

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



IF “EVERYTHING IS FOR THE GOOD”, CAN ANYONE EVER BE BLAMED FOR ANYTHING?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The rabbinic saint Nachum of GimZo responded to his numerous trials and tribulations with an aphorism: “This too (=GaM Zu) is for the good” (Taanit 21). Unsurprisingly, his philosophy proves true in his own life, at least so long as one accepts an expansive definition of the good.

It’s unclear whether Nachum’s aphorism is stoic or ecstatic. Does he greet suffering and pleasure identically, or does he welcome adversity with particular joy as a faith opportunity?

It’s also unclear whether Nachum’s aphorism is descriptive or prescriptive. Are all bad things that happen to anyone for the good? Or is it that all bad things will be for the good so long as one has faith that they will be? Or that we should greet trials and tribulations as opportunities to redefine our concept of the good so that it includes everything that happens to us?

The last version seems the most theologically radical. It assumes that everything that happens to us is granularly directed by G-d. This opposes Rambam’s notion that individual suffering can be collateral damage in a world set up to function according to inviolate rules that maximize the good of humanity; Nachum lives a life “accustomed to miracles”! To be perfectly clear: The bad that Nachum suffers is never justified on the grounds that it benefits someone else.

But opposing Rambam does not make a theology radical; more the other way around. The deeper issue is that “*gam zu letovah*” apparently applies to harms intentionally and maliciously inflicted on us by other human beings. If all things are for the good, do we owe our enemies gratitude? Can they be held responsible for their intentions, when after all their actions are directed by G-d, and therefore will inevitably turn out for our good?

Consider Yosef’s response to his brothers when they come to him after Yaakov’s death.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף
 אֶל-תִּירְאוּ
 כִּי הִתְחַטַּאתְמוּ אֵלֶיךָ אֲנִי
 וְאַתֶּם חָשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה
 אֲ-לֵהִים חֲשַׁבְהָ לְטוֹבָה

לִמְעַן עֲשֶׂה פְּנִים הַזֶּה לְהַחֲלִית עִם-רַבִּי
 וְעַתָּה
 אֶל-תִּירְאוּ
 אֲנִי אֶכְלָל אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת-טַפְּכֶם
 וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם
 וַיְדַבֵּר עִלְיָהֶם:

Yosef said to them:

“Do not fear!

ki hatachat Elokim ani

You thought to do bad to me

But Elokim thought it for good

so as to make today possible and sustain a large populace.

So now:

Do not fear!

I will provide for you and your children.”

He comforted them, and he spoke to their emotions.

Why should Yosef’s attitude toward his brothers depend on outcome rather than intent? This puzzle drives unexpected commentators to read Yosef in the key of Nachum. Their textual hook is the phrase “*ki hatachat Elokim ani?*”, which they interpret as “*Can I judge you the way that G-d would?*”

For example, the 19th century Rabbi Naftali Weisel, associate of Mendelsohn, fascinatingly offers an explanation that seems torn from the pages of his contemporary R. Mordechai Leiner, the Izhbitzer Rebbe:

“*Ki hatachat Elokim ani*” . . .

Sometimes a human being does evil but is not thereby guilty, if

G-d willed it thus,

such as the episode of Yehudah and Tamar,
 and so too the episode of the sale of Yosef;
 because (Yehudah and the brothers) were not fit for this deed,
 because they were pure-hearted (ברי לב),
 yet the matter emerged from the mouth of the Most High¹.

Yosef in his wisdom and righteousness understood this, as

Scripture explains the matters;

but Yosef’s brothers were the humblest in the land and did not
 claim this crown for themselves,

rather they considered themselves guilty because via their sin
 and the evil of their hearts they had done this wrong.

