



NORMAN LAMM

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My thesis that Hester Panim (on the national level) removes or at least dulls the one-to-one correspondence of Reward and Punishment, has been criticized on the grounds that it goes against various texts which speak clearly of such a correspondence in the realm of distributive justice.

Certain things must be made clear. For one, the difference I alluded to between individual and national Reward and Punishment.

Second, even on the individual level, while it is true that ish be'heto yumat, nevertheless this is a general principle of theodicy, justifying G-d's decree, but not quite allowing man to pin-point the sin and thus blame the victim. If it were so, how could we ever eulogize the dead, including the greatest Zaddik, whereas according to this thesis we should berate him and try to figure out which sin it is that he is being punished for. This is a little more than reminiscent of the friends of Job and their point of view, which was rejected by the Almighty.

Third, and most important: A study of Avot reveals many passages which speak of a clear relationship between sin and punishment. Nevertheless, there is a contrary statement, the famous one by R. Yannai, that ein be'yadenu lo mi'shalvat ha-resha'im ve'lo mi-yesurei ha'tzaddikim. According to this latter

opinion, every attempt to sketch with any clarity the relationship between Sin and Punishment is doomed to failure.

Finally, the efforts by the Sages to identify such a relationship between sin and punishment must not be seen as an endeavor to uncover the secrets of the Most High, but rather to accept the mystery as impenetrable and nevertheless seek to convert suffering--both the suffering of the righteous and the anguish of religious man trying to understand the eternal enigma of suffering--into something constructive, something creative.

(Compare S. R. Hirsch's comment on lamah azavtani.) In other words, the effort by the Sages is one of leading from yisurim to teshuvah, by encouraging the sufferer to enhance his spiritual life and improve his moral stature, for otherwise the suffering makes no sense and is a waste.

Indeed, this last point is probably assented to by R. Yannai and, if that is the case, then there is no mahloket between R. Yannai and the other Sages in Avot, because all agree that they cannot penetrate the divine mystery, and yet it is incumbent upon us to derive whatever moral good we can out of suffering which remains impervious to our rational quest.