



Understanding Suffering Through Sinai **Torah Reflections on Shavuot**

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The holiday of Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The event has far reaching implications as well as symbolic and textual meaning throughout Jewish sources. Moses Maimonides (1137-1204), also known as the Rambam, a seminal thinker in the Jewish philosophic tradition as well as a physician, has a particular understanding of the meaning of Torah that informs his treatment of human suffering.

According to Maimonides' great philosophical work, the Guide of the Perplexed, the giving of the Torah at Sinai was the moment at which humanity's true understanding of the world was regained-- the reasons for causation, the nature of good and evil, and the means for understanding science and metaphysics were restored. This knowledge was lost when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, and was only reclaimed at this very moment, the moment which is now commemorated with the holiday of Shavuot. The knowledge of the knowable world lies, according to the Rambam, within the metaphorical and parabolic language of the oral and written Torah.

How the Torah views suffering is described by Maimonides' in his own esoteric explication of the book of Job. In Guide III: 22, Maimonides tells the reader that Job was not wise or comprehending, even though moral virtue and righteousness were ascribed to him. That is, Job had an exoteric, or pashat (surface) level, understanding of the Torah, but didn't comprehend its inner, esoteric meaning. Job assumed that by virtue of his righteousness he did not "deserve" the afflictions which beset him. What Job did not understand was the true nature of his suffering, the universe, and how that universal structure influenced not only him, but all of humanity and all that exists within the terrestrial realm.

Maimonides points to a detailed and intricate cosmological order which influences the corporeal world. Applying his understanding of science and metaphysics Maimonides discerned that a chain of natural causation was alluded to in the Torah. What happens to us-- our suffering and our losses-- is not caused directly by God, or a divine will, but results from the very nature of our bodies and our minds, being composed of delicate and unstable matter. Not only is our fragile physical composition subject to flux and change, but other "evils" which we experience are caused by either our own inclinations towards that which does not benefit us, or by the actions of others who also incline towards their own baser nature or towards misapprehensions which lead them to wrong action. Even nature itself—storms, floods, fires—are the result of the unthinking and unreflective forces existing in the universe and are not the result of divine intention.

But what of God? Did not the divine give the Torah to Moses at Sinai? Again, according to the Rambam, the Torah speaks metaphorically here. God, as the ultimate perfection, is essentially beyond human comprehension; but through a process of emanation the

cosmos and the world came into being. And it was Moses, by virtue of his vastly superior prophetic intellect and ability to grasp the true nature of things that we actually came to possess the Torah. Moses retained knowledge perhaps similar to that of Adam and Eve before they ate of the fruit. They, for a time, understood the world according to the law of true and false. It was only after eating, that they began to judge the world according to the standard of good and bad—a lower level of discernment.

Moses, through Torah, restored to Israel that potential to understand a higher truth which transcends more common human notions. The laws of the written and oral traditions are useful for conditioning our mental and physical faculties and for perhaps preserving us for a time from harm, but we should also be aware that our fallibility, according to the subtext of the Guide, is inherent in the very nature of being corporeal. Eventually all that inhabit the earth, whether mineral or human, ultimately will disintegrate into their constituent elements. With the giving of Torah, and our commemorating of this event on Shavuot, it is perhaps worthwhile to reflect on the idea that God, at least according to Maimonides, does not intend our suffering; and that one of the truths of the universe is that our decline and pain are an inevitable consequence of being composed of some of the same matter which comprises the rest of the universe.

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