To this Yosef responded:

“This matter is given over exclusively to the Maker of the human heart, as Shlomoh said: *for You Hashem alone know the hearts of all human beings*, so how can you conclude that via your sin you have done me wrong? How can I respond about

¹ cf. Eikhah 3:38 מפי עליון לא תצא הרעות והטוב

this “You are guilty!”? Am I an ‘investigator of hearts and evaluator of kidneys’ like Him, to stand in His place (=tachtav) and judge you as things appear to me? You are innocent of this great sin. The reverse is true: you have done the will of the Blessed Omnipresent, Who willed the deeds that you did to me.”

R. Weisel may hold that G-d manipulates only the utterly pure-hearted in this manner, rather than denying free will entirely. (This would distinguish him from the Izhbitzer, who distinguished the greatly righteous in a different way; all our actions are in accordance with Hashem’s will, but some are consistent with our individual human will, and some are not; only the greatly righteous can know experientially that they are sinning despite their will rather than in accordance with it.) If so, Yosef was not merely acting out his philosophy in not holding his brothers’ accountable for selling him. Rather, his philosophy became relevant only because he viewed their actions toward him as wholly out of character. This would be an astonishing assessment of their overall relationship, and, IMHO, simply cannot be squared with the narrative of Chumash.

ShaDaL takes the more moderate position that G-d controls consequences but not actions:

“*Ki hatachat Elokim ani*” – the Holy Blessed One evaluates hearts and kidneys, and He judges a person not only on the basis of his action, but even on the basis of his thoughts, but human beings can judge only on the basis of what their eyes see, and so too I am unable to judge you on the basis of your intent, but only your actions; and if you thought to do evil to me, your thoughts were not fulfilled, rather the thought of the Divine was fulfilled, and it was for good; so you do not need to lower yourselves before me and seek forgiveness and pardon from me, because I see you only as agents of Providence for the good of a great populace.

Nonetheless, he argues, human beings should react only to consequences:

Behold, this is one of the great goods that follow from faith in the Divinity and His Providence:
For a human being rules his own deeds, but the fulfillment of the action is not in his hands, rather in the hands of Heaven. (See my commentary to Vayikra 21:7). So if a wicked person plots against a righteous person and seeks to do evil to him, Hashem will not abandon (the righteous person) in his hand, and the hatred of the wicked person will become a cause of the success of the righteous person. And one who possesses this faith will not be angry at any person nor hate any person.

This position is obviously untenable legally – whole categories of halakhah are devoted to intent – and I prefer not to radically disassociate Hashkafah and Halakhah. This is aside

from the immense practical difficulties involved in separating action and consequences, which seemingly should require a constant stream of evident miracles. (Possibly some of ShaDaL’s formulations hint at a Rambamesque willingness to define the good on an overall rather than an individual basis.)

All these far-reaching theological explanations of the narrative assume that because Yosef has the power to punish the brothers, he may or ought to exercise it, unless somehow they don’t deserve punishment. I prefer to deny that assumption. Rather, I suggest that Yosef understood that the brothers had wronged him personally, and that it would be an abuse of power for him to use his official position to punish a private wrong. Only G-d can punish all wrongs. An eye for an eye indeed makes the whole world blind when taken as a vigilante principle.

I confess that I have not seen this approach explicitly in prior commentators, but I’m confident that this reflects lack of breadth rather than originality. I will close though with a beautiful Netziv that I think comes from a related place. Netziv reads *ki hatachat Elokim ani* as related not so much to what follows as to what came immediately before, namely the brothers prostrating themselves before Yosef and declaring themselves his *avadim*.

“*ki hatachat Elokim ani*” =
You are *avadim* of Elokim,
so if you become my *avadim*,
will I not be infringing the honor of Heaven by accepting His
avadim as mine?
How could it be possible to do this?!
‘Am I in place of Elokim’ to accept His *avadim* as mine?!
This is along the lines of the Torah in Vayikra (25:55):
“For the Children of Israel are *avadim* to Me – they are My
avadim”
and it is not the will of The Holy Blessed One that they be sold
as *avadim* to any other.

Enslaving his brothers would certainly have been poetic justice. But as Gilbert and Sullivan might have said, administering a just state is an object more sublime than making the punishment fit the crime.

Shabbat shalom!

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