

FATE AND DESTINY

From Holocaust to The State of Israel

by

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Introduction by

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grave and difficult questions. He tracks the intellectual foundations of suffering and evil, and seeks to find the harmony and balance between the affirmation and the negation and to blunt the sharp edge of the tension between the thesis—the good—and the antithesis—the bad—in existence. As a result of the question and answer, problem and resolution, he formulates a metaphysics of evil where-with he is able to reach an accommodation with evil, indeed to cover it up. The sufferer utilizes his capacity for intellectual abstraction, with which he was endowed by his Creator, to the point of self-deception—the denial of the existence of evil in the world.

Judaism, with its realistic approach to man and his place in the world, understood that evil cannot be blurred or camouflaged and that any attempt to downplay the extent of the contradiction and fragmentation to be found in reality will neither endow man with tranquility nor enable him to grasp the existential mystery. Evil is an undeniable fact. There is evil, there is suffering, there are hellish torments in this world. Whoever wishes to delude himself by diverting his attention from the deep fissure in reality, by romanticizing human existence, is nought but a fool and a fantasist. It is impossible to overcome the hideousness of evil through philosophico-speculative thought. Therefore, Judaism determined that man, entrapped in the depths of a frozen, fate-laden existence, will seek in vain for the solution to the problem of evil within the framework of speculative thought, for he will never find it. Certainly, the testimony of the Torah that the cosmos is very good is true. However, this

affirmation may be made only from the infinite perspective of the Creator. Finite man, with his partial vision, cannot uncover the absolute good in the cosmos. The contradiction in existence stands out clearly and cannot be negated. Evil, which can neither be explained nor comprehended, does exist. Only if man could grasp the world as a whole would he be able to gain a perspective on the essential nature of evil. However, as long as man's apprehension is limited and distorted, as long as he perceives only isolated fragments of the cosmic drama and the mighty epic of history, he remains unable to penetrate into the secret lair of suffering and evil. To what may the matter be compared? To a person gazing at a beautiful rug, a true work of art, one into which an exquisite design has been woven—but looking at it from its reverse side. Can such a viewing give rise to a sublime aesthetic experience? We, alas, view the world from its reverse side. We are, therefore, unable to grasp the all-encompassing framework of being. And it is only within that framework that it is possible to discern the divine plan, the essential nature of the divine actions.

In a word, the "I" of fate asks a theoretical-metaphysical question regarding evil, and this question has no answer. It is insoluble.

In the second dimension of human existence, destiny, the problem of suffering assumes a new form. What is the nature of the existence of destiny? It is an active mode of existence, one wherein man confronts the environment into which he was thrown, possessed of an understanding of his uniqueness, of his special worth, of his freedom,

and of his ability to struggle with his external circumstances without forfeiting either his independence or his selfhood. The motto of the "I" of destiny is, "Against your will you are born and against your will you die, but you live of your own free will." Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life and can extricate himself from a mechanical type of existence and enter into a creative, active mode of being. Man's task in the world, according to Judaism, is to transform fate into destiny; a passive existence into an active existence; an existence of compulsion, perplexity, and muteness into an existence replete with a powerful will, with resourcefulness, daring, and imagination. God's blessing to the work of His hands sums up their entire purpose in life: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Subdue the environment and subject it to your control. If you do not rule over it, it will subjugate you. Destiny bestows upon man a new rank in God's world; it presents him with a royal crown, and man becomes transformed into a partner with the Almighty in the act of creation.

As was stated above, man's existence of destiny gives rise to an original approach to the problem of evil. For so long as a person grapples with the problem of evil while still living an existence of fate, his relationship to this problem expresses itself only in a theoretical-philosophical approach. As a passive creature, the man of fate lacks the strength to struggle with evil in order to contain it or in order to utilize it to achieve an exalted goal.

For the "I" subject to fate is unable to effect any matter of consequence in the sphere of his own existence. He is nourished by his external environment, and his life bears the imprint of that environment. Therefore, he relates to evil from a nonpractical standpoint and philosophizes about it from a purely speculative perspective. He wishes to deny the existence of evil and to create a harmonistic worldview. The end of such an effort can only be complete and total disillusionment. Evil derides the captive of fate and his fantasy about a world which is wholly good and wholly beautiful.

However, in the realm of destiny man recognizes the world as it is and does not wish to use harmonistic formulas in order to gloss over and conceal evil. The man of destiny is highly realistic and does not flinch from confronting evil face to face. His approach is an ethico-halakhic one, devoid of the slightest speculative-metaphysical coloration. When the man of destiny suffers he says to himself: "Evil exists, and I will neither deny it nor camouflage it with vain intellectual gymnastics. I am concerned about evil from a halakhic standpoint, like a person who wishes to know the deed which he shall do; I ask one simple question: What must the sufferer do so that he may live through his suffering?" In this dimension the center of gravity shifts from the causal and teleological aspect of evil (the only difference between causality and teleology being a directional one) to its practical aspect. The problem is now formulated in straightforward halakhic language and revolves about one's daily, quotidian tasks. The fundamental question is: What obligation does suffering

impose upon man? This question is greatly beloved by Judaism, and she has placed it at the very center of her world of thought. The halakhah is concerned with this problem as it is concerned with other problems of permitted and forbidden, liability and exemption. We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but, rather, about the path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes. We ask neither about the cause of evil nor about its purpose, but, rather, about how it might be mended and elevated. How shall a person act in a time of trouble? What ought a man to do so that he not perish in his afflictions?

