

Pathways to God

Torah, Society, and the State



Rabbi Nachum L. Rabinovitch

PATHWAYS
TO GOD
TORAH, SOCIETY, AND STATE

Translated by Elli Fischer

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*Pathways to God
Torah, Society, and the State*

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In memory of our beloved Sabba,

Ha'Rav Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch zt"l

הרב נחום אליעזר רבינוביץ זצ"ל

*Spiritual giant, outstanding scholar, leader, and teacher
to so many across the globe, as well as being our caring,
loving, and devoted grandfather and great-grandfather.*

*Always ready to listen,
ever kind and sensitive.*

Deeply loved and missed by us all,

הנכדים והנינים, האוהבים ומתגעגעים

Dedicated in memory of our dear parents

ישראל בן יוסף יהודה אריה זצ"ל

מאשה בת חיים הכהן ז"ל

דוד מאיר בן משה זצ"ל

*who, whilst facing considerable challenges,
embodied heartfelt and unwavering dedication to values
of Torah and hesed with humility, sensitivity, and kindness.*

*May the Truth of Torah continue to spring
forth from their rich legacy.*

*Chaim and Renee Fromowitz
and family*



In memory of

*HaRav Hagon HaGadol
Rav Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch*

*In honor of
Annette Basri*

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Editor's Preface

We are pleased to present this, the second volume of Rabbi Nachum L. Rabinovitch's writings in the Maggid Modern Classics series. The English translation of Rabbi Rabinovitch's original Hebrew work, *Mesilot BiLvavam* (Me'aliyot, 2015), is presented in two volumes, following the work's original division into two sections focusing on the individual and society: *Pathways to Their Hearts: Torah Perspectives on the Individual* (Maggid and Me'aliyot, 2023), and the present volume, *Pathways to God: Torah, Society, and State*.

A translation of Rabbi Rabinovitch's original prologue to the Hebrew edition, including his acknowledgments and personal notes, appears in the previous volume.

This second volume too would not have been possible without the efforts of Ayal Fishler of Me'aliyot Press; the leadership of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe; and Guido Rauch, to whom we are grateful for his partnership and his support for this important book.

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This translation was published posthumously and was not reviewed by the author.

Note to the Reader

All citations of Maimonides' works are to the following editions, unless otherwise indicated:

- *Commentary to the Mishna*: Qafih edition (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963–1969).
- Introductory essays within the *Commentary on the Mishna* (with the exception of *Eight Chapters*): Shilat edition (Jerusalem: Me'aliyot, 1992).
- *Sefer HaMitzvot*: Qafih edition (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971).
- *Mishneh Torah*: Where available, the citations are from my edition, *Yad Peshuta* (Ma'aleh Adumim: Me'aliyot, 1990–2011).
- Otherwise, we use the text of the *Mishneh Torah* Project edition: Y. Makbili, ed. (Haifa: Or Vishua, 2009).
- *Guide of the Perplexed*: Pines translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
- *Iggerot HaRambam* (with the exception of the *Epistle to Yemen*): Shilat edition (Jerusalem: Me'aliyot, 5750).

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- *Responsa of Maimonides*: Blau edition (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1958–1960).
- *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics: Shemonah Perakim*: Gorfinkle translation and edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912).
- *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*: Cohen (trans.) and Halkin edition (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952).

Whenever “*Hilkhoh X*” is cited, the reference is to *Mishneh Torah*. References to talmudic tractates in the Yerushalmi are prefaced with Y; if there is no prefacing letter, the reference is to the Babylonian Talmud.

Chapter 1

On the Holocaust and Rebirth

“Let Me Know Your Ways”

The painful problems of exile and suffering have been with us since Israel became a nation. The Sages explained that when Moses said, “Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, please let me know Your ways” (Ex. 33:13), his intent was as follows:

He said before Him: “Master of the World! Why are there innocent people who prosper and innocent people who suffer, evildoers who prosper and evildoers who suffer?”¹

Moses was tired of easy answers. When “he went out to his brothers and saw their suffering” (Ex. 2:11), his spirit was overwhelmed: Why did Israel, more than any other nation, deserve enslavement and forced labor? Although this was preordained by God in a prophecy to Abraham, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (Gen. 15:13), still, this prediction is itself a source of anguish. Is this the proper reward for Abraham, who withstood ten trials? Moses raises

1. Berakhot 7a.

a challenging question: “Why did You bring harm upon this people?” (Ex. 5:22). The same question reverberates through history, to our own times: “Why, O Lord, do You stand far off, do You hide in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1).

The problem of evil has challenged the thought and faith of gentle thinkers as well. Since they accepted the prophet’s word, that God alone “forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil” (Is. 45:7), they were faced with the frightening question: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Gen. 18:25). This gave rise to an entire philosophical discipline known as “theodicy,” whose purpose is to justify God, as it were, and explain why He created evil.

