

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

HOW DOES GOD FIT INTO THE PICTURE OF THE EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI?

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Over these past days, I have read many statements made by rabbis in which they explicitly absolve God of any involvement in the earthquake and tsunami. The Talmud is quite clear on this point: God is to be thanked for all the good we experience in life and God is to be acknowledged as the author of disaster, as well. These passages from Tanach and rabbinic literature make that point clearly:

The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

When bad tidings are heard one says, "Blessed is the true Judge. (M. Berachot 9:2)

A person is obligated to bless God for the evil as he blesses Him for the good. (B. Berachot 33b)

R. Abbahu was bereaved. One of his children had passed away from him. R. Jonah and R. Yose went up [to comfort him]. When they called on him, out of reverence for him, they did not express to him a word of Torah. He said to them, "May the rabbis express a word of Torah." They said to him, "Let our master teach us." He said to them, "Now if in regard to the government below, in which there is no reliability, [but only] lying, deceit, favoritism and bribe-taking, which is here today and gone tomorrow, [if concerning that government] it is said, 'And the relatives [of the felon] come and inquire after the welfare of the judges and of the witnesses, as if to say "We have nothing in our hearts [against you], for you judged honestly (M. Sanhedrin 6:6)" in regard to the government above, in which there is reliability, but no lying, deceit, favoritism, or bribe-taking, and which endures forever and to all eternity, all the more so are we obligated to accept upon ourselves the just decree [of the heavenly government].'" (Y. Sanhedrin 6:12, 23d-24a)

This last passage from the Yerushalmi may need a bit of explaining. If a member of one's family was found guilty and executed, after a period of time the members of the deceased's family would visit the judges and witnesses to reassure them that they acknowledged the righteousness of their decree and hold no grudge against them. R. Abbahu likens his experiences to being in front of God's court. He recognizes that God has brought this upon him and he holds no grudge against his Creator.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it difficult to blame God for something which was clearly a natural disaster? This is not like the Holocaust: a tragedy created and committed by human beings and allowed to happen by other human beings who looked the other way. Only God can cause earthquakes and giant waves.
2. Why would God do such a thing?
3. If we are created in God's image and we each have an "evil inclination" does that mean God has an "evil inclination" as well? If so, how are we to help God as God helps us?