

THE CRY FROM THE THORNBUSH: ON THE PAIN OF GOD'S BODY¹

By Allen Lipson

INTRODUCTION: UNSHAREABLE PAIN

Grasping for symbols to express his overwhelming pain, the fictional yeshiva *bucher-*turned-artist Asher Lev reluctantly turns to the most potent image he knows: Jesus

¹ This paper has gradually taken root over years of personal and academic conversations with friends, teachers, and colleagues. In particular, I am profoundly grateful to Burt Visotzky for our conversations on divine corporeality and his suggestions for background reading; Nehemia Polen for his generous feedback and bibliographic guidance; Micha'el Rosenberg for his guidance within early Christian-Jewish scholarship; Shai Held for his perspective on Heschel's corpus; Yonatan Brafman and Jason Rubenstein for their introduction to the work of Martha Nussbaum; Rachel Adelman and Aron Wander for their comments on earlier drafts; and Dave and Herma Adams for a devout, nonjudgmental welcome into their lovely church community and intellectual tradition.

suffering on the cross. His paintings turn him into a pariah, “an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment.”²

Asher’s story throws down a gauntlet for modern Jews, daring us to uncovering traditional language with which to speak of a God who shares in our “ultimate anguish” a God who promises that we never suffer alone. For me, this is no academic question. A committed Jew with a decade-long diagnosis of a quite literally continuous headache, I have found physical pain and its religious consequences difficult to escape. And my most compelling solace has often come from the belief, one I first heard from devout Christian friends, that my predicament echoes God’s. Every pulsating, piercing ache that I have felt, God feels too – not as a passive sympathizer but as a co-participant in the raw reality of pain.³

Thus baldly stated, the belief in God’s physical pain provokes some fraught questions – even more so in the shadow of a pandemic and its ghastly bodily toll. Firstly, can a vocabulary of God’s physical pain be drawn out of Jewish sources? Secondly, does the exercise of imagining God in pain have pragmatic value? What might be some of the benefits and pitfalls of talking about our religious lives this way? Finally, and most crucially

² Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (Anchor, 1972), 330.

³ See, for example, John Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and “Death’s Duella,” and his popular modern interpreter Philip Yancey’s *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Zondervan, 1997).

to me, is God's physical pain metaphysically plausible? That is, does it describe some underlying reality of how our universe really works? Speaking to these concerns means tracing the long and tangled genealogy of a rabbinic debate. In place of a broad survey, I focus on sources surrounding the burning bush, one (but not the only) *locus classicus* for the motif of God's bodily pain.⁴ This approach aims to recoup in depth what it sacrifices in breadth.

Jewish scholars⁵ have devoted ample attention to the theme of God's emotional suffering, what R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) terms the "divine pathos."⁶ The literature, with some exceptions, tends to collapse God's *physical* pain and *emotional* distress into a single phenomenon.⁷ In what follows, I want to treat to the question of God's

⁴ Several other points of departure for Jewish language on God's physical pain merit further attention, including the embodied nature of the shekhinah in classical rabbinic thought; Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's near-death, resurrection, and hand wounds in the Gemara and his apotheosis in *Idra Zuta*; the more general kabbalistic claim that imperfections in the human body correspond to blemishes in the sefirot; and Rabbi Nachman's conception of the messianic role of the tsaddik as repository for Israel's suffering (see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master* (University of Alabama Press, 1979), 15).

⁵ Within Christian scholarship, naturally, the question of God's physical pain, referred to as "divine passibility," takes on momentous importance. For an introduction, see Paul Gavriluk's *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford Press, 2006).

⁶ See, for example, Norman J. Cohen, "Shekhinta Ba-Galuta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, Vol. 13, No's. 1-2 (1982), p. 147-159; Jacob J. Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut* (London, 1978); Henry Slonimsky, *Essays* (Cincinnati, 1978), pp. 41-48; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 2001); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: 2005). Many thanks to Nehemia Polen for his introduction to key scholarship in the field.

⁷ I am aware of at least two scholarly references to this particular issue. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg briefly describes God's participation in Israel's physical pain as the first step toward the redemption from Egypt (*The Particulars of Rapture*: Schocken Books, 2001). Heschel's discussion of the Akivan school in *Heavenly Torah* also comes close to suggesting that God shares in Israel's physical pain, just as God partakes in the physical scent of sacrifices (82-

physical pain as a distinct claim. To say that God literally feels Israel’s bodily discomfort, rather than intellectually commiserating with Israel’s woes, constitutes a radical theological distinction, and ought to be analyzed as such. The issue at stake here is whether or not God shares with us a sensation that philosopher Elaine Scarry (America, b. 1946), in her classic study of physical pain, calls intrinsically “unshareable:”

For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that “having pain” may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to “have certainty,” while for the other person it is so elusive that “hearing about pain may exist as the primary model of what it is “to have doubt.” Thus pain comes unshareably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.⁸

The religious wager amounts to affirming that God does, *contra* Scarry, confirm our pain even at our loneliest moment of bodily anguish – a rare comfort indeed, were it only true. So the task of assessing the midrashic belief God’s pain matters deeply; and taking that belief seriously means understanding the sources that gave it birth. To those fraught sources, tangled up in lashes, aches, thorns, and burdens, we now turn.

