

## If God is Good, Why is the World So Bad?

By Benjamin Blech

Simcha Press  
Florida, 2003

250 pages

Reviewed by Shalom Carmy



In my *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, I wrote that those who place truth over happiness often get both, while those who choose happiness over truth are liable to get neither. Yet, in thinking about the suffering that is a ubiquitous feature of this world, we all seek a belief that is not only true, but also consoles; for many, the desire for consolation takes precedence over all else.

It is to the latter group that Rabbi Blech addresses this book. These are the same people who bought, and read, Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner suggested that people who are troubled by the idea that God is in control of the world, and that their suffering is due to their sins or to Divine indifference, could find comfort in the notion that

God is not in control of the world, and that they suffer because God lacks the power to prevent it.

Rabbi Blech opens with an anecdote demonstrating that Kushner's view is not only in contradiction to traditional religion, which is pretty obvious, but that it is therapeutically inadequate too. A woman, who had first been comforted by Kushner's assurance that her child's death was not punishment, now complains that the book gives her nightmares: "I now have two healthy children. We are so happy. But any minute now I expect something terrible to happen. If God doesn't run the world like this book says..." And her voice cracks. This woman, Rabbi Blech says, needs assurance. To be sure, Rabbi Blech cannot assure her that her surviving children will continue to thrive. But he can try to assure his audience that whatever happens is indeed the will of a benevolent deity.

The book before us consists of an eclectic collection of explanations and talking points on behalf of traditional Jewish belief. Whether one finds the presentation convincing or not, and whether or not one agrees with the shape of Jewish theology that emerges from it, Rabbi Blech must be congratulated for withstanding the temptation to tone down Orthodox belief in order to please his popular audience. Rabbi Blech subscribes to the fundamental idea developed by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, according to which Judaism is more interested in how people respond to suffering than in their theories of suffering. Unlike many rabbis who seize upon the slightest provocation to attach their musings to the Rav's name, Rabbi Blech never mentions him, though at least one anecdote comes directly from *Halakhic Man*. Thus he avoids creating the misimpression

that all of his proposals stem from the Rav's theology.

The primary dissonance between Rabbi Blech's approach and that conveyed by the Rav is that Rabbi Blech is not at all hesitant to offer confident theological explanations for good and bad occurrences. Thus he writes:

*And how can we know whether our own suffering is divine punishment or heavenly warning? When God intervenes, when He is sending you a message, you will know it. How? There is one sure way to tell—God is very specific and leaves no doubt about His meaning if you merely give it a little thought.*

Many of Rabbi Blech's stories about unmistakable Divine communications involve numerical coincidences: a winning lottery ticket for exactly the cost of a grandson's Bar Mitzvah; hitting the jackpot at a Polish casino on a Saturday night for a sum almost equivalent to the contribution made that morning in shul. In the very last chapter, Rabbi Blech reveals a secret doctrine received from a saintly mystic of Tzefat, according to which the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel can be deduced by counting verse numbers in the Torah.

No doubt Rabbi Blech is correct when he says that God is present in Las Vegas and Atlantic City and not only in synagogues and houses of study. Yet I must confess that God seems to communicate with many of us more ambiguously. To understand how I have failed to pursue the right relationship with God, by behaving with disobedience, indolence and coolness, and how I might repent and renew the relationship, like the parallel situation when one turns away from sins toward other human beings, seems to require a different kind of deciphering than that of Rabbi Blech's cryptograms.

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Belief in reward and punishment after death is, of course, a fundamental tenet of Judaism. Most of us, from time to time, take comfort from the conviction that what is disordered and unjust in this world will be remedied beyond the grave. (Of course, religious people also contemplate with fear and trembling the prospect of giving an account of their commissions and omissions.) Rabbi Blech attempts to bolster our confidence in future life by pointing to the scientific evidence of individuals who, after resuscitation, have returned to tell us what the afterlife is like. He also appeals to the principle of reincarnation, the belief that souls return to earth garbed in other people's bodies (which is far from universal in main-

memories of yesterday or hope for tomorrow.

I have questioned the self-proclaimed ease with which Rabbi Blech serves up reasons and explanations for suffering. For me, the day-to-day experience of repentance is more like the repair of an intimate personal relationship, where it is not always superficially evident what, if anything, is deficient, than it is like a crime exposed. Hence it is natural that the signs and lessons of suffering are more ambiguous, demanding strenuous spiritual effort on the part of the sufferer. Perhaps Rabbi Blech and I are thinking of different types of people or different spiritual biographies.

