

SUFFERING, SIN AND THE WAYS OF GOD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Oratz

*Can there be a misfortune in a city and
God has not brought it? (Amos 3:6)*

On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic earthquake hit the country of Haiti, causing widespread devastation and massive loss of life and limb, and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. The international community, shocked by the indescribable human tragedy, immediately galvanized efforts to bring relief to, and express solidarity with, the suffering people of Haiti. Prominently included among those expressing solidarity and offering humanitarian aid was the State of Israel and the Jewish community—including the Orthodox Jewish community.¹

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1 As was widely reported at the time, the State of Israel was the first to have an advanced field hospital setup in Haiti. For the Orthodox involvement, see, for example, Peter Applebom, “Haitians and Hasidim Find Common Cause,” *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2010.

There were other reactions to the tragedy as well. As frequently happens when faced with human suffering on such a massive scale, people struggled with the age-old question of “Why has God done thus to this land? What has caused this great anger?”² And, as is inevitably the case, there were those who felt they had the answer, felt they understood the ways of God,³ and confidently made pronouncements as to the precise cause of the tragedy.

In the case of Haiti, a popular non-Jewish clergyman went so far as to explain why God’s great wrath was specifically on *this land*: not only had the people of Haiti forsaken the covenant with God; they had made one with the devil. Others offered alternate explanations. An Iranian cleric, for example, was quoted as proclaiming that earthquakes are caused by the immodest dress of women.

As expected, these positions were excoriated and ridiculed in the media—excoriated for the seeming callousness to the pain of the people of Haiti⁴ and ridiculed for thinking that one could read the mind of God. Others went further and argued that it was wrong to even suggest that there *was* a reason for the tragedy. After all, earthquakes are caused by shifting tectonic plates; what does the devil or women’s immodesty have to do with it?

Criticism came from all corners. Using his sharp wit and comedic brilliance, a popular Jewish comedian ripped into the aforementioned clergyman and went so far as to offer a lesson in what he felt was the proper religious response to tragedy. Quoting from the books of Isaiah and Psalms, he read verses that offer comfort and speak of God’s unwavering love of humanity. The irony of a secular, Jewish comedian lecturing a world-famous clergyman was duly noted.⁵

I use the tragedy in Haiti as an example because the responses on both sides

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/21/nyregion/21towns.html>); and “OU to Help Victims of Earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, *News*, Orthodox Union, Mar. 3, 2010 (http://www.ou.org/news/article/ou_to_help_victims_of_earthquakes_in_haiti_and_chile).

2 *Devorim* 29:23.

3 See *Shemos* 33:13 and *Berachos* 7a.

4 It should be noted that the clergyman’s comments were made in the context of a fund-raising drive for the earthquake victims. It is very likely that many of those who harshly critiqued his comments did less for the suffering people of Haiti than he did. This, however, may be of no consequence; see Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Matnos Aniyim* 10:4-5.

5 See Jeffrey Weiss, “Haiti and the Pat Robertson Paradox,” *Free Republic*, Jan. 22, 2010 (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/2434701/posts>).

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were stark and passionate; the pattern, however, repeats constantly. During the recent devastating fires that swept through *Eretz Yisroel*, a prominent rabbinic figure offered his opinion as to the cause of the Divine wrath. As expected, he was taken to task by an observant professor of English literature for offering a picture of God that is cartoonish, nasty, and petty.⁶ Whether it is hurricanes, earthquakes or Israeli forest fires, the responses on both sides are predictable and not particularly illuminating.

And the debate does not surround major tragedies only. Recently, a number of prominent rabbis found the need to issue a public warning against a popular speaker, specifically critiquing him for his repeated claims of knowing why tragic events occur.

It is easy to criticize a speaker who seemingly mocks the idea of having compassion on blind children, and it does not take much effort to offer red meat rhetoric to the readers of secular Israeli newspapers—far more difficult, but far more necessary, is to approach honestly the full depth of sources within Jewish tradition. Is there validity to the claim that the very idea of looking for a spiritual cause for physical tragedy is misguided? What does one do with the numerous sources that seem to indicate that we are allowed, nay *obligated*, to look for such meaning in personal and communal tragedy?⁷ Is it not an

6 William Kolbrener, “Israel Fires as ‘Divine Retribution’? The Cartoon God of Israel’s Settler Rabbis,” *Haaretz.com*, Nov. 28, 2016 (<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.755752>).

7 A sampling of sources: See *Vayikro* 26:14-44; *Devorim* 11:13-18, 28:1-69, 29:19-27, 31:16-19; *Mishnah Avos* 5:8-9; *Berachos* 5a, *Shabbos* 31b-33b, *Yevamos* 63a; *Megillah* 31a and Rashi *ad loc.*, *s.v. berachos*; and Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 6:1.

