



## Ki Tavo

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### ***The Nature Of Theodicy***

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If you were to ask people which book in Tanakh is their favorite, the responses are certain to be as varied as the texts themselves. But I am willing to wager that in any survey, the Book of Iyyov is likely to be in the top five on most lists. Moreover, if you were to follow up and inquire about their favorite chapter(s), I predict that chapters 38-42 in Iyyov would rank right up there with Bereishit chapter 22 (the Akeidah), Shemot chapter 15 (Az Yashir), I Shemuel chapter 2 (Hannah's prayer), I Melakhim 1 chapter 18 (Eliyahu's confrontation of the priests

of Ba'al on Har Carmel), and Yechezkeil chapter 37 (the prophecy of the dry bones). The very fact that the book of Iyyov, and chapters 38-42 specifically, are included in the canon is nothing short of remarkable.<sup>1</sup> Among all the extraordinary passages in Tanakh, Iyyov stands out as one of the few occasions when there is a direct response from heaven to a human request for divine accountability.

When people contemplate their predicament in the world, thoughts generally center on three theological questions: 1) Why is there anything at all, and why is reality the way it is? 2) Why do I have to do what I have to do and specifically, for Jews, why do I have to observe the mitzvot? and 3) Why don't things work out for me in the way

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://tikvah.org/course/the-book-of-job-power-justice-and-divine-ethics/>.

they should? The third question, the problem of theodicy, is the central subject of the Book of Iyyov. Why do the righteous suffer and evil people flourish? After losing his children, his wealth, and his health, this is Iyyov's challenge to his wife, to his "friends," and, ultimately, to God. That God even takes notice of Iyyov and appears out of the whirlwind to defend divine honor is what captures our attention and makes the climactic scene so riveting. God's dramatic reply is spellbinding, but is it responsive to Iyyov's charges, and does it offer him a path forward? I suggest that God's comeback is not merely descriptive, but rather prescriptive, and that it does offer Iyyov a method to take stock of his life and ponder its trajectory.

Chapters 38-42 never define the virtuous or sinful life, what constitutes divine justice, or what human beings should expect from God in response to their behavior. Instead, these chapters form a graphic and formidable portrait of nature, on earth and in heaven. It is a terrifying vision of the inanimate forces, living creatures, and celestial elements that fill the cosmos, all beyond human comprehension or control. It represents a universe without limits – intermingled currents of light and dark, rushing rainwater, lightning and crashing thunder, ocean depths and mountain peaks, streaking celestial bodies, hungry animals in battle, everything relentlessly threatening to breach boundaries, spin out of control. Without God's figurative finger in the proverbial dike, everything teeters on the

brink of violent collapse. Iyyov's nature lacks a clear teleology or comprehensive vision that man can grasp. It is a universal Wild West. There is barely any mention of man except for his puny presence and inability to fathom nature in all of its concrete manifestations and raging forces.

There are other depictions of nature in Tanakh, most noticeably Psalms 104 and 148. In contrast to the brutal universe of Iyyov 38-42, these two psalms picture a much more harmonious creation in which all of the elements of nature honor their place in the scheme of things, interacting peacefully and predictably with one another. There is a structured hierarchy from inanimate objects to lower animals, finally culminating in human beings. Nature is a coordinated ecosystem that evokes the original description of nature in the first chapter of Bereishit in which man, formed in God's image, represents the peak of creation. He is blessed and granted dominion over nature and charged to master it. The portrait of man and his pride of place in the universe echoes the description of Adam I, rational and powerful, compared to Adam II, miniscule and overwhelmed by the cosmos, as conveyed by Rav Soloveitchik in [\*The Lonely Man of Faith\*](#).<sup>2</sup>

The challenge then is to try to understand how the portrayal of a ferocious nature in chapters 38-42 represents a meaningful response to Iyyov's questions to God. Rambam's opening chapters in *Mishneh Torah* serve as a useful point of

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 1992).

departure. In *Sefer Ha-Mada*, Rambam promotes an appreciation of nature as a critical first step on the path to true knowledge of God (*Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2). He endorses the study of physics, or science, as an important component of human activity. He sees nature as vast, dwarfing human beings. Nevertheless, true to his valorization of reason and an intellectual perception of reality, Rambam is confident that, with careful observation and analytical acumen, men and women should and can come to an understanding of nature in comprehensible terms. For Rambam, this may have meant what was the best way to maintain health and treat disease. For us, it means Newton's law of gravitational force,  $E=mc^2$ , purine-pyrimidine base pairing in the DNA double helix. Moreover, an appreciation of the workings of nature in all its myriad complexity reflects God's actions in the world and provides accessible models for our conduct and behavior as finite creatures. The study of nature and a conceptualization in which all creatures are sustained, each according to its specific needs, is a blueprint for how human beings should construct the social order to ensure the wellbeing of all of its members.

