

knew. No wonder these events drew rabbinic attention to the exclusion of others. (Yes, these rabbis were not interested in history for its own sake.) What is notable is that the Tosefta is willing to record these events and admit their significance, unlike the Mishnah before it.

Coming between a half-century and a century later than the Mishnah, and in the midst of a decline which brought considerable pain and deprivation, the Tosefta allows for one significant development beyond the powerful Mishnaic precedent: its admission that there is change in history, the world is not perfect, and restoration is something which must be hoped for. The defensive denial of the Mishnah characterizes significant aspects of the Tosefta, but not the whole. Perhaps because of increasing distance from the most catastrophic events in rabbinic history, or perhaps because of the insidious effect of more recent, more modest but unflagging sufferings, the Tosefta's authorship permits itself to be distracted by less-than-ideal realities. True, the events which are the focus of these attentions occurred possibly two centuries before, and more recent suffering is as yet unnoticed. But the Mishnah's pure ideal has been left behind. Would the suffering of the third century make itself felt in rabbinic circles, as the suffering of the first and second century now did in the Tosefta? For an answer to this question, we turn, in the next chapter, to later contemporary expressions, recorded in the halakhic midrashim.

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6

Early Rabbinic Responses: The Halakhic Midrashim

The so-called halakhic midrashim, the tannaitic midrashim on the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, are the next stage in the development of the rabbinic literary corpus. Regrettably, there remains considerable disagreement among scholars in dating these works, with regard both to their substance and (somewhat less so) their final redaction. As in the case of the Tosefta, Albeck here again argues that these are (redactionally) post-Talmudic documents.¹ In what he calls "a good guess," Neusner remarks that they were probably completed around 400 CE—though he does not offer substantive proof for this guess.² In my opinion, it is more reasonable to suggest a date of the late third century, for the following reasons. First, these midrashim quote both the Mishnah and, less frequently, the Tosefta, meaning that the earliest possible date of their redaction is the mid-third century. On the other side, they are already quoted in the Yerushalmi, c. 400, making this the latest possible date of their redaction. The remaining question is whether they were completed before the Christianization of the empire and therefore closer to Avot and the Tosefta, or after the triumph of Christianity and thus closer to the Yerushalmi and the early aggadic midrashim. As will be evident to anyone who reads these works, they are, in terms of language, named authorities, and ideologies, far closer to the former than to the latter. Moreover, the qualities which characterize the Yerushalmi and the aggadic midrashim as a consequence of their reaction to the Christian triumph, spelled out in detail by Neusner, are absent from these works. Individual comments may be construed as directed against Christians, but the overall program of these books is not controlled by that

concern. In light of these factors, it is likely that these works are earlier, before the Christianization of the empire, and not later. Therefore, the most reasonable surmise concerning their dating seems to be c. 300.

Accordingly, the context for the discussion of these works is approximately the same as the context pertinent for the Tosefta. By the end of the third century, Jews in Palestine had suffered through a half-century or more of chaos and decline. Land had been abandoned, basic necessities became difficult to come by, and the Jewish population of the territory fell. As the experience of postdestruction "exile" became more permanent, the hope for salvation must have been more urgent (psychologically) but more difficult to affirm with confidence. If the rabbis of this period were open to such reflection and discussion, the conditions which might provoke deliberations on suffering were undeniably present.

Perhaps because of his difficulty in dating these books, Neusner, exceptionally, does not read them in the context of their time. He instead thinks that these works bespeak an internal rabbinic development, responding to what he calls "the crisis precipitated by the Mishnah."³ Noting that the Mishnah had not explicitly laid out its claim of relationship to scripture, but had instead offered its laws mostly in the voice of its own independent authority, Neusner understands the agenda of the midrashim to be filling in the gap, connecting the law of the rabbis with the written law given by God to Moses. These midrashim represent, in his view, a development precipitated by forces internal to the rabbinic movement and not a response to the larger history of the time.

Whatever the merit of Neusner's characterization, and I agree, in large measure, with his understanding of this development, it is still impossible to divorce consideration of these works entirely from the broader historical context. Moreover, the responses to suffering recorded in these pages are more frequent, more detailed, and more profound than what we have seen earlier, and this development is not accounted for by reference to the relation of the Mishnah and the midrashim. Only reference to the malaise of the recent century, and to developments in the rabbinic movement itself, will provide an adequate setting for explaining what we find here.

Before passing to the relevant texts it is also essential that we ask whether these midrashim may be considered together or whether each is distinct, demanding individual examination. In his studies of each work, Neusner has pointed to a variety of differences in their overall approaches.⁴ However, in the present matter, I have discovered no significant differences in their responses, and what few differences may suggest themselves are not frequent enough to support conclusions. Moreover, in his comprehensive study of a related subject (responses to the destruction of the second Temple), David Nelson concludes that these midrashim do effectively represent one corpus.⁵ Therefore, with respect to the subject at hand, we may approach these various works collectively and speak of their common witness to this stage of the development of rabbinic responses to suffering.

The simple connection between sin and suffering as punishment is commonly repeated in the halakhic midrashim. The Sifra, for example, repre-

sents God as saying to Israel: "You have transgressed seven sins; come [now] and accept upon yourselves seven [kinds] of suffering" (*behuqotai*, chapter 5, 1). The same assumption is clearly announced in Sifrei Deuteronomy: "[Y]ou, if you are worthy you are rewarded but, if you sin, you are visited with retribution . . ." (Sifrei Deut. 306, p. 333).⁶ Death also is conventionally understood as punishment, as in Sifrei Numbers, where R. Shimon b. Eleazar expresses the opinion that Moses and Aaron, like all other mortals, died on account of sin, and continues by claiming that if they had not sinned they would as yet not have died (par. 137, p. 183). In these and other traditions like them, the tradition of the Mishnah, following upon the most common biblical view, is repeated without elaboration or reservation.

Other earlier approaches, less common in the Bible and the Mishnah but no less traditional, are also repeated at this stage. The most typical such response is the idea that the scales of divine justice, apparently improperly tipped in this world, will be restored to their proper position in the world-to-come (see, for example, Sifrei Num. 103, p. 102). A view with shallower roots, repeated in the Mekhilta de'R. Ishmael (henceforth: Mekhilta) (*Yitro, ba-hodesh*, par. 7, p. 228) from the Tosefta, is the belief that suffering is essential in effecting atonement for the two most serious categories of sin. As discussed earlier, this formulation had no precise precedent in earlier literature, but the connection with documents that had equated suffering with sacrifice is unmistakable. Understood more broadly, redemptive suffering went back, of course, to second Isaiah. The more literal claim for the redemptive quality of suffering is also found in this literature (for example, Mekhilta *neziqin*, par. 9, p. 280).

At the same time, the halakhic midrashim record lengthy treatises on suffering that, by virtue of their rhetoric in particular, mark new directions in rabbinic responses to the problem. The most elaborate treatment of suffering is found in Mekhilta *ba-hodesh* (par. 10, pp. 239-41) and is repeated with mostly minor differences in Sifrei Deuteronomy (par. 32, pp. 55-58). Slightly abridged for purposes of conserving space, the text follows.

a. R. Aqiba says, "With me . . . you shall not make . . ." (Ex. 20:20)—[this teaches] that you should not conduct yourselves with respect to me as others conduct themselves with respect to those [gods] that they fear.

b. For when good comes upon them, they honor their gods . . . but when suffering comes upon them they curse their gods. . . .

c. But you, if I bring upon you good, give thanks [and if] I bring upon you suffering, give thanks.

d. And thus does David say, "I raise the cup of deliverance and invoke the name of the Lord" (Ps. 116:13) [and, at the same time,] "I come upon trouble and sorrow and I invoke the name of the Lord" (ibid., vss. 3-4).⁷

e. And thus [too] does Job say, "the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)—[blessing God, therefore, both] for the good measure and for the measure of suffering.

f. What does his [= Job's] wife say to him? "You still keep your integrity! BlaspHEME God and die!" (ibid. 2:9). And so he responds, "You talk as any foolish woman . . ." (ibid. vs. 10). . . .

If you suffer
∴ you will be forgiven

no anti-Christian polemic

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g. And moreover [it teaches] that a person should be happier with suffering than with good, for even if a person experiences good all of his days, he is not forgiven for his sins. And what causes his sins to be forgiven? Say: suffering.

h. R. Eleazar b. Jacob says, "Behold, He [= scripture] says, 'Do not reject the discipline of the Lord. . . .' For what reason? 'For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes [as the father the son whom he favors]' (Prov. 3:11-12). You say: come and see, what caused this child to be pleasing to his father? Say: suffering."

i. R. Meir says, "'the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son' (Dt. 8:5). [According to the instruction of this verse] your heart should know: [in Sifrei: you and your heart know] the deeds that you have done and the suffering that I have brought upon you, not according to your deeds have I brought suffering upon you."

Part II

... | י"ו' | י"ז

j. R. Yose b. R. Judah says, "precious are sufferings, for the name of the Omnipresent rests upon the one to whom sufferings come . . ."

k. R. Jonathan says, "precious are sufferings, [for] just as the covenant is established by virtue of the land, so too is the covenant established by virtue of suffering . . ."

l. R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai says, "precious are sufferings, for three good gifts did [God] give to Israel, and the nations of the world covet them, and they were not given except by means of sufferings. And what are they? Torah and the Land of Israel and the World-to-Come . . ."

m. You say: what is the way that brings a person to life in the World-to-Come? Say: it is sufferings.

n. R. Neḥemiah says, "precious are sufferings, for just as sacrifices [cause God to] pardon, so too do sufferings [cause God to] pardon . . ."

o. "And not only so, but sufferings [cause God to] pardon more than sacrifices. For what reason? Because sacrifices are with [one's] property, but sufferings are with [one's] body. . . ."

Part III

p. R. Eleazar was once sick, and four elders came in to visit him, [those being] R. Tarfon and R. Joshua and R. Eleazar b. Azariah and R. Aqiba.

q. R. Tarfon responded and said, "Rabbi. You are better for Israel than the solar sphere . . ."

r. R. Joshua responded and said, "Rabbi, you are better for Israel than a drop of rain . . ."

s. R. Eleazar b. Azariah responded and said, "You are better for Israel than a father and a mother . . ."

t. R. Aqiba responded and said, "precious are sufferings."

u. R. Eleazar said to his students, ". . . let me hear the words of my student, Aqiba, who said, precious are sufferings . . ."

To facilitate comment, I have broken this treatise into three segments. The first (a-i) elaborates the theme of praising God for suffering and rejoicing in it, the second (j-o) is united by the common introductory for-

mula, "precious are sufferings," and the last segment (p-u) relates a dramatic narrative that communicates the same message as the middle section of this text. Clearly what we have here is a lengthy apologetic for suffering.

The first segment begins by making the same point as m. Ber. 9:5; that is, a person is required to thank God for the bad that he experiences as well as for the good. Noteworthy in this section is, first, the second proof for this proposition, brought from Job (e-f). In the verses quoted, Job is considered a proper model for pious behavior; he blesses God for the bad that has befallen him and he scolds his wife for suggesting that he do otherwise. As we saw earlier, rabbinic attitudes toward Job are not united in viewing him favorably, so the fact that Job is held up as a model is striking. True, the Job speaking here is the pre-rebellion Job, but if in the minds of the rabbinic authors the figure of Job were sufficiently blemished by his subsequent rebellious expressions, it would have been difficult to use him as a positive role model in the present context. If Job can be a pious model, perhaps pious people can question God's justice.

The latter part of this first section similarly argues that suffering should be blessed = welcomed, now mostly on the basis of careful quotation from scripture. Important here is the extent to which the apologetic is furthered, for the verses are quoted to increase our desire for suffering while diminishing our sense of its severity. To make these points we are told, first, that suffering causes our sins to be forgiven, but only in the way that punishment restores a child to his parent's good favor. Our suffering is evidence of God's special relationship with us. But the model of a parent punishing a child is important here in another way: since a parent punishes out of love, the punishment a parent metes out is less in degree than would be required by the crime; since God punishes as a parent, God too does not punish according to the full measure of transgression (i). Punishment is not measure-for-measure; it is less than justice would call for. God, in other words, is more merciful than just.

But why conclude that this is the primary sense of the tradition at hand (i)? Why not read "not according to your deeds have I brought suffering upon you" as saying that punishment is in excess of one's sinful deeds? My preference for the former reading is based upon two observations. First, the text suggests that self-reflection will reveal the cause of the punishment. Calling on the individual to be honest with himself, the midrash seems to believe that a true accounting of one's sins will yield the conclusion that the punishment is not uncalled for; on the contrary, it is even less than might be justified. In contrast, it is unlikely that punishment that is greater than the sin could be understood through self-reflection. Second, this tradition forms part of a long sequence of apologia for suffering. How would such a purpose be served by saying that suffering is greater than is justified? In light of these observations, surely the first of the suggested readings should be understood as the preferred one.

All this being said, there is little doubt that the noted ambiguity is itself part of the message. Indeed, the comparison to the punishment of a child by a parent opens up another interpretive possibility that has important

consequences. Amos, it will be recalled, argued that God more readily punishes Israel, God's beloved people, for lesser sins. On the human plane, as well, it may be appreciated that parental discipline, intended to correct the child, may sometimes be even harsher than the wrongdoing. Considered on either level, it is evident that, just as parental discipline might be less severe than the crime, so too might it be more severe. What distinguishes parental discipline is that it often does not correspond exactly to the crime. Correspondence is the way of justice, not of parental love. Thus whichever way parental discipline is imagined, it is correct to say "not according to your deeds have I brought suffering upon you."

In the present context, it is this latter point that is most crucial. This midrash argues explicitly, for the first time in the rabbinic context, that suffering, as discipline (and not as punishment in the penal sense), does *not* correspond exactly with the measure of sin. Contrary to the claim of Mishnah Sotah, this is not a world that is judged according to a measure-for-measure system. If it is not strict justice that we insist upon, then, of course, suffering is far less of a problem. Simply put, if suffering is not punishment, it must be something else. In this simple, brief step, the necessary relationship of correspondence between sin and suffering has been severed. Once it has been admitted, as in this text, that the correspondence is not necessary, then it is possible to redefine completely the place of suffering in the system. Crucially, it is also possible, with this redefinition, to confront reality more directly. With this severing accomplished, it is never again necessary to face the reality of suffering and pretend that it is absolutely just. Suffering can now be salvaged, but in a different guise—with a different purpose.