With specific regard to earthquakes, see *Tehillim* 104:32; *Berachos* 59a (and the comments of Rabbeynu Chananel and Rav Nissim Gaon [published by Machon Lev Sameach, Jerusalem, 5750], *ibid.*); and *Yerushalmi, Berachos* 9:2 (64a). Great rabbinic figures who commented on causes of earthquakes include the Chasam Sofer (discussing the 1837 earthquake in Tzefas), see *Toras Moshe*, end of *Parshas Emor*, and the Chofetz Chaim (discussing an earthquake in Yerushalayim in 5697), see *Kol Kisvey Chofetz Chaim*, v. 3, *Letters*, p. 299 (“God forbid to say it was mere happenstance...”).

For fire being caused by desecration of Shabbos, see *Shabbos* 119b. For a popular contemporary work that brings this idea (along with other sources), see Rabbi Dovid Ribiat’s *The 39 Melochos* (Feldheim, 2005), v. 1, p. 5.

Regarding the reason children are born blind, see *Nedarim* 20a.

For immorality and immodesty as a specific cause of catastrophe, see *Yerushalmi Berachos* 9:2 (64a); *Yerushalmi Sotah* 5:1 (6a); *Rashi, Bereyshit* 6:13 *s.v. keitz* (cited even in *halachic* works, see *Iggeros Moshe, Even haEzer* 3:50); and *Rashi, Yoma* 76b *s.v. shemayvi*. Famously, the Chofetz

exercise in hubris to claim to know better than the revered rabbinic figures (in previous generations and in ours) who offered reasons for tragedy? On the other hand, can even the greatest of human beings,⁸ even the heavenly angels,⁹ truly comprehend the ways of the Almighty?

There are those who, claiming to base themselves on the rationalist school of Jewish thought, respond unequivocally. Yes, the whole enterprise is misguided. No, there is no point in looking for the hand of the Creator in such events. God runs the world through nature. Earthquakes are a natural phenomenon caused by shifting tectonic plates. Port-au-Prince lies on top of a fault line. Earthquakes cause death and destruction—very tragic, but also very natural and normal.

What follows below is my attempt to offer an authentic Jewish approach¹⁰ to this issue, one that clarifies our appropriate response to the suffering of others (and ourselves), an approach that does justice to our being a nation that is merciful and the children of merciful, bashful purveyors of kindness,¹¹ and

Chaim cites the verse “So that he may see no shameful thing among you and turn away from you” (*Devorim* 23:15) to show that immodesty and immorality is a cause of God turning away from the Jewish people, thereby causing natural disaster and catastrophe. See *Chofetz Chaim al haTorah* (New York: Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim, 5703), p. 50, 193-194, 241-243. This idea has been plastered on posters and proclaimed over megaphones throughout the streets of Yerushalayim, and been highlighted in many contemporary *tzenius* lectures, articles, and books. See, for example, Aviva Rappaport, *Woman to Woman* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1996), p. 211-212.

I recall the *Yerushalmi Berachos*, which mentions both homosexuality and God’s pain at seeing theaters full while the Holy Temple is in ruins, being highlighted during the 1989 earthquake that struck the San Francisco area and postponed the World Series. I do not recall, however, if it was mentioned by any mainstream rabbinic authorities.

8 See *Shemos* 33:13, *Yirmiyahu* 12:1, *Berachos* 7a, Ramchal, *Sefer haKelalim* (*Kelalim Rishonim* # 34).

9 See *Berachos* 61b, *Menachos* 29b.

10 An authentic Jewish approach, but I make no claim to be presenting *the* authentic Jewish approach. Indeed, as can be expected when dealing with such a fundamentally important topic, there have been numerous quality discussions, books, and articles dealing with Theodicy and Divine Providence. However, in many recent discussions one senses an almost palpable discomfort with the parts of our tradition that deal with the real, serious ramifications of sin and a glossing over of the uncomfortable fact that throughout the ages, universally respected Rabbinic figures did not hesitate to associate suffering with sin, even specific sin (see also *Mishnah Berurah* 124:27).

11 See *Yevamos* 79a and *Sefer haChinuch*, *mitzvah* 42.

at the same time one that affirms the belief that it is Hashem alone who makes peace yet creates evil,¹² Who created and alone retains control,¹³ without one value infringing on the other, an approach that allows (even demands) that we seek to know the God of our fathers in order to properly serve him,¹⁴ while simultaneously acknowledging that the ways of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* are ultimately unknowable¹⁵ and that the world seemingly runs according to the natural order.

The Friends of Job

One fundamental challenge to pointing out sin as a cause for the suffering of others is that such speech seemingly falls under the category of *ona'as devorim* (verbal oppressiveness).