Rambam examines nature from our perspective. In contrast, chapters 38-42 in Iyyov describe nature as seen from God's vantage point, looking down on creation, like the display of the constellations in the ceiling mural at Grand Central Station. It highlights the centrifugal nature of things, always at risk of spinning out of control if God were to take his metaphoric hand off the controls. The implication of the powerful poetry in

these passages is that, despite human attempts to study nature and impose order, we cannot control the primal surge of everything poised to breach the primordial barriers. We can formulate explanatory laws and overarching theories of nature. But we will always come up short, because the underlying forces are always menacing, primed to break through their limits and defy human expectations.

It is important to note at this point that the centrality of nature in God's response to Iyyov has been noted by readers of the book from the moment it entered the canon. Elihu, the fourth "friend" who suddenly appears on the scene in chapter 32 to respond to Iyyov's challenge, tries to put Iyyov in his place by pointing to the enormity of the natural world and calling into question any person's, let alone Iyyov's, ability to comprehend it. Rambam, too, in his discussion of Iyyov, looks to the infinite expanse of nature to provide a cautionary note, namely that God's justice and human justice are not the same (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:22-23). Both look to nature only to describe the insurmountable gap between human and divine understanding. They do not turn to nature to provide Iyyov a model, an actionable strategy to cope with the quandaries of theodicy. Can Iyyov's nature provide that?

The view of nature in chapters 38-42 as always threatening to escape boundaries is consistent with the position that science, the study of nature, cannot definitively prove anything. Any attempt to establish a scientific truth – all swans are white – is always subject to the unexpected appearance of

a black swan. In the formulation of Karl Popper, the Austrian-British philosopher, scientific investigation can only falsify a hypothesis. It can never rely on inductive reasoning to prove anything about nature based on observable facts.<sup>3</sup> Any proposed explanation for how things are is only provisional, subject to the demonstration of a single counterexample, new empirical data that contradict the prevailing theory. The universe was filled with an ethereal substance until Michelson and Morley's elegant experiments, which demonstrated the constancy of the speed of light, showed otherwise. Newton's gravitational force governed mechanics until it was superseded by Einstein's spacetime curvature. That is not to say that science is subjective. But its objective findings are never final. Rather, scientific discovery is a work in progress that is constantly being updated, usually gradually but sometimes suddenly and abruptly.<sup>4</sup>

Can this theory of science be reconciled with Rambam's charge to study nature in the quest for knowledge of God? One might imagine him responding in the following way: Devising theories to explain the workings of nature that are compatible with the available facts at hand has value. They represent a meaningful human accomplishment and they can guide how we act towards one another and with our environmental partners. However, intellectual modesty is in

order. Keeping in mind the limitations of our sensory and analytic capacities, it is necessary to remain open to new findings, not to hold on stubbornly to theories that are discredited by the data, and to adapt our thinking as our knowledge and understanding of nature grow. Rambam was true to this approach. Witness his frank willingness to reinterpret the biblical text, were there to be demonstrable proof that the universe was eternal (*Moreh Nevukhim* 2:25). Considering how central his position on creation *ex nihilo* was to his view of divine law and human accountability, Rambam's openness to consider new findings about fundamental cosmological questions supports the contention that he recognized the provisional nature of scientific and religious discovery.<sup>5</sup> This is further reinforced by his statements about the imperfect rabbinical knowledge of astronomy and mathematics (*Mishneh Torah, Kiddush Ha-Hodesh* 17:24; *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:14). It is unclear if Rambam thought that human beings have the capacity to provide demonstrable proofs for all key scientific (physical) questions, but, at least in theory, he entertained the possibility.