Of course, this is not the first time that this relationship has been severed. Job and Ecclesiastes, in the canonical context, deny the direct and necessary relationship between sin and suffering, and apocalyptic books also claim that present suffering is a matter of fate, and thus not a measured outcome of sin. But the step taken here is significant for two reasons. First, this is the first time in rabbinic literature that the admission of a lack of correspondence is made this explicitly. Elsewhere, to this point, a more archaic biblical perspective has been preferred by the rabbinic authors. Here they begin to recover other, less prominent, biblical alternatives. Second, and crucially, this is *not* an apocalyptic response. Rabbinic literature never admits the apocalyptic possibility, and so the severing of correspondence in the rabbinic context is both more troubling and more radical.

What the different purpose of suffering might be is explored in the second section of this midrash. Here the author argues not merely that suffering is not to be despised, or even, as in the first section, that it leads to a positive outcome, but that suffering carries with it so many profound benefits that it is to be held precious by the sufferer. The first major thrust of the argument (k-m) is that suffering is covenantal. The tradition attributed to Shimeon b. Yohai is particularly noteworthy: the three symbols of covenantal fulfillment—the Torah, the Land, and final redemption—are all made con-

ditional upon suffering. Of course if suffering guarantees each of these three things, then suffering genuinely is to be welcomed.

In consideration of the context in which these traditions are expressed, more important is the opinion attributed to R. Nehemiah (n) and its elaboration (o). One of the central problems for emergent rabbinic Judaism and for contemporary Jewish movements was what to do with the Torah's requirement of sacrifices, which, in the absence of the Temple, could apparently no longer be brought. The response of the author of Hebrews (chapters 7 and 9), claiming that Jesus was the perfect, eternal sacrifice, shows the centrality of this dilemma. The present tradition comes remarkably close to that position, but with important differences. In this midrash, sacrifice, while perhaps ideally desirable, is not absolutely essential, because suffering brings God's pardon at least as well as do sacrifices. As it turns out, though, suffering is even more effective than sacrifices, because suffering involves personal, bodily sacrifice, whereas animal sacrifices do not. We who suffer, like Jesus who suffered, replace the sacrifices. Our suffering, like his for Christians, is redemptive. But this similarity is also the most important difference between the two approaches. In the case of Jesus, the suffering of the perfect individual was understood to atone for the sins of the many. In the view of this midrash, in contrast, it is individuals, all imperfect and all sinners, who suffer and thereby effect their own atonement. Our own flesh and blood replace the flesh and blood of the sacrificed animals. Suffering repairs the ruptures that earlier only sacrifices could mend.

The final dramatic narrative gives further proof of the preciousness of suffering, and gives it the support of both scripture (not quoted here) and rabbinic authority. But the point has already been made. And what a point it is indeed. Suffering should be the source of joy! Suffering is dear! Suffering is at the foundation of the covenant! Suffering is redemptive!

As should be clear, it is not, for the most part, the substance of this midrash that is new. Each of its central points can at least find an approximate parallel in earlier Jewish literature. But the attitude expressed and recommended here is nowhere before paralleled. What we see here is a powerful rhetorical attempt to take a painful reality, one in which Jews have suffered horribly as individuals and as a nation, and to transform completely the attitude that a Jew will bring to this reality. If suffering repairs my relationship with God, brings me to Torah, leads me to the land, and assures me life in the world-to-come, then I cannot possibly—or so would seem reasonable—protest this suffering. Relative to the reward, the cost is surely quite minor.

As remarked earlier, the parallel in Sifrei Deuteronomy is virtually identical with the record in the Mekhilta. The most significant difference in the Sifrei version is the bridge to the deliberation on suffering as such. That midrash begins essentially by quoting m. Ber. 9:5, attributing the opinion found in the Mishnah to R. Aqiba. Aqiba comments, in connection with the phrase "[You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and] with all your might" (*bekhol me'odekha*), that this means you should love God "for each and every measure [*bekhol mida umidda*]

with which He measures you, whether with a good measure or with a measure of suffering." The language employed here makes it impossible not to hearken back to the Mishnah in Sotah which, claiming measure-for-measure justice, uses the same terminology. But, as discussed previously, the purpose of the present midrash is to make precisely the opposing argument—that measure-for-measure justice is not the rule. Therefore, the midrash, in its choice of words, assures that the reader will note the contrast. Taking issue with the Mishnah's more simplistic claim, the midrash argues for an understanding of suffering that, while every bit as apologetic for suffering in God's world, nevertheless does not succumb to the simple picture with which the Mishnah suffices.

A brief discussion of death in the Mekhilta (*ba-hodesh*, par. 9, p. 237) also shows that the question of divine retribution is more complicated than simple biblical equations might suggest and, like parts of the prior midrash, rends the correspondence between punishment and individual sin. The first comment claims: "If it were possible to remove the Angel of Death, I [God] would remove him, but the decree has already been decreed." That is to say, death is ever-present, by virtue of divine fiat. Having thus been fixed in the world, it is now impossible even for God to remove death. This means, of course, that even if there were to be a perfectly righteous individual she would die because of the universalism of the decree. Accordingly, death is assuredly not simple punishment.

Following this opinion, R. Jose comments: "On this condition did Israel stand at Mount Sinai, on the condition that the Angel of Death have no dominion over them, as it says 'I had taken you for divine beings, sons of the Most High, all of you' (Ps. 82:6); [but] you ruined your deeds, 'therefore you shall die as men do, fall like any prince' (ibid. vs. 7)."⁹ As is clear, the connection between sin and death is not broken. The sin of human beings means that they must die. But, once again, the sin of a particular person is not what leads to his individual death. Cause and effect there still is; correspondence there is not.

A similarly complicated comment on death and suffering is recorded later in the Mekhilta (*nezigin*, par. 18, p. 313). The text is this:

a. R. Ishmael and R. Shimeon were once on their way out to be killed [by the Romans, when] R. Shimeon said to R. Ishmael: Rabbi, my heart goes out, for I do not know why I am being killed.

b. R. Ishmael said to R. Shimeon: [Has it never happened] in your days that a person came to you for judgment or for a question and you delayed him until you swallowed [what was in] your pouch or until you fastened your sandal or until you wrapped [yourself in] your shawl? [Remember!] The Torah said "[You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan.] If you do mistreat . . ." [Ex. 22:21–2] [meaning] either great or minor mistreatment.

c. And for this word, he said to him: You have comforted me, Rabbi.

d. And when R. Shimeon and R. Ishmael were killed, R. Aqiba said to his students: prepare yourselves for suffering. For if good was to come in

our generation, R. Shimeon and R. Ishmael surely would have received it first,

e. rather, it is revealed and known before the One Who Spoke and the World came into Being that *great suffering is about to come in our generation and [God therefore] removed them from our midst*

f. To uphold what is said: "The righteous man perishes, and no one considers; Pious men are taken away, and no one gives thought . . ." and it says "Peace will come, they shall have rest on their couches who walk straight-forward."¹⁰ And, at the end, "But as for you, come closer, You sons of a sorceress, you offspring of an adulterer and a harlot!" (Is. 57:1–3).

Here, as in the previous text, suffering and death are claimed to be the consequence of wrongdoing, even of sin proper ("You shall not ill-treat"). But in order to make this argument, even the most insignificant act has to be considered ill-treatment (making someone wait a brief moment while one ties one's sandal), and what is highlighted, again, is not the fact that suffering results from sin but that it is virtually impossible to make a reasonable argument for any direct correspondence between the gravity of the sin and the severity of the punishment (suffering). This midrash goes a significant step beyond even Amos's double standard, demanding of at least the leaders of Israel (the rabbis) a level of righteousness that is nearly impossible to achieve. If that level of righteousness is not achieved, it will be recalled, even the most extreme suffering is justified as punishment. Yet, equally important, this justification is deemed comforting. At least it allows one to avoid the conclusion that God permits suffering for no reason at all.

The second part of the midrash—the teaching of R. Aqiba to his disciples—confronts the problem of the suffering of the (relatively more) righteous (= Shimeon and Ishmael) with a different set of assumptions. According to this opinion, Shimeon and Ishmael may be seen as a sort of barometer for their generation. If this were to be a generation that would enjoy peace, they would be the first to merit this reward. But, since this is to be a generation of suffering, they must die first to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: first the righteous must die and come to their eternal rest, and only then will God call the wicked to account. These righteous individuals are being "removed from our midst" in order to spare them the more severe suffering to come. Their suffering must be considered in relation to the greater burden of suffering that their survivors will bear and, relatively speaking, it is not severe at all. Not since the Wisdom of Solomon has this claim for suffering as an act of grace, of mercy, been made in this manner.

The majority of texts analyzed to this point have been drawn from the Mekhilta de'R. Ishmael, but the variety of views seen in that midrash is replicated in the others. Sifrei Deuteronomy, for example, parallels the Mekhilta in many of its comments on suffering and death. As in the Mekhilta, the relationship of Sifrei to suffering is extremely apologetic. This is true not only of the lengthy treatise on suffering, which, as noted previously, appears in both documents in almost exactly the same form, but also of other sig-

nificant responses to the problem of suffering. The relevant comments are united in their observation that, if understood properly, suffering is far less extreme than is commonly imagined and, again if viewed through the proper lens, suffering is by no means unjust.

One such midrash (Sifrei 311, p. 351) makes its argument this way:

a. When Abraham, our father, had not yet come into the world, the Holy One, Blessed be He, judged the world—as if it could be—with a strict [= cruel, severe, merciless] measure.

b. [Thus,] the people of the [generation of the] flood sinned [and God] scattered them like sparks upon the water. The people of the [generation of the] tower [of Babel] sinned [and God] scattered them from one end of the earth to the other. The people of Sodom sinned [and God] flooded them with brimstone and fire.

c. But when Abraham came to the world, he had merit to receive suffering and they [= sufferings] began coming slowly. As it is said, “There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt” (Gen. 12:10). And if you should say, Why do sufferings come? Because of the love of Israel: “He fixed the boundaries of peoples / In relation to Israel’s numbers” (Dt. 32:8).¹¹

The midrash defends the suffering that Jews endure by comparing it with the suffering that others, before Israel, endured. The claim is simply this: the other nations were judged with great harshness, as evidenced by the Torah’s record of the punishments of the people of the flood, the tower, and Sodom. But for Abraham and those who followed, harsh judgment was replaced with suffering. This sort of recompense for transgression, the midrash describes, comes gradually—not in a sudden catastrophic incident—and thus is vastly preferable to other forms of punishment. Since all humans sin, they all must be punished. As punishments go, personal suffering is relatively less severe, and so it is reasonable for the midrash to claim that suffering is an expression of God’s love for Israel.¹²

Despite the explicit claim of the midrash, it would be a mistake to understand its system in strictly chronological terms. The more important dichotomy is not before Abraham—after Abraham, but Israel—the nations. This must be so because the people of Sodom and Gemorrah were punished *after* Abraham came. It was Abraham, of course, who argued that God should spare those cities. In light of this well-known connection, it must be assumed that the reader of this midrash—and therefore also the writer of this midrash—was aware of the inconsistency that was here created. The unavoidable reading of the present text must, then, be this: before Abraham, no one merited the more humane punishment represented by personal suffering; beginning with Abraham, Abraham and his offspring had such merit.

Very much the same point is made at Sifrei 325 (p. 377). There again the suffering of the nations is compared with the suffering of Israel, and again the suffering of Israel is considered gradual and therefore tolerable. When causing the nations to suffer, God “causes the earth to quake for them,” whereas we are merely given over to the domination of the pro-

verbal four kingdoms, where “I am with you to deliver you—declares the Lord” (Jer. 1:8). The argument that the suffering of Israel is gradual, piecemeal, and comparatively less harsh was made earlier in 2 Maccabees (chapter 6). There the narrator, in direct address, prepares the reader for the suffering of the seven brothers, described following, by offering precisely the same justification that we see here. So this strategy, as such, is centuries older than its appearance in this midrash. Still, this is its first appearance in literature that rabbinic Jews will consider authoritative, and it should be accounted as significant for that reason.¹³

The Sifrei also parallels the Mekhilta in its stated view of death. The following deliberation, in the guise of dialogues between Moses and God and then the ministering angels and God, questions first the death of Moses and then the death of Adam. Moses makes his own case (Sifrei 339, p. 388):

Master of the world! Why do I die? Is it not better that they should say “Moses is good” from sight [= from actually seeing him] than that they should say “Moses is good” based [merely] upon reports? [And] is it not better that they should say “this is Moses who brought us out of Egypt and split the sea for us and brought down the manna for us and performed for us miracles and great deeds” than that they should say “thus and thus was Moses and thus and thus would Moses do?!”

God’s response is simple and to the point: “It [= death] is a decree from before me that is equal for all persons.” That is, Moses ideally would not have died. Clearly, no claim is being made that Moses died because of his sins. Instead, Moses died as all humans die—this is the divine decree. Therefore, death (at least Moses’ death) is not punishment; it is simply the way of the world.

But the latter part of the same midrash, emphasizing the present lesson with regard to Adam, also suggests that death and transgression are related. In these steps, the ministering angels ask God why the first person died. God answers that he died for not having followed God’s command (presumably regarding the tree in the garden). The angels then turn their attention to Moses, who, they claim, did perform God’s commands. Here God reiterates the earlier response: “It is a decree from before me.”

On the one hand, the discussion of Adam suggests that death is clearly tied to transgression. On the other hand, Moses’ death is, for this author, evidence that death is not always tied to transgression; it must sometimes be explained as a simple, divine decree. It might be possible to resolve this apparent contradiction by proposing that only Adam’s death must have been tied to transgression, but that subsequent deaths are necessary on account of the decree of death precipitated by Adam’s sin. I prefer, though, to leave the tension unresolved. It seems more likely that there are arguments in opposition here: one which does not want to abandon the connection between death and sin, the other which admits a reality where death seems inevitable regardless of sin.

In all of the halakhic midrashim we have seen, traditions that relate to

“hist” evolution of suffering

suffering are overwhelmingly apologetic; if they do not defend the justice of the system in archaic terms, they instead suggest that suffering is relatively less severe than other possible punishments or claim that suffering has a variety of benefits that should cause the afflicted individual to welcome his suffering. However, the texts examined so far do not entertain the possibility that suffering, whatever its status, does not come from God. One way or another, suffering is assuredly divine in origin.