Those who highlight the sins of those who are suffering are, in the words of Rabbi Emanuel Feldman,

apparently oblivious to the warning of the sages (*Bava Metzi'a* 58b) that such theorizing is a direct violation of Leviticus 25:17, *Lo tonu ish et amito*—"You shall not wrong one another, and you shall fear the Lord." That is to say, if a friend is suffering, we may not say to him—in the way that Job's friends said to him in 4:6-7—that if he were truly free of sin, such things would not have been visited upon him. To make such a statement is to commit the transgression of *ona'at devorim* (verbal wrongdoing) . . .¹⁶

12 See *Yeshayahu* chap. 45.

13 See *Bey'ur Halacha* chap. 1 *s.v. Hu*.

14 See *Divrey haYamim I*, 28:9. In the introduction to his edition of the Ramchal's *Da'as Tevunos* (Beney Berak: Sifri'yati, 5758), p. 11-12, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander explains this verse as a command to seek to understand the ways of God. He quotes the great masters of the *Musar* movement (Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm, Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Broidy, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, and Rabbi Elya Lopian) as extolling the study of *Da'as Tevunos* as it gives insight into this fundamentally important topic.

15 See, for example, *Yeshayahu* 55:8-9 and *Iyov* 38:4.

16 Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, "Plunging into Mighty Waters and Emerging with a Broken Shard: New Orleans and the Mind of God," *Tradition* 40:1 (2007), p. 8. Rabbi Feldman's article is reworked and reworded in his *Tales Out of Jerusalem: Seven Gates to the City* (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 2010), p. 313-327.

Similarly, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein wrote:

Regarding Job's religiosity, Hazal entertained widely divergent views . . . None, however, challenged the assertion that his comforters' responses were, in effect, models of prescribed *ona'at devorim* (verbal oppressiveness) . . .¹⁷

Things, however, are not as simple as they seem. Are not Job's friends the paradigm of friendship, about whom the Rabbis tell us (*Bava Basra* 16b)—“Either friends like the friends of Job or death”—how can they be accused of *ona'as devorim*, a behavior that is the antithesis of true friendship?

Also difficult to understand is the following story in the Talmud (*Berachos* 5b):

Rav Huna had four hundred barrels of wine that soured. Rav Yehudah the brother of Rav Salla Chasida, as well as other sages, went up to him . . . They said to him “Let the master examine his affairs.” He said to them: “Am I suspect in your eyes?” They said to him: “Is the Holy One Blessed is He suspect of punishing without justice?”

The Talmud goes on to say that Rav Huna accepted their response, accepted upon himself to take appropriate action and was saved from the financial loss.

The words of the Rabbis seem to be textbook *ona'as devorim*.

It seems likely that neither the friends of Job, nor the Rabbis who spoke to Rav Huna, were guilty of *ona'as devorim*. Rosh,¹⁸ commenting on the actions of Job's friends, comments “Job's friends spoke because he was defending himself and accusing [God's] attribute of Justice.” *Sema*¹⁹ says similarly: “They spoke to him as such because Job was speaking harshly about God's Providence and his decrees.” As works of Halacha, Rosh and *Sema* are not merely defending Job's friends, but clarifying details of the laws of *ona'as devorim*. Possibly troubled by these quintessential friends speaking in a very unfriendly manner, they

17 Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” in Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living*, (Newark, NJ: Ktav, 2004), v. 2, p. 145.

18 *Bava Metzi'a* chap. 4, no. 22, cited in *Shulchan Aruch haRav, Hilchos Ona'ah veGeneyvas-Da'as* # 28.

19 *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 228:2, cited in *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 63:2.

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conclude that their speech was perfectly acceptable—it is only that if *we* would act in a similar manner, we would be guilty of *ona'as devorim*.²⁰ This may also be the intent of *Tosafos*²¹ who explain that the Rabbis spoke as such to Rav Huna because they wanted to teach him a lesson.

Based on these comments and others,²² it seems that *ona'as devorim* is not transgressed when words are spoken “for the sake of Heaven,” such as seeking to correct clearly wrong behavior or to defend the justice of God’s ways. While the requisite standard to allow such speech may be difficult to attain,²³ it does leave open the possible permissibility of pointing to the sins of others as a cause of suffering.

20 This is possibly also the position of Ramban. As far as I can tell, Ramban understands the critique of Job’s friends to be for their improper comprehension of Divine Providence (and the results of such misunderstanding)—not that they were acting inherently inappropriately by discussing the cause of Job’s suffering. See his commentary to *Devorim* 32:6, in *Sha’ar haGemul* (*Kisvey Ramban* 2:280), and his commentary to *Iyov* (*ibid.* 1:126). See also *Sha’ar haGemul* (*ibid.* 2:271) which seems to allow for pointing out sins of others. As pointed out by R. Feldman (“Plunging into Mighty Waters, p. 12, op. cit., at footnote #16.), Rashi (*Iyov* 42:7) does understand God’s anger to be their inappropriate rationalizing of Job’s suffering. But considering all the above, contra Rabbis Feldman and Lichtenstein, I do not believe the matter is so clear-cut.

21 *Berachos* 5b *s.v. Dina*.

