##### 2. What is its content?

The book of Job (in Hebrew *Iyov*) is the story of an exceedingly righteous man who is afflicted with horrific suffering for no apparent reason. While the main character is obviously *Iyov*, it is not at all clear who this person was. In fact the Talmud ( *Bava Bathra* page 14b ) contains a long dispute if *Iyov* was a Jew, a gentile, or indeed if he at all existed.

According to the latter opinion the book of Job is a parable. It seems that most of our sages did not accept this opinion. But even according to this minority opinion we cannot relegate this work to the realm of empty fiction or myth. We can confidently claim that it is the greatest commentary on human suffering ever written.

It is interesting to note that the *Vilna Gaon* offers a fascinating interpretation of this Talmudic passage. According to his approach the latter opinion does not dispute the reality of *Iyov*. Rather it explains the purpose of his existence. He ( *Iyov* ) was created to be a role model ( a "*mashal*" in Hebrew ) from whom everyone can learn the appropriate way to accept suffering. Accordingly, we are to take a lesson from *Iyov* that man has no license to sit in judgment of G-d. He ( G-d ) does not need our moral approval. Although at times some of His ways may seem to be harsh they are allways based on absolute justice. Alas, the world of the absolute is often beyond our comprehension.

The tragic suffering of *Iyov* evokes the strong protest of all fair minded human beings: Should the righteous suffer? This question has to be one of mankind's most elusive mysteries since time immemorial. Several answers are presented and fiercely debated throughout the chapters of the book. They are forwarded by the friends of *Iyov*: *Eliphaz*, *Beldad*, *Tzofer*, and *Elihu*.

There is also a curiously veiled character who appears in the story; the *Satan*. He is the antagonist, the prosecutor, the villain (additional pejorative epithets are optional). His motivations are not clear, but his influence is clearly demonstrated. We will devote special attention to the subject of the Satan in one of our future installments.

There can be no discussion on human suffering without mention of G-d. Indeed, comprehending G-d's role in the world is essential in order to understand this book. His acquiescence to the *Satan* is

simultaneously perplexing and disturbing. The absence of Divine intervention throughout this drama lends strong support to Iyov's contention that G-d neither scrutinizes human behavior nor concerns Himself with the human plight.

### 3. In what form is the material presented?

The discussions and arguments are presented in the form of a dialogue between Iyov and his friends. Each of these characters presents a unique approach to Iyov's plight. On the one hand Iyov is a believer, a man of intense faith and devout service. However, he cannot accept that a merciful, righteous G-d would consent to the dreadful suffering meted out to him at the hands of the *Satan*. The foundations of theology are tested in a battle field of what appears to be senseless human suffering. The issues are hotly debated between Iyov and his three friends. Finally Iyov finds balm for his wounds in the wisdom of *Elihu ben Barachel*.

### 4. What is the purpose of this book?

*Moshe* wrote this book as a source of consolation for his brethren who were suffering at the hands of their brutal Egyptian slave masters. They wanted to know why the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper. This was an issue with which *Moshe* had to struggle with his entire life time. As a young man he saw both the tranquillity of Pharaoh's palace and his brothers subjected to arduous labor and cruel torture. He felt compelled to find out if there was order and justice in the world or if man was just to suffer silently? Indeed, *Moshe* was so absorbed with this issue that on one momentous occasion when his intimate relationship with G-d could have secured for him whatever his heart desired, *Moshe* requested only two things:

1. That G-d cause His Divine Presence to dwell only amongst the Jewish nation for eternity.
2. That G-d grant him the wisdom to understand the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked.

Our Sages tell us that although *Moshe* was granted his first request. The second remained concealed from him.

Our Sages reveal to us that ultimately there is an approach which can help us constructively accept our own misfortunes and suffering, however they make it clear that no absolute solution is available. Let us be patient in our investigations and all the more so in our conclusions. Let us have the humility and integrity to recognize and accept our own human limitations. After all, we have not the prophetic powers of *Moshe* nor the wisdom of Solomon and even they could not uncover the answer. It is crucial to realize that our limitations in understanding does not mean that suffering is without reason or plan. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato explains in his book *Daas Tevunos* that part of our reward in the world to come will be that G-d will reveal to us the meaning of every bit of pain and suffering that we experienced in our life times.

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