90, 118-121). Shai Held reads Heschel as eschewing this position in his own thought: though God knows precisely what it feels like for Israel to suffer physical pain; God can never directly experience that pain, existing beyond the realm of physicality (personal correspondence).

⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.

"THE BUSH OF PAIN AND DISTRESS": A BRIEF MIDRASHIC SURVEY

In situating God's pain at the burning bush, the rabbis reveal a keen awareness of the Bible's thematic structure. Just as the Israelites reach the lowest depths of physical degradation, God announces God's intention to dwell among them. The fulfillment of God's promise unfolds over the Exodus, dramatically culminating in the book's last phrase: "And a fire would appear in [the cloud] by night in the view of all of the house of Israel throughout their journeys."⁹ God first appears in flame at the *s'neh*,¹⁰ then at Sinai, the site of a grander future revelation; and ultimately over the desert journeys to come. Thus, the bush at once embodies both the Israelites' moment of darkest despair and God's first act of public self-disclosure.

Skillfully welding these twin themes of suffering and revelation, early midrashim advance the bold claim that God experiences physical pain. The Mekhilta de'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a Tannaitic midrash, comments on the burning bush passage:

A parable: to what can this matter be compared? To one who took a staff and hit two men. Both chafed under the blow [lit. "received the wound from the hand of the staff"]. Just so, the pain

⁹ Shemot 40:38. Translations of biblical text are adopted from the JPS Hebrew English Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society, 1999), with occasional departures in order to highlight wordplay and allusion. I follow the SBL standards for transliteration, except in cases where overwhelmingly common usage dictates otherwise.

¹⁰ A word that appears in no other context within the Tanakh, and surely an allusion to the word *sinai*.

and the bondage of Israel is revealed and known before God. Thus it is written, “I am mindful of their sufferings” (Exodus 3:7).¹¹

The midrash latches onto the verse’s plural form of the word “sufferings,” *ki’ovav*, to read God as communing with Israel in pain.¹² Setting aside modern presuppositions, it seems clear that the text assumes God has a body, a common Hellenistic and rabbinic view.¹³ From the outset, the midrash places God’s physical sensations at center stage; rather than lamenting or weeping on Israel’s behalf from the sidelines, God steps onto the playing field, as it were, smarting from the same vicious blow. Is physical pain truly “unshareable”? Not so, the midrash insists. God feels the precise contours of Israel’s agony.

A second Tannaitic midrash on Sinai employs another revealing metaphor: that of twins. The context is a passionate lovers’ refrain from Song of Songs (“Behold, my beloved knocks”), which the midrash explicates as a list of God’s appearances before Israel. The rabbis understand the endearment “My darling, my faultless dove [*yonati tamati*]” (5:2) as an allusion to God’s union with Israel at Sinai. Commenting on the same phrase, Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin creatively vocalizes the word “my faultless one” [*tamati*] as “my twin

¹¹ Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai with Critical Introduction and Annotation by W. David Nelson (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006) 1:1f. All translations of rabbinic text are my own, unless otherwise noted.

¹² Gottlieb Zornberg notes that the biblical root כָּאֵב almost exclusively appears in what she terms the “pain books” of Jeremiah, Job, and Lamentations (35).

¹³ See Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge Press, 2009), 124-9; Charles Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

[*t'umatî*]:” “Just as with twins, one’s head hurts and the other feels it, so too the Holy Blessed One says: ‘I am with him in his affliction’ (Psalms 91:15).”¹⁴

For Rabbi Joshua, the occasion for God’s tenderness at Sinai becomes not only God’s climactic revelation at Sinai but God’s earlier act self-disclosure at the burning bush. God manifests love for Israel by sharing Israel’s suffering. As in the previous midrash, God’s pain here is distinctly physical; embodied, not abstract. But the imagery of twins sets this source apart. Twins, in its ancient view, share an essential identity; one’s sensations correspond to the other’s. Not only do they smart under the same lash, but they feel one and the same pain. God effectively becomes consubstantial, of one essence, with Israel. Far from vicariously offering words of comfort, God feels, viscerally, the very same pricks and bruises as do we. A famous mishnah in Sanhedrin makes the same point in the context of a prohibition to leave a hanged man up overnight: “[God]¹⁵ says [upon a man’s death], as it were, ‘My head hurts, my arm hurts.’”¹⁶