22 See *Chasdey Dovid* to *Tosefta Bava Metzi’a* 3:14, *Kesubos* 8b and Meiri, *Chibur haTeshuvah* p. 609; Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, *Emes leYa’akov* (*Choshen Mishpat* 228); *Aruch haShulchan*, *Choshen Mishpat* 228:1. See also the compendium of sources on laws of *Beyn Odom leChaveyro* put out by the Center for Jewish Values (Jerusalem, 2006), 1: 137, where it is speculated that perhaps *ona'as devorim* does not apply if the intention is to benefit the one spoken to. In truth, the simple reading of Rama, *Choshen Mishpat* 228:1 and *Sema ad loc.* 3-4, would allow for even greater leeway, under certain circumstances, to point out the sins of others without transgressing *ona'as devorim*. For further discussion, see Rav Avraham Sherman (*Techumin* 2, p. 267-271).

23 While purity of intent is always ideal (see *Nedarim* 62a and *Pesachim* 50b), when it comes to acts that harm others, it may be essential. See *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchos Sanhedrin* 24:10; Rav Moshe Feinstein’s comments on the Rambam (*Derash Moshe*, v. 2, *Bamidbar* 25:13; and *Kol Ram*, v. 2, *Bamidbar* 33:51; In *Kol Ram*, the language and citation of the words of the Rambam are not precise, but the intent is clear); *Meshech Chochmah* (*Bereyshis* 22:16); Ramban (*Bereyshis* 15:14); *Hagahos Rabbeynu Peretz* to *Semak* # 82 and the comments of the Chofetz Chaim (*Shemiras haLoshon*, *Sha’ar haTevunah* #17); *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchos De’os* 6:7; and the comments of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky (*Emes leYa’akov*, *Bereyshis* 29:4).

Sensitivity to the Suffering Sinner

Based on the above discussion, there is a time and a place for highlighting sin as a cause of suffering. However, there is a much more fundamental response that would always seem to be called for.

One of the places where the Torah itself highlights suffering as caused by sin is regarding *tzara'as* (Biblical leprosy). “Be very careful,” we are warned, not to forget “what Hashem your God did to Miriam.”²⁴

Listing a whole litany of possible causes, the Talmud (*Arachin* 16a) leaves no doubt that *tzara'as*, or at least public *tzara'as* (see *Berachos* 5b), is self-inflicted. The sinner deserved his suffering, and God wants us all to know that he deserved it; in fact, he is required to call this out for all to hear. And what is to be our reaction to this sinner—this possible miser, adulterer, thief, murderer, or gossipmonger? On this, the rabbinic tradition is clear: he must let the public know of his pain so that the public *will pray for mercy for him* (*Mo'ed Katan* 5a). No sanctimonious judgment, no rejoicing at the downfall of the sinner and the carrying out of Divine justice, only prayer for mercy.²⁵

If this is to be our reaction towards someone we know has sinned, how much more so for those about whom we have not been granted divine insight as to the cause of their suffering?²⁶

The example of *tzara'as* allows us to highlight an additional important point. Both Rambam²⁷ and Ramban²⁸ go out of the way to point out how great Miriam was, the relatively minor nature of her sin and how yet she was punished. The inference is obvious—even when suffering is connected to specific sin, we cannot draw conclusions about the inherent spiritual stature of the one suffering. As with Miriam, the sin may be relatively minor and

24 *Devorim* 24: 8-9.

25 Obviously the lesson of the *metzora* is *not* that prayer alone suffices. In the case of the *metzora*, the only, and most effective, thing to do is pray. In the cases of suffering of others that we are faced with in daily life, there is no doubt that the lesson to be learned is to pray *and* take whatever actions we can to alleviate the suffering. Sometimes all we can do is pray. See also *Bereyshis* 18: 23-33; *Netziv, HaEmek Davar*, introduction to *Bereyshis*; and *Berachos* 10a.

26 See the incident with both Abaye and Rava in *Shabbos* 33a where it is pointed out that the same malady that the Talmud points out comes from sin can also have natural causes.

27 *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Tum'as Tzara'as* 16:10.

28 *Devorim* 24:9

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the punishment specifically directed to those who are able to “fear Me, extract a lesson.”²⁹ The punishment may be evidence of their elevated level, not the reverse.³⁰

I will raise my knowledge from afar, I will ascribe righteousness to my Maker (*Iyov* 36:3).³¹

Two additional challenges to those who ascribe reasons to suffering are frequently raised: 1) It is extreme hubris for someone in our day and age to attempt to understand the ways of God at all. Seemingly following Rabbi Soloveitchik, the claim is made that our only response to tragedy is *what* to do to improve the lives of those suffering, not *why* the suffering came about;³² and 2) that natural disasters are just that, natural occurrences from which we can take no lessons and see no hand of the Divine.

In his aforementioned essay,³³ Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, highlights challenge (1) above. In his typically eloquent and erudite fashion, R. Feldman emphasizes the inherent mystery of the ways of God and the importance of humility and silence in the face of such tragedy: “Best to be careful, warns Maimonides;³⁴ the waters are endlessly wide and infinitely deep, and descending into them will not help one attain a greater knowledge of the mysterious way of God.” Best to emulate the response of Aharon (*Vayikra* 10:3) and follow King David’s dictum, *Lecha dumiyya tehilla*—“to Thee, silence is praise” (*Tehillim* 65:2).