Bringing this all together, if these chapters are God's long-sought after response to Iyyov, an interlocutor to whom He shows genuine affection and closeness, then we are forced to link this stormy revelation back to the question of

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Popper, [\*The Logic of Scientific Discovery\*](#) (University Press, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, [\*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions\*](#) (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> See Marvin Fox, [\*Interpreting Maimonides: Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy\*](#) University of Chicago Press, 1990, 251-298.

theodicy, the driving theme throughout the dramatic narrative. Jewish thinkers have offered many theories to account for divine justice. For example, there is an extreme position that there is no evil in the world, that the experience of evil represents a lack of awareness of the ultimate divine purpose, and that theodicy is not a challenge (*Likutei Moharan* 65:3:4). Alternatively, the accounting systems are valid and dependable, but human beings are unaware of the true tally of their righteous acts and sins (*Berakhot 7a, Pirkei Avot* 4:15). People have a reasonably accurate estimate of their conduct scorecard, but the final reconciliation will occur not in this world but in the next world (*Ta'anit* 11a ). Suffering is retributive and is intended to promote human agency, namely, to promote introspection and encourage people to mend their ways and enhance their moral capacity (*Berakhot* 5a). The degree of divine justice for each individual is directly proportional to their true knowledge of God, something that may be hard to judge (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:17; Ralbag, *Milhamot Hashem*). God is just, but on a cosmic level, and there are glitches in the system (Ralbag, *Milhamot Hashem*). Finally, while Iyyov is the most outspoken ancient critic of theodicy, for some modern thinkers it is conceivable that there is no transcendent divine justice and that what happens to the righteous and evil is random.<sup>6</sup>

From an epistemological standpoint, if nature is to be our guide and scientific investigation our

means of discovery, then we should acknowledge that overarching explanations of theodicy will ultimately fail, because there will always be the falsifying empirical exception. In line with the scientific model, we should feel empowered to formulate theories about our lives. But we should maintain humility about their finality. From a theological perspective, inappropriate loyalty to tentative theories about theodicy, like invalid scientific theories, is unacceptable to God.

One might reasonably question if there is a place for such scientific thinking when pondering questions of religious faith. For Popper, a valid scientific theory has to generate hypotheses that are amenable to testing and falsification based on observable data. There is no feasible human experimental design that can prospectively assess the validity of divine justice. But that is the beautiful irony of the book of Iyyov. As [Micah Goodman points out](#), we know why Iyyov suffers – all because of an off-the-cuff wager between God and Satan. We as readers know for certain, from the very beginning of the story, that Iyyov himself is the black swan proving that righteous people suffer for no apparent reason related to their moral conduct. He is the hard evidence that falsifies the oversimplistic theories of his friends that are to be summarily rejected. His act of honest confrontation and protest against God carries the divine day, in contrast to the formulaic hypotheses of his friends.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Rubenstein, [After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism](#) (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

In the end, what is God's prescription to Iyyov? He encourages people to survey their lived experience and formulate a hypothesis that both explains theodicy and accounts for the data they have collected. But God rejects the friends' facile presentations and stubborn adherence to theoretical constructs, and their insensitivity to Iyyov, as they glibly offer their theories of theodicy as supposed words of comfort. Instead, God embraces Iyyov's honest dissent regarding His engagement with and governance of the world. Ponder theodicy, formulate theories. But know that there will always be exceptions, which, in the end, proves to be the true wisdom.

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### ***Shopping for Shabbat in the Diaspora***

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**E**ach Friday afternoon I drive to the grocery store a few miles away. It's not like shopping in Machane Yehuda or the Tel Aviv shuk

where you can smell the fragrant aromas of fresh baked challah, bourekas, and malawach, fried eggplant, ground tahini, sweet cheese kanafeh kubbeh soup, and mounds of spices, and where you are surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colors—endless rows of leeks, peppers, radishes, tomatoes, dried fruit, nuts, and more. It's not an open market under a blue sky where it's as if the eye of God is watching over you, and you can feel the Shabbat angels preparing to descend from the clouds. It's a store like any other suburban grocery. Muzak playing, check-out counters humming. Conveyor belts carrying boxes and jars to registers. Cashiers ringing up prices baggers putting each item in a bag. It's not like shopping for Shabbat in Israel and feeling closer to heaven. Even so I arrive home eager to prepare dinner, hoping soon the Shabbat angels will join us at our table and hear our prayers and bless the day and grant us peace— a Shabbat shalom.

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