Later midrashim employ a broader range of symbols for God’s physical pain. *Pirkei de’Rabbi Eliezer*, an early medieval work (~9th century), is the first to express the image of God dwelling in thorns, a theme taken up by later midrashic collections:

¹⁴ PRK 5:6. Nearly identical variants appear in *Tanḥuma Shemot*, PR 15:1, *SHSR* 5:2, *Midrash Tehillim* 27, *Midrash Aggadah* (Buber) *Shemot* 3, and *Yalkut Shimoni Shemot*.

¹⁵ I follow the Kaufman manuscript, which omits the word “Divine Presence” [*shekinah*], making God Godself the speaker.

¹⁶ *M. Sanhedrin* 6:5.

The bush was [full of] pain and distress, and it was all thorn and thistles. Why did God dwell within the pain and distress? Because when God saw Israel in great pain, God too dwelled with them, within the pain, to fulfill that which is written, “In all their troubles he was troubled [*b’hol tsaratam lo tsar*]” (Isaiah 63:9).¹⁷

For the sensitive reader, this analogy evokes an immediate and intense reaction: getting caught in a thornbush *hurts*. Thorns are sharp, an acute danger that goads the skin’s nerves to shoot out agonizing alarms. We fear thorns as we fear needles; they prick and pierce and draw blood. By evoking a deeply rooted physical aversion, the midrash guides listeners toward intimate communion with God’s body in pain.¹⁸

Even the apparently simple prooftext from Isaiah, a common feature of midrashim on divine suffering, reveals careful authorial craftsmanship. Following the *qere*, the scribal tradition of pronunciation, for Isaiah 63:9, Pirkei de’Rabbi Eliezer renders the biblical word *lo* (לֹ) with a vav; however, the *qetiv*, the written tradition, records an aleph (אֵ), yielding a simpler reading: “In all their troubles, no [*lo*] angel or messenger delivered them.”¹⁹ This midrash and its variants selectively read the scribal tradition to buttress a theology of God’s pain.

¹⁷ PRE 40. The work as a whole displays anthropomorphic tendencies; see especially Chapters 3-5.

¹⁸ A parallel midrash, cited by Rashi, appears in Tanḥuma Shemot 14.

¹⁹ See Petuchowski, 85.

Shemot Rabbah (~10th-12th century) delves deeper into God's bodily sensations through its language of a bearing a load. In a creative hermeneutical move, it taps into unsuspected reserves of meaning within the tradition known as the *qere*, the ancient scribal indications for proper pronunciation. The *qere* for God's call "Moses! Moses!" [*moshe moshe*] (Exodus 3:4) from the bush omits a customary *pasek*, a brief verbal pause between repetitions of a name.²⁰ The midrash daringly explains the irregularity: "It is a parable of a person upon whom a heavy burden is placed, and calls out, 'So-so, so-and-so, my close one! Take this burden off of me.'"²¹ The bearer of the burden is God, his friend Moses. Overwhelmed by pain, God cannot waste a moment's breath to pause. The midrash's repetition of "so-and-so" [*ploni*] vividly conveys a sense of urgency. Like thorns, burdens call up a universal sensation; nearly every listener has staggered under a weight too heavy to bear. But unlike the previous midrashim, God's pain here exceeds that of Israel; in fact, Israel is called upon to relieve God's suffering, since God cannot endure it alone. God lets out a cry before even we do.

Beginning in the early medieval period, burning bush traditions became a lightning rod for creativity and controversy. Rashi (R. Solomon b. Isaac, France, 1040-1105), publicist *par excellence*, vaults these traditions into prominence by drawing on them in his Torah commentary. God's voice resounds "'out of the bush,' and not from any other tree, because

²⁰ See Bereshit 22:11, 46:2; I Shmuel 3:10.

²¹ Shemot Rabbah 2:6.

‘I am with him in his affliction’ (Psalms 91:15).”²² As usual, Rashi’s words reflect careful deliberation. In quoting the Tanhuma’s version of the midrash and citing in full the verse “I am with him in his affliction,” Rashi makes a conscious decision to evoke God’s pain; as the *Be’er Yitzhak* (R. Isaac Horowitz, Poland, 19th century) points out, Rashi had on hand no less than eleven other explanations of the bush’s meaning from parallel midrashim, any of which could have served the same interpretive function.²³

We have seen the midrashic tradition weave a rich symbolic web around the theme of God’s pain. Drawing on a vivid vocabulary of lashes, aches, burdens, and thorns, the midrashim invite listeners to imagine God’s sensations through their own experience, beckoning them toward relationship with a radically present, afflicted God. The great psychological advantage of this theology lies in its insistence that the believer never suffers alone. Even the grimmest scene has a cast of two; I and the One in pain with me.