Despite the obvious power of R. Feldman’s words, it is not clear that silence is always the preferred response. King David himself does not always advocate for the praise of silence—rather he proclaims “*ve-lo yidom*” (*Tehillim* 30:13)—despite his suffering, he proclaims that he will continue to sing of the justice of God’s ways.³⁵

29 See *Tzeiphania* 3:6-7; *Yevamos* 63a and *Rashi ad loc. s.v. bishvil*.

30 See *Yevamos* 121b; Ramban, *Vayikra* 13:47 and *Sha’ar haGemul, Kisvey Ramban* 2:278; and Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Tum’as Tzard’as* 17:10.

31 See *Sha’ar haGemul (Kisvey Ramban* 2:281).

32 See footnote 4 above.

33 *Plunging into Mighty Waters*,” p. 10, *op. cit.*, at footnote #16 above.

34 Immediately preceding this statement, R. Feldman quoted from Rambam’s comments on the last Mishna in *Berachos*.

35 *Tehillim* 101:1 (according to an interpretation of the *Tiferes Shlomo* of Radomsk and the

It is important to point out the words of Ramban:³⁶

And if you will ask: since there is an element of the hidden in judgment, and we will in any case be forced to believe in His righteousness as the true Judge may He be blessed and exalted, why make us put forth the effort and command us to study the arguments that we have explained and the secrets that we have alluded to? Why not completely rely on what in any case we will have to rely on in the end, that there is before Him neither unrighteousness nor forgetfulness [and] all His ways are just? *This is the argument of fools who despise wisdom. . .*

Ramban goes on to explain the great benefit of studying, analyzing, and exploring God's ways, despite the fact that His ways are ultimately unknowable.³⁷ By striving to understand to the best of our abilities, we will achieve greater faith and trust in Him, will gain insight into His ways and will achieve a greater appreciation that "all His paths are justice" (*Devorim* 32:4).

The Ways of God

It goes without saying that underlying this entire discussion is a rejection of the idea that there is no lesson to be learned from "natural" occurrences (even if one freely acknowledges God as the Creator of nature). That idea, according to Ramban, was made initially, and then again subsequently, by Job (2:275 and 277) and is one that is alive and well today.

Before discussing how we can learn lessons from occurrences that seem completely natural (or caused by human negligence), it is important to acknowledge the obvious—the world *does* generally run according to the laws of nature. As Rambam writes, this attests to God's perfection in that He created a world that does not need changes or improvements (*Guide* 2:28). But, as will be shown below, this does not negate its being used as a messenger of God at a

Rebbe of Kotzk, cited in *Sefer Daf al haDaf* to *Sanhedrin* 92b); *Berachos* 60b.

36 *Sha'ar haGemul, Kisvey Ramban* 2:281.

37 It is very telling that in a number of discussions I have seen, Rabbi Feldman's refined, measured and cautious approach was lumped together for censure along with those who pinpointed specific cause for tragedy (see footnote 7 above). This seems to be precisely the danger Ramban seeks to avoid.

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specific moment in human history.

This idea emerges from the following Talmudic and midrashic statements:

1. “Now *Yisroel* loved Yosef more than all his sons . . . and he made him a fine woolen tunic. His brothers saw that it was he whom their father loved most of all his brothers; so they hated him” (*Bereyshis* 37:3-4). Rava bar Mechasya said in the name of R. Chama bar Gurya who said in the name of Rav: “A person should never treat one son differently than his other sons, for on account of two *sel’im* that Ya’akov gave to Yosef in excess of his other sons, his brothers became jealous of him and the matter evolved and our forefathers descended to Egypt.”³⁸
2. “So he sent him from the depths of Chevron” (*Bereyshis* 37:14). “But is not Chevron on a mountain . . . ? But [it really means] from the deep counsel of that righteous one who is buried in Hebron, in fulfillment of what was said to Avrohom [at the Covenant] Between the Parts that your offspring shall be sojourners” (Rashi, *Bereyshis* 37:14). “And Yosef was brought down to Egypt” (*Bereyshis* 39:1). Rav Tanchuma said: “To what may this be compared? To a cow on whose neck you wish to place a yoke but it does not allow the yoke to be placed. What did they do? They took its son away from it and brought it to the place they wished to plow. The calf began to cry; the cow heard the crying of its son and went against its will for the sake of its son. So too the Holy One Blessed be He wanted to fulfill the decree ‘Know with certainty’ and manipulated all these things and they came down to Egypt” (*Tanchuma VaYeyshev* 4).
3. R. Chiya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: “Ya’akov, our father, was destined to descend to Egypt in iron chains (Rashi: like all those who go into exile). However, his merit caused him [to escape this fate], as it is written (*Hoshea* 11:4), ‘with ropes of a man I will draw them with braids of love . . .’” (*Shabbos* 89b).³⁹

At first glance these statements seem blatantly contradictory. Was the reason for the descent to Egypt caused by Ya’akov’s incorrectly favoring Yosef over his brothers or the mysterious “deep counsel” of the Covenant Between the Parts?