Yet a careful search yields at least two (so I have found) midrashic texts that unmistakably assume that some suffering, at least, does not originate with God. The first is a well-known text that has commonly been understood to reflect a rabbinic response to the Hadrianic persecutions¹⁴ (Mekhilta *ba-hodesh*, par. 6, p. 227). The narrator enumerates the various reasons for which Jews are put to death: "because I circumcised my son . . . because I read Torah . . . because I ate matzah [on Passover]," and so forth. How are these sufferings justified? "These afflictions caused me to be beloved to my Father in heaven." The afflictions, in other words, are not exactly "afflictions of [God's] love"—a justification for suffering that will become prominent in later texts—but they do cause me to be loved by God. Submitting to suffering inflicted by other humans, the sufferer is recognized by God as faithful and God's love for him or her is thereby increased.

There is no hint here that the suffering is in any way punishment for sin. On the contrary, the suffering experienced by the people is avowedly human in origin and obviously unjust. For precisely this reason is God's love for the sufferer increased! Thus, for the first time in the many midrashim we have reviewed, we find allowance for suffering that is not the doing of God. In light of the overall midrashic context, this is a radical allowance.

We must be cautious, however, about reading too much into this tradition. It may well be that the author believes that the wars, destruction, and persecution *began* as punishment for sin and what is here reported is a case of the persecutor—originally performing God's will—going too far. Such an interpretation will merely recall the prophetic view of Babylon (see Isa. 47 and Zech. 1:15). This exposition thus may not be quite as radical as it at first appears. Nevertheless, the admission of human prerogative as a cause for suffering is explicit, and this is a major step, therefore, in severing the necessary connection between suffering and sin.

A second text that similarly unlinks suffering and sin—and allows for a purely human source of suffering—is the midrash at Sifra *behuqotai*, chapter 3, 6:

a. "And I broke the bars of your yoke." (Lev. 26:13)

b. They told a parable—to what is the matter similar?

c. To a homeowner who had a plowing cow and lent it to another to plow with it. And that man had ten sons [and] this one came and plowed [with it] and [then] rested and [then] this one came and plowed [with it] and rested, until the cow became exhausted and lay down. [Thereupon] all of the cows came in but this cow did not come in. It was not enough in [the owner's] mind to receive conciliation from that man, rather, he immediately came and broke the yoke and cut the ropes.

d. Similarly, Israel, in this world, one regime comes and enslaves [them] and [then] goes, [then another] regime comes and enslaves [them] and goes. . . . Tomorrow, when the end-time arrives, the Holy One, blessed be He, will not say to the nations, "thus and thus have you done to my children." Rather, He will immediately come and break the yoke and cut the ropes.

Clearly, the persecution of Israel in its various exiles is the work of its hosts, not of God. The parable leaves no room to doubt that this is intended. Probative in this regard is the equation drawn between Israel and the cow. A cow, of course, cannot sin, so the abuse of the cow cannot be seen as punishment. Israel in exile is likewise to be understood as a "dumb cow," abused for no good reason. The borrowers alone are the cause of the suffering, be it of the cow or of Israel.

Again, it may well be that the author imagines that Israel was originally thrust into exile as punishment for its sins, and it may always be wondered why God does not now intervene to end the suffering of the nation (perhaps that very hesitation makes the continuing exile an ongoing punishment from God). Be that as it may, the active persecution of Israel is not claimed to be the act of God. There is limited room, therefore, for understanding suffering as the outcome of human freedom and not, in any direct sense, as punishment from God.

Related Traditions

The exploration of alternatives that is evident in the preceding midrashic-halakhic deliberations on suffering finds little parallel in more theoretical treatments of divine justice or in the few explicit responses to recent national suffering as represented by the destruction of the Temple. In contrast to some texts seen above, where the correspondence between transgression and punishment = suffering is admitted to break down, texts that approach divine justice in the abstract make no such admission. This may be because, as I suggested in my introduction, discussions of personal suffering are less susceptible to detached intellectualization than are discussions of the more theoretical question of justice. Or it may be because, as we shall see, the halakhic midrashim caught upon a single resolution of the problem of divine justice—projection into a future world—that is not available to refutation, and they therefore required no significant alternatives. Whichever of these explanations best accounts for the difference in tone and overall approach between the following texts and those already reviewed, it will be clear in what follows that the difficulties evident in treatments of suffering are not present in this related context.

As has been noted, rabbinic literature in general and the midrashim in particular are often internally inconsistent. There will be no surprise, then, in finding that, despite the obvious denials of measure-for-measure justice found in several of the texts reviewed previously (in particular the lengthy deliberation on suffering in the Mekhilta and Sifrei Deuteronomy), affirmations of measure-for-measure justice are recorded in the very same documents. This affirmation is explicit and common in the Mekhilta (see

vayehi, intro., pp. 78 and 81, and par. 5, p. 133), where the language of Mishnah Sotah is quoted, in greater or lesser part, almost verbatim. It is also found in another Mekhilta text (*deshira*, par. 2, p. 123), which, though not using the Mishnaic language for “measure-for-measure,” does employ the same biblical examples as Mishnah Sotah and quotes the same scriptures in support. These texts obviously occupy the same position as the Mishnah with respect to the question of divine justice, and if there is any difference between these traditions and the Mishnaic model, it is at most a matter of tone: they, like the Tosefta, prefer to emphasize the latter part of the Mishnah’s lesson, that God’s reward is more generous than God’s punishment.¹⁵

But insistence on this-worldly justice, where the punishment corresponds with the crime, is clearly peripheral in these documents. Far more central is the view that the scales of justice will be balanced only in a world-to-come. This is a widespread notion at the present level of rabbinic expression, and a few examples will illustrate this already well-known approach.

At Mekhilta *deshira* (par. 2, p. 125) God is assumed to be a person’s judge immediately after death. Earlier (*vayehi*, par. 5, p. 107) we find one of numerous places in which the Mekhilta declares that God will bring punishment = suffering to the wicked in the world-to-come. The Sifra (*vayiqra*, par. 12, p. 10) emphasizes the reward coming to the righteous in the future world. Despite their different emphases, these texts are obviously in agreement that all will get what is due to them in that future world.¹⁶

One of the most eloquent statements of this view, stating explicitly that the inequities of this world will be resolved in the world-to-come, is found in the Sifra (*behuqotai*, chapter 2, 5):

“I will look with favor upon you”¹⁷ (Lev. 26:9)—They told a parable:¹⁸ To what may the thing be compared? To a king who hired many workers and there was one worker who worked for him for many days. The workers came in to collect their wage and that worker came in with them. The king said to that worker: My son, I will look [with favor] upon you. These many who did only a little bit of work, I give them a small wage. But you, I have a significant accounting to figure with you in the future.

So too, Israel was requesting their reward from God in this world, and [at the same time] the nations of the world were requesting their reward. And God said to Israel: My children, I will look [with favor] upon you. These nations of the world did a little bit of work for me and I [therefore] give them a little bit of reward. But you, I will in the future do a significant accounting with you. For this reason it says “I will look with favor upon you.”

This midrash may be understood as an apologia for the biblical chapter that serves as its reference. The difficulty with the biblical chapter (Lev. 26), from the perspective of the rabbis composing the present text, is that it promises reward and punishment in this world. Their historical experience obviously belies this promise. The midrash latches on to one of the biblical phrases that may be understood more generally and argues, on its basis, that God’s generosity to Israel may be viewed precisely in the fact that God does not—as reality attests—reward Israel in this world. The justification

for the absence of present reward, understood now as an intended delay, is that immediate reward comes only to those who have earned reward in small measure; they may be paid quickly and their accounts will thus be settled. But Israel, who has labored long and hard with God, has a significant reward that must be paid, and such great reward cannot be paid quickly or casually. God, therefore, will pay Israel in the future, when the account may be settled properly and in adequate measure. The absence of present reward, in contrast with the apparent reward of the nations, should not, therefore, be interpreted as injustice. The delay is necessitated by the circumstances. Israel, like the faithful laborer, should understand that special reward has to await the opportunity for a full accounting.

Another text on God’s justice, agreeing with those just cited that justice is realized only in the world-to-come, asserts with equal vigor that any questioning of God’s final justice is utter foolishness. In other words, scripture itself—according to the understanding of the midrash—reveals that reward and punishment await the future judgment, and thus there can be no reasonable questioning of scripture when it asserts “all His ways are just” (Deut. 32:4). The essential elements of the text are these:

a. “His deeds are perfect” (ibid.)—His conduct is perfect with all inhabitants of the world and one may not suspect even the smallest fault in His deeds.

b. “A faithful God”—for He had faith in the world and [thus] created it.

c. “And there is no perversity”¹⁹—for humans were not created to be evil but to be righteous. . . .

d. “His deeds are perfect” (ibid.)—His conduct is perfect with all inhabitants of the world and *one may not suspect even the smallest fault in His deeds*, for there is no one of them concerning which one may look and say “why did the people of the generation of the flood deserve to be inundated with water, and why did the people of the tower [of Babel] deserve to be scattered from one end of the earth to the other . . . and why did Aaron deserve the priesthood and why did David deserve the monarchy . . . [for] scripture says, “all His ways are just,” [meaning] He sits with each and every one in judgment and gives him what he deserves. . . .

e. Another interpretation . . . “His ways are just”— . . . [regarding] the payment of the reward of the righteous and the affliction of the wicked, these have collected nothing of theirs in this world and these have collected nothing of theirs in this world.

f. And from where [do I know] that the righteous have collected nothing of theirs in this world? For it says, “How abundant is the good that *You have in store* for those who fear You” (Ps. 31:20, emphasis added).

g. And from where [do I know] that the wicked have collected nothing of theirs in this world? For it says, “Lo, I have it all put away, Scaled up in My storehouses” (Dt. 32:34).

h. When do these and those collect? “For all His ways are just,” tomorrow, when He sits on the throne of judgment, He sits with each and every one and gives him what he deserves.

i. “A faithful God”—just as He pays to a completely righteous person the reward of the commandments that he performed in this world in the

World-to-Come, so too does [God] pay to the completely wicked person the reward of the slight commandment that he performed in this world in this world.

j. And just as [God] collects from the completely wicked person for the sins that he performed in this world in the World-to-Come, so too does [God] collect from the completely righteous person for the slight sin that he performed in this world in this world.

k. "And there is no perversity"—when a person leaves the world all of his deeds come and are detailed before him, and they say to him: "thus and thus did you do on this day and thus and thus did you do on this day. Do you affirm these things?" And he says "yes." They say to him: "sign" . . . and [God] affirms the judgment and says, "I have judged well . . ."

l. Another interpretation: "The Rock!—His deeds are perfect"—When they captured R. Haninah b. Teradion, it was decreed for him that he should be burned with his [Torah] book. They said to him: "It has been decreed for you that you should be burned with your book." He [thereupon] recited this scripture: "The Rock!—His deeds are perfect."

m. They said to his wife: "it has been decreed on your husband that he is to be burned, and upon you to be killed." She recited this scripture: "A faithful God, never false."

n. They said to his daughter: "it has been decreed upon your father to be burned and upon your mother to be killed and upon you to perform labor." She recited this scripture: "wondrous in purpose and mighty indeed, whose eyes observe . . ." (Jer. 32:19).

o. Rabbi said: "How great are these righteous ones, for in the time of their trouble they summoned three verses for the affirmation of justice . . ."

p. A philosopher stood before his governor.²⁰ He said to him: "My master, do not be troubled that you have burnt the Torah, for from the place that it came out it has returned, to its Father's house." He said to him: "Tomorrow your fate will be just as [that] of these [described above]." He said to him: "You have given me good news, for tomorrow my portion will be with them for the World-to-Come." [all emphases added]

This beautifully constructed text needs little elaboration. As noted, it again assumes that judgment will take place, finally and perfectly, in the world-to-come (e-k)—even the pagan philosopher is said to be confident of this fact. Moreover, this is considered the clear sense of scripture (f-h). The explanation of apparent present injustices is that the few merits of the wicked and few demerits of the righteous must also, according to the dictates of justice, be properly repaid, and that payment takes place in this world in order that the bulk of reward or punishment—whichever is appropriate—may be duly paid in the world-to-come. To be sure, the deliberation is more elaborate here than elsewhere, and the justification of the claim based upon the reading of scripture also goes a step beyond the like-minded texts cited previously, but in basic substance there is nothing unique in this element of the present text; it is one with the many other halakhic-midrashic texts that displace justice to the future world.

What is new in this text—though not unique to it in the halakhic midrashim—is the obvious apologetic tone that runs throughout. From

the very beginning we are warned that God's perfection—God's justice—may *not* be called into question (a, d). The central obligation of human beings, therefore, is to affirm justice, both in this world (l-o) and in the world following death (k). The final narrative (l-o) presses this point most forcefully by praising the great heroism and righteousness of those suffering at the hands of the Roman oppressors who quote these very verses (among others) to affirm the perfect justice of God. Clearly, in light of the experience of R. Haninah b. Teradion and his family, there is no alternative but to assume that such justice will be realized after death.

This insistence that God's justice be affirmed in the face of suffering is our first explicit evidence of what will become (if it is not already) the dominant Palestinian view regarding protest and the questioning of suffering: such responses are impious and are to be condemned. Up to this point, this position has perhaps been implicit. The Mishnah's virtual silence on recent suffering, for example, may be understood as an implicit condemnation of those who would respond otherwise. But, since the issue isn't addressed directly there, there is no need to relate to the question of proper response explicitly. At this stage, however, when the problem of suffering has come under the scrutiny of the rabbinic authors, the question of appropriate responses is likewise subject to discussion. As we shall see, the position evident in this midrash is widely accepted in later Palestinian rabbinic texts, much in contrast with the possibilities that will be admitted in the Bavli. Why this difference develops we will consider at a later stage, though we might already note that the assumptions of the surrounding culture may be influential in this regard. In his *Consolation to His Wife*, Plutarch writes: "For reverent language toward the Deity and serene and uncomplaining attitude toward fortune never fail to yield an excellent return. . . . It ill becomes us to fall into this state by cavilling at our own life for receiving . . . a single stain."²¹ If this is the conception of piety of one prominent Greek pagan in the period not too long before the composition of this midrash, then how could the neighboring rabbis demand less?

