

# The Way of Heaven Through Good and Evil

*Commentary to Parshat VaYeshev*

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok  
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*“And a man found him and he was lost in the field, and the man asked him what he sought and he said, “my brothers I seek, can you tell me where they are shepherding.”* (Gen. 37:15, 16)

This mysterious man is identified in classical literature as being the angel Gabriel in disguise. The angel then directs Joseph to his brothers where he meets his fate, is sold into slavery and shipped off to Egypt.

Now, it is obvious that the meeting between Joseph and an angel in disguise was by no means a coincidence. G-d sent his angel specifically to direct Joseph to his brothers and to their plot. It was the Will of Heaven that what transpired indeed did transpire and specifically in the way that it did. Years later Joseph himself comforted his brothers with this same exact sentiment.

Yet, one must wonder how long did it take for Joseph to realize this striking revelation. It might have taken him a good number of years. It must have been rather hard for him to understand why G-d allowed him to be subject to such misfortune. Yet, regardless of whatever struggles of faith he must have experienced as would any other human being, still he stood strong and faithful to the character of his upbringing. He did not compromise himself nor use his misfortunes as justification to compromise his high morals. Joseph remained a man of righteous behavior and in spite of whatever adversity he faced, he still professed faith in G-d. Joseph thus stands out to us as being a fantastic and great role model.

Yet, in spite of Joseph coming through his ordeal with “flying colors,” there is an ominous message here that we need to pay attention to. It was G-d who ordained and executed the plan to allow Joseph to be sold into slavery; it was G-d who allowed Joseph to suffer the way that he did; it was G-d that allowed his otherwise righteous brothers to act in such an evil way to hatch this rather nasty plot and it was G-d who allowed his beloved Jacob to sit and suffer from debilitating depression for a period of 22 years.



Granted in the end, everything worked out alright; but still, during those years before the end came, everyone involved must have suffered a great deal; and G-d not only allowed it all, it was by His design, by sending His angel that made it all materialize. All this suffering and apparent evil was ordained by the Higher Hand of Heaven. Just when we want to believe that only niceness and goodness is bestowed upon us from Heaven, G-d comes along and slams us with a message and lesson that He is going to do what He ordains to be necessary and right, and if we suffer because of it, well, that's just too darn bad!

Wow! What a lesson! It is fundamental to the Divine Way. So important is this lesson that it is even elaborated upon centuries later by the prophet Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah makes some rather interesting prophecies that reveal to us the unfathomable Ways of Heaven. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says HaShem." (Isaiah 55:8). We might take this for granted. Of course G-d's Thoughts are higher than those of we mortal humans. Of course the Divine Way will operate according to a higher wisdom. Yet, in an earlier statement, G-d spoke through Isaiah (45:7) and said this, "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am HaShem that does all these things."

G-d creates light and darkness, this we know, but He also creates evil? Did we know this? Again G-d says through Isaiah (45:6), "That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside Me; I am HaShem; and there is none else." G-d is the author of all and thus the director of all. Good and evil are equal creations of the Creator, both are equally His tools and ultimately both are His servants in that both are used by Heaven to accomplish the Divine Will.

This is exactly what we have seen with the life and sufferings of Joseph, his brothers and their father Jacob. This Biblical lesson serves us as a role model for all Israeli/Jewish history. As bad as things gets, G-d is still there. As bad as things get, G-d is still in control. As bad as things get, G-d and no independently acting Devil, is still in charge. As bad as things get, everything is still proceeding in accordance to the higher wisdom of Heaven and is consistently and unabatedly working towards fulfilling the Divine goal.

Life is a long road and only G-d knows the Way. We humans are often blinded by the very things that we see in front of us. We allow almost anything to distract us and to make us lose sight of the final goal. I am sure that when Joseph was sold and subject to the mistreatment of his handlers that he was no "happy camper" joyously awaiting the revelation of G-d's higher wisdom. I am sure that when Joseph was falsely accused of adultery and then thrown into prison apparently for the rest of his life that he was no "happy camper" humming a religious medley of how good G-d is. No matter how one wants to look at these events, there is one word that accurately sums them up, they are bad! One can twist logic any way one wants and say how in the end everything worked out just fine; that is all well and good. Still, when the original evil befell Joseph, it was just that, evil and bad. And G-d is the creator of evil and bad as He is the creator of good.

