

Yemei Iyun on Tanach and Jewish Thought--5778

ACTS OF GOD: Religious Responses to Natural Disasters

This study guide was made possible by funds granted by the Covenant Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of the author.

Acts of God vs. Nature

1. Numbers 25	במדבר ט"ז
<p>25 Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, the elders of Israel following him.</p> <p>26 He addressed the community, saying, "Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be wiped out for all their sins."</p> <p>27 So they withdrew from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Now Dathan and Abiram had come out and they stood at the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones.</p> <p>28 And Moses said, "By this you shall know that it was the LORD who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising:</p> <p>29 if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the LORD who sent me.</p> <p>30 But if the LORD brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the LORD."</p> <p>31 Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder,</p>	<p>כה וַיִּקַּם מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל-דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרָיו זְקֵנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p> <p>כו וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר סוּרוּ נָא מֵעַל אֹהֲלֵי הָאָנָשִׁים הַרְשָׁעִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאַל-תִּגְעוּ בְכֹל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם פֶּן-תִּסְפוּ בְכֹל-חַטָּאתָם: כז וַיַּעֲלוּ מֵעַל מִשְׁכַּן-קִרְחַדָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם מִסְבִּיב וּדְתָן וְאַבִּירָם יָצְאוּ נֹצְבִים פְּתַח אֹהֲלֵיהֶם וּנְשֵׂיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם וְטַפָּם:</p> <p>כח וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי-יְהוָה שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי-לֹא מִלְּבִי:</p> <p>כט אִם-כַּמּוֹת כָּל-הָאָדָם יִמְתּוּן אֱלֹהִים וּפְקֻדַת כָּל-הָאָדָם יִפְקַד עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא יְהוָה שְׁלַחְנִי: ל וְאִם-בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהוָה וּפְצָתָהּ הָאֲדָמָה אֶת-פִּיהָ וּבִלְעָה אֹתָם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי נֹאצוּ הָאָנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת-יְהוָה:</p> <p>לא וַיְהִי כַכֵּלְתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶת-כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּבְקַע הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֵּיהֶם: לב וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת-פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת-בְּתֵיהֶם וְאֶת-כָּל-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לְקִרְחַח וְאֶת-כָּל-הָרְכוּשׁ:</p>

<p>32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. 33 They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.</p>	<p>לֹג וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַתִּכַּס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל:</p>
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1. How does Moses frame the opening of the earth and the swallowing of Korah's people? What fallacies might this perspective lead to?

<p>2. Mishnah, Ethics of the Fathers, ch. 5, Mishna 6</p>	<p>אבות פ"ה ה"ו</p>
<p>Ten things were created on the eve of the [first] Shabbat at twilight. And these are they: The mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach in Numbers 16:32]; and the mouth of the well [that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness in Numbers 21:17]; and the mouth of the donkey [that spoke to Bilaam in Numbers 22:28–30]; and the rainbow [that served as a covenant after the flood in Genesis 9:13]; and the manna [that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus 16:4–21]; and the staff [of Moshe]; and the shamir (the worm that helped build the Temple without metal tools); and the letters; and the writing; and the tablets [all of the latter three, of the Ten Commandments]. And some say, also the destructive spirits, and the burial place of Moshe, our teacher, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say, also the [first human-made] tongs, made with [Divine] tongs.</p>	<p>עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֶשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאָרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֵתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמָּטָה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַכֶּתֶב, וְהַמִּכְתָּב, וְהַלְוִיחֹת. וַיֵּשׂ אֹמְרִים, אִף הַמְזִיקִין, וְקִבּוּרְתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוֹ. וַיֵּשׂ אֹמְרִים, אִף צַבַּת בְּצַבַּת עֲשׂוּיָה:</p>

1. What is the Mishna's purpose of grouping these ten things together? Are there any that seem that they don't belong? Why are they included?

- Does this Mishna support the position that natural disasters are punishments from God or that natural disasters just happen? What would be a middle position between these two extremes?