38 *Shabbos* 10b. See also *Bereyshis Rabba* 84:8.

39 See also *Maharsha ad loc.* and *Bereyshis Rabba* 86:2 and commentary of *Matnos Kehunah, ibid.*

Was Yosef being sold to Egypt a manipulation by God to bring Ya'akov to Egypt against his will, or an act of love to bring him down in honor instead of in chains?⁴⁰

We can resolve these contradictions by introducing a possible understanding of a fundamental⁴¹ principle introduced by Rambam (*Guide* 2:48):

It is very clear that everything produced must have an immediate cause which produced it; that cause itself has a cause, and so on, until the First Cause—the will and decree of God . . . The prophets therefore sometimes omit the intermediate causes, and ascribe the production of an individual thing directly to God . . . it makes no difference whether these causes are natural events, free-will choices, or chance . . . chance being but an excess of what is natural, as has been made clear, and its largest part partakes of nature, free choice, and volition . . .

Rambam goes on to list many examples, ending off with the comment of Yosef to his brothers, “And God sent me before you” (*Bereyshis* 45:7).⁴²

The simplest understanding of Rambam is that neither a human being’s free will, nor the fact that an event is purely natural, limits its ability to be an agent of Divine Providence.

This is also how Ramban understands the interaction between Yosef and the “man” whom he meets while wandering in the field (*Bereyshis* 37:15):⁴³

The Torah speaks of this at length . . . to also tell us that the decree is true and the effort futile, for Hashem sent him a guide without his knowing in order to bring him to their hands. This is the intent of our teachers who

40 Of course, one can simply say that the various *Midrashim* dispute one another (see, for example, *Tosafos, Eruvin* 38b *s.v. ve-ayn* and *Tosafos, Yevamos* 64a *s.v. ve-leylaf*). In this case I don’t believe this is necessary.

41 Rambam tells us to pay particular attention to this chapter, exceeding all others in his treatise.

42 See also *Chovos haLevavos, Sha’ar haBitachon*, the fifth introduction.

43 As he makes clear, Ramban’s comments on this episode were not meant merely as an elucidation of the Biblical narrative—rather, as a lesson for all time, a manifestation of *ma’aseh avos siman le-banim*—the acts of the fathers are a sign for their children. Ramban does not always use this exact phrase, but the concept runs through much of his commentary. For some examples, see his commentary to *Bereyshis* 12:10, 26:20, prior to 32:4, and beginning of *Shemos*.

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say that these individuals⁴⁴ were angels . . . to teach us that “the counsel of Hashem shall be established.”

This fundamentally important principle, aside from answering the contradictions between the various midrashic statements,⁴⁵ and clarifying many details in the Torah narrative,⁴⁶ grants a glimpse into the workings of the Divine. As in the story of Yosef, our lives are filled with free-willed decisions—both good and bad—with “random” occurrences and interactions and with natural events that are beyond our control. We make mistakes—in hindsight we cannot comprehend how or why we did so. Our positive decisions lead us to the ability to make further positive decisions; the reverse is true as well. We seek a connection to the Divine, but frequently cannot feel the connection and exclaim, as did Yosef’s brothers, “What is this that God has done to us?” (*Bereyshis* 42:28). But the lesson is that there is always a Divine plan behind the seemingly random vicissitudes of life. Sometimes we are fortunate to be a main player, have a starring role, on the stage of life; other times, due to our distance from God, we are the “random interaction” for the sake of a greater picture⁴⁷ or for someone else to make a free-willed decision.

While this is true of individual lives, it is even more so with regard to the lives of countries and the major events of human history as a whole.⁴⁸ Only God, who “examines all with one glance” while still paying close attention to

44 Ramban is using the plural based on *Bereyshis Rabba* 84:14 that says there were three *malachim*.

45 In that it *was* because of Ya’akov’s favoritism and yet *was* a Divine plan. It *was* a punishment, yet it *was* a reward. The Divine plan takes place in any case; it is our choice if we are recorded in history as the hero or the villain. Sometimes there is an element of both. Ya’akov is the hero, yet his incorrect favoritism is recorded and worthy of punishment (for someone of his unfathomable stature), but even when being punished he was brought down with “braids of love.”

46 Some small examples: Why Ya’akov sent Yosef in the first place (he knew the brothers hated him) and why Yosef went. See some discussion in *Bereyshis Rabba* 84:13; *Rashbam*, *Netziv*, and *Ohr ha-Hachaim* to *Bereyshis* 37:13-14 and *Rashbam* and *Ramban* to verse 15.