Neither the prophets nor the Sages make themselves out to be God’s advocates. Jeremiah, the prophet of fury and devastation who rebuked Israel for its sins and prophetically foresaw the destruction of the Temple, the exile of the people, and rivers of spilled blood, is the one who grieved over his shattered people and said: “We have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven” (Lam. 3:42). It is true that we sinned, but You, Master of the Universe, how could You not forgive? “See, O Lord, and behold, to whom You have done this” (ibid. 2:20). The prophets “knew of the Holy One, blessed be He, that He is truthful; therefore, they did not speak falsely about Him” (Yoma 69b). Why should man give futile answers? “Let him sit alone and be silent when the Lord disciplines him” (Lam. 3:28). There are some things that mortal man cannot speak of, and he must instead “place his mouth in the dust” (ibid. 29).

God is also displeased with His various advocates. We see this from Job’s friends, each of whom tried to justify, in his own way, the horrific tragedies that befell Job. One said that suffering befalls man in retribution for his sins. Another said that suffering befalls him so that he will receive more reward. And so forth. But Scripture explicitly rejects their approaches, summing up: “The Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job’” (Job 42:7). “You have not spoken the truth” – God does not want those who, in their incomplete understanding, do not even grasp the terrifying dimensions of the question and, with their limited intelligence, propose answers that are very far from the truth.

“Moses Hid His Face”

The Gemara’s [Talmud’s] approach to Moses’ request, “Let me know Your ways,” is both surprising and profound. The Gemara explains the essence of the prophetic vision in which God first revealed Himself to Moses. Commenting on the verses “He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed ... and Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Ex. 3:2, 6), the Gemara says:

R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: In the merit of three things, [Moses] was granted three things. As a reward for “Moses hid his face,” he merited that his face shone; as a reward for “for he was afraid,” he merited “they were afraid to approach him” (Ex. 34:30); as a reward for “to look at,” he merited “he looks at an image of the Lord” (Num. 12:8).²

A superficial reading shows that the first two of the three things that Moses was granted were *quid pro quo*: Because “Moses hid his face,” “the skin of his face was radiant” (Ex. 34:29); because “he was afraid” to approach God, they – the elders and all of Israel – “were afraid to approach him” when they saw the aura of radiance that enveloped him.

But what is the meaning of the third element? As a reward for not looking at God, he merited to “look at an image of the Lord”? If it is virtuous to refrain from gazing upon a prophetic manifestation of the Divine, then how can the reward for such restraint be to “look at an image of the Lord”? It is improper to look! And if this is considered a precious reward, why did he refrain in the first place? What was he afraid of? And why does he deserve reward for his fear and restraint?

God wanted to reveal to Moses the solution to the question that had been troubling him his whole life. The verse that tells how Moses refrains from gazing uses the name Elokim, which represents God’s attribute of justice: “For he was afraid to look at God [Elokim].” God wanted to raise Moses above and beyond all other creatures, so that he could fathom the secret of the name Elokim and see human suffering not from the human perspective, but from the Creator’s perspective. He

2. Berakhot 7a.

was given the chance to peer behind the curtain that prevents the human mind from understanding the ways of divine providence.

But Moses refused: “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” Moses, who was plagued by this question his whole life, recoiled and refused to look. Why? “He was afraid.” Afraid of what? He was offered an answer to the ultimate question faced by believers in the one true God! And at the moment that he was given this opportunity to break through the limits of the human intellect – he hid his face. Why?

The Human Intellect and the Attribute of Justice

However, this is precisely the point. Moses understood that there can be no human heart without the human mind. Even in our everyday experiences, we see that when we understand the purpose of another’s pain, we do not empathize quite as much. To use an almost childish example, parents will let a doctor stick their baby with a needle in order to vaccinate him. They hear the child’s cries of pain and fear, yet the pangs in the parents’ hearts do not override their satisfaction over the fact that their child is being inoculated against all sorts of terrible diseases.

A more serious example is the phenomenon, well-known in the medical profession, of competent physicians who become so hardened that they no longer look at the patient as a human being in distress. Their initial intentions are good – they want to help patients and find new and better treatments for their diseases – but ultimately their work is liable to coarsen their personalities, render them deaf to the distress and suffering of fellow human beings, and cause them to treat patients like laboratory specimens. It goes without saying that military and political leaders throughout history are prone to exhibiting the same traits; they speak of “the price of victory” and assess what “price” should be deemed reasonable. Even Queen Esther explained to the king: “Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen, I would have kept silent” (Est. 7:4), but the extermination of an entire people is too high a price, and “we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated.” What emperor worthy of the name is not convinced that it is worthwhile to sacrifice tens of thousands of his countrymen on the altar of victory? The risk is even greater when the leader has good intentions. Were he to know in advance that he would indeed achieve

the “good” of his goal, no price would be too high, and his heart would turn to stone.

Moses knew that it would be impossible to exceed the limitations of the human intellect and still maintain his human heart, his empathy for others. That is why Moses was afraid to look upon God. When he saw the taskmasters beating his brothers when they failed to meet their brick quota, when he saw Egyptians taking Israelite babies and pushing them into gaps in the wall in lieu of missing bricks, his heart broke. From the depths of his soul, he boldly demanded of God: “Why did You bring harm upon this people?” He sensed the outrage with every fiber of his being, and he rose up to salvage what he could. But if he were to lose his human heart, he would no longer be human, God forbid. This is what Moses feared!