<p>3. Israel Lischitz, <i>Tif'eret Yisrael</i>, "Yachin", s.v. "the mouth"</p>	<p>תפארת ישראל, יכין, ד"ה פי</p>
<p>This is the reason it says "the mouth of the earth," because power was given to the earth in that place to open it's mouth wide to swallow the company of Korach and to close it afterwards, like an animal who opens its mouth, and snatches and tears in anger and swallows its prey and the returns and closes its mouth. As it says, "the earth closed over them". And this was only to sanctify God's name (May it be blessed). And to clarify the truth of the Torah of Moses, since they denied the prophesy of Moses our Teacher...</p>	<p>להכי קאמר פי הארץ דר"ל ניתן כח בהארץ באותו מקום לפער פיה לבלוע עדת קרח, ולסתמו אח"כ, כחיה הפותחת פיה, וחוטפת וטורפת בכעס ובולעת שללה וחוזרת וסוגרת פיה. וכמ"ש ותכס עליהם הארץ והי' זה רק לקדש שמו ית' ולברר אמיתית תורת משה, מדכפרו בנבואות משרע"ה, וכמ"ש וידעתם כי נאצו וגו' את ה':</p>

- How would you characterize the Tif'eret Yisrael's description of the earth opening its mouth? Natural? Miraculous? How does this suggest that the Tif'eret Yisrael would come down on the debate about punishment vs. natural occurrence above?

<p>4. Isaiah 45</p>	<p>ישעיה מ"ה</p>
<p>7 I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe— I the LORD do all these things. 8 Pour down, O skies, from above! Let the heavens rain down justice! Let the earth open up and triumph sprout, Yes, let vindication spring up: I the LORD have created it. 9 Shame on him who argues with his Maker, Though naught but a potsherd of earth! Shall the clay say to the potter, "What are you doing? Your work has no handles"? 10 Shame on him who asks his father, "What are you begetting?" Or a woman, "What are you bearing?"</p>	<p>ז יוצר אור ובורא חשך עשה שלום ובורא רע אני יקוק עשה כל-אלה: ח הרעיפו שמים ממעל ושחקים יזלו-צדק תפתח-ארץ ויפרו-ישע וצדקה תצמיח יחד אני יהוה בראתי: ט הוי רב את-יצרו חרש את-חרשי אדמה היאמר חמר ליצרו מה-תעשה ופעלך אין-ידיים לו: י הוי אמר לאב מה-תוליד ולאשה מה-תחילין:</p>



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<p>11 Thus said the LORD, Israel’s Holy One and Maker: Will you question Me on the destiny of My children, Will you instruct Me about the work of My hands? 12 It was I who made the earth And created man upon it; My own hands stretched out the heavens, And I marshaled all their host.</p>	<p>יֵא כֹה־אָמַר יְהוָה קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִצְרָו הָאֲתִיּוֹת שְׁאֵלוּנִי עַל־בְּנֵי וְעַל־פְּעַל יְדֵי תִצְוֵנִי: יֵב אֲנֹכִי עֲשִׂיתִי אֶרֶץ וְאָדָם עָלֶיהָ בְּרָאתִי אֲנִי יְדֵי נָטוּ שָׁמַיִם וְכָל־צַבָּאָם צִוִּיתִי:</p>
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1. What kind of theology emerges from these verses? Does God control every act of nature or does nature exist independent of God? Are these the only possible readings?
2. How do you phrase for yourself God’s relationship to natural disasters?

The Best Possible World

5. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, Translated by E.M. Huggard, Open Court Publishing Company, Peru, IL, 1988.

<https://archive.org/stream/theodicy17147gut/17147.txt>

8. Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better...so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best (optimum) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any. I call 'World' the whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things, lest it be said that several worlds could have existed in different times and different places. For they must needs be reckoned all together as one world or, if you will, as one Universe. And even though one should fill all times and all places, it still remains true that one might have filled them in innumerable ways, and that there is an infinitude of possible worlds among which God must needs have chosen the best, since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason.

9. ...it must be known that all things are connected in each one of the possible worlds: the universe, whatever it may be, is all of one piece, like an ocean: the least movement extends its effect there to any distance whatsoever, even though this effect become less perceptible in proportion to the distance. Therein God has ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest; and each thing as an idea has contributed, before its existence, to the resolution that has been made upon the existence of all things; so that nothing can be changed in the universe (any more than in a number) save its



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essence... Thus, if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world; which, with nothing omitted and all allowance made, was found the best by the Creator who chose it...