The defensiveness of this and related midrashim²² shows an important shift in rabbinic strategy, one which confronts directly the important theological issues generated by the conditions of the time. Obviously there must be those, addressed by the authors of these texts, who are moved by the conditions they witness around them to call God's justice into question; otherwise there would be no need for the extreme defensive tone. Implicitly admitting the problem, these rabbinic authors at the same time insist that they have a solution which is unimpeachable. In contrast, it will be recalled, other texts, both earlier and contemporary, do not even give implicit evidence of the problem. Accordingly, those texts, proposing only pure theory, defend God's justice briefly if at all. But when, as in this midrash, theory is tempered by sensitivity to the human aspects of the problem (here again our attention is drawn to individual human suffering), the claim for justice takes on another form. When the righteous in-

dividual and his suffering are in our field of vision, we cannot look aside (so midrashim like this one show) and fail to grapple with the problematic reality.

National Suffering and the Destruction of the Temple

What we just observed in the matter of personal suffering does not extend to related deliberations on national suffering, represented by the destruction of the Temple. The most outstanding feature of the halakhic midrashim, as concerns the question of the Temple's destruction, is that, in those places where the biblical verses detail laws of the Temple and sacrifices, the midrashim interpret those verses with virtually no apparent recognition that the subject of their deliberation is without practical consequence. Like the Mishnah, these midrashim recount the sacrificial laws as details of a seemingly flourishing institution.²³ This being so, it will come as no surprise that these same documents have little to say—at least on an explicit level—about the Temple's destruction, and few traditions give evidence that the destruction was an event worth noting at all.

The Mekhilta has virtually nothing explicit to say about the destruction. At the beginning of *ba-ḥodesh* 1 (p. 203), the text makes reference to the first destruction, but only as a detail in a list and exhibiting no particular concern for the event. Only a text in *shira* 10 (pp. 149–50) hints at any unusual concern for the Temple, here by emphasizing its extreme importance. The destruction of the first Temple, apparently, is spoken of in that context, and perhaps it is the second destruction that provokes the exegetical praise of the institution. However, this connection is not explicit, and the absence of any apparent mourning for the destroyed Temple is as striking as any other feature in this text.

The Sifra—the “Law of the Priests”—obviously has the most to say about the sacrifices and the holy precincts but, like the Mekhilta, it speaks little about the destruction of the first or second Temple. The two explicit mentions of that event (Emor, par. 10, 10, and Emor, chapter 16, 9) are actually brief quotations of the same tradition found at m. Suk. 3:12. These quotations are peripheral in both contexts, and the destruction is clearly not of major concern in either text. As noted, in the vast majority of cases—unlike in these two—the Sifra does not even see a need to update its outdated Temple-related laws.

Sifrei Numbers likewise has little to say about the destruction. Sifrei 64 merely repeats the same insignificant point as Mekhilta *ba-ḥodesh* 1, where the first destruction was understood, by reading subsequent biblical texts, as an event from which the passage of time would be counted. Sifrei 78 also makes reference to the destruction of the first Temple, but only as a historical-exegetical detail.

Only in Sifrei 161 (p. 222) does the *second* destruction finally merit discussion in the halakhic midrash, and here we are also fortunate to learn this author's understanding of the reason for the destruction. The midrash claims

that the Temple (which one as yet undesignated) was destroyed because of the shedding of blood. This contention is supported by reference to a story in which two priests, competing for the honor of clearing the altar, raced to the incline of the altar. One, having arrived first, was then stabbed by his jealous brother. Rabbi Zadok thereupon arose and castigated all involved for the fact that this horrible crime could take place in their midst. They, however, were more concerned for the impurity the death would cause than for the death itself, thus compounding their crime by showing their distorted priorities and lack of remorse. This bloodshed and their callous disregard for it are seen to be the crime for which the Temple would thereafter be destroyed.²⁴ In claiming a specific cause of this nature for the destruction, this midrash is similar to the Tosefta at the end of *Menahot* that connects the destruction to transgression. Significantly, though, the midrash here explains the second destruction on the basis of the same sin (bloodshed) with which the Tosefta (and the Bible; see 2 Kings 21) explains (in part) the first destruction. In this respect the midrash is closer to its biblical source than the Tosefta.

In Sifrei Deuteronomy, finally, there remain few mentions of the Temple's destruction. Two are quite minor: in one (43, p. 102) the destruction is part of the cycle of exile and restoration, in the second (357, p. 425) the destruction is one of many things that Moses is claimed to be shown by God before he dies. The other two references to the destruction,²⁵ though, are more significant, and each merits independent discussion.

The first text, at Sifrei 61 (p. 127) has R. Gamliel²⁶ reworking an earlier midrash to say, “You should not do according to their [= the idolators'] deeds, because [if you do] your evil deeds will cause the Temple of your ancestors to be destroyed.” Evil deeds are understood to lead to destruction; the destruction is punishment for sin. As in the Sifrei Numbers text above—the only other halakhic midrash that explicitly suggests a reason for the Temple's destruction—the destruction is an act of justice. In this respect, the present traditions are even more classical than the treatments of divine justice reviewed earlier. Those, it will be recalled, mostly delayed punishment to a future world. These two traditions indicate that, at least in connection to the destruction, the claim might still be made that punishment is manifest in this world.²⁷

A final Sifrei text (352, p. 410) deals not with the question of why the Temple(s) was (were) destroyed, but with the assurance that it will be restored. Responding to Moses' final blessing of Benjamin, in whose territory the Temple will be built (see p. 409 there), the author interprets the words “he rests between His shoulders” (Deut. 33:12) as referring to a Temple “rebuilt and restored in the future.” The midrash then goes on to show, supported by creative readings of scripture, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were each shown visions of the Temple, first built, then destroyed, then restored. The emphasis is on the restoration, with reference to which each thrust of the midrash concludes. Of course, if the bearers of the covenant each saw the restored Temple, then it may safely be assumed that the

Temple will in the future be rebuilt. Such a message is essential, of course, only to an audience whose Temple remains destroyed. This is the only instance in the entire midrash in which this sense of destruction and hope for restoration is so explicit and palpable.

It should be emphasized, again, that my discussion here—as elsewhere—relates only to explicit reference to the Temple's destruction in these documents. Recent work by David Nelson provides the opportunity to illustrate how identification of implicit responses to the destruction might yield evidence of more complicated attitudes to that event.

Nelson's work considers in depth the impact of the destruction upon the halakhic midrashim. In addition to explicit references to the destruction, reviewed above, Nelson reviews a variety of other texts whose postures or attitudes might be construed as responses to the destruction. These include (1) traditions that suggest (implicitly or explicitly) reasons for the destruction (very few in number), (2) discussions of behavioral changes (or the absence thereof) necessitated by the destruction, (3) suggested substitutions for the sacrificial service, (4) what he terms theological responses (discussions of God's relationship to Israel following the destruction, though the destruction is generally not mentioned explicitly in these contexts),²⁸ and (5) shifts in attitude that might be assumed to stem from the destruction (such as emphasis on the primacy of Moses = the rabbi over Aaron = the priest). Nelson makes an important contribution by offering these texts with detailed analysis, and he shows that the destruction undeniably had its impact.

Our question, however, is not whether the destruction had an impact—that could never really be doubted. The question in this context, rather, is how the destruction is explained and how such explanations relate to explanations of and responses to suffering. In fact, isolating the texts that give evidence of response to the destruction distorts the larger picture, because, as Nelson points out, the texts out of context and read together do not fairly represent the approaches of the documents as a whole. Overall, these responses are not prominent; they are generally difficult to identify in the first place. More prominent is the fact, emphasized in each of Nelson's summaries, that these documents typically give little or no explicit evidence of the destruction—and that is what is crucial in our study. This conclusion supports our own, and the limited evidence may therefore be taken accurately to reflect the tenors of the documents as a whole.

Summary

For the most part, the halakhic midrashim agree with both the Mishnah and the Tosefta that suffering can be justified, and ancient justifications continue to play a significant role. But unlike those other documents, personal suffering disrupts the complacency of the present authors. The difficulty and bitterness break through. They find themselves forced to respond in detail and to marshal their full resources to defend the system. Apologia

NOT THE FACTS, BUT THEIR MEANING

"N+1" destruction deflected onto personal suffering

is the order of the day. Those who respond in a less affirmative manner are condemned.

But this is all true in the halakhic midrashim only where the issue is personal suffering. Where the discussion is divine justice in the abstract, or the suffering of the nation as represented by the destruction of the Temple, these midrashim continue to maintain the position of the Mishnah. As far as the destruction is concerned, there is little to discuss. The Temple is mostly spoken of as a living institution. And though discussions of justice are more extended here than in the Mishnah (where we have but a few relevant comments), they are not different in substance. Again, only in the matter of personal suffering is there evident development here.

Despite their differences, the Tosefta and the halakhic midrashim do share one important feature: they both address one part of the imperfection of their own day where the Mishnah, several generations before, did not. Each in its own way, the Tosefta in confronting the destruction of the Temple and the midrashim in their treatments of personal suffering—grants that the ideal imagined in the Mishnah has yet to be realized. Of course, if there is imperfection, there must be change. If redemption lies in the future, there is something to struggle toward today.

As mentioned earlier, developments internal to these documents as they relate to one another do not explain the present phenomena. Whether as commentary or as scriptural proof-text, these third-century works serve primarily as defenders of the Mishnah, perhaps critiquing its presentation (in the case of the midrashim) but still supporting its substance and extending its authority. The exception to this rule is in the traditions we have examined. If the Mishnah wanted to ignore the destruction, the Tosefta doesn't allow us to turn aside from that reality; if the Mishnah admitted only the ideal, the midrashim are too concerned with suffering and its justification to believe that the world at hand is really ideal. These are important differences in tone and judgment, and exegeses of these documents as a whole do not explain them.

But if we consider these developments against the background of the history of Jews in Palestine in the third century, and the history of rabbinic Judaism in particular, they begin to make sense. First, mere chronological distance from the catastrophes of the first and second century may allow the authors of the Tosefta, and less so those who composed the contemporary midrashim, to begin speaking more directly of those events. Observers of human nature have noted that the first response to personal catastrophe is often denial. Only with the passage of time are those who have experienced loss able to face their losses and begin feeling their pain. Perhaps similar forces are at work here on the communal level. The passage of time itself may have granted these rabbinic authors license to address issues which their teachers were still compelled to avoid.

The newfound midrashic attention to personal suffering may be explained, in part, by reference to the third-century Palestinian setting. We must bear in mind that the third century was marked by a slow, persistent deteriora-

one generation after?

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tion of conditions. Suffering was not now focused in catastrophic events—as it had been in the prior two centuries—but was spread throughout mundane experience, undeniably and ever more painfully. It seems likely that these deteriorating conditions forced a more direct confrontation with an imperfect, unredeemed reality. Many experiencing the same conditions looked to the mystery religions for salvation. Others, despite the threat of persecutions during this century, turned to Christianity with its promise of salvation. The conditions of the time clearly supported forms of religious expression which focused on mundane suffering and sought means to be liberated from it. Thus if rabbinic Jews in this period redoubled their defense of God's justice while at the same time insisting that suffering would lead to salvation (the midrashim) and that the Temple would soon be rebuilt (the Tosefta), we must be mindful of the fact that this was not an isolated development. It is reasonable to surmise that this was the rabbis' particular expression of a shared religious sensibility.

The rabbinic movement, later in the third century, was experiencing small but still important developments. Lee Levine documents the decline in patriarchal status during this period, as attested in the later rabbinic record.²⁹ If the rabbinic patriarchate suffered a diminution in power, then the rabbinic movement, which also enjoyed some benefits of the patriarchal prerogative, must similarly have suffered. Even if the movement's popular influence was increasing, as it may well have been, the loss of this stake in official power must have had an impact on the rabbis' status. At the same time, testimony preserved in the Bavli suggests that the power of Palestinian rabbis over the movement as a whole, now with a more significant presence in Babylonia, was in the process of weakening. Babylonian sages were asserting their own right to teach Torah.³⁰ They no longer necessarily looked for "Torah to come out from Zion." In addition, the flourishing contact between the two rabbinic centers, with messengers constantly relating the teachings of one community in the other, could only have reinforced to the Palestinian rabbis that their movement was increasingly diverse and beyond their immediate influence. To the extent that the Palestinians experienced the Babylonian movement as part of their own, their sense of command of the group and respected status at its center must have diminished accordingly. These shifts in the social and political dimensions of Palestinian rabbinism may also have contributed to the ideological developments traced earlier. Cohesive enough still to insist upon defenses of God's justice, this community was no longer able to suppress the question of suffering and its justifications, even within its own ranks. As structures of inside and outside, center and periphery, became less secure, rabbinic society would no longer support single explanations of its suffering. The classical view remained at the center, to be sure, but other explanations, suppressed in the earlier rabbinic movement, began to find a place by its side.

Whatever the precise factors which contributed to the developments detailed here—and the reasons for even these relatively small changes were

undoubtedly multiple and complex—one thing emerges clearly: the attitudes and ideologies of the Mishnah have already yielded to broader possibilities. Though, in fundamental ways, the system proposed by the Mishnah continued serving the needs of rabbinic Jewry in the century following its composition, the insularity of the Mishnah would not serve. Jews, even rabbis, needed to comfort themselves by articulating what they saw and by imagining a time—not too far off—when conditions would improve. It is this need that we see addressed by the rabbis, for the first time, in the Tosefta and the halakhic midrashim.

city would leave deposits without witnesses. Yet one person came and deposited with him before witnesses. One time, this person forgot and deposited with him without witnesses. His wife said to him, "Come let us deny it." He said to her, "And because this idiot acted improperly, should we lose our source of livelihood?"

c. So too, when they [presumably God?] send afflictions [= suffering] upon a person, they make [the afflictions] swear that they will not leave until such-and-such a time and by the hand of so-and-so and with such-and-such a remedy. When their time for leaving arrived, he went to an idolatrous temple. They said, "It is proper that we should not leave [because of his sin]" and then they say, "Just because this idiot acts improperly, should we deny our oath?" . . .

In truth, I have great trouble making sense of the parable, beyond the most superficial similarities. ("Should we lose our source of livelihood?"—"should we deny our oath?" Are the trustworthy man and his wife the afflictions? Are the people of the city God? The parallel should not be pressed.) But the nature of the problem (a) and the proposed solution (c) are crystal clear. The problem is everyday experience which contradicts traditional assumptions regarding divine justice. How can this sinner, going to the house of the idol, find himself cured there? Cure should come to those who, following affliction, repent and are therefore atoned! The answer is that there is proper justice ("It is proper" = "*din hu*," "it is just") and there is reality. And reality, as presently imagined, is this: suffering, when it comes upon a person (for reasons that are nowhere mentioned here) is assigned a specific term (it is a decree!); when its term is up, whatever justice might demand, the suffering leaves and the person is healed! Suffering that is an expression of justice is certainly known here. But the common equation, according to which suffering is measured punishment, appropriate to the particular sin, is denied. The truth, as now spelled out, is that it is all quite arbitrary. Expanding upon the immediate narrative, if a righteous person genuinely repents, yet it is not time for his suffering to desist, nothing he has done will matter. Again, to state it quite unambiguously, suffering or healing, as imagined in this text, might be arbitrary and capricious. The justice that is elsewhere imagined does not, according to the present authors, exist.

