

February 8, 1985

*Why Good Deeds Don't Guarantee Rewards
and Vice Versa*

From time immemorial the question has been asked: Why did a presumably good God create evil and why does evil befall people who deserve a better deal from the Judge of all the earth?

Lest any reader assume that I can answer these questions, let me state at the outset that I have no answers. I wish that I did. I would be able to share them with everyone and become immortal. In fact, I was challenged many years ago - when one of my books was first published - why I dealt so minimally with the Holocaust, and all that I could say was that I usually write when I have a solution to a problem that distresses me. When I have only questions, I prefer to be silent.

And I have no way to account for the most inexplicable happening in recorded history - the premeditated organized murder of six million Jews within a few years. Similarly, I have no way to solve what is known as the problem of the theodicy - why do evil men thrive while good men suffer. Yet, while I cannot explain why God does precisely what He does - why He tries some and others are spared - I do want to make it clear that I do understand why there is no connection, at least in this world, between a person's righteousness and God's behavior toward him.

If anyone of us were God, he or she could not act differently than does God, who must so confuse the picture that no one can detect any connection between being good and a reward that is visible on earth. And the picture must be confusing.

In the biblical Book of Job, we find that his friends tried to argue that this was not the case. But we do not require Job's denial to dismiss the contention ourselves. We see it almost daily in

human society. There is no connection between being righteous and enjoying rewards for good deeds.

And this must be the case. Otherwise, God would have destroyed the possibility that men could do good solely because it is good without thought of reward. If good deeds produced a reward - other than the satisfaction of having done the good - then all people would be good because of the blessings such behavior entailed. It is obvious that this must be the proper way to educate and motivate children.

Adults, however, must do good because it *is* good - and that is all there is to it. The absence of any this-worldly reward eliminates the pursuit of good for any other purpose. True, the promise of another-worldly reward helps many to behave well, but our sages preferred performance of a mitzvah. They wanted to achieve the perfect performance of the mitzvah by detaching it completely from the anticipation of reward.

If they rationally believed that there is another world in which the good are rewarded, it was because their belief in God's justice required them to hold that God himself would ultimately do the right thing by those who were faithful to Him. However, they encouraged faithfulness to him exclusively for its own sake.

I repeat: I do not know why God departs Himself as He does. His wisdom is beyond me, and I cannot account for the manner in which He blesses and curses. But I can understand why He must deny me any knowledge of His behavior in this matter. I must seek the good "even if he slay me" because it is good. And to insure that human beings so behave, God permits no one to see a connection between righteousness and a reward.

What then, one will ask, are the biblical promises to reward Israel if it creates a just society in God's service in the Promised Land? The answer is simple. The promises are to the nation, and a nation cannot long endure if it is not founded on the principles of justice and mercy and the ideals which the Torah mandates.

There is a causal connection between a righteous society and its longevity. And many psychiatrists are now discovering a causal connection between righteousness and mental health. But this proves only that righteousness may be part of the natural law for societies and individuals.

However, God's ways are still beyond our comprehension. We simply cannot fathom them, and I do not know that we ever will. But we can comprehend why there must be no connection for mature people between doing good and expecting a reward.