Unfortunately many in various religious camps are taught and then entertain and perpetuate a spiritual myth. So many are under the mistaken impression that once one is religious then everything in one's life should turn to the good. Indeed, this is the sales pitch used by many in

the religious camp as outreach to the non-religious persuading them to become religious. Unfortunately all too often this promise of “all goodness” rings hollow. Good and evil still affect religious and non-religious alike.

We might dismiss misfortune as some sort of natural phenomenon that haphazardly affects us all. But, Isaiah warned us, that this is not so. Millennia later, Albert Einstein made a statement that in my opinion also expresses this sentiment. He is reported to have said, “G-d does not play dice with the universe.” This secular scientist said this with regards to universal cosmology. We in the Torah camp recognize this truth as also being applicable to everything, from the cosmic to the microscopic. G-d is here; G-d is there, G-d is truly everywhere. There is no other reality than Him.

Good and evil are equal creation and servants of Heaven. There is no spiritual war between G-d and a Devil. Even G-d’s agent for evil, Samakel, is Heaven’s faithful servant charged with a mission; one that he and his dominions faithfully execute. There is no other reality than the Creator, author of all. When evil or simply bad things befall us, they all occur for a greater reason. We may not have the wisdom to fathom such, but our lack of insight does not make G-d’s plan and purpose any less real.

In the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his famous book, Isaiah presents a beautiful saga of one who has come to be known as the Suffering Servant of G-d. One can look closely at the Biblical verses and the others before it to identify this Servant as none other than Collective Israel. In other words, Isaiah clearly states (43:2, 49:3), Israel is G-d’s servant. G-d’s servant Collective Israel undergoes a history of suffering and hardships. Indeed, Collective Israel suffers a fate similar to Biblical Joseph. Joseph suffered, although not as punishment for his personal sins; so too Collective Israel is punished, but not for the sins of its individual members. Rather, there is something much more profound happening here.

Collective Israel suffers at the hands of the nations of the world. Collective Israel, as Isaiah (42:6) says is supposed to be a “light to the nations.” For thousands of years, Collective Israel, divided, split up and scattered shined its light into every culture and people throughout the world. This is the profound higher Way of Heaven. G-d chose Collective Israel and imbued it with the Light of His Torah and then scattered Israel and the Torah Light throughout the world. This is called the exile of Israel and the exile of the Torah.

Even though Jewish identity may have become lost over the millennia, the Light of Torah still shines. It has been adopted by many cultures and now takes on many forms. Granted, the historical connection to the origins of this Light being from Torah may have been lost, but this present state is not the final state. Like Joseph in the Egyptian prison, he woke up one morning to face another dreary day and later that night went to sleep in a palace after being raised to become the new Prime Minister of the nation. I am sure that when he woke that morning, he had no immediate plans of achieving greatness. It was just another boring day when the Divine Hand made its move and Joseph, like a pawn on the chess board rose from anonymity to check-mate. So it was with Joseph, so shall it be with Collective Israel and Torah, for essentially the two are identical (Zohar, Ekev 72).

As it was in the past so will it be again in the future. This is the way things have always been. It is the Way of Heaven; unfathomable, indiscernible and to us apparently without rhyme or reason. Yet, human history and the very details of our individual lives all unfold to reveal to us the Divine Way. The lessons of the past were recorded to teach us these things. As we bless Heaven and thank it for good, so too must we bless Heaven and thank it for bad. For as our Sages of old have taught us, nothing bad ever really descends from Heaven. Within every bad there is ultimate good, however much concealed and invisible to the eye.

We have the Talmudic role model of Nahum Ish Gamzu, who is renowned for his famous statement that, "this too is for good." Whenever evil befell him, he proclaimed with full faith that the present evil would serve a higher purpose and fulfill the Divine Way and indeed it did. With faith in Heaven and surrender to the Divine Way, Nahum saw every adversity turn into something good and profound. His role model also serves us as a guide to facing our own adversities.

Our Sages have taught us that the events in the lives of our ancestors serve us as role models for today. We would benefit if we invested more of our time in simply reading the Biblical encounters for real-life moral values instead of transforming them into myths about supermen who never existed. Religious fantasies are a true impediment to sincere spiritual experience.

Life is not always pretty, fair or kind, but ultimately life, all life is in Higher Hands. We may not know or understand what is happening, at least not with our present limited state of human consciousness. Maybe, if we tried to stop understanding and to start experiencing we would indeed come to see glimpses of the big picture and, like Nahum Ish Gamzu before us, come to recognize the Divine Way in all things, good and bad alike.