It is further essential to note that, despite its attribution to R. Aqiba, this tradition is certainly the opinion of the Bavli. This is evident in the language with which the exchange is introduced—Babylonian Aramaic (with no equivalent Hebrew in manuscript variants)²⁴—an unmistakable sign of the hand of the Bavli's final authorship. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that this sequence has no parallel in any earlier rabbinic text. Whatever its actual origin, therefore, only the Bavli finally saw fit to give it voice.

Undoubtedly, the Bavli's best known discussion of divine justice is the brief sequence at Ber. 7a, which, like the preceding texts, indicates serious misgivings with the conventional view of God's system of justice and the place of suffering in that system. The discussion commences with a question attributed to Moses: "Master of the world! Why is there a righteous

person and it is good with him and a righteous person and it is bad with him, a wicked person and it is good with him and a wicked person and it is bad with him?" The first proposed answer, that the difference lies in the parent (is the righteous individual the child of another righteous individual or of a wicked person?) is rejected—the punishment of a child for the sins of a parent, despite biblical expressions to this effect, is simply unacceptable at this level of the tradition. The better answer is one seen also in other texts: it depends on whether the individual is wholly or only partly righteous, wholly or only partly wicked.²⁵

The brutal directness with which this text expresses the question is striking. Surely this impression reinforces our broad sense of the Bavli in these matters: it is, indeed, willing to admit the problem, and it does so often. Still, it should be emphasized that there is no compromising of God's justice in what we have quoted so far. "Good" and "bad," comfort or suffering, are here claimed to be expressions of reward or punishment. The brief discussion to this point is every bit as insistent on God's justice as other deliberations seen earlier in this chapter.

The next steps, though, record an alternative:

And this disputes [the opinion of] R. Meir, for R. Meir said . . . it says, "I will grant the grace that I will grant"—even though he is not worthy; "and show the compassion that I will show," (Ex 33:19)—even though he is not worthy; "He said: you cannot see my face" [meaning, in this context, you cannot understand my ways].

Thus it is admitted, at least according to this opinion, that God's ways may be inscrutable. It may indeed be that God is merciful to those who are not deserving and, presumably, less than merciful to those who are. In this view, God's justice, at least in its present application, may be less than perfect.

This is a difficult admission—and one, we have learned, which characterizes the Bavli. Yet this admission finds far more eloquent expression in several of the texts examined earlier in this chapter, and once it is expressed here, it generates no discussion. It is an alternative that the present author is not interested in pursuing. So, despite the eloquence of the question, this text in no way stands out in the Bavli. It affirms our sense that the challenge may be articulated in these pages and that alternatives are unhesitatingly entertained. Still, the boldest explorations are found elsewhere. The intimations and brief challenges offered in the foregoing texts pale in comparison with the Bavli's boldest and most extended considerations of suffering and divine justice, to be studied in the following chapter.

The Bavli Contrasted with the Palestinian Tradition

In earlier chapters we noted and began to document the fact that, unlike Palestinian rabbinic documents, the Bavli does not condemn those who protest suffering or question God's justice. By way of setting the stage for the Bavli's most radical expressions on suffering (examined in the next

chapter), we here return to this point, to illustrate its full extent and to appreciate the Bavli's unique position in this regard.

First, to establish the negative: despite occasional recommendations of "joyful" acceptance of suffering, if one is unable to assume such a stance, the Bavli does not insist. Nor does it condemn those who speak up in protest. This claim which, I have found, applies generally in the Bavli, requires brief reference to a seemingly contradictory tradition at Ber. 62a. The statement reads, as it appears in the printed editions, "the tradition [or, teaching] relating to suffering is silence and prayer." Were this reading to be supported, we would have here modest evidence of agreement with the Yerushalmi's opinion that suffering must be accepted, not protested (see Rashi). But the present text has been emended based upon Rashi's commentary, and all manuscripts have not "tradition" but a term that should probably be taken as "charm (to ward off danger)."²⁶ Thus the text should read: "A charm against suffering is silence and prayer." quite a different sense indeed.²⁷ In this apparently more original version, the teaching gives advice for avoiding suffering in the first place but says nothing about responses to suffering once it has begun. The difference is crucial because, as indicated, characteristic of the Bavli's overall position is its complete omission of condemnation of those who protest suffering. As we now see, not only is this tradition not an exception but, in fact, it might even be understood to be a manifestation of the Bavli's more contradictory spirit. Why else, after all, advise "charms" against suffering? If suffering is punishment, the only advice necessary should be the avoidance of sin and repentance.

The Bavli's lengthy deliberation on Job (B.B. 15a-16b) also offers important insight into its attitudes toward protest and complaint. The Talmud's evaluation of the rebellious Job, negative but understanding, tells us as much about its sense of the appropriate limits of challenge as any other relevant Talmudic deliberation.

The Bavli's unique reflections on Job (the earliest part of its discussion is shared with prior rabbinic works) begin with its expansion upon the biblical account. The first part of this exposition, beginning near the bottom of 15b, supplies several opinions on Job and his qualities, all praising him. For example, the text emphasizes, in the name of R. Yohanan, that "greater is that which is said [in scripture] about Job than that which is said about Abraham." Scriptures are quoted here to prove the point. Next we learn that Job was not stingy and, then, that Job had what might be called a Midas touch ("anyone who would take a coin from Job would be blessed"). Job himself, the gemara goes on to show, was blessed miraculously, even enjoying a taste of the world-to-come. Crucially, all of the verses expounded here, yielding these various lessons, are drawn from the first chapter of Job. This is a picture of Job before his severest test—and before his rebellion. Everything is still relatively Edenic, and Job may be praised without hesitation. How quickly, however, will things change!

Following an introduction to Satan in the Jobian context, and then a

brief digression on the identity and powers of Satan, the gemara returns to expound scripture—now those verses where Job expresses some of his most stinging protests. I quote the central part of the exposition:

- a. "For all that, Job did not sin with his lips." (2:10)
- b. Rava²⁸ said: With his lips he did not sin but, in his heart, he sinned.
- c. What did he say?²⁹ "The earth is handed over to the wicked one; He covers the eyes of its judges. If it is not He, then who?"³⁰ (9:24)
- d. Rava said: Job sought to "overturn the bowl" [that is, to upset the balance of the world].
- e. Abbaye said to him: Job only spoke concerning Satan [and you have, therefore, misunderstood his intent].
- f. This is [also] a tannaitic argument . . . R. Eliezer says: Job sought to overturn the bowl. R. Joshua said to him: Job only spoke against Satan.
- g. "You know that I am not guilty, And that there is none to deliver from Your hand." (10:7)
- h. Rava said: Job sought to exempt the entire world from judgment. He said before Him, "Master of the world! You created [clean and unclean animals] . . . ; You created the Garden of Eden [and] You created Gehinnom; You created righteous individuals and You created wicked individuals; who has the power to prevent You [from doing as You wish? So, having created the world this way, how can You hold the wicked, whom You Yourself created, responsible for their wickedness]?"
- i. And what did his friends respond to him? "You subvert piety And restrain prayer to God" (15:4)—[True,] the Holy One, blessed be He, created the evil inclination, [but] He also created the Torah as a remedy!
- j. Rava expounded: What is [the meaning of what is] written, "I received the blessing of the lost; I gladdened the heart of the widow" (29:13)? This teaches that [Job] would rob a field from orphans and improve it and return it to them; "I gladdened the heart of the widow," [teaching] that wherever there was a widow whom [others] would not marry, he would go and put his name upon her [Rashi: saying that she was his relative or speaking to her to marry her] and they would come and marry her.
- k. "If my anguish were weighed, My calamity laid on the scales," (6:2)
- l. Rav said: Dust into the mouth of Job! [He makes himself as though] a colleague of Heaven!
- m. "Would there be an arbiter between us / To lay his hand on us both." (9:33)
- n. Rav said: Dust into the mouth of Job! Is there a servant who reproves his master?!
- o. "I have covenanted with my eyes / Not to gaze on a maiden." (31:1)
- p. Rava said: Dust into the mouth of Job! For Job did not [gaze] at another [woman, while] Abraham did not even look at his [woman]. . . .
- q. "As a cloud fades away, So whoever goes down to Sheol does not come up." (7:9)
- r. Rava said: From here [we learn] that Job denied the resurrection of the dead.
- s. "For He crushes me with a storm [or, 'with a hair'—see below]; He wounds me much for no cause." (9:17)

difficult to dismiss so easily. A text that so definitively rejects the explanation of suffering that has been offered by Jews since the Torah should be sensitive to the void that it leaves. Perhaps the message it finally wishes to communicate is that there are no ready explanations.⁶

Berakhot 5a-b

This text is the longest deliberation (by far) on suffering as such in all classical rabbinic literature. It requires analysis of its many details, but it is far too long to consider at a single, uninterrupted reading. I will thus divide my presentation of the text into the three major sections that I see comprising the text. However, the analyses that follow are cumulative, each building on and responding to the lessons of the prior reading.

Before commencing analysis, it is necessary to say a few words about the nature of the Bavli's intended reader and what that assumption contributes to analysis and, finally, to understanding. This clarification is essential because, as will be evident in what follows, this Bavli text (like many others, but we are interested here in this one) echoes and turns back upon itself, later comments qualifying or contradicting earlier comments on more than a few occasions. The question is, How are we to take these qualifications and contradictions? Are they to be harmonized or allowed to stand in tension? Are we intended to notice contradictions or difficulties at all? Are we to go along with difficult interpretations or claims of meaning, even if they contradict our sense of the meaning of a text? Only by first identifying the assumed reader can we begin to answer these and related questions of interpretation.

To state the matter as briefly as possible, from the nature of this text and so many like it, it appears clear that the Bavli's intended reader is massively literate in biblical and rabbinic tradition, is questioning and critical, and is confident of his own intellectual resources and willing to use them. Assumed competence in biblical and rabbinic tradition is evident from the frequency with which such traditions will be quoted only in part or merely referred to in the Bavli, assuming, though, that the reader will be able to supply the rest of the relevant context and its interpretation. The questioning and critical character of the reader is modeled by the Bavli itself, which invites its reader to engage in the same process. In fact, without such questioning and critical inquiry, the Bavli is frequently impossible to understand. Appreciating the common gaps that characterize the Bavli's expression, we may readily understand that the reader is expected to contribute such critical acumen on his own. Finally, the confidence that the Bavli expects the reader will have in his own intellectual resources is expressed in the fact that the Bavli speaks to its reader as an equal partner in the learning process. This peer—the reader—is engaged directly and is expected to respond and contribute at each stage of the unfolding argument. Thus the passive or submissive reader will have a hard time being part of the process of Talmud. Talmud is an active, demanding, and consequently empowering project.⁷

Given this picture, it seems likely that the reader is intended to approach a text such as this one with critical sensors fully attuned. He will recognize reinterpretations or contradictions. He will be called upon to evaluate such phenomena and to respond. If reasonable reconciliations are available, he will probably be invited to assent to them—but he will not be asked to suspend critical judgment. Thus, where a text works against itself, it will be his responsibility to evaluate the rhetoric of such a move. And, given his assumed confidence, he will be asked to identify with one position or another, but not without challenging himself with the alternative. The text will never be reduced or simplified; he will always be sensitive to its complexities. With this in mind, we now turn to the text at hand.

Transition

a. And R. Isaac said: Anyone who reads the Shema upon his bed demons separate from him. . . .

b. R. Shimeon b. Laqish said: Anyone who engages in [the study of] Torah, suffering separates from him, as it says. . . .

c. R. Yoḥanan said to him, this [idea that you have just expressed] even children in school know it, for it says, "He said, 'If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the Lord am your healer.'" (Ex 15:26)

d. Rather, anyone for whom it is possible to engage in [the study of] Torah and does not [thus] engage, the Holy One, blessed be He, brings upon him ugly, horrible suffering, as it says. . . .

I describe this exchange as a transition because the text has not yet devoted its attentions exclusively to the question of suffering; what follows does not speak of suffering but of God's generosity in giving the Torah. The primary emphasis here too, therefore, should be understood to be Torah, not suffering. The present opinions wish to emphasize the importance of Torah study; suffering is the threat that looms behind the text's exhortation. It is incidental, not central.⁸

Still, this transition serves the following discussion of suffering in two ways. First, it does build the bridge to the primary discussion of suffering—it is the excuse which allows the text to address this central problem. Second, it emphasizes that there is an opinion—that the study and observance of Torah assures that God will protect the person thus engaged from suffering—that is so obvious that "even the child in the school knows it." As we shall see, when the ensuing deliberation has the opportunity to reflect upon this opinion (from several perspectives but by implication) it turns out that it is not nearly as obvious as is claimed. Thus the introduction of this opinion lulls us into a sense of unwitting confidence. It is this sense that the following deliberation will most challenge.

