THE PERFECT SCRIPT WRITER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Your right hand, God, is glorious in power; Your right hand smashes the enemy into pieces. (Shemos 15:6)

The story of Iyov is the quintessential example of an age-old philosophical issue, that being why do bad things happen to good people. It is a question, according to the Talmud, that even Moshe Rabbeinu himself asked God while on Har Sinai after achieving forgiveness for the Jewish people's involvement in the golden calf (Brochos 7a).

Seemingly, Iyov had been a thoroughly righteous person who had done little wrong to warrant the personal destruction he experienced. Yet, prompted by God Himself, the Satan, a.k.a. the Accusing Angel, brought upon Iyov tremendous personal hardship, causing him to lose his wealth, his health, and even his family.

The rest of the story is about Iyov coming to terms with his personal tragedy. First he, and then his friends, tried to find a rational explanation for his misfortune. With the exception of Elihu, they could find none, and therefore they concluded that Iyov could not have been as righteous as they had previously thought. For, they assumed, God does not punish and allow suffering for no reason.

However, Iyov rejected their deduction, knowing full well that he had done everything in his power to be loyal to God. And, after his friends took leave of him and God Himself paid Iyov a visit, he took the opportunity to question God about what had befallen him.

Rather than sympathize with Iyov, God criticized him sharply for even questioning His judgment. He asked Iyov:

"Who is this who disgraces [My judgment, which is made with] secret wisdom, with words [which he speaks] without knowledge [of the secret wisdom]? ... Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell [Me] if you have knowledge to understand its foundation?" (Iyov 38:1-4)

From there, God took Iyov on an intellectual tour of the universe, showing him the tremendous wisdom with which He made Creation, and maintains it. And, in spite of the fact that God did not provide Iyov with a precise answer for his own personal tragedy, it seemed to have sufficed for Iyov, whose only response was:

"Behold, I am worthless, so how can I answer You? I place my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I won't respond [again]. A second time, I will not [complain] anymore." (Iyov 40:4-5)

Humbled by the awesomeness of the Divine wisdom, Iyov felt ashamed that he ever doubted the

workings of his Creator. He came to realize from God's response that, as smart as man may be, his vision of reality is still incredibly limited, and therefore he is never capable of fully comprehending Divine judgment, if at all.

However, though Iyov himself may not have been aware of the cause of his suffering, apparently the Talmud was:

Rav Chiya bar Avva said in the name of Simai: Three were involved in that advice [to enslave and oppress the Jewish people], and they were Bilaam, Iyov, and Yisro. Bilaam advised to kill them, Iyov remained silent and was punished with suffering, and Yisro fled and merited descendants who sat in the office of hewn stone (i.e., the chamber in which the Sanhedrin officiated). (Sanhedrin 106a)

It is so simple that you don't have to even resort to Sod to figure it out. Iyov had remained silent while standing before Pharaoh, and failed to cast the deciding vote in favor of freeing the Jewish people. And, since, as the Talmud teaches:

All the traits of The Holy One, Blessed is He, are [based upon the principle of] measure-for-measure . . . (Sanhedrin 90a)

measure-for-measure, for having remained silent in Pharaoh's court and allowing, at least indirectly, the suffering of the Jewish nation in Egypt, Iyov himself was punished with tremendous suffering. Thus, even on the level of Drush there is an answer for why bad things happen to good people, at least with respect to the story of Iyov.

However, anyone who ignores the Talmud and simply reads the Book of Iyov enters the story in the middle, so-to-speak, and not at the beginning, and hence, of course questions are going to arise regarding the fairness of Divine judgment.

Even though in this case the perplexing question is answered through the Talmud, in truth, it is still Kabbalah that provides the key pieces of the puzzle that truly reveal the justice in what occurred to the seemingly righteous Iyov. It also explains why the Satan plays such a major role in the story, many years after Iyov had left the court of Pharaoh for his own home.

It took 116 years, but eventually the end of the Egyptian servitude came, and the Jewish people left Egypt en masse in the year 2448/1313 BCE, after being in Egypt a total of 210 years. Nevertheless, as the Torah writes, Pharaoh regretted his decision to free the slave nation and pursued them with his best soldiers, and trapped them at the shores of the Red Sea.

But, God divided the waters and allowed the descendants of Avraham to flee to safety once again. The sea splitting also drew the Egyptian army into the sea after them, after which God returned the waters and drowned every last Egyptian who entered the sea. Pharaoh, wisely, did not.

Awestruck and extremely grateful, the Jewish people sang praise to God, reciting the following verse:

Your right hand, God, is glorious in power; Your right hand smashes into pieces the enemy (Aleph-Vav-Yud-Bais). (Shemos 15:6)

On the simpler levels of Torah learning, there is nothing unusual about these words to suggest a deeper meaning. However, the Arizal points out, the letters of the word "enemy" are, in fact, the same letters as that of "Iyov" —Aleph-Yud-Vav-Bais—and this is not by coincidence, for it was Iyov who provided themeans for the Jewish nation's escape across the sea. How is that? The answer to that question comes from knowing what took place by the sea, just before it finally split and provided the fleeing Jewish people with dry land on which to tread. For, as the Jewish people stood in the water up to their necks and in a grave state of danger, it was then that the Prosecuting Angel—the Satan—hurled his accusations against the Jewish people before God.