47 According to this understanding, there is always Divine Providence, including when one is left to “chance.” Chance means that God’s Providence is not for your sake, but you are used as a tool for the greater plan. And even then, you cannot receive anything not deserved.

48 See the comments of the Chofetz Chaim, *Kol Kisvey Chofetz Chaim*, v. 3, *Letters*, p. 91 and *Maharal, Netzach Yisroel*, chap. 6.

every individual,⁴⁹ has the ability to use all the pieces of the puzzle—natural events, free-will choices and “chance” events—to bring the Divine plan to fruition while still being the true Judge.

This is the intent of another perplexing midrashic statement. In the midst of the episode of Yosef and his brothers, the Torah interrupts with the story of Yehudah and Tamar. The *Midrash* comments as follows: “The brothers were busy with selling Yosef, Yosef was busy with his sackcloth and fasting, Reuven was busy with his sackcloth and fasting, Ya’akov was busy with his sackcloth and fasting, Yehudah was busy taking a wife, and the Holy One Blessed is He was busy creating the light of the *Mashiach*.”⁵⁰ Throughout the entire episode, everyone was busy with their individual concerns, and troubled by the disturbing outcome of their actions. No one knew that they were part of a greater drama⁵¹—that they were pawns⁵² carrying out God’s ultimate plan—to bring the world to its ultimate fruition when the whole world will bask in the glory of God and the light of the *Mashiach*.

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

An honest look at the rabbinic tradition tells us that, contrary to what is frequently quoted in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s name,⁵³ our reaction to tragedy

49 See *Rosh haShanah* 18a.

50 See *Bereyshis Rabba* 85:1, *Matnos Kehunah ad loc.* and *Rashi*, *Bereyshis* 38:1.

51 An exception to this may have been Yitzchok Avinu. See *Bereyshis Rabba* 84:21, *Rashi* to *Bereyshis* 37:35 and 37:37 and the commentaries on *Rashi* there.

52 By using the word “pawns,” I by no means intend to minimize the importance of the free-willed decisions made by the various parties involved. What is our role in carrying out the Divine plan is of paramount importance: See *Shabbos* 32a, *Bereyshis* 42:21 and *Sha’arey Aharon* there in the name of the *Zohar*; and *Bamidbar Rabba* 13:18. See also *Bereyshis* 15:12 and *Rashi* and *Ramban* there, and *Torah Sheleymah*, note 130, *Bereyshis Rabba* 44:17; *Pirkey deR. Eliezer* chap. 27; and R. Sa’adya Gaon, *haEmunah ve-haDeyos*, *Ma’amar* 8, “The Final Redemption.”

53 In truth, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s “what” includes the requirement of man to “repent and return to God” (*Kol Dodi Dofek*, 2006 translation by David Z. Gordon, p. 9). Claiming that Rabbi Soloveitchik’s response to the tragic fires in Haifa would be asking “what forms of kindness and generosity can we offer to those who endure hardship?” and demanding that we transform the experience into the action of “consolation of others who are suffering” (see footnote 4 above), while true, would be far from complete. It completely ignores the fact that the “essence of suffering confirms the existence of sin and commands man: find your sin and return to your

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is supposed to be both what *and* why. We are expected to realize that whether a tragedy is the result of a natural disaster, chance encounter, free-willed choice, or a combination of them all, does not minimize its ability to have a Divine message,⁵⁴ part of a greater Divine plan,⁵⁵ that is just, righteous, and fair,⁵⁶ and that whatever occurs will ultimately be shown⁵⁷ to be for the best.

Most uncomfortable to modern man, our reaction must include contemplation as to real ramifications of sin,⁵⁸ and on occasion it allows us to point

Creator” (*Kol Dodi Dofek*, note 3, p. 94).

54 Even in the midst of an earthquake, Halacha expects us to make the blessing, “Whose strength and might fill the world” (see *Mishnayos Berachos* 9:2; see also *Berachos* 59a regarding thunder.) As I heard from Rav Mattisyahu Salamon, *shlita*, “natural disasters” are one way Hashem responds to our High Holiday prayers, “Instill Your terror upon all Your works and Your dread upon all that You have created.”