Part I

דברים 17/10

- locus classicus
- A. Rava, and some say R. Hisda, said:⁹
1. If a man sees suffering coming upon him, he should examine his deeds, as it says, "Let us search and examine our ways, And turn back to the Lord." (Lam 3:40)
 2. If he searched and did not find [his deeds to be the cause of his suffering], he should attribute it to neglect of Torah [study], as it says, "Happy is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, the man You instruct in Your teaching." (Ps 94:12)
 3. And if he attributed it [to the neglect of study] but did not find [his study to be wanting] then it is clear that they are afflictions [= suffering] of [God's] love, as it says, "For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes." (Prov 3:12)
- B. Rava said R. Sehora said R. Huna said:
1. Anyone whom the Holy One, blessed be He desires, He afflicts with suffering, for it says, "And the one whom the Lord desires, He crushes with illness." (Isa 53:10)¹⁰
 2. Is it possible [that this is the case] even if he does not accept them willingly? Scripture says, "if he made himself an offering for guilt" (ibid.)—[meaning] just as an offering is [offered] willingly, so too suffering [must be accepted] willingly.
 3. And if he accepted them [willingly] what is his reward? "He might see offspring and have a long life" (ibid.), and not only so, but his learning will remain with him,¹¹ as it says, "And that through him the Lord's purpose might prosper." (ibid.)
- C. R. Jacob b. Idi and R. Aha b. Hanina dispute:
1. One says: What is suffering of love? Any [suffering] that does not cause the neglect of Torah, for it says, "Happy is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, the man You instruct in Your teaching." (Ps 94:12)
 2. And one says: What is suffering of love? Any [suffering] that does not cause the neglect of prayer, as it says, "Blessed is God who has not turned away my prayer, or His faithful care from me." (Ps 66:20)
 3. R. Aba the son of R. Hiyya b. Abba said to them: This is what R. Hiyya b. Abba said [that] R. Yohanan said—[Both] these and these are suffering of love, as it says, "For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes." (Prov 3:12) Rather, what does scripture [mean when it] says, "the man You instruct in Your teaching?" Don't read "instruct him" [the more literal rendering of this verse] but "[and from your Torah] instruct us," [meaning] this thing You instruct us from your Torah, [that is] *a fortiori* from [the law of the removal by a master of] the tooth or eye [of his slave]; what if [by the removal of] a tooth or an eye, which are but one of a man's limbs, a slave goes out to freedom, suffering, which cleanses the entire body of a person, how much the moreso [should a person "go out to freedom"]!
- 3A. And this is [the same as the opinion of] R. Shimeon b. Laqish, for R. Shimeon b. Laqish said: "Covenant" is stated with respect to salt and "covenant" is stated with respect to suffering. "Covenant" is stated with respect to salt, as it is written, "you shall not omit . . . the salt of

your covenant," (Lev 2:13) and "covenant" is stated with respect to suffering, as it is written [following the long recitation of afflictions that Israel will suffer if she does not obey God's will], "These are the terms of the covenant" (Deut 28:69)—just as with "covenant" spoken of with respect to salt, the salt sweetens the meat,¹² so too with "covenant" spoken of with respect to suffering, the suffering cleanses all of a person's transgressions.

First, it is necessary to clarify the system by which the translation of the text is presented here. It will immediately be evident that I am following a different system than that followed elsewhere. Ordinarily, my divisions of the text are intended to recreate the smallest units of expression, thereby facilitating reference. But here, my intent is to delineate the substantive structure of the text, showing where the expression of a single coherent idea leads to the expression of another, distinct coherent idea. Where such expressions subdivide into substantive (not formal) units, I indicate such divisions as well. For example, at A, the statement of Rava (or R. Hisda) divides into three distinct ideas: (1) the first response to suffering, (2) the first fallback position (What if sin, in the normal sense, is not at the root of a person's suffering?), and (3) the final, safety position (if 2 doesn't work, there is still an explanation available). Though each of these statements relates to the previous one, each could nevertheless be formulated independently with little adjustment and still express a perfectly coherent idea ("If a person suffers, yet neither sins nor neglects Torah study, it must be suffering of love."). In contrast, in C, though there are three expressions relating to suffering of love (What is and what isn't?), the final opinion (3) is built on a series of individual steps and is then supported (or correlated) with a related opinion, itself built on a series of steps (3A). The point, throughout, is a single one: suffering—apparently (at this point, but see later) potentially any suffering—is an expression of God's love because it cleanses one of one's sins and thereby leads to "freedom." To be sure, this idea takes many formal steps to express. But there is a single, basic idea here nonetheless.¹³

Now to the substance of this first part of the deliberation. The overall concern of part I is what is called "sufferings of [God's] love," a concept with an ancient history whose present appellation waited, nevertheless, to Genesis Rabbah. The idea contained in this term is a simple one: as a parent will reprove a child with love, so too will God reprove individuals (see Deut. 8:5, quoted below in this text). Suffering has undeniable positive consequences; it should therefore be understood as a good gift from God. The present deliberation seeks to define precisely when suffering can be understood as an expression of God's love. In A we learn that the more conventional explanation of suffering should be preferred; we should first consider sin as the possible source of suffering. At this point, suffering of love is seen as a kind of last resort. But in the following steps, suffering of love becomes the exclusive concern of the authorities. In B it is immedi-

ately recognized that some might have trouble accepting the notion that suffering is an expression of divine love. Therefore, the text explains that suffering will be suffering of love only if that suffering is accepted out of love. If it is, then the suffering will lead to great reward. In C we learn that, in the opinion of some, certain suffering—that suffering which leads to a breakdown of communications with God—cannot be suffering of love; if God loved us, why would God remove the possibility of communication? But the final opinion in this section remarks that even such suffering is not to be excluded from the category of suffering of love. Suffering in general is considered, on two accounts (the logical relation to the minor suffering of a slave and the relation of suffering to “covenant”), potentially a manifestation of divine love.

Outstanding in the formulation of this deliberation is the clear and consistent formal structuring. The tripartite expression of ideas, typical of many Talmudic texts, predominates. This structuring gives the deliberation a very distinctive voice and, as we shall see, demands that diversions from this formal structure be given particular notice. At present, the balance and order of the text create a confident context for the articulation of mostly traditional ideas—those already widely expressed in scripture and earlier rabbinic literature. Supporting the impression of traditionality is the regular reference to scriptural prooftexts. In fact, each of the lessons supported by scripture is relatively straightforward; one is left with the impression that these opinions do, for the most part, indeed reside in scripture. Thus the voice of biblical tradition looms large. If one were to go no further, this would represent a thoroughly traditional expression.

Yet this air of confident traditionality is not entirely without qualifications. The first such qualification is the admission, in B, that suffering of love is conditional. Suffering will be suffering of love only if it is accepted out of love, that is, willingly. If there is hesitation or misgiving on the part of the sufferer, then it is not suffering of love. Implicit in this statement, of course, is the recognition that such acceptance might not be easy; as we shall see later in the text, even the most pious individuals might not accept suffering. The second reservation is found in the dispute, in C, with regard to the possible disqualification of certain kinds of suffering from the said category. The reasons for suggested disqualification are well understood: If you can't speak to God (prayer) or God won't speak to you (through study of Torah), then how can this be suffering of love? Stated in other terms, this disqualification applies to extreme suffering. By insisting on these exceptions, these opinions open up the possibility that certain extreme forms of suffering might go searching for, but not find, a ready explanation. For this reason, we are relieved when the final opinions reject these exceptions. Still, as we shall soon discover, this rejection is a setup. Even R. Yoḥanan, to whom this opinion is attributed, insists that certain suffering cannot be suffering of love. In retrospect, this easy acceptance will appear ironic indeed.

The next major section of this deliberation begins by quoting a teaching known already from the halakhic midrashim.

Part II

- מין מן 23
- A. It is taught: R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai says: Three good gifts did the Holy One, blessed be He, give to Israel, and all were given only by means of suffering. And what are they?
1. Torah,
 2. and the Land of Israel,
 3. and the world-to-come.
- A1. From where [do we learn] Torah? As it says, “Happy is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, the man You instruct in Your teaching.” (Ps 94:12)
- A2. The Land of Israel? For it says, “the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son,” and it is written after it, “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land.” (Dt 8:5, 8:7)
- A3. The world-to-come? For it is written, “For the commandment is a lamp, The teaching is a light, And the way to [future] life is the rebuke that disciplines.” (Prov 6:23)
- B. 1. A Tanna taught before R. Yoḥanan: Anyone who engages in (1) Torah or (2) deeds of lovingkindness or (3) buries his children, all of his sins are forgiven him.
2. R. Yoḥanan said to him: It is fine with Torah and deeds of loving-kindness, for it is written, “Iniquity is expiated by loyalty [= kind deeds] and faithfulness [= truth]” (Prov 16:6)—“loyalty,” this is acts of loving-kindness, for it says, “He who strives to do good and kind deeds / Attains life, success, and honor” (Prov 21:21); “faithfulness,” this is Torah, for it says, “Buy truth and never sell it.” (Prov 23:23). But burying one's children, where is this from?
3. That elder taught in the name of R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai: It is derived by a scriptural equation of “iniquity” and “iniquity;” it is written here “Iniquity is expiated by loyalty and faithfulness” and it is written there “but visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children.” (Jer 32:18)
- C. R. Yoḥanan said: Sores and “children” are not suffering of love.
1. And are sores not? But is it not taught: Anyone who has any one of these four appearances of skin-ailment, they are none other than an altar of atonement.
 - a. They might be an altar of atonement, but they are not suffering of love;
 - b. And if you wish I will say: this [the teaching in C.1] relates to us [in Babylonia, for skin ailments do not disqualify us from anything] and this [R. Yoḥanan's statement] relates to them [for, in the Land of Israel, skin ailments cause certain disqualifications due to impurity];
 - c. And if you wish I will say: this [the teaching in C.1] is [speaking of a case where the skin affliction is] private [= in a covered location on the body] and this [R. Yoḥanan's statement] is [speaking of a case where the skin affliction] is public.
 2. And are “children” not?
 - a. How is this to be imagined? If you say that [we are talking about a case where] he had them and they died, did not R. Yoḥanan say “this is the bone of my tenth son!”¹⁴
 - b. Rather, this [R. Yoḥanan's statement above at C] is where he did

not have them at all and this [his statement here at C.2.a, assumed to support the notion of suffering of love] is where he had them and they died.

I designate this section of text as a single major unit by virtue of the connection of each step with the one preceding it, though the last step (C) is less immediately related to the first (A, that is, beyond the overall theme of suffering of love). So A is related to B by the designation of tannaitic authority, by its inclusion of Torah, by its tripartite structure, and by its attribution of the final answer to R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai (at B.3), the alleged author of the opinion in A. B is related to C in its discussion of “children” and in the difficulty that R. Yoḥanan has with “children” in both of the steps. Still, I admit that important connections can also be found with the lengthy section that follows, so these sections should be read together as well as apart from one another.

The first portion of this section is, as mentioned earlier, a quotation of a tradition found also in the lengthy discussion of suffering in the Mekhilta and Sifrei. What is notable about its present quotation is the seemingly minor but (I shall argue) actually rather significant omission of the introduction to R. Shimeon’s comment as recorded in those midrashim. Here the Talmud merely commences by saying, “three good gifts did the Holy One . . .,” whereas in the midrashim R. Shimeon’s opinion is introduced with the words “*suffering is precious*, for three good gifts. . . .” Because the tradition appears, in the midrashim, in the context of a series of statements commencing with this introductory formula, it might be thought that this introduction was added under the influence of that formulaic context. It might be imagined, therefore, that the Bavli’s version is more “original.” Whether or not that is so, we could easily suppose that the Bavli merely preserved a slightly different version of this tradition, and we might therefore conclude that this difference—this omission in the Bavli’s version—is insignificant. However, as we shall see, the question of whether “suffering is precious” plays a crucial role in the present deliberation. Below, several sages are addressed with the question “Is suffering precious to you?” (the Hebrew adds only one word to change the affirmative declaration into a question). Each time the question is asked, the answer is direct and unambiguous: “neither they [= the sufferings] nor their reward!” With this utter rejection of the preciousness of suffering, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the omission of this comment in the baraita of R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai is, in fact, significant. If nothing else (that is, if the phrase was not actually excised by the author of the Bavli’s deliberation), then, at the very least, this omission shows that the Bavli is not predisposed to agree that “suffering is precious.” For this reason (either intentionally or unwittingly) it chooses a version of this tradition that does not include this expression.

The second segment of the present text (B) begins by arguing again on behalf of the benefits of suffering. If these forms of suffering lead to the forgiving of sins, then they must surely be suffering of love. But R. Yoḥanan’s

response reveals, now more explicitly, that the apologetic for suffering is not as simple as it might appear. The problem is that, while R. Yoḥanan can indeed find scriptural support for the claims concerning Torah and deeds of lovingkindness, he allegedly cannot find such support for the claim that the loss of one’s children leads to the forgiving of sins. But the text gives us every reason to question this failure. First, his proofs for Torah and lovingkindness require the combination of three verses; the proof for burying one’s children requires only two. Second, his proof is original, while the proof he fails to offer has already been expressed in the tradition (by R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai). Third, the proof that he fails to supply is given by some anonymous elder; is it possible that the great R. Yoḥanan is unable to find a simple proof where an unnamed elder can?! Finally we learn (at C.2.a) that there is good reason for R. Yoḥanan to have difficulty with “burying one’s children”—he himself was forced to do so and thus he knew this pain intimately. Is it this pain, we are forced to ask ourselves, that doesn’t allow him to find scriptural proof for the benefits of losing one’s child?

Turning to C, we again learn that R. Yoḥanan has misgivings about suffering that involves “children”; he is unwilling to admit that either it or skin afflictions is suffering of love. It must be noted: the text signals us here that something is awry. Unlike all of the traditions that have come before this, R. Yoḥanan’s statement is built of two points, not three. With respect to his dissent on skin afflictions, some equilibrium is quickly recovered—three solutions to the problem of the apparent contradiction of his statement with another authoritative teaching are offered. But the number three appears nowhere in the discussion of “children,” not in the problem and not in the solution.

Oddest of all is the way that R. Yoḥanan’s dissent on “children” is challenged: he can’t mean what he appears to say because he was also accustomed to say “this is the bone of my tenth son.” Apparently the gemara is suggesting that, for some reason, this statement should be taken as evidence that the loss of one’s child, obviously experienced by R. Yoḥanan himself, is in fact suffering of love.¹⁵ But we ourselves would be tempted to say that for precisely this reason R. Yoḥanan is unwilling to accept such an experience as suffering of love! Would we be impious for arriving at such a conclusion? Are we to conclude, despite alternative and possibly better interpretations, that R. Yoḥanan does, in fact, believe that the loss of one’s children is suffering of love, as the gemara here demands? Since R. Yoḥanan’s statement (“this is the bone”) is presented here as deriving from another context, we can really judge only if we consider the context from which it was taken. Fortunately, the Talmud supplies us later with a context that is clearly more original and thus we will be invited to judge for ourselves. I will argue that, in light of the “original” context, the meaning given to this statement here becomes highly implausible. In my opinion, the author of this deliberation intentionally asks us to reconsider and ultimately to reject his conclusions here.¹⁶ At this point it is sufficient to note that there are

already several signals, both formal and substantive, that cause us to respond to the gemara's present arguments with misgivings.

Now, in the penultimate section of this deliberation, we are introduced to "the real R. Yoḥanan" and we learn, in the course of this introduction, a great deal about R. Yoḥanan's attitudes concerning suffering.

