

Floods, Earthquakes, Famine: Acts of God or Flawed Social Policy?

Rabbi Rick Jacobs

Central Synagogue, Yom Kippur 5778

"GEMARA. Our rabbis taught: Philosophers asked the elders in Rome, 'If your God has no desire for idolatry, why does He not abolish it?' They replied, 'If it was something of which the world has no need that was worshipped, He would abolish it; but people worship the sun, moon, stars and planets; should He destroy the Universe on account of fools!

The world pursues its natural course, and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.

Another illustration: Suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and went and sowed it in the ground; it is right that it should not grow, but the world pursues its natural course and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.

Another illustration: Suppose a man has intercourse with his neighbor's wife; it is right that she should not conceive, but the world pursues its natural course and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.'

This is similar to what R. Simeon b. Lakish said: The Holy One, blessed be He, declared, Not enough that the wicked put My coinage to vulgar use, but they trouble Me and compel Me to set My seal thereon!"

- Avodah Zarah 54b

גמ' ת"ר שאלו פלוסופין את הזקנים ברומי: אם אלהיכם אין רצונו בעבודת כוכבים מפני מה אינו מבטלה? אמרו להם: אילו לדבר שאין העולם צורך לו היו עובדין הרי הוא מבטלה הרי הן עובדין לחמה וללבנה ולכוכבים ולמזלות יאבד עולם מפני השוטים

אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין

דבר אחר: 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: הרי שבא על אשת חבירו עדן הוא שלא תתעבר אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג והולך ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את עדן והיינו דאמר ריש לקיש אמר הקב"ה

לא דיין לרשעים שעושיין סלע שלי פומבי אלא שמטריחין אותי ומחתימין אותי בעל כרחי

עבודה זרה נ"ה ב

"who [shall perish] by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by lapidation, who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted."

Unetaneh Tokef

מי במים, ומי באש, מי בחרב, ומי בחרב, ומי ברעב, ומי בצמא, מי ברעש, ומי במגפה, ומי בחניקה, ומי בסקילה, ומי ינוח, ומי ינוע, מי ישקט, ומי יטרף, מי ישלו, ומי יתסר, מי יעני, ומי יעשיר, מי ישפל, ומי ירום

ונתנה תוקף

"There are many scapegoats for our blunders, but the most popular one is Providence."

Mark Twain

"The DNA we inherit is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. It is simply a fact. A remarkable but nevertheless an amoral fact.... The shifting plates beneath the earth that produce earthquakes are not judgments. They are not moral decrees. An earthquake is not God's verdict. The hurricane is not a punishment. A volcanic explosion is not a punishment. All of these are consequences of geological and atmospheric phenomena."

Rabbi Harold Schuleweis,
Rabbinical Assembly Address,
2000

"The modern age has many birthdays. One of them... Is the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. What makes it such a memorable disaster is not the destruction of a wealthy and splendid city, nor the death of some ten to fifteen thousand people who perished in its ruins, but the intellectual response it evoked throughout Europe. It was the last time that the ways of God to man were the subject of general public debate and discussed by the finest minds of the day. It was the last significant outcry against divine injustice... From that day onward, the responsibility for our suffering rested entirely with us... The earthquake was a natural event; it was a disaster... only because people had built houses six or seven stories high. In a desert or a village of huts it would have caused no injuries. It is our own fault..."

The Faces of Injustice, Judith N. Shklar, Yale University, 1990 pp. 51-53

"I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reasons."

Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Terrible Things Happen to Good People*, 1981