"Master of the Universe," he argued, "did not the Jews worship idols in Egypt as well? Why do they deserve miracles?" (Yalkut Shimoni, 1:234)

The truth was, as the Midrash points out, he had a good point. Indeed, the Jewish people, because of their previous deeds, warranted Divine punishment, and should have been left to drown right there in the sea. However, there was a problem, and that was that God had promised Avraham Avinu hundreds of years earlier:

On that day, God made a covenant with Avram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land ..." (Bereishis 15:18)

And, as the Talmud points out:

Every promise of good that comes from the mouth of The Holy One, Blessed is He, even if conditional, is never retracted. (Brochos 7a)

This, of course, created a dilemma. On one hand, there was the promise made to Avraham Avinu to eventually bring his descendants to Eretz Yisroel. However, the last of those descendants were neck-deep in a raging sea, with the Egyptian army ready to pounce on them from the other direction, while the Prosecuting Angel hovered above, removing all possibility of a miraculous salvation. What to do?

It is at this point that the Book of Iyov begins, reveals the Arizal: God said to the Prosecuting Angel at that precise time:

"From where do you come?"

And the Prosecuting Angel answered God, "From searching the earth and from traveling in it [looking for people's sins]."

And God said, "Have you noticed My servant Iyov, that there is none like him on earth? [He is] a perfect and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." (Iyov 1:7-8)

The Talmud has an expression:

Do not open your mouth to the Satan (Kesuvos 8b)

and the story of Iyov is the reason why. For, any type of bragging of righteousness is a direct invitation to the Satan to come and investigate the merits and demerits of the one being praised. If the investigation finds fault in the object of conceit, judgment can be swift and costly, perhaps even fatal.

Thus, speaking so highly of Iyov in the face of the Satan, God was, in effect, prompting an investigation into the merits and demerits of Iyov, and it is THIS that resulted in the supreme test he underwent. The only question is, since God knows this, why did He do it?

The answer is, to pull the Satan away from the Jewish people, in order to end his prosecution of them by the sea. This way, God could perform the necessary miracle to save the Jewish people, and fulfill the promise to Avraham Avinu. In other words, after failing to be the vehicle of redemption from the Egyptians 116 years earlier when he had the chance to, Iyov, at the sea, became the vehicle for their redemption from the Egyptians—measure-for-PERFECT-measure.

However, the story of Iyov is not complete yet; Sod has more to say about the source of his suffering:

Terach, Avraham's father, reincarnated into and was rectified by Iyov. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 36)

The truth is, this is really what Elihu told Iyov when he said:

[Consequently, God] has redeemed his soul from passing into Gihenom, and his living soul will see the light [of the World-to-Come, when the time comes for him to die]. (Iyov 33:28)

God in His kindness created the concept of gilgulim—reincarnations—in order that no soul should be expelled from the World-to-Come. (Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya)

Yes, Elihu told Iyov, you are righteous in THIS life. However, what about in your previous lives, all of which make up the totality of your being. Is it not possible that you are rectifying today something that was wrong from the past, before you were even born into this reincarnation?

Indeed, explains the Arizal, the concept of "the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward for a sin is a sin" actually spans lifetimes (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 38), making it next to impossible for us to be able to figure out why we, or others who seem innocent of their pains, suffer. The best we can do is take note of how what we are going through can be used to improve our future lot, in this world and the next one.

One thing is certain, as mourners say as they rend their clothing over the death of a near relative, "God is just." We have a mitzvah to judge others to the side of merit, even when it looks like they are guilty, at least until they are proven to be guilty, and even then, we have to judge them to the side of

merit as to how they may have come to be guilty. How much more so must we judge God to the side merit, no matter how much the situation incriminates Him, because He is never guilty of being unjust.

Even in situations where God admits guilt, so-to-speak, as in the case of reducing the light of the moon, even asking us to bring a Sin-Offering on His behalf on Rosh Chodesh, if you can imagine such a thing, it is mostly for show. God, of course, has done nothing wrong, but reduced the light of the moon for our sake, to give us free-will, and earn eternal reward for making good decisions.

Hard to see how that is true? Learn the Zohar and its commentaries, which spend many pages discussing the entire issue, which is a major one in Kabbalah. The bottom line is that we human beings are like movie-goers, who watch a film on the screen oblivious to all the technical things taking place around it. There are film crews, and a whole host of people standing around trying to make the shoot a success, so that it can become the movie we are watching.

Furthermore, we don't know the script, and go along with the plot as if it is unfolding for the actors as it does for us sitting in the theatre. In reality, everyone on stage knows the entire plot already, and any suspense of and misunderstandings that arise along the way are purely those of the audience.

The same can be said about real life. Except that even though we are the actors, we are unable to fathom the entire plot, or see the film crew, and have to go with the flow just like the audience would have to. Therefore, all we can do is be the best we can be at all times, and trust that the Script Writer has done a perfect job of being just, and at leaving no loose ends.

Text

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