The contrived explanations of intellectual midgets paralyze and marginalize human emotion, causing apathy and even cruelty. Certainly, then, had man been allowed to understand the ways of God’s attribute of justice, it would have been at the expense of his humanity. Therefore, “Moses hid his face,” and the prophet says almost a thousand years later: “Let him sit alone and be silent.” The human intellect has no access to the attribute of justice. That gate is closed and locked before man. “You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us; You have slain without pity. You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through” (Lam. 3:43–44).

From Moshe Rabbeinu we turn to Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides, who was also greatly troubled by the question of evil. After surveying all the common explanations for why “the greatest and heaviest misfortunes befall the most perfect individual, who was the most unblemished of them in righteousness,” his definitive conclusion is: “It is obligatory to stop at this point and believe that nothing is hidden from Him.”³

The Wicked Who Prosper: The Attribute of Kindness

When a person becomes aware of the limits on human understanding, he shares Moses’ response of being “afraid to look at Elokim.” Moses

3. *Moreh Nevukhim* III:23, pp. 491, 496.

also deserves reward for this act of restraint. The reward for not looking at Elokim is that “he looks at an image of the Lord” – here the verse uses the Tetragrammaton, which symbolizes God’s attribute of mercy.

There are two aspects of the problem of justice in this world. On the one hand there are the innocent who suffer. Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why is never-ending fury poured out on the Jewish people? Why have men, women, and children been exterminated, babies who never knew sin, pure souls that could have illuminated the world with their radiance? “Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction and distress?” (Ps. 44:25). If there is an explanation for evil, it is forbidden to hear it, just as Moses refused to listen. And even if there is still hope for good, it does not compensate for evil. Regarding Isaiah’s prophecy of comfort, R. Yoḥanan said:

Woe to the nations who have no remedy, for it says: “Instead of copper I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, copper; and instead of stone, iron” (Is. 60:17). But what can one bring instead of R. Akiva and his companions? Of them it is said: “Though I cleanse, their blood I will not cleanse” (Joel 4:21).⁴

This does not apply only to R. Akiva; every infant whose life was cut short by evildoers is irreplaceable. What can be brought to replace a million children who were murdered during the Holocaust?

There is another facet of the problem of theodicy: the wicked who prosper. The world is filled with limitless kindness. All existence abounds with goodness, and evildoers, too, enjoy the world’s bounty. Moses’ reward was, “he looks at an image of the Lord.” He was privileged to tear off all masks and reveal the positive in each and every person. He was thus able to see and understand why there is so much compassion in the world.

Although we have not achieved the same degree of insight as Moses, we can nevertheless adopt his approach in this respect. It is impossible for us to fathom the secret of the manifestation of the

4. Rosh HaShana 23a.

Tetragrammaton, and we cannot grasp the attribute of divine mercy in all its glory and grandeur. However, there is something we certainly can do: if we are honest with ourselves and we soberly examine everything that befalls us, we will acknowledge the amazing and unexpected reversal of our condition during the past half century. During the Holocaust there were many who thought – with apparent justification – that the end of the Jewish people had arrived. How close was the “Final Solution” to really being final!

We must open our eyes and see what has happened to us. In the words of the prophet: “Raise your eyes and look around; they have all gathered and come to you” (Is. 60:4).

We cannot explain the hiding of God’s countenance during the Holocaust. We cannot understand “why... You hide in times of trouble” (Ps. 10:1). A man of faith must also be a man of truth, and so he does not mock the unseen God with false descriptions. There can be no restitution in this world for the rivers of blood that were shed in sanctification of God’s name. When a believer stands before the terrifying mystery of innumerable martyrs, when the gates of heaven are sealed shut in the face of heartrending pleas for mercy and furious demands for justice, the man of faith can do nothing but “sit alone and be silent... place his mouth in the dust” (Lam. 3:28–29).

The establishment of the State of Israel does not compensate for the horrors of the Holocaust, and it certainly does not make restitution for the accumulated pain of seventy-five generations steeped in suffering.

But was it really our own strength and might that brought about our success? Were all the experts who predicted a decisive Arab victory during the War of Independence mistaken and blind? Later, did the commanders who mapped out the strategy for the Six Day War ever foresee such an overwhelming victory? Were there even contingency plans that addressed such an optimistic forecast? Not only did they not expect it – it was beyond their wildest dreams!

Of all the generations that pined and yearned and longed and even sacrificed for Zion – are we really the best and most worthy? Who would be so bold as to claim that we have deserved the amazing kindness that God has bestowed upon us, as it is written: “With vast mercy I will gather you” (Is. 54:7)? It is all a result of God’s attribute of mercy.

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One who is guided by truth knows that it was not due to our righteousness that God has granted us such kindness. Rather, God's attribute of mercy has been manifested on our behalf, and we should meditate upon it: "He looks at an image of the Lord."