From Rabbi Blech's perspective, the difference between us is captured in

after we've opened our eyes to the many ways in which we've come to realize that there may be answers or at least partial answers to the problems that perplex us."

For me, the insight that we ought not to classify ourselves too easily as either saints or evildoers is fundamental. It should come not at the end of our study, but at the beginning. It is because we do not know ourselves as God knows us and loves us that we must be so attentive to His discipline. It is because our actions and attitudes, with respect to our realization of good and evil, are mysterious and opaque that God's address to us is not always very specific and demands more than a little thought and response. When Kushner's book was all the rage, the Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas commented that Kushner, dropping traditional belief in God's power, had also omitted God's love. It seems to me that Rabbi Blech, recovering belief in God's power, has not yet recuperated the ultimate drama of God's love, focusing on the ways in which our relationship to God resembles an intimate personal relationship, with all its heartrending ambiguity. Only within the framework of that insight can we attempt to formulate and distill, with the help of traditional categories, specific lessons that we can learn from suffering and adversity.

One last caveat: Rabbi Blech is a polished and personable veteran of the pulpit and the lecture circuit. As the book jacket proclaims, he has shared his ideas onstage with Oprah and other television personalities. It is not surprising that, in his hands, the ideas and insights and phrases that comprise this book are deployed in a manner that gives comfort to troubled people and may also lead them to a closer engagement with theological truth. Inexperienced readers may borrow some of the phrases and ideas without the skill to adapt them to a specific audience. There is a danger that Rabbi Blech's confidence and ease will come across as glibness at best, and callousness at worst. The untrained lecturer may get results that are diametri-

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stream Jewish thought, and not to be confused with resurrection of the dead) to explain undeserved suffering. Again, my own efforts, and those of people like me, to come closer to God, do not make so much of these speculations.

At other times, Rabbi Blech speculates freely about how much people actually suffer. He writes:

*When an infant dies, it cannot be said that he has suffered much. His tiny life was so pitifully short that he was almost certainly unaware of either his life or his death. Our problem is not with his pain, but with his purpose.*

It is a great pity that, in this case, pertaining very much to this world, Rabbi Blech offers no empirical data. That a tiny life is correlated with a tiny amount of pain, or that the intensity of pain is proportional to the bulk of the victim, is not self-evident. To the contrary, it could be argued plausibly that mature people, who have stored up memories of joy and meaningful achievement, can more easily cope with suffering than an infant whose pain fills its existential horizon, unmitigated by

his remarks on Rav Yannai's statement in *Avot* 4: "It is not in our hands to grasp why the wicked are at ease or why the righteous suffer." Rabbi Blech follows the view among the commentators that Rav Yannai refers to our inability to understand the ways of Divine governance. Now the Talmud (*Shabbat* 114a) tells us that Rav Yannai instructed his sons not to bury him in white, symbolizing saintliness, or in black, signifying wickedness. Rabbi Blech brilliantly connects this story with Rav Yannai's teaching in *Avot*: He "wasn't about to pronounce himself totally righteous. He knew he wasn't perfect. And for that reason, he wasn't going to make such a judgment about others as well." According to Rabbi Blech, Rav Yannai was not skeptical about our ability to identify God's message to us: Indeed, Rabbi Blech insists, he was "supportive of every one of the ideas we have so diligently followed in the preceding chapters." Rav Yannai reminds us that "we don't have *all* the answers." This kind of humility, Blech concedes, "deserves a place in our study—but only at the end,

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cally opposed to those intended by Rabbi Blech. Every page of this book should bear the header: "Don't try this at home."

I read this book twice. The first reading highlighted the elements in Rabbi Blech's approach with which I am unhappy and to which I have objected above. On my second reading I had the opportunity to appreciate the many areas in which Rabbi Blech articulates points common to all Orthodox thought. He presents readable versions of the free will defense—i.e., that God does not prevent all evils in order to allow human beings the exercise of their free responsibility; he surveys concisely popular views about the Holocaust and classical approaches to the Akeidah. Throughout he supplies a multitude of anecdotes about people, and from his wide experience, and he is a fountain of quips and quotations. For example, the Chofetz Chaim opposed saying that things are "bitter," instead he recommended saying that they are "bitter." Medicine, he explained, is often bitter, but that does not make it bad. Despite several inadvertent errors—such as implying that God tells Cain that he will be killed by a descendant when Cain's death at the hands of Lemech is a rabbinic interpretation not attributed to God's direct speech; ascribing to Hazlitt a remark of Hume's; consistently referring to Rabbi Issachar Teichtal as "Pechtal"—and despite the theological and pastoral reservations I have expressed, this book can be mined for particular insights and references. **A**

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