55 Numerous rabbinic statements can be understood based on this principle, and it gives a glimpse into the endless possibilities of God’s Providence. It explains how even our bad decisions can ultimately be for the good and part of the Divine plan, and how even the truly evil who are harshly punished may still receive a degree of reward for being messengers of the Divine plan (see the words of the Alter of Kelm, *Chochmah uMusar*, v. 2, p. 345; *Chasam Sofer, Parashas Kedoshim s.v. “Zima Hi;”* and *Yeshuos Ya’akov* 695, 1). For some sources, see *Mishley* 19:3 with Rashi and *Mishley* 19:21; *Sukkah* 53a; Rashi, Ramban and Netziv to *Bereyshit* 37:20 and *Torah Sheleymah, ibid.*, note 131; *Tehillim* 2:4; *Bereyshit Rabba* 85:1 and *Matnos Kehunah ad loc.*; Rashi, *Bereyshit* 38:1; *Da’as Tevunos*, especially numbers 14, 48, 54 and the comments of Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (*Iyunim*, no. 14); Netziv, *Bereyshit* 12:14 in *HaEmek Davar* and 31:21 in *Harchev Davar*; *Bereyshit Rabba* 85:8 and Rashi to *Bereyshit* 38:26; *Sotah* 7b and 10b; *Bamidbar Rabba* 13:3; the lengthy discussion in *Sefer Yam haChochmah* (Jerusalem, 5768), 596-607; R. Tzadok haKohen of Lublin, *Sefer Takanas haShavin* 10:9; *Sefer Kedushas Levi, Kedushah Revi’is Purim* and commentary on *Eyicha*; *Chofetz Chaim al haTorah* to *Bereyshit* 45:3. This approach can also possibly shed light on the enigmatic comments of R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, *Sefer Mey haShiloach, Bereyshit* 18:15, beginning of *Parshas Pinchas, Devorim* 21:18, among many others, as well as the surprising comments of Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, *Ohr Yechezkel, Emunah* 3, p. 100 and 113. See also Rashi to *Bereyshit* 12:10.

56 See *Devorim* 32:4.

57 To quote R. Feldman: “In the fullness of time, our unanswered questions will be addressed. What seems today like a random, kaleidoscopic whirling of events will slow to a halt and will reveal, to all who have the patience and the faith to wait, a divine pattern and purpose. This is what the genuine prophet Zechariah meant when he said, in 14:9, ‘On that day God will be one and His name will be one’” (R. Emanuel Feldman, “Haiti and the Mind of God,” *Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 29, 2010 (<https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Haiti-and-the-mind-of-God>)).

58 And we look to rabbinic tradition, and universally respected rabbinic figures, for what sins should be worked on when faced with tragedy. See footnote #5 above.

out the sins of others.

However, one who is honest with himself will realize that such occasions should be few and far between. The criteria that would allow for pointing out sins of others are exceedingly difficult to fulfill, and more often than not, sin should not be pointed out in the age of social media when such pronouncements inevitably bring ridicule, not honor, to His name.⁵⁹ More fundamentally, even when one does point out the sins, it must be accompanied by compassion and an understanding that it is no judgment of the inherent status of the other. But we can understand the actions of great sages throughout the years who felt they were able, and possibly required, to point out specific sins following tragedy. They did so out of love and compassion, and with the interest of the betterment of the community and the honor of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. Mere mortals are advised to tread carefully, to take the beam from between our eyes before we point to the splinter in the teeth of others (*Bava Basra* 15b).

On all occasions, our primary introspective focus should be inward. “If one sees that suffering has come upon him,” advises the Talmud,⁶⁰ “he should search *his* actions,” not the actions of others.⁶¹

At the same time as we look inward,⁶² we must never be callous to the very real suffering of others. Our hearts should be pained by the suffering of any human being⁶³ (indeed any creation⁶⁴) and we should learn the lesson of the *metzora* and do whatever we can to alleviate their suffering. No matter what God’s plan, our response must always befit the “merciful, the children of the merciful”—in thought, speech, and action.

The Torah’s approach to suffering is that it is a tool to bring us closer to

59 This does raise the question of whether one should refrain from making a statement—that can be correctly understood in context by its intended audience—out of fear that others will be turned off by it. See *Hoshey’a* 14:10 and *Mesilas Yesharim*, chap. 20.

60 *Berachos* 5a.

61 This alone would allay much of the visceral disgust many feel at contemporary figures connecting tragedy to specific events or sins. When the tendency is to blame tragedy on the actions of one’s ideological opponents, or one’s pet ideological peeve, it does not have a real chance of broad acceptance.

62 Those who respond to tragedy introspectively are frequently those with the greatest generosity of spirit towards others.

63 *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim* 10:12.

64 See *Sefer haChinuch*, Mitzva 529.

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God. Feeling God's closeness allows one to proclaim, even in times of sorrow:

I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed is His Name, creates and guides all creatures, and that He alone made, makes, and will make, everything.⁶⁵

At the very same time, one is expected to understand that to be truly close to God means emulating His ways:

Just as He is called Merciful, you shall be merciful;...⁶⁶

Today's responses typically ignore one or the other; we can do better and acknowledge both.

65 *Ani Ma'amin* in the Siddur. Although its author is unknown, there is no doubt that it represents the simple faith of pious Jews for many centuries. See also Rav Yosef Zalman Bloch, *Sefer BeEmunah Sheleymah* (p. 116), who quotes the Brisker Rav as saying that the text in the Siddur is to be considered authoritative.

66 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchos De'os* 1:5-6. See also Rashi, *Devorim* 13:5 *s.v. u-vo* (In most editions, the source for Rashi is cited as *Sotah* 14a—note however, that Rashi uses different terminology and places the *derashah* on a different word in the verse); and Rashi, *Shabbos* 133b *s.v. hevey*.