“CROWNED WITH THORNS”: EARLY CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

Of course, the midrashic tradition is not alone in speaking of a God who suffers physical pain in His head and arms, a God with a human counterpart below, a God who dwells among thorns and staggers under unbearable burdens. Consider Clement of

²² Rashi on Exodus 3:2

²³ *Be’er Yitzhak* ad. loc.

Alexandria (c. 150-215 C.E.). Clement, an early church father died shortly before the redaction of the Mishnah, studied with a Palestinian Jewish convert, and drew extensively from the writings of Philo.²⁴ In *Christ The Educator*, a practical guidebook for faith, he reflects at length on the hidden meaning of Christ's crown of thorns:

When the almighty Lord of the universe began to legislate through the Word and decided to make His power visible to Moses, He sent Moses a divine vision with the appearance of light, in the burning bush. Now, a bramble-bush is full of thorns. So, too, when the Word was concluding His legislation and His stay among men as their Lord, again He permitted himself to be crowned with thorns as a mystic symbol; returning to the place from which He had descended, the Word renewed that by which He had first come, appearing first in the bush of thorns, and later being surrounded with thorns that He might show that all was the work of the same one power.²⁵

²⁴ Francis Havey, "Clement of Alexandria." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), Web. Retrieved December 15, 2020.

Whether early Christian fathers like Clement were "influenced" by Jews or vice versa is a hotly debated issue—but for our purposes irrelevant. Scholars of ancient religion have increasingly complicated the picture of cultural influence. As Peter Schafer writes: "Historical influence is a creative and mutual process that affects both partners, so that neither is simply 'source' or 'recipient'" (*Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 232-3). In our particular case, to even speak of Jews and early Christians as easily distinguished groups posits a hard-and-fast distinction in the place of a messier reality, at least in the era of Tannaitic midrash. See Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Shaye Cohen, "Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not': How Do You Know A Jew in Antiquity When You See One?" in *Diasporas in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye Cohen and Ernest Frerichs (Brown University, 1993), 1-46. Suffice to say that Palestinian rabbi and bishop alike inherited ample prophetic material on divine suffering, as well as a Hellenistic trope of what Charles Stang calls the "divine double:" "The individual person as such [...] has a transcendent dimension at his disposal [...] a counterpart, a 'heavenly partner'" (6).

²⁵ Clement of Alexandria. *Christ The Educator*. Trans. Simon Wood. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1953. 68. I preserve gender pronouns as in the original to reflect Christ's specifically masculine nature here.

Clement reads the burning bush as a prefiguration of the cross: God’s embodiment at the bush foreshadows Christ’s embodiment at Calvary. At the bush one man hears the divine Word; through the cross all men witness it. God speaks from a thornbush to signal His identity with Christ, whose crown of thorns betokens His pain and His ultimate Kingship. The thornbush and the thorns tear Christ’s flesh in place of our own, sparing us the agony from “all the sins by which we are pierced.”²⁶

Clement’s commentary lays bare a paradox until now unspoken: that of God as both punisher and punished. Recall that in the parable of Mekhilta de’Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai, two men suffer under the lash. They stand in for God and Israel, but the identity of their assailant is left unclear. A theological difficulty underlies this silence – does God cause Israel’s pain? Does God brandish the whip only to strike Godself? Clement responds by spelling out what would eventually become an orthodox Christian doctrine: God as Christ must descend to earth in order to receive the suffering He Himself has justly decreed. In the terms of our *mashal*, God the Father administers the lashes, while His Son and Israel take them.

²⁶ Ibid. 157.

BLAMING THE VICTIM: MORAL OBJECTIONS TO GOD'S PAIN

Clement and his successors at the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) resolved the theological ambiguity of early midrash—who causes Israel and God to suffer?—by positing the mystery of the Trinity. But their intellectual consistency leads to a troubling moral doctrine. The fourth-century Roman Christian poet Prudentius sharpens the issue with evocative language in his rendering of the burning bush episode:

God moved amid the branches set with spines/ [...] that He might shadow forth His Son's
descent/ into our thorny members [that] sin infests/ With teeming briars and fills with bitter
woes/ For tainted at its root, that noxious shrub/ Had sprouted from its baneful sap a crop/ Of
evil shoots beset with many thorns.²⁷

Prudentius here voices a classic instance of what philosopher Charles M. Taylor (Canada, b. 1931) calls the “juridical-penal framework:” that is, an ideology whose central metaphor is that of legal penalty. “[God] gets satisfaction he must have for our sin through Christ; he works off the required punishment on him, and this allows us to be imputed just [...] In sinning, we deserved punishment and hence were lost to God. A big debt had to be paid.”²⁸ To the extent that God suffers with us, He takes on the punishment that by the

²⁷ Lienhard, 11.