242. It should be no cause for astonishment that I endeavour to elucidate these things by comparisons taken from pure mathematics, where everything proceeds in order, and where it is possible to fathom them by a close contemplation which grants us an enjoyment, so to speak, of the vision of the ideas of God. One may propose a succession or series of numbers perfectly irregular to all appearance, where the numbers increase and diminish variably without the emergence of any order; and yet he who knows the key to the formula, and who understands the origin and the structure of this succession of numbers, will be able to give a rule which, being properly understood, will show that the series is perfectly regular, and that it even has excellent properties. One may make this still more evident in lines. A line may have twists and turns, ups and downs, points of reflexion and points of inflexion, interruptions and other variations, so that one sees neither rhyme nor reason therein, especially when taking into account only a portion of the line; and yet it may be that one can give its equation and construction, wherein a geometrician would find the reason and the fittingness of all these so-called irregularities. That is how we must look upon the irregularities constituted by monstrosities and other so-called defects in the universe.

243. ...It belongs to the great order that there should be some small disorder. One may even say that this small disorder is apparent only in the whole, and it is not even apparent when one considers the happiness of those who walk in the ways of order.

1. What is Leibniz's explanation for natural disasters? What is the value judgement he associates with that explanation? Is this value judgement necessary? What does it add? How might it detract from Leibniz's argument?
2. What is left to *do* when a natural disaster strikes according to this argument? What action is demanded by this belief system?

<p>6. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zara 54:</p>	<p>בבלי ע"ז נ"ד:</p>
<p>One who stole a <i>seah</i> of wheat and went and planted it in the earth. In justice, it should not sprout. However, the world continues according to custom and fools who sin will account for it in the future. Another thing</p>	<p>הרי שגזל סאה של חטים [והלך] וזרעה בקרקע דין הוא שלא תצמח אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג והולך ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין דבר אחר</p>



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A man who sleeps with his comrade's wife. In justice, she should not conceive. However, the world continues according to its custom and fools who sin will account for it in the future.

הרי שבא על אשת חבירו דין הוא שלא תתעבר אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג והולך ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין

1. What do these texts suggest about God's intercession in nature? Is this true only in individual cases (a thief who plants their ill-gotten wheat) or even en masse?
2. What problems does this theology solve? What problems does it create?
3. How is this formulation different from Leibniz's "best possible world" above? Do you identify with this more or less than with Leibniz's argument?

Nature, God, and Humanity

7. David K. Chester, *Natural Disasters and Christian Theology*, 2009

<https://www.faraday.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/resources/FAR268%20Chester.pdf>

In the case of research on disasters, the dominant approach became the subject of trenchant criticism. Briefly, the dominant approach accepted that factors such as differences in systems of beliefs, material wealth, previous experience of hazardous events and psychological factors may be of importance in affecting human responses, it nevertheless emphasized the role of environmental extremes as the principal determinants of disasters. In contrast, by the final decades of the twentieth century greater weight was being placed on human vulnerability. It was argued cogently and with increasing force that most of the mortality and morbidity in disasters, especially in economically less developed countries, could be explained by factors such as poverty, deprivation, marginalization, lack of disaster preparedness and, in the case of earthquakes, by collapsing buildings constructed to inadequate or non-existent codes. For instance, in the twentieth century c.99% of volcano related deaths occurred in economically less developed countries, while examination of the impacts of earthquakes of similar magnitude showed a similar disparate pattern, with major 14 death tolls increasingly becoming the preserve of the world's poor, whereas financial losses were the most striking feature of 'rich' countries. When financial impacts are expressed as percentages of national wealth - Gross Domestic Product, or GDP) - however, then the relative economic toll in 'poor' countries is far higher...

A second strand in post-Leibnizian theodicy emphasises the immanence of God within human affairs. Terrence Tilley (1991), for instance, argues that the Leibnizian approach is a means of reducing human responsibility for both natural and human-induced suffering because it focuses responsibility on God rather than people: on creator rather than creature. This line of argument

may also be seen in the work of two highly influential writers. The Jesuit Raymund Schwager (1987), who shows how there is both a biblical and historical tendency within Christianity to make God the scapegoat for all manner of human failings; and Ted Steinberg (2000), a secular historian of the environment, who in reviewing disasters in the USA argues that the perception of such events as being caused by either a malign nature or by God are convenient devices for both commercial interests and institutions of government who can thereby evade responsibility for the poor, the racially disadvantaged and other marginalized groups within American society...