Part III

- A. R. Ḥiyya b. Abba became ill. R. Yoḥanan went in to him.
1. He said to him: Is suffering dear to you?
 2. He said to him: Neither it nor its reward.
 3. He said to him: Give me your hand.
He gave him his hand and raised him.
- B. R. Yoḥanan became ill. R. Ḥanina went in to him.
1. He said to him . . .
 2. He said to him . . . [all same as in A]
 3. He said to him . . .
He gave him his hand and raised him.
(And why? Let R. Yoḥanan raise himself [for we have seen that he has the power to do so in the prior story]! They say, "One who is imprisoned does not release himself from prison.")¹⁷
- C. R. Eleazar became ill.¹⁸ R. Yoḥanan went in to him. He saw that he was lying in a dark room. [R. Yoḥanan] uncovered his arm and a light fell [over the room] and he saw that R. Eleazar was crying.
1. He said to him: why are you crying?
 - a. If it is because of Torah that you have not [studied] sufficiently, we have taught [in m. Men. 13:11], "it makes no difference whether one does much or little, provided that he directs his heart to heaven."
 - b. And if it is because of food, not every man may merit two tables [= wealth].¹⁹
 - c. And if it is because of children, *this is the bone of my tenth son* [emphasis added].
 2. He said to him: I am crying on account of this beauty that will rot in the earth.²⁰
 3. He said to him: For this you should surely cry
And the two of them cried together.²¹
 4. He said to him . . .
 5. He said to him . . . [all same as in A and B]
 6. He said to him . . .

In this segment of the deliberation, the present consideration of suffering comes to a climax. The essential point is made in the first two virtually identical sections (A and B). When questioned regarding their attitudes toward their suffering, both sages respond by declaring that neither it nor its reward is desired by them. To put it in other words, if this is what is necessary to attain reward, keep it! Both parties would rather be spared the suffering.

The response to suffering modeled here is quite startling. To begin with, it should be recognized that the suffering experienced here is some kind of illness; each sage is confined to his bed, and it is necessary that each be raised (= healed). At the same time, there is no explicit evidence that we are speaking of suffering so severe that it would render the sufferers unable to pray or study—though, to be sure, if we (mistakenly) sought to reconcile this with what came earlier we could insist upon such a reading. Nor, obviously, is the present suffering related to the loss of one's children or to skin afflictions. According to all parties, therefore, this is suffering that might qualify as suffering of love.

But this cannot be suffering of love because, as we learned above (at I.B.2), to be suffering of love, adversity must be accepted with love, and that clearly is not the case here. Neither, however, can it be deemed suffering of punishment, for these sages actively intercede to eliminate the suffering of the other. If this suffering were understood as God's punishment, there could be no justification for their initiatives.²² In fact, these masters evidently do not accept—as the Yerushalmi would have liked—that their suffering is the direct will of God at all. But if not the direct will of God, then what is it? What in the attitudes or beliefs of these rabbis leads them to respond as they do?

Unfortunately, answers to these questions are not readily forthcoming in this text. But certain possibilities are negated, at least, in the more complex final section (C). Upon discovering R. Eleazar weeping, R. Yoḥanan asks him why he is doing so. Yoḥanan does not wait for an answer, but instead rejects what he believes to be certain obvious possibilities. If it is because of lack of sufficient study, he says, no problem! It is not quantity that counts but proper intention. Again, R. Yoḥanan works against more conventional opinions expressed much earlier: lack of sufficient Torah study ("neglect of [study of] Torah" at I.A.2) was offered, it will be recalled, as good reason for suffering. Not so, says R. Yoḥanan. Alternatively, if it is because of the lack of wealth, conventionally understood as reward from God (its inverse must therefore be punishment), this, too, is not to be interpreted in this way. Again, no reason to cry. And, says R. Yoḥanan, if it is because of "children," neither is this reason to cry, for, Yoḥanan points out to Eleazar, "this is the bone of my tenth son."

How are we to understand this last step in R. Yoḥanan's comforting of R. Eleazar? The comment regarding "children" is found in a series of statements regarding what R. Eleazar lacks. He believes that he lacks sufficient Torah and he sees that he lacks wealth. The possible problem is not the loss of something but its absence to begin with. Conversely, when Yoḥanan responds that there is good reason to cry, it is for something that he most assuredly has—his own beauty. The contrast is between something now enjoyed and something never possessed. Therefore, it seems likely that the same is being said about children: lack of children is not something to cry about. Why? Because "this is the bone of my tenth son." In other words—

it now seems clear—R. Yoḥanan comforts his friend by indicating that things could have been much worse. If he thinks that childlessness is painful, look at the alternative. Far more painful is the loss of a beloved child.

I am arguing for this understanding based upon purely literary considerations, signals to the reader given in this text alone. It may be objected that R. Eleazar is known in the Talmud to have had at least one son (R. Pedat; see Ber. 11b and M.Q. 20a). However, it seems to me that there is no reason to admit that knowledge here. Signals given in the present context should be considered far more powerful than details that might be available from elsewhere (unless we could show that that other information is assumed to be common knowledge, which is not the case here). Lest there be doubt concerning the sense of the present text, I refer the reader's attention to the comment of Tosafot at Nid. 8a (s.v. "v'amar"):

[Commenting on the fact that R. Pedat is identified in this text as being the son of R. Eleazar:] And should you say that in the first chapter of Berakhot [5b, our text here] R. Yoḥanan said to R. Eleazar, "If because of children, this is the bone of my tenth son," suggesting that R. Eleazar did not have children, it could be said [in response to this problem] that he was born to him after [this story in Berakhot] or that he had many children and some of them died. . . . [emphasis added]

So Tosafot, too, believe that the clear sense of the present text is that R. Eleazar has no children. The meaning of R. Yoḥanan's statement, therefore, is just as I have said: the lack of children is insignificant next to their loss.

I inquire into the precise meaning of this exchange because of its implications for our understanding of the earlier segment of this deliberation, at II.C.2. If there is no reason to understand R. Yoḥanan's statement as evidence that he believes that the loss of children is suffering of love, as now seems clear, then we should finally reject the forced conclusion of that step above. As we have now learned, Yoḥanan grieves the loss of children deeply. It is for this reason that he rejects such suffering as "suffering of love"—precisely as we had preferred earlier. Are we to be troubled by the contradiction between this conclusion and the conclusion expressed explicitly at II.C.2? I think not. First, it will be recalled that the formulation of the text itself invited us to question the sincerity of its explicit avowal. Moreover, now the gemara has given us precisely the evidence we need to challenge its claim above. Of course, it did not need to do so. By supplying this information, the gemara is inviting us to reread and to reevaluate. By doing just this, we discover that the gemara, too, was not fully comfortable with its first tentative interpretation of R. Yoḥanan's bitter statement.

Thus we see R. Yoḥanan is extremely bitter about his suffering. He has suffered the loss of a child and he is in no mind to accept this suffering. He would be willing to forgo the reward if he could avoid the suffering. But where, in the opinion of R. Yoḥanan, is value to be found? What truly is worth crying about? The answer, we see in the final crucial step of this last

exchange (2–3; the final exchange [4–6], if it belongs at all,²³ is a mere formulaic repetition of what has come before), is this beauty—the beauty of R. Yoḥanan—that will, with his death, rot in the ground. In the end, it is all reduced to the simple and undeniable beauty of the mundane. Grandeur conceptions, those which transcend the mundane, are dismissed as being (at the very least) inscrutable or, possibly, without redeeming value. Apologies for God's ultimate justice and the meaning of God's world find no hearing with these masters. As Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) himself might remark, only that which can be definitively grasped has enduring value.²⁴

But, almost perversely, this is not the end of this deliberation on suffering. Someone has added a very different conclusion, one that returns us to pieties apparently long put aside (in this context).

Part IV

- a. R. Huna, four hundred barrels of wine turned sour on him.
- b. R. Judah the son of R. Sala the Pious and the sages (and there are those who say it [was] R. Ada b. Ahava and the sages) went in to him and said: The master should examine his ways [to see if there was any sin that caused this punishment].
- c. He said to them: And am I suspect in your eyes?
- d. They said to him: Is the Holy One, blessed be He, suspected of doing judgment without justice?
- e. He said to them: If there is someone who heard something about me, let him speak.
- f. They said to him: This is what we have heard, that the master has not given vines [due in payment] to his hired man.
- g. He said to them: Is anything left to me from him? He has stolen everything!
- h. They said to him: This is what people say, "The one who steals from a thief tastes the taste [of his theft]."
- i. He said to them: I accept upon myself that I will give it [his due] to him.
- j. There are those who say that [as reward for his "repentance"] the vinegar once again became wine,
- k. And there are those who say that [as reward] vinegar went up in price and sold for the same amount as wine.

The point of this narrative is the same as so many: suffering, even of the economic sort, must be punishment for sin. Therefore, the first thing to do when one experiences such suffering is to examine one's ways (b = I.A.1 above); we have come full circle.

But how are we to respond to this in light of what has come before? When we hear the question, "Is the Holy One, blessed be He, suspected of doing judgment without justice?" we are tempted to say, "What about R. Yoḥanan and his loss of his child? Was that justice? Certainly, R. Yoḥanan was not willing to admit to this."²⁵ Against the tense struggle with the meaning of suffering that has preceded this, this final piety fails to convince.

Moreover, this final narrative is also formally distinct from the prior deliberation. Unlike almost everything above, the stamp of tripartite formulation is completely absent from this segment of text. Even in the most artificial way, it is difficult to see a triplet in this exchange.²⁶ So not only the substance of what is said here but also the way in which it is said sets this last section off from the rest.

What does the Bavli seek to communicate by adding this story at the end of the lengthy prior deliberation? It may wish to indicate some discomfort with the implications of the earlier discussion and allow the reader to recover more conventional views.²⁷ But if this is the intent, the efforts are ironically thwarted. The challenge of what comes above cannot easily be put behind. If it means to take issue with what came before, the contrast that the placement of this story has highlighted only calls into question the assumptions upon which the story is built. Which is more powerful, after all, the lengthy, detailed struggle represented in the earlier deliberation or the conventional conclusions offered here? If this represents a retreat from the more radical statements that have come earlier, it has (in this immediate context) ultimately failed. If, instead, the intent is to invite us to compare and contrast the opinion with which we began—repeated here again—with those opinions we have encountered in the course of deliberation, then this has been accomplished brilliantly. Returning to this position at the end, we *are* forced to ask whether it can be upheld against the bitter rejections we heard earlier. At the very least, after following R. Yoḥanan through his struggle with suffering, no reader can be sure that this final, very ancient opinion is one that he or she can fully accept.

Finally, it is the sense of struggle which emerges most resoundingly from this lengthy deliberation. The problem of suffering and the question of its meaning is difficult—perhaps too difficult—precisely as the very difficulty of this text illustrates. Having worked through the various approaches to the problem, we are left with no obvious solutions. That may indeed be the point which the final authorship of this sugya wanted to make.

Ḥagiga 4b–5a

The final text to be examined in this chapter, at Hag. 4b–5a, is a lengthy and sometimes internally contradictory deliberation on suffering, God's justice, and the condition of Israel in this world. It is included here because of the radical view concerning premature death expressed in one segment of the lengthier sugya.

Before commencing analysis, let me clarify my claim at the opening of this chapter that this text is without precedent. The common structural element that ties the deliberation as a whole together is the statement, "R. so-and-so, when he arrived at this scripture, he would cry (quote scripture) (explanation)." The Yerushalmi, at Hag. 2:1 (77a), records a tradition that there are six scriptures that Rabbi would read and cry. The scriptures enumerated there are, with one exception, all quoted in the Bavli's present

deliberation as well. But there the parallel ends. The attributions are all different. The explanations that so emphatically clarify the point in the Bavli are, with one exception, completely absent in the Yerushalmi (so much so that one commentator on the Yerushalmi, the *Qorban ha-'eda*, is forced to quote the Bavli's explanations in order to render the Yerushalmi fully comprehensible). More important, there are thirteen cases of such scriptures outlined in the Bavli, not a mere six, as in the Yerushalmi. Furthermore, the scriptures are simply referred to in the Yerushalmi (with one exception); no compositional relationship is created between them. In contrast, the Bavli formulates a context to create a message that transcends the individual scriptures. Finally, and most crucially for our discussion here, the scripture that yields the most radical view in the Bavli has no parallel in the Yerushalmi. Thus, when speaking of the opinions expressed at the Bavli's compositional level, it is correct to say that there is no precedent elsewhere in rabbinic literature.

Before the segment of text that will most concern us, the gemara in Ḥagiga makes reference to seven other scriptures that provoked one sage or another to cry upon reading them. The first two traditions, attributed to R. Huna, speak of the sorrow caused when being reminded, in two specific scriptures, that God has distanced Israel from God, despite earlier expressions of desire for closeness. The second two speak of the fear that must overcome a person when anticipating God's judgment. These enunciate more explicitly the theme which will dominate the deliberation that follows.

The fifth through seventh steps, attributed to R. Ammi and R. Asi, quote scriptures that list various extremely righteous or pious acts that a person can undertake and yet, according to each scripture, such undertakings only possibly guarantee divine reward or protection; as each sage remarks, "all of this and [only] 'perhaps'!" The quotation of these scriptures out of context and with this added emphasis has an important effect. In their original prophetic contexts (Lam. 3:29, Zeph. 2:3, Amos 5:15) it seems likely that this conditional "perhaps" should be understood as saying, "If you improve your deeds now, *perhaps* these deeds will bring you enough merit either to avert the evil that should follow from your sins or to give you hope after the punishment has already come"—the "perhaps" because the meritorious deeds done now still have to be weighed against the iniquities that preceded them. However, as quoted here, the impression is clearly given that no matter how good one's deeds are, and in complete disregard of what they might be balanced against, still, all that can be guaranteed is a "maybe." To some extent, the system of balances, of appropriate reward and punishment, cannot be assured—there is something arbitrary in the whole system that does not permit confidence. This lack of confidence, this fear of arbitrary nonjudgment, causes these sages to cry.