The halakhic answer to this question is very simple: Afflictions come to elevate a person, to purify and sanctify his spirit, to cleanse and purge it of the dross of superficiality and vulgarity, to refine his soul and to broaden his horizons. In a word, the function of suffering is to mend that which is flawed in an individual's personality. The halakhah teaches us that the sufferer commits a grave sin if he allows his troubles to go to waste and remain without meaning or purpose. Suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man, in order that atonement be made for him, in order to redeem him from corruption, vulgarity, and depravity. From out of its midst the sufferer must arise ennobled and refined, clean and pure. "It is a time of agony unto Jacob, but out of it he shall be saved" (Jeremiah 30:7); i.e., from out of the very midst of the agony itself he will attain eternal salvation. The agony itself will serve to form and shape his character so that he will, thereby, reach a level of exaltedness not possible in a world

bereft of suffering. Out of the negation grows the affirmation, out of the antithesis the thesis blossoms forth, and out of the abrogation of reality there emerges a new reality. The Torah itself bears witness to man's powerful spiritual reaction to any trouble that may befall him when it states: "In your distress, when all these things come upon you . . . and you return unto the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 4:30). Suffering imposes upon man the obligation to return to God in complete and wholehearted repentance.³ Afflictions are designed to bestir us to repent, and what is repentance if not man's self-renewal and his supernal redemption?

Woe unto the man whose suffering has not precipitated a spiritual crisis in the depths of his being, whose soul remains frozen and lacking forgiveness! Woe unto the sufferer if his heart is not inflamed by the fires of affliction, if his pangs do not kindle the lamp of the Lord that is within him! If a person allows his pains to wander about the vast empty spaces of the cosmos like blind, purposeless forces, then a grave indictment is drawn up against him for having frittered away his suffering.

Judaism has deepened this concept by combining the notion of the mending and elevation of suffering with that of the mending and elevation of divine lovingkindness, divine *hesed*. God's acts of *hesed*, Judaism declares, are not granted to man as a free gift. Rather, they impose obligations, they make ethico-halakhic demands upon their beneficiary. To be sure, the overflow of divine *hesed* derives from God's open, superabundant, and generous hand, but it is not an absolute gift, without

conditions or restrictions. The bestowal of good is always to be viewed as a conditional gift—a gift that must be returned—or as a temporary gift. When God endows a person with wealth, influence, and honor, the recipient must know how to use these boons, how to transform these precious gifts into fruitful, creative forces, how to share his joy and prominence with his fellows, how to take the divine *hesed* that flows toward him from its infinite, divine source and utilize it to perform, in turn, deeds of *hesed* for others. A person who is not brought by divinely bestowed bountiful good to commit himself, absolutely and unreservedly, to God perpetrates a dire sin, and in its wake he finds himself in very difficult straits which serve to remind him of the obligation he owes to God for His gift of *hesed*. Our great tannaitic masters have taught us: “A man must pronounce a blessing over evil just as he pronounces a blessing over good” (Berakhot 9:5). In the same way that God’s goodness imposes upon man the obligation to perform exalted, sublime deeds, and demands of either the individual or the community original, creative actions, so too do afflictions require of a person that he improve himself, that he purify his life—if he was previously not bestirred to action when God’s countenance shined upon him, when God’s *hesed* overflowed toward him. For there are times when a person is called upon to mend through his afflictions the flaws that he was inflicting upon creation when God “extended peace to him like a river” (cf. Isaiah 66:12). The awareness of the requirement to commit oneself entirely to God and the understanding of one’s obligation to purify and sanctify

oneself from precisely out of the midst of one’s suffering must shine brightly in the soul of a person when he finds himself in the straits and inquires into the meaning of his very existence. At that very moment, he is obliged to mend his unfeeling heart, the moral callousness that caused him to sin while he was yet standing in the great expanses. In a word, man is obliged to resolve not the question of the causal or teleological explanation of suffering in all of its speculative complexity, but rather the question of the rectification of suffering in all of its halakhic simplicity. He does this by transforming fate into destiny, elevating himself from object to subject, from thing to person.

JOB

Consider: This was precisely the answer that the Creator gave to Job. As long as Job philosophized, like a slave of fate, regarding the cause of and reason for suffering, as long as he demanded of God that He reveal to him the nature of evil, as long as he continued to question and complain, asking why and wherefore afflictions befall man, God answered him forcefully and caustically, posing to him the very powerful and pointed question, “Dost thou know?” “Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto Me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast the understanding. . . . Dost thou know the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? Or