1. What is the relationship between Dr. Chester's argument here and Leibniz's theory of "the best possible world"? Does Chester reject Leibniz entirely?
2. What is left to *do* when a natural disaster strikes according to Dr. Chester's argument? What action is demanded by this belief system? Does this make it preferable to other belief systems which demand less?

9. Mishnah, Masechet Ta'anit 3:4	משנה תענית פ"ג מ"ד
And thus, when pestilence reigns in a city, or when the walls fall down, [the inhabitants of] such a city must fast, and sound an alarm: and those of the circumjacent places shall fast, but not sound. Rabbi Akivah says, "they are to sound, but not to fast.	וְכֵן עִיר שֶׁיָּשׁ בָּהּ דָּבָר אוֹ מַפְלֵת, אוֹתָהּ הָעִיר מְתַעֲנֶה וּמְתַרְעֵת, וְכָל סְבִיבוֹתֶיהָ מְתַעֲנֹת וְלֹא מְתַרְיָעוֹת. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר, מְתַרְיָעוֹת וְלֹא מְתַעֲנֹת.

10. Rashi ad loc (19a)	רש"י שם (י"ט).
Or when the walls fall down - When their walls and houses fall in the wind.	או מפולת - שחומותיה והבתים נופלין ברוח:

1. What kind of theology is reflected in the Mishna here? What might be the difference between Rabbi Akiva's position and the initial position? What is not taken into consideration in terms of the meaning of the walls falling down?

11. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 20b	בבלי תע' כ':
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The Sages taught: These collapsing buildings to which the Sages referred are those of sturdy and not dilapidated walls; they have walls that are not ready to fall, and not those that are ready to fall...

It is necessary to specify that in the case of walls that fell due to their height, (i.e., they are sound but also ready to fall), due to their excessive height. Alternatively, the baraita is referring to a case where the walls were positioned on a riverbank, (as they are likely to fall despite the fact that they are not dilapidated, as the riverbank itself is unstable).

תנו רבנן מפולת שאמרו בריאות ולא
רעועות שאינן ראויות ליפול ולא הראויות
ליפול
הי ניהו בריאות הי ניהו שאינן ראויות ליפול
הי ניהו רעועות הי ניהו ראויות ליפול לא
צריכא דנפלו מחמת גובהיהו אי נמי דקיימן
אגודא דנהרא

1. How do the Rabbis of the Talmud subtly alter the meaning of the Mishnah? What theology is reflected now?
2. How does this new meaning reflect Dr. Chester's position above and how does it differ? Which resonates more for you?

Explanations Owed

12. Voltaire, *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne, 1756*, translated by Joseph McCabe
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Toleration_and_other_essays/Poem_on_the_Lisbon_Disaster

POEM ON THE LISBON DISASTER;

Or an Examination of the Axiom, "All is Well"

...A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,
Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,
Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,
In racking torment end their stricken lives.
To those expiring murmurs of distress,
To that appalling spectacle of woe,
Will ye reply: "You do but illustrate
The iron laws that chain the will of God"?



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Say ye, o'er that yet quivering mass of flesh:
"God is avenged: the wage of sin is death"
What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss...

"All's well," ye say, "and all is necessary,"
Think ye this universe had been the worse
Without this hellish gulf in Portugal?
Are ye so sure the great eternal cause,
That knows all things, and for itself creates,
Could not have placed us in this dreary clime
Without volcanoes seething 'neath our feet?
Set you this limit to the power supreme?
Would you forbid it use its clemency?
Are not the means of the great artisan
Unlimited for shaping his designs?
The master I would not offend, yet wish
This gulf of fire and sulphur had outpoured
Its baleful flood amid the desert wastes...

And o'er this ghastly chaos you would say
The ills of each make up the good of all!
What blessedness! And as, with quaking voice,
Mortal and pitiful, ye cry, "All's well,"
The universe belies you, and your heart
Refutes a hundred times your mind's conceit...