This insistence that the system of correct justice cannot be guaranteed—supported, it will be recalled, with full scriptural "proof"—sets the stage for the most radical possibility. The text is this:²⁸

a. R. Joseph, when he would arrive at this scripture, he would cry: "there are those who find their end without judgment." (Prov 13:23, translated for context)

b. He said:²⁹ But is there [one] who passes [away] not in his [proper] time?

c. Yes!

d. As [in] this [case] of R. Bibi b. Abbaye, who was found in the presence of the Angel of Death.

e. He [= the Angel of Death] said to his messenger: Go bring to me Miriam the Hairdresser.³⁰

f. He went [and] brought to him Miriam the raiser of children.

g. He [= the Angel of Death] said to him: I said to you Miriam the Hairdresser!

h. He said to him: If so, I will return her.

i. He [= the Angel of Death] said to him: Since you have brought her, let her be in [my] number [= let her remain among the dead]. But, [tell me] how were you able [to take] her [being that it was not her appointed time]?

j. [He answered:] She took a shovel in her hand and she was raking [the coals in] the oven. She took it and placed it on her knee [and] she burned [herself] and her luck went bad and [an opening was thus provided and so] I brought her.

k. [Having witnessed this exchange,] R. Bibi b. Abbaye said to him [or, to them]: Have you permission to do this?

l. He [= the Angel of Death] said to him: And is it not written, "there are those who find their end without judgment [or, justice]!?"

m. He said to him: But is it not written, "One generation goes, another comes?" (Eccl 1:4) [thus implying, as understood by R. Bibi b. Abbaye, that each generation has an appointed time which must be fulfilled]

n. He [= the Angel of Death] said: [This verse merely requires] that I accompany them until the generation is completed and then I give them to Duma [see Ps. 115:17].

o. He [R. Bibi] said to him: In any case, what did you do with her years [those that were rightly due to Miriam or to anyone who similarly died prematurely]?

p. He said: If there is a student of sages who forgives [others] I will add them [= the years] to him and he will be the other's replacement.

The simple story line is straightforward enough. Rabbi Bibi b. Abbaye witnesses an exchange between the Angel of Death and his messenger. Having been sent to bring a certain Miriam—it being her appointed time to die—the messenger brings the wrong Miriam. Asked by the Angel of Death himself how he was able to do so, the messenger replies that this wrong Miriam had an accident that provided the opportunity for her life to be taken. Rabbi Bibi b. Abbaye then intervenes, challenging the idea that the Angel of Death and his messenger have permission to take someone before his or her appointed time. The Angel of Death says he can and justifies his actions with the very same scripture that had caused R. Joseph to cry. Bibi quotes another scripture, which he takes to suggest that such pre-

mature death is not permitted, and the Angel of Death explains how both scriptures can be accommodated. Crucially, the Angel does not yield his right to take life prematurely (that is, before the time appointed by God's justice). An artificial accounting, whereby the unused years will be taken advantage of by someone (to fill out the "generation"), is all that is necessary.

Before even taking our analysis any further, the opinion of this story, in all of its radicalness, is perfectly clear. There can be premature death. God's justice is not necessarily done. The Angel of Death or his messenger can entirely disregard what God's will requires. In an extreme and explicit way, this narrative eliminates all of the many rationalizations of suffering (in this case, premature death) that came before it and returns, almost perversely, to the opinion that a collective—now some ill-defined entity called a "generation"—is all that counts in the justice of this world. But distinguishing this treatment from earlier collective treatments is the fact that here the concern is undoubtedly the individual; reference to the collective is a mere lame rationalization—not the real point at all.

The composition of this story supports the lesson just outlined in a variety of remarkable ways. The first and most obvious element of this composition is the complete absence of any explicit mention of God. Thus the author signals in his composition the point that he otherwise makes in the narrative: God is not involved here. God is not an active participant in this death or related matters of justice. God does appear, though only by implication, in the scriptures quoted, which are of course understood by the rabbi or rabbis who composed this text and by their readers to be in some way words of the Divine. It turns out, then—ironically and remarkably—that the very justification for the Angel of Death and his messenger acting in disregard of God's specific will (l) is the words of God, which the Angel uses to serve his purpose. In an extreme application of the principal, "It is not in Heaven" (b. B.M. 59b), the Angel of Death uses God's word against God, a perversion over which God has no power (or, if you prefer, chooses to have no power). Again, God's disembodied word appears here but, as in the premature death of one poor Miriam, God Godself is nowhere to be found.

Related to these points is the fact that, as this story has it, it is the Angel of Death who here sends an agent. It will be recalled that it is the Angel of Death who is meant to serve as God's agent (Greek: "*angelos*" = messenger). In all of the Babylonian Talmud there is not another angel who sends a messenger. Yet here, the Angel of Death does. It is the Angel of Death, in other words, who stands, in this story, in the place otherwise occupied by God. God is removed from the scene; the Angel of Death takes God's place. Moreover, by positing that the death itself is effectuated by an agent of the agent of God, the narrative serves further to symbolically remove this death from God. God is removed in every sense from the death described here. The opinion is thus stated quite eloquently: this death, at least, has nothing to do with God.

לְבַר רַבִּי בִּבִי בֶּן אֲבָיִה
שֶׁהָיָה עִירְוֵהוּ לְפָנָיו
וְהָיָה עִירְוֵהוּ לְפָנָיו
וְהָיָה עִירְוֵהוּ לְפָנָיו

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But it is essential to recognize that the lesson articulated here is not meant to be narrowed to this single death. The point of R. Joseph's crying in response to the verse from Proverbs is that its teaching has a far more general application. The same is evident in the final exchange between R. Bibi and the Angel of Death; "have you permission?" (k) is a broad question, and the angel's response makes it clear that he feels he has the overall right to take lives prematurely. If there is any limitation on this power, it is not spelled out. Only an accident is needed before the angel's right is activated, and there can be little question of the prevalence of such accidents.

It is virtually impossible to miss the meaning of this story. On the foundation of what precedes it—a foundation that remarks that reward and justice are only possible, not assured—this sequence illustrates just how unassured justice is. How startling a claim this is! The lessons of this story were so troubling to some later readers that R. Ḥananel (tenth century, North Africa), for example, remarks here:

There is one who says that [R. Bibi b. Abbaye] saw a kind of dream here, and, not only so, but R. Bibi b. Abbaye was involved in seeking demons. For this reason, one may say, he saw something like this [the story reported here], and we do not depend on this [story to draw authoritative conclusions]. Indeed, there is an explanation [of the verse] "there are those who find their end . . ."—such as where a person killed his fellow.

For this commentator, to accept what this story clearly says would be unthinkable. It must be the result of some dangerous and improper speculation! Besides, the verse can be explained without problem: murder can end a life even before its appointed time. This explanation is acceptable because people have free will (even to murder). Otherwise, however, God's justice and God's will prevail.

Of course, the Talmud records not the opinion that R. Ḥananel would prefer but the one we described above. Had it been thought to be unacceptable or merely the result of hallucination, there would have been no reason for the Talmud to record it. Therefore, this must be deemed a legitimate opinion at the level of the Talmud's redaction. And, it must be recalled, it is deemed legitimate in rabbinic circles, in all of its harsh reality, only in the Bavli.³¹

Just how provisional the foregoing opinion is, even in this context, is evident in a step that follows shortly after the one just analyzed. Again, attentions turn to the problem of premature death:

a. R. Yoḥanan, when he arrived at this scripture, would cry, "He puts no trust in His Holy ones" (Job 15:15)—If He will not put trust in His Holy ones, in whom will He put trust?

b. One day he [= R. Yoḥanan] was walking on the road. He saw a certain man picking figs. He left those that were ripe and took those that were not ripe.

c. He said to him: Are not these [others] better?

d. He said to him: I need these for the road. These will keep [while] these will not keep.

e. [R. Yoḥanan] said: This is what is written, "He puts no trust in his Holy ones." [Rashi: "(Just as, with respect to) the good (figs) he is afraid that they will rot, so too are righteous youth brought to death (prematurely) lest they sin."]

f. Is this so? But [there is the case of] that student who was in the neighborhood of R. Alexandri and he died prematurely, and he [= R. Alexandri] said: "If this student had wanted he could have lived [by living righteously]." And if this principle [spelled out in the prior story] pertains, perhaps he [= this student] was of "the Holy ones" [whose lives are taken early so that they not sin].

g. That one [= the student] was rebellious against his teachers.

How different is the tone of this story from the one above! The story admits that there are some who die prematurely, but only because God wants to "protect them from the road," to assure that they not "rot." This is the meaning of the verse: "He puts no trust in His Holy ones"; instead, God takes them to assure that they will remain holy. But this pertains only to those who are genuinely holy. Those who have sinned are punished accordingly, and this is the explanation of the premature death of the certain student.

Here there is no admission of the lack of God's justice. On the contrary, justice prevails in all realms. Even premature death is just because it may be understood either as punishment or as protection of those who have not yet sinned. They, of course, will be rewarded in the world-to-come (not stated here explicitly, but clearly assumed).

This text as a whole gives no indication of which of the expressed views, this or the one examined earlier, is to prevail. Perhaps it would be best to read their combination here canonically, that is, as a case where contradictory opinions, juxtaposed, are simultaneously to be considered legitimate options. However, in light of the careful composition of this text as it progresses, it is likely that there is a better explanation of the present contradiction.

The text that follows the first story above is, with some variation and room for expansion, structured around this common formula: "R. Yoḥanan, when he came to this scripture, he cried. . . . [He said:] a servant whose master does thus-and-so to him, has he any [hope of] remedy?" (The only exception to this formula in the primary structure is this last story regarding premature death.) The master in each case is, of course, God, and the general point is that a variety of scriptures may be understood to say that God is particularly harsh in judgment against Israel. In the thematic progression of this long sugya, the present sequence may be understood as saying, "Not only are chances of being rewarded for righteous acts dubious, but also God is so exacting with Israel that what are seemingly the most minor transgressions will lead to punishment." Included among the sins that are men-

tioned to illustrate this point are giving charity to the needy in public, which leads, presumably, to their embarrassment. Another example, well below this, is speaking to one's wife with undue levity while making love.

This sequence of traditions built around the statements of R. Yoḥanan assumes divine justice of a sort—as stated, a particularly harsh sort. In this respect, this segment of text is even more ominous than what came before. In the earlier part of the deliberation at least there was a chance, no matter how uncertain in might have been. Now, that chance is defined as being ever more remote because of the strict application of justice. Ironically, the radical possibility enunciated earlier is now left behind, but with far harsher consequences. As has been noticed in many earlier deliberations on God's justice, if such justice is too consistently applied, mankind will have difficulty surviving its application. Without mercy or, here, at least some degree of arbitrariness, "Has he any [hope of] remedy?"

The pessimistic tenor of this text is reinforced in its final steps, where the theme becomes the hiding of God's face. As is stated, "anyone who is not in [a state of] 'the hiding of [God's] face' . . . [and] in [a state of] 'they shall be ready prey' (both, Dt 31:17) is not of them [= of Israel]." The condition of being Israel today demands that one be prey to the nations and demands that one feel the distance of God's presence. Both these conditions are an outcome of divine justice, a justice which, however, does not (at the present time, at least) offer much hope. Hope is found only in the next stage of this text, in a transition away from this immediate discussion, from which we learn that God does, at least, cry for our catastrophe.

A quick review of the themes that provoke crying makes clear the direction that this text wants to point us. It begins with distancing from God, then goes on to the fear of judgment. Next comes the play of the arbitrary—the complete absence of justice. But then comes the even more difficult condition to confront: the complete and unyielding application of justice. We conclude with God's intentional absence, which, the gemara says, is too harsh—at least God must weep. It is evident, from this review, that a logically consistent analysis of God's justice has never been the point, thus logical contradictions are not a problem. The author has been interested in leading us along the progressively bitter path of individual and collective Jewish experience. Notably, when it appears that Rava is living too comfortably, though in secret he too may be prey to the government's lust for wealth, this appearance must change (for this, see 5b, top). The author of this text is a resolute and almost unyielding pessimist. It is this attitude and emotion that he has shared with us.

Of the several more radical expressions regarding suffering and its relation to divine justice, none is entirely without precedent in biblical literature. The protest of R. Yoḥanan and his colleagues in Berakhot is really no more extreme (and far less eloquent) than that of Job. And the skepticism articulated in the story of the wrong Miriam is no more doubting than that of Ecclesiastes. However, unlike Job (the book), the rabbis saw no possibility of a thundering *deus ex machina* in their time, and the piety that prob-

ably saved Ecclesiastes for the canon (its final two verses)—providing hope against the wise man's lack thereof—are in Hagiga the end of hope: if God will bring all of a person's actions to judgment, even that which is hidden from him, then what hope is there? These small differences are very important. They make the protest more biting, the skepticism more stinging. They give a new voice to views that were not fully articulated in the first go around.

In fact, it may be that it is this giving of new voice that represents the Bavli's most radical departure from earlier rabbinic forays. It is one thing to quote scripture—if an opinion is scriptural, it is legitimate. But it is another thing entirely to express these opinions in the rabbis' own idiom, using rabbinic authorities and employing contemporary reality for illustration. In doing this, the Bavli admits above all that the reality perceived by Job or by Ecclesiastes is also part of its own reality, a courageous and possibly even dangerous admission. Moreover, expressing these views in its own voice, the Bavli takes full responsibility for them. What an astounding responsibility it is.

Understanding the Bavli

The Bavli's teachings on suffering are extremely varied, ranging from the most antique of biblical views to the far more radical possibilities just examined. In terms of their numbers, most of the Bavli's treatments probably recreate the most traditional possibilities, though these expressions tend to be brief and peripheral to the discussions at hand. Many are ambivalent or express their challenge *sotto voce*, showing the Bavli's broad willingness to give an ear to protest or complaint. The relatively common presence of such texts shows that their uneasiness with simplistic theodicies is at least approvingly understood by the Bavli's authorship, if not widely shared. The Bavli makes it clear that even outright protest is to be tolerated.

Notably, in extended theoretical discussions of justice as such (as opposed to deliberations on personal suffering), the Bavli says little to distinguish itself from earlier rabbinic texts. It is fully able to speak on behalf of the reality of God's justice, and the schemes it employs to justify that support are themselves ancient and often repeated. If these were the only expressions in the Bavli that related to the present concerns, we might have concluded that the Bavli, like the Yerushalmi, for example, insisted upon complete adherence to the age-old pieties.

However, it is impossible to separate discussions of justice from those relating to suffering. The texts that address the problem of suffering are also discussions of God's justice. And, as we have seen, the Bavli does express alternative, even angry views. Numerous texts are not at all confident of the justice so unhesitatingly supported in others. How, then, are we to understand the difference in approach between these two sorts of texts?

In the introductory chapter, I suggested that my decision to focus primarily on texts that relate to suffering as such was motivated by the apprehension that theoretical discussions of "justice"—a concept, not a reality—