

# The Arc of the Moral Universe

האזינו

ESSAYS ON ETHICS, I BELIEVE · HA'AZINU · 5775, 5780, 5782

In majestic language, Moses breaks into song, investing his final testament to the Israelites with all the power and passion at his command. He begins dramatically but gently, calling heaven and earth to witness what he is about to say, sounding ironically very much like “The quality of mercy is not strained”, Portia’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. Here is is Moses begins:

Listen, heavens, and I will speak;

Let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

May my teaching pour down like rain

Let my speech fall like the dew;

Like gentle rain on tender plants,

Like showers upon the grasses.

Deut. 32:1-2

But this is a mere prelude to the core message Moses wants to convey. It is the idea known as *tzidduk haDin*, vindicating God’s justice. The way Moses puts it is this:

The Rock, His work is whole,

And all His ways are justice.

A God of faith who does no wrong,

Just is He, and upright.

Deut. 32:4

This is a doctrine fundamental to Judaism and its understanding of evil and suffering in the world – a difficult but necessary doctrine. God is just. Why then do bad things happen?

Did He act ruinously? No, with His children lies the fault,

A warped and twisted generation.

Deut. 32:5

God requites good with good, evil with evil. When bad things happen to us it is because we have been guilty of doing bad things ourselves. The fault lies not in our stars but ourselves.

Moving into the prophetic mode, Moses foresees what he has already predicted, even before they have crossed the Jordan and entered the land. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy he has been warning of the danger that, in their land, once the hardships of the desert and the struggles of battle have been forgotten, the people will become comfortable and complacent. They will attribute their achievements to themselves and they will drift from their faith. When this happens they will bring disaster on themselves:

*Yeshurun* grew fat and kicked –

You became bloated, gross, coarse –

They abandoned God who made them

And rejected the Rock of their rescue...

You deserted the Rock that bore you;

You forgot the God who gave you birth.

Deut. 32:15-18

This, the first use of the word *Yeshurun* in the Torah – from the root *yashar*, upright – is deliberately ironic. It underlines its prophecy that Israel, who once knew what it was to be upright, will be led astray by a combination of affluence, security and assimilation to the ways of its neighbours. It will betray the terms of the covenant, and when that happens it will find that God is no longer with it. It will discover that history is a ravening wolf. Separated from the source of its strength, it will be overpowered by its enemies. All that the nation once enjoyed will be lost. It is a stark and terrifying message.

Yet Moses is here bringing the Torah to a close with a theme that has been there from the beginning. God, Creator of the universe, made a world that is fundamentally *good*: the word that echoes seven times in the first chapter of Genesis. It is humans, granted freewill as God's image and likeness, who introduce evil into the world, and then suffer its consequences. Hence Moses' insistence that when trouble and tragedy appear, we should search for the cause within ourselves, and not blame God. God is upright and just. The defect is in us, His children.

This is perhaps the most difficult idea in the whole of Judaism. It is open to the simplest of objections, one that has sounded in almost every generation. If God is just, why do bad things happen to good people? This is the question asked not by sceptics and doubters, but by the very heroes of faith. We hear it in Abraham's plea, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" We hear it in Moses' challenge "Why have you done evil to this people?" It sounds again in Jeremiah:

"Lord, you are always right when I dispute with You. Yet I must plead my case before You: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?"

Jer. 12:1

It is an argument that never ceased. It continued through the rabbinic literature. It was heard again in the *kinot*, the laments, prompted by the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages. It sounds in the literature produced in the wake of the Spanish expulsion, and echoes still when we recall the Holocaust.

The Talmud says that of all the questions Moses asked God, this was the one to which God did not give an answer.<sup>[1]</sup> The simplest, deepest interpretation is given in Psalm 92, “The song of the Sabbath day.” Though “the wicked spring up like grass,” (Ps. 92:7) they will eventually be destroyed. The righteous, by contrast, “flourish like a palm tree and grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.” (Ps. 92:13) Evil wins in the short term but never in the long. The wicked are like grass, the righteous like a tree. Grass grows overnight but it takes years for a tree to reach its full height. In the long run, tyrannies are defeated. Empires decline and fall. Goodness and rightness win the final battle. As Martin Luther King Jr. said in the spirit of the Psalm: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”<sup>[2]</sup>

It is a difficult belief, this commitment to seeing justice in history under the sovereignty of God. Yet consider the alternatives. They are three. The first option is to say that there is no meaning in history whatsoever. *Homo hominis lupus est*, “Man is wolf to man”. As Thucydides said in the name of the Athenians: “The strong do as they want, the weak suffer what they must.” History is a Darwinian struggle to survive, and justice is no more than the name given to the will of the stronger party.

The second, about which I write in my book *Not in God's Name*, is dualism, the idea that evil comes not from God but from an independent force: Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, and the many other names given to the force that is not God but is opposed to Him and those who worship Him. This idea, which has surfaced in sectarian forms in each of the Abrahamic monotheisms, as well as in modern, secular totalitarianisms, is one of the most dangerous in all of history. It divides humanity into the unshakeably good and the irredeemably evil, giving rise to a long history of bloodshed and barbarism of the kind we see being enacted today in many parts of the world in the name of holy war against the greater and lesser Satan. This is dualism, not monotheism, and the Sages, who called it *shtei reshuyot*, “two powers” or “domains”<sup>[3]</sup>, were right to reject it utterly.

The third, debated extensively in the rabbinic literature, is to say that justice ultimately exists in the world to come, in life after death. Yet though this is an essential element of Judaism, it is striking how relatively little Judaism had recourse to it, recognising that the central thrust of Tanach is on this world, and life before death. For it is here that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection, as far as lies within our power, of society and our individual lives. Tanach almost never takes this option. God does not say

to Jeremiah or Job that the answer to their question exists in heaven and they will see it as soon as they end their stay on earth. The passion for justice so characteristic of Judaism would dissipate entirely were this the only answer.

Difficult though Jewish faith is, it has had the effect throughout history of leading us to say: if bad things have happened, let us blame no one but ourselves, and let us labour to make them better. It was this that led Jews, time and again, to emerge from tragedy, shaken, scarred, limping like Jacob after his encounter with the angel, yet resolved to begin again, to rededicate ourselves to our mission and faith, to ascribe our achievements to God and our defeats to ourselves.

I believe that out of such humility, a momentous strength is born.

---

[1] The full discussion can be found in [Brachot 7a](#).

[2] "Out of the Long Night," *The Gospel Messenger*, February 8, 1958, p. 14.

[3] [Brachot 33b](#).



## AROUND THE Shabbat Table

---

1. What extra dimension does poetry give this week's parsha?
2. What right do the heroes of our faith, such as Moses, Jeremiah, and Job, have to ask God why there is injustice in the world? Did they receive answers?
3. Does this approach to suffering blame the victim? Or are we asking for something else from the victims (and from us all)?