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But how conceive a God supremely good,
Who heaps his favours on the sons he loves,
Yet scatters evil with as large a hand?
What eye can pierce the depth of his designs?
...One sophist says he had not power to change;
"He had," another cries, "but willed it not:
In time he will, no doubt." And, while they prate,
The hidden thunders, belched from underground,
Fling wide the ruins of a hundred towns
Across the smiling face of Portugal.
God either smites the inborn guilt of man,
Or, arbitrary lord of space and time,
Devoid alike of pity and of wrath,
Pursues the cold designs he has conceived.
Or else this formless stuff, recalcitrant,
Bears in itself inalienable faults;
Or else God tries us, and this mortal life
Is but the passage to eternal spheres.
'T is transitory pain we suffer here,
And death its merciful deliverance.
Yet, when this dreadful passage has been made,
Who will contend he has deserved the crown?
Whatever side we take we needs must groan;
We nothing know, and everything must fear.
Nature is dumb, in vain appeal to it;
The human race demands a word of God.
'T is his alone to illustrate his work,
Console the weary, and illumine the wise...

1. How does Voltaire feel about the various theologies of natural disasters that we've offered so far? Does this dissatisfaction resonate for you?

2. What alternative theology is Voltaire offering in this poem? Is this a more satisfying theology than the theologies discussed above? Is it more honest? Why or why not?

13. Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 59a	בבלי בר' נ"ט.
<p>Rav Ketina was once walking along the road when he came to the entrance of the house of a necromancer and an earthquake rumbled. He said: Does this necromancer know what is this earthquake? The necromancer raised his voice and said: Ketina, Ketina, why would I not know? Certainly this earthquake occurred because when the Holy One, Blessed be He, remembers His children who are suffering among the nations of the world, He sheds two tears into the great sea. The sound of their reverberation is heard from one end of the earth to the other. And that is an earthquake...</p> <p>Rav Ketina also stated his own explanation for the earthquake: Because God claps His hands together in anger, as it is stated: "I will also smite My hands together and I will satisfy My fury; I, the Lord, have spoken it" (Ezekiel 21:22). Rabbi Natan says: The earthquake is caused because God sighs, as it is stated: "Thus shall My anger spend itself, and I will satisfy My fury upon them, and I will be eased" (Ezekiel 5:13). And the Rabbis say: An earthquake is caused when God kicks the firmament, as it is stated: "The Lord roars from on high, from His holy dwelling He makes His voice heard. He roars mightily over His dwelling place, He cries out like those who tread grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth" (Jeremiah 25:30). Rav Aḥa bar Ya'akov said: An earthquake is caused when God forces His feet beneath the throne of glory and the world quakes, as it is stated: "The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool" (Isaiah 66:1).</p>	<p>רב קטינא הוה קאזיל באורחא כי מטא אפתחא דבי אובא טמיא גנח גוהא אמר מי ידע אובא טמיא האי גוהא מהו רמא ליה קלא קטינא קטינא אמאי לא ידענא בשעה שהקב"ה זוכר את בניו ששרויים בצער בין אומות העולם מוריד שתי דמעות לים הגדול וקולו נשמע מסוף העולם ועד סופו והיינו גוהא...</p> <p>ורב קטינא דידיה אמר סופק כפיו שנאמר (יחזקאל כא, כב) וגם אני אכה כפי אל כפי והניחותי חמתי רבי נתן אומר אנחה מתאנח שנאמר (יחזקאל ה, יג) והניחותי חמתי במ והנחמתי ורבנן אמרי בועט ברקיע שנאמר (ירמיהו כה, ל) הידד כדורכים יענה אל כל יושבי הארץ רב אחא בר יעקב אמר דוחק את רגליו תחת כסא הכבוד שנאמר (ישעיהו סו, א) כה אמר ה' השמים כסאי והארץ הדום רגלי:</p>



YESHIVAT | CELEBRATING
CHOVEVEI | EIGHTEEN
TORAH | YEARS

חי וקיים

1. What theologies are suggested here as the cause for earthquakes? How are they different from anything we've seen so far? Do any of these resonate for you?
2. What would Voltaire hate about this passage? What might he be willing to consider?
3. Which of the various theologies discussed in this packet resonate most strongly for you? How does this affect your future practice?