²⁸ Taylor, 78-79; see also 650-654. Gary Anderson's *Sin: A History* (Yale University Press: 2009) makes a compelling claim that early Christian thinking on the atonement emerges naturally out of postbiblical Jewish thinking, especially evident in the writings of the Qumran sect.

cosmic scheme of things He ought to have meted out. Of course, this view lies squarely at the center of Christian thought since Augustine, with notable exceptions. Certainly, laying guilt for God's pain at the feet of humanity heightens the cosmic significance of moral action. But it does so at the cost of blaming victims for their misfortune: human beings have coming whatever pain God accepts for them.²⁹

Several Jewish mystical writers prove willing to pay that cost.³⁰ A range of Hasidic texts, guided by the Lurianic theme that Jewish sins blemish God's essence, cast God in the role of condescending judge. Rebbe Naḥman of Bratslav (Ukraine, 1772-1810) asks what Moses turned to behold in the bush. His answer: "the pain of Israel [...] the essence of which is the burden of sin, God forbid."³¹ For Rebbe Naḥman, God graciously deigns to

²⁹ At the extreme end of this theology lies Richard Rubenstein's haunting portrayal of the well-meaning German bishop and anti-Nazi resistance leader Dean Heinrich Gruber, who despite his best intentions cannot help but attribute the Shoah to Jews' own obstinacy; see "The Dean and the Chosen People" in *After Auschwitz* (Macmillan, 1966).

³⁰ See also Menachem Recanati, a thirteenth-century Italian kabbalist, who takes the midrashic tradition of God's pain to distressing extremes:

The sages said, "In all of their troubles He was troubled" [...] Rabbi Yudan said: To what is the matter similar? To a pregnant woman became angry at her mother, and her mother went up [far] above her. At the time of [the daughter]'s delivery, she was crying out below. Her mother heard her voice from above and cried out in time with her. All [the mother's] neighbors asked her: "What do you care that [your daughter] cries out? Are you giving birth with her?" She said to them, "My daughter is giving birth in pain, and even though I am angry at her, I cannot bear her cries. Is my daughter's pain not mine?"

Like the Tannaitic midrashim, Recanati sees Israel's travails below mirrored in God above. But his evident approval of God as neglectful parent, who leaves her daughter alone to a drawn-out labor, makes for deeply disturbing theology. True, the mother in the end condescends to feel for her estranged daughter; but one cannot help but feel it a petty sort of condescension.

³¹ LM II 7:11.

carry the load of Israel's moral failures. (Consider the contrast to *Shemot Rabbah*, in which Israel rushes to ease God's painful burden.) Along the same lines, the early twentieth-century Rebbe Shmuel Bornsztain (Poland, 1855-1926) reads the classic proof-text for divine pain discussed above, "In all their troubles [God] was troubled," as an account of a punitive process: "After God has already performed the deed of punishment, then additional compassion for a person is awakened above."³² No longer a stricken victim beneath the lash, God is recast as a taskmaster with a guilty conscience.

The price for such theological comfort is ultimately a sort of moral bankruptcy: the bankruptcy of Job's friends, who chide a broken, blameless man for his supposed failings. But that price need not be paid. Counter-voices within the mystical tradition disentangle the strand of divine suffering from that of human depravity, envisioning God in physical pain alongside a guiltless people. Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (Ukraine, 1740-1810), in folk legend a defense attorney for the Jewish people in God's court, imagines the Jews' exile as "touching the top of the highest heavens, since in the time of exile the divine strength weakens [*tashash kocho*]."³³ Invoking a classical rabbinic idiom *teshut koach* for physical and emotional distress, Rebbe Levi Yitzhak builds on the Tannaitic view of divine

³² *Shem Mi'Sh'muel on Re'eh* 7:3.

³³ *KL on Genesis* 28:10.

suffering as an act of communion. Remarking on God's attribute of mercy, he compares God to

A rich man who looks upon the lowliness and pain of a poor man and descends in his perspective in order to see him [...] In this way [God] clothes God's perspective in the garments of the lower worlds and takes pity on us.

