

What Nietzsche Can Teach Jews About the Problem of Evil

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A. The Nietzschean Critique

Religion has debased the concept “man”. Its ultimate consequence is that everything good, great, true is superhuman and bestowed only through an act of grace.

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, [WP] tr. W. Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), §136

B. Nietzsche on Theodicy

[I]t was reserved for Christianity to say: ‘Here is a great misfortune and behind it there *must* lie hidden a great, *equally great* guilt, even though it may not be clearly visible! If you, unfortunate man, do not feel this you are *obdurate* – you will have to suffer worse things!’ – Moreover, in antiquity there still existed actual misfortune, pure innocent misfortune; only in Christendom did everything become punishment, well-deserved punishment: it also makes the sufferer’s imagination suffer, so that with every misfortune he feels himself morally reprehensible and cast out. Poor mankind!

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 78

The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity – *and the ascetic ideal offered it [i.e. suffering] a meaning!*... in every respect the ascetic ideal has been the “*faute de mieux*” *par excellence* there has been thus far. In it suffering was *interpreted*; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door fell shut to all suicidal nihilism The interpretation – there is no doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, gnawing more at life: it brought all suffering under the perspective of *guilt*... But in spite of all this – man was *rescued* by it, he had a *meaning*.

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* [GM], trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen

(Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1998) III: 28

C. Soloveitchik on Theodicy

The gist of my discourse was that Judaism did not approach the problem of evil under the speculative-metaphysical aspect. For such an inquiry would be a futile undertaking. As long as the human mind is unable to embrace creation in its entirety and to gain an insight into the very essence and purposiveness of being as such, it would not succeed in its attempt to resolve the dilemma of evil. The latter is interwoven into the very fabric of reality and cannot be understood outside its total ontological configuration. Job was in error because he tried to grasp the nature of evil. Therefore, Judaism has recommended that the metaphysical inquiry be replaced by the halakhic ethical gesture. Man should not ask: Why evil? He should rather raise the question: What am I supposed to do if confronted with evil; how should I behave *vis-à-vis* evil?... instead of philosophizing about the nature of evil within the framework of a theodicy, Judaism wants man to fight it relentlessly and to convert it into a constructive force.

Soloveitchik, Letter to Dr Dan Vogel, Dean of Stern College, dated 04/15/65, in *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*, ed. N. Helfgot (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, Ktav, 2005), 331-2

D. A Halakhic Approach

Halakhic thought wonders about evil not from a metaphysical standpoint, but from a moral-halakhic perspective. It does not ask why or from what cause, but for what purpose. It is interested not in the causal aspect, but in the teleological element of evil. Its question is a halakhic one. What should man do when confronted by evil, so that he may live and flourish? How can we turn evil into a creative force?

Uvikkashtem mi-Sham, trans. Naomi Goldblum as *And From There You Shall Seek* (New York: Ktav/Toras Horav Foundation, 2008), 32.

The well-known metaphysical problem arises yet again and the sufferer asks: “Why dost Thou show me iniquity and beholdest mischief?... For the wicked doth best the righteous; therefore, right goes forth perverted” (Habakkuk 1:3–4). However... God does not address Himself to this question, and man receives no reply concerning it. The question remains obscure and sealed, outside the domain of logical thought... When the impulse of intellectual curiosity seizes hold of a person, he ought to do naught but find strength and encouragement in his faith in the Creator, vindicate God’s judgment... If we wish to probe deeply, to question profoundly during a period of nightmarish terrors, then we have to pose the question in a halakhic form and ask: What is the obligation incumbent upon the sufferer deriving from the suffering itself? What

commanding voice, what normative principle arises out of the afflictions themselves?... Then, and only then, will we rise from the depths of the Holocaust, possessed of a heightened spiritual stature

Kol Dodi Dofek [KDD], trans. Lawrence Kaplan as *Fate and Destiny: From the Holocaust to the State of Israel* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2000), 18–19

E. The Value of Suffering

From life's school of war. "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), I:8

The spiritual arrogance and disgust of anyone who has suffered deeply (order of rank is almost determined by just *how* deeply people can suffer), the trembling certainty that saturates and colors him entirely, a certainty that his sufferings have given him a *greater knowledge* than the cleverest and wisest can have, that he has known his way around and was once "at home" in many distant and terrifying worlds that "you don't know anything about" ... Profound suffering makes you noble; it separates.

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [BGE], trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 270

Faith is a passional experience, an experience of suffering. From the very dawn of our history, with the emergence of Abraham, suffering was considered both the main challenge which the covenantal community was expected to meet heroically and the great means of realizing the metahistorical destiny of this community. Abraham, as the incarnation of the knighthood of faith, was a great sufferer, a martyr. His greatness is manifested through his superhuman capacity for endurance and acceptance of sorrow. As a matter of fact, the election of his seed as a covenantal community was to be realized through suffering. The birth of the charismatic community was accompanied by affliction and pain... The realization of the covenant is possible only if the people is tested in the crucible of affliction

Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition* [W], eds. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav/Toras Horav Foundation, 2003) 118–9

To the Halakhah, suffering is the great medium through which God, of the all-consuming fire of Mount Sinai, discloses Himself to man... He reveals Himself through the whirlwind, through the sharp pain and sorrow, and appears to man through the violent shock of encountering infinity. (*W* 128)

Holiness is not won easily, at no sacrifice. It emerges out of sorrow, confusion and inner turmoil. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, eds. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2000), 74

F. Turning Fate into Destiny

Afflictions come to elevate a person, to purify and sanctify his spirit, to cleanse and purge it of the dross of superficiality and vulgarity, to refine his soul and to broaden his horizons... The halakhah teaches us that the sufferer commits a grave sin if he allows his troubles to go to waste and remain without meaning or purpose. Suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man, in order that atonement be made for him, in order to redeem him from corruption, vulgarity and depravity... The agony itself will serve to form and shape his character so that he will, thereby, reach a level of exaltedness not possible in a world bereft of suffering. Out of the negation grows the affirmation, out of the antithesis the thesis blossoms forth, and out of the abrogation of reality there emerges a new reality... Woe unto the man whose suffering has not precipitated a spiritual crisis in the depths of his being... Woe unto the sufferer if his heart is not inflamed by the fires of affliction, if his pangs do not kindle the lamp of the Lord that is within him... a grave indictment is drawn up against him for having frittered away his suffering. (*KDD* 8–9)

It does... lie in our power, to use every event, every small and large accident, for our improvement and proficiency, to derive benefit from them. The intentional character of the fate of the individual is no fable if we understand it as such. It is up to us to make purposeful use of fate: for in themselves events are empty shells. It depends on our disposition: the worth that we attach to an event is the worth it has for us.

Nietzsche, 1867 letter to von Gersdorff, cited in Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 67

The tension that breeds strength into the unhappy soul, its shudder at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, surviving, interpreting, and *exploiting* unhappiness... weren't these the gifts of suffering. (*BGE* 225, emphasis added)