



When Bad Things Happen To Good People

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The age-old question of Theodicy is raised by Moshe Rabbeinu in our Parsha. He pleads ‘Please show me Your Glory’, which the Gemara (Brachos 7) understands to mean that when Moshe realised that it was a propitious time (עת רצון), he made three requests of Hashem, one of which was that Hashem should explain why “tzadik v’tov lo, tzadik v’ra lo, rasha v’tov lo, rasha v’ra lo.” Why is it that there are some righteous people who prosper and others who suffer; additionally, why is it that there are wicked people who are successful and others who suffer?

In response, the Gemara quotes divergent views whether Hashem acceded to this request or not. The Tana Kamma is of the opinion that Moshe was answered by Hashem. “*V’chanosi es asher achon*,” (33:19) is actually the response -- Hashem rewards those who deserve reward. The *tzadik* who has it good is a *tzadik gamur* – a completely righteous individual; in contrast, the *tzadik* who suffers is a *tzadik* who is not entirely without guilt. Similarly, the *rasha* who suffers is a *rasha* who is completely wicked and deserves punishment; whereas, the *rasha* who seems to be smiled upon by fortune, is a *rasha* who is not completely bad.

The Chofetz Chaim explains this approach by way of an analogy. A visitor from out of town, attends a shul and notices that the gabbai seems to give the *kibbudim* and *aliyos* in an apparently random manner. After davening, the guest goes over to the gabbai to complain about the haphazard and unprofessional manner in which the honours were dispensed. Convinced that his objectivity as an outsider enables him to perceive the apparent injustice, he upbraids the *gabbai*. The tables are soon turned however, when the *gabbai* points out that his perceived insight and wisdom as the outsider, is in fact the very source of his ignorance. A regular would know that the man at the back of Shul has been seriously ill, and, having recovered from major surgery, is back in shul for the first time in many months, the others were celebrating family *simchas*, another just returned from a trip abroad, etc etc.

What appeared arbitrary to the outsider, was, in fact, well justified and carefully arranged. In this vein, argues the Chofetz Chayim, we are, in essence, outsiders when it comes to understanding the big picture it would be arrogance of the highest order to presume to be able to fathom the workings of the Divine based merely on our few years of existence in this world.

The Gemara then quotes the opinion of R’ Meir who disagrees and is of the opinion that Hashem did not answer Moshe’s question. The *pasuk* used as the proof-text for the first opinion, “*V’chanosi es asher achon*,” actually can be read to mean that Hashem will reward even those who do not deserve it.¹

The Noam Elimelech explains that the argument is not about how to interpret the *pasuk*-- even R’ Meir may readily concede that the basic *pshat* favours the Tana Kamma’s reading, that Hashem will reward those who deserve it. R’ Meir, however, sees an additional dimension to the *hashgacha* that understands that when Hashem gives a *tzadik*, it is not perceived as being merely for the *tzadik*’s personal benefit. A *tzadik* acts as a conduit to bring *bracha* into the world, everything that transpires to him is received with the responsibility to utilise it for the benefit of all. Thus, by extension, through rewarding the *tzadik*, Hashem ultimately channels *bracha* even to those who don’t personally deserve it. The net result is that everyone benefits.

Returning now to Moshe’s question, something more significant emerges. Superficially, he seems to raising the classic question of theodicy – why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? But if that alone was what troubled him, then the gemara should refer only to “*tzadik v’ra lo... rasha v’tov lo*.” Why does the gemara include in the question “*tzadik v’tov lo... rasha v’ra lo*,” the fact that there are righteous people who get their reward and wicked who suffer?

The Maharil Diskin refers us to another gemara (Moed Katan 28) that “*banei, chayei, u’mzonei lav b’zechusa talya elah b’mazla*.” There is a concept of “*mazal*,” which forms the context within which a person receives his *schar v’onesh*. A poor person might manage to climb the social ladder and become middle class, however, it is unlikely that the pauper will suddenly become a millionaire. That’s what bothered Moshe. Rare though it may be, there are cases that are the exceptions to the rule. There are *tzadikim* who receive reward that completely defies the norms of nature – and then there are the vast majority who do not. Moshe was as mystified by the phenomenon of “*tzadik v’tov lo*” despite the effects of *mazal*, as he was at there being a “*tzadik v’ra lo*.” How does the system work?

The gemara answers that we have to distinguish between the “*tzadik gamur*” and the “*tzadik she’eino gamur*.” The *tzadik gamur* who is completely righteous rises above his natural tendencies, and is in turn rewarded outside the normal *teva/mazal* boundaries (genetic, socio-economic, etc.) of nature. A *tzadik* who does good to the extent his natural talents allow for but does not push the envelope in turn is rewarded only to the degree that *mazal* allows.

1 For a more sophisticated approach to all of this, students of נהגות will readily appreciate the parallel lines of נהגות המשפט ונהגות היחוד at play here.

2 ע'י מורש"א בח"א שם

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