To explain God's mercy, Rebbe Levi Yitzḥak evokes the human experience of compassion in the face of suffering: showing true compassion to a poor man means treating him as one's equal and sharing in his pain; just so does God share ours.³⁴ Entirely missing from this account is the language of punishment, condescension, or inveterate sin. The Piacezner Rebbe (R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapir, Poland, 1889-1943), a close reader of Rebbe Levi Yitzḥak's work, takes a similar route, as we will soon see.

The twins, the sufferers under the lash, Rebbe Levi Yitzḥak's rich man and poor man – the sources never intimate that they deserve their trauma, nor that God purposefully inflicted it. True, within a religious landscape shaped by the juridical-penal framework, God's pain and our culpability are deeply interwoven, but they need not be inseparable. Those of us drawn toward the language of God's physical pain have an honorable tradition to stand on.

³⁴ Kl on Shemot 34:6.

BUT IS IT REAL? METAPHYSICAL OBJECTIONS

We have traced the motif of God's physical pain through the history of rabbinic text; argued for its deep religious power; and defended it against sharp moral critique. But unless God actually does feel pain, this is all a moot point. What, in fact, can one even mean in ascribing pain – or any physical sensation, for that matter – to a God without a body?³⁵ Are we to believe that God's nerve endings set off celestial synapses?³⁶ Perhaps our midrashim give voice to nothing more than a lovely but metaphysically misguided fairy tale.

Medieval Jewish rationalists arrived at this conclusion in short order. Even as Rashi's supercommentators proliferated in the late medieval period, a groundswell struck the field of Jewish thought: talk of a personal God, much less an embodied one, fell into disfavor.³⁵ One hand, the philosophical tradition, most influentially represented by Maimonides (R. Moses b. Maimon, Spain and Egypt, 1138-1204), rejected anthropomorphism out of hand: "A God who has a body is undoubtedly a foreign God."³⁶ Characteristically, Maimonides spins Mishnah Sanhedrin's image of God's aching head³⁷ as a mere rhetorical flourish, a

³⁵ Lehman, 51-82.

³⁶ Teshuvot Ha'Rambam 117 (Blau). See also the Guide 1:1: "On account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form [tselem] and likeness [demut] of God, but far from it be the notion that God is corporeal, having a material form."

³⁷ Sanhedrin 6:5.

“way that men happen to speak [*minhag b’nei adam lomar*].”³⁸ Meanwhile, Christian polemicists publicly mocked more imaginative aggadic passages as evidence of the rabbis’ benighted Pharisaism. One Spanish *converso*, roughly contemporary to Maimonides, wields midrashim of God’s body as a rhetorical bludgeon: “Do you see, [my Jewish adversaries], how far all this type of thing is from true theology [...] that God weeps for you, sighs in the manner of doves, moves His head and cries, “Woe to me” out of excessive grief, strikes His feet in His grief [...] To believe this about God is blasphemy.”³⁹

Under intellectual and polemical assault, Rashi’s supercommentators squirmed to extricate themselves from the bush’s brambles. Even the sixteenth-century Maharal of Prague (R. Judah Loew b. Bezalel, 1520-1609), no friend of rationalism, balks at the thorn midrash’s plain meaning:

*The explanation is not in the least that God is in pain, God forbid that one speak this way. Rather [...] God is bound up in chains with Israel, and with them always. Thus, so long as Israel is in pain, God’s reign is not complete [...] Therefore, God reveals [Godself] from the bush.*⁴⁰

Rejecting the doctrine of God’s physical pain as theologically unacceptable, the Maharal reinterprets it as a figure of speech for this world’s imperfections – a maneuver that gains

³⁸ Peirush al Ha’Mishnah ad loc.

³⁹ Petrus Alfonsi (Spain, 1062-1140, *Dialogi*, col. 551, quoted in Lehman, 61, who analyzes the passages extensively.

⁴⁰ GA on Exodus 3:2; italics mine.

in metaphysical plausibility what it loses in physical immediacy.⁴¹ This reading escapes the scandal of God's bodily pain at the cost of relegating God to the role of sympathetic spectator rather than fellow sufferer. Other commentators, like the Mizrahi (R. Elijah Mizrahi, Ottoman Empire, 1455-1509), hew to the spirit of the midrashic tradition: "We find [written] explicitly that God suffers in the pain of Israel [...] Rashi chose this [midrash] to conform to the plain sense of Scripture."⁴² But this camp never won a consensus among *mefarshim*.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, neo-Maimonidean distaste toward talk of God's body, fueled by reaction to Christian polemic, achieved axiomatic status within liberal Jewish thought.⁴³ But the rationalist posture smuggles in a dubious moral genealogy that calls for unmasking. Moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum (America, b. 1947) astutely notes classical theologians' tendency to imagine gods who embody their preconceptions of a life well lived.⁴⁴ The medieval intellectuals and their modern heirs disdain physicality as, at best, a necessary evil, and at worst, a barrier to transcendence; and that bias shapes their theology. In his commentary to the Mishnah, Maimonides explains that God created

⁴¹ In a similar vein, the nineteenth-century Be'er Yitzhak subtly spiritualizes Rashi: God dwells "within the lowliest of trees, a thornbush, in order to show [Moses] that the pain of the Israelites had reached Him." Be'er Yitzhak, loc. cit.

⁴² Loc. cit.

⁴³ See, for example, Hermann Cohen's Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism.

⁴⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (University of Cambridge Press, 1986), 176-183.

manual laborers, “crazy people [*mish'ta'agaim*]” only in order to save Torah scholars the trouble of growing food – for what else but craziness would make physical needs worthy of attention?

After all, there is no craziness on earth like the craziness of human beings, who are weak in their souls and poor in their posture, who travel on the seas in the wintertime and through dry lands in the summer, and expose themselves to danger from the beasts and snakes of the field in order to earn their keep.⁴⁵

To be physical, Maimonides correctly understands, is to be vulnerable; and the Hellenistic philosophical project is in part a bid to overcome that vulnerability through a self-sufficient life of the mind. Discovering our dependence upon an afflicted God would defeat the purpose of the entire enterprise. Hence the serene, solitary theologian creates a God in his own image; a God impermeable to circumstance, unmoved by love, invulnerable to pain.

But as the rabbinic scholar Mara Benjamin (America, b. 1972) has recently argued at length,⁴⁶ shared vulnerability lies at the root of our relationships with each other and God’s relationships with us; if we do not know this, we do not know ourselves. In Nussbaum’s words: “[A God] lacking the constraints imposed by mortality, lacking vulnerabilities of many kinds, lacking the demands and finitude of the mortal body, will of necessity lack, as well, some of the forms of life that we now find valuable and pursue as

⁴⁵ Peirush al Ha’Mishnah, Introduction.

⁴⁶ Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 1-11.

ends.”⁴⁷ Casting one's lot with another means a mutual acceptance of fragility, a resignation of each party to be overwhelmed by the other's eventual pain. A relationship absent such acceptance is a strained, attenuated thing. Loving an unblemished, immovable form – that is, a statue – falls short for us as it fell short for Pygmalion.

CONCLUSION: GOD'S IN*Conclusion: God's Infinite Pain*

We now stand more ready to appreciate the grand sweep of midrash's philosophically scandalous portrayal of God's body in pain at the burning bush: its biblical and Hellenistic antecedents, its growth in the fertile ground of Tannaitic lore, its eclipse by rationalism and Christian polemic in the medieval period, its lonely standard-bearers among commentators and Hasidim.

How, then, might we translate the language of a God who shares our bodily pain from midrash to metaphysics? Oddly enough, the seeds of such an approach grow out of Spinoza's hyperrational *Ethics*. Following Maimonides, Spinoza (Dutch Republic, 1632-1677) famously defines God as “a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes.”⁴⁸ Each

⁴⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 271.

⁴⁸ *Ethics* I P. 11.

of these attributes, in turn, extends infinitely, leading Spinoza to the conclusion that “whatever is, is in God.”⁴⁹ In other words, God is identical with the universe, containing the whole of space and time.⁵⁰

Here comes the crucial step, implied but never fully developed by Spinoza: If “whatever is, is in God,” then God’s aspects (what Spinoza calls “affections” or “modes”⁵¹) contain all biological phenomena, physical and physiological including our most

⁴⁹ Ibid. I P. 15.

⁵⁰ Inspired by Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and his disciples, a turn toward “process theology,” a close cousin of pantheism, has come increasingly into focus among postmodern Jewish thinkers. Most prominently, Hans Jonas (1903-1993), Bradley Shavit Artson (b. 1959), and my cherished teacher Arthur Green (b. 1941) all express a worldview of the universe as a manifestation of God’s evolution into increasing levels of dynamism and complexity. In contrast to pantheism, liberal Jewish process theology generally sees evil as separate from God, a sort of inevitable byproduct of the universe’s effort to come into its fullest existence. See Bradley Shavit Artson, “Ba’Derekh--On The Way: A Presentation of Process Theology”, *Conservative Judaism* 62:1-2 (2010), 3-35; Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2010); Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice,” *The Journal of Religion* 67:1 (1987), 1-13.

Engaging with these thinkers’ systems at length lies beyond the scope of this paper. In particular, the question of process theology’s vision of the messianic future deserves more room than I can give here. Artson defines Creation as “the process of God luring emergent being into order, diversity, abundance, and goodness.” Similarly, Green describes “the force of Being directed from within, however imperfectly and stumblingly, to manifest itself ever more fully, in ever more diverse, complex, and interesting ways.” If I correctly interpret Green and Artson’s position as implying that the cosmos naturally tend toward some future telos, then I respectfully and reluctantly differ. In my view, the evidence of entropy and recent history would seem to suggest the opposite trend, a descent into chaos and finitude. Contemporary Jewish theologians generally hesitate to describe any piece of God’s essence as amoral; I see that amorality as tragic but real.

Finally, at the risk of wading too deep into a perennial debate, I cannot help but regard the panentheist postulate of God existing over and above the universe itself as metaphysically superfluous. Perhaps out of temperament, I find myself incapable of imagining the piece of God not included by the universe; straightforward pantheism strikes me as a more parsimonious and more likely reality. However, this is certainly a *da’at ha’yaḥid*, a minority position, within Jewish theology.

⁵¹ Ibid. I D. 5.

momentary flashes of joy and twinges of pain. Modern Spinoza scholar Stephen Nadler raises this possibility: “When a person feels pain, it [would] follow that the pain is ultimately just a property of God, and thus that God feels pain.”⁵² And Rebbe Levi Yitzhak expresses a parallel insight in his own poetic language: “God is clothed, as it were, within the *tsadik*, and God is referred to in the aspect of ‘a person’.”⁵³ By this radical view, human beings literally incarnate God. God does indeed have nerve endings — *our* nerve endings.

Following in the footsteps of Spinoza and modern Jewish pantheists, we might say that pain, as an attribute of an infinite God, extends infinitely.⁵⁴ In the anguish of the

⁵² Stephen Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 98. Nadler later resolves this question in the negative, arguing that Spinoza's God does not in fact include all of nature but only nature's conceptual and causal grounds. There is considerable debate over this interpretation of the Ethics; for a description of the controversy, see Samuel Newlands, “Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008). In any case, the problem remains philosophically provocative regardless of how Spinoza himself might have answered it.

⁵³ KL on Genesis 28:10

⁵⁴ This claim raises a serious problem: by this logic, a God Who embodies all of the pain in the universe also embodies all its cruelty, capriciousness, and so on. These considerations lead writers like Mordechai Kaplan (America, 1881-1983) to identify God with “the forces that make for salvation,” excluding the forces of evil from God's essence.

To briefly respond here: Fundamentally, Kaplanian theology strikes me as tone-deaf to the thundering ontological force of *gevurah*. Our universe is indeed an infinitely cruel and capricious place. Hence the God of the Bible, who slays thousands through plague on a sudden fit of blind rage that dies down as quickly as it starts up; and the millions dead of plague the year of this writing. An honest pantheism ought to account for the full splendor and utter absurdity of the world we live in.

In this view, human atrocities like the Shoah and natural disasters like disease reveal a horrifying but basic aspect of the divine essence. God is, at the same time, unspeakably cruel and unimaginably kind; God both feels our pain and remains indifferent to it. In rabbinic terms, God rises from the seat of *din* each day to sit on the seat of *hesed* (*Avodah Zarah* 3b). For some, this perspective may prove unhelpfully bleak; but I believe it captures the reality in which we all sooner or later find ourselves.

Warsaw Ghetto, it fell to the grief-stricken, weakened Piacezner Rebbe, a final spokesman for the great midrashic tradition, to preach on that theme in a staggering effort of compassion and will:

It may be that since God is not subject to any limitation – for which reason no conception of God is possible in this world – therefore God’s suffering from Israel’s pain is also boundless. It is not merely that it would be impossible for a person to endure the experience of such great pain, but that even to conceive of God’s pain – to know that God does suffer [...] – is impossible.⁵⁵

This pain, “so great that the world cannot contain it,” forces God to cry out at the bush: “Take this burden off of me!”⁵⁶ God, through Israel, feels to its fullest the unfathomable sum of human suffering. So the minutest tickle in your throat and the throbbing of my head and the unbearable burden on our backs, “swelling to fill the entire universe”⁵⁷ through all of these is God embodied in us: since, in a final analysis, we are the bodies of God.

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⁵⁵ EK Mishpatim 5702. I rely here on Nehemia Polen’s felicitous translation.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Vayikra 5700.

⁵⁷ Scarry, 35.

cum laude in economics and rabbinic literature, respectively. Before his rabbinic career, he worked as a community organizer for the national network Faith in Action and the hotel and food service workers' union UNITE HERE.

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