

God in Chains- Why God lets me suffer

*All expressions concerning the description of God must never be taken literally; they are simply due to the inadequacy of human language "to make the ear listen to what it can hear."
— Abbot de-Rabbi Nathan, 2*

Why does God allow evil to exist?

A Chever Torah Jew: "If God is so loving, please explain the holocaust." It is difficult to explain evil and sin without coming to one of four conclusions:

1. God does not exist (an idea logic easily refutes: there has to be a "First Cause").
2. God does not care about evil and sin (again, logic refutes this: God's will is the criteria for what is good and what is evil, therefore if God did not care, there would be no logical basis for good and evil).
3. God is evil (which again is easily refutable: why would an evil God create good things?).
4. God has chosen to limit (withhold) His control over evil and sin.

The Bible supports the idea of a self-limited God... God's oneness (as stated in the *Shema*—Dt 6:4) leads to the inevitable conclusion that He is present everywhere and all powerful, yet the creation cannot be the Creator, therefore God must in some way withdraw (*tsimtsum*) from Creation to "make space" for its existence. This is a self-imposed limitation on God's omnipresence for the sake of all creation. See **Ge 1:4,6,7,14&18**, where the Bible uses the word *badal* ("divide," or "separate") again and again to describe how God created the universe.

Also, *agape* love—love expressed through right actions, which is the antidote to evil and sin—can exist only when it is freely chosen, which means God must give us the freedom not to choose it. This is a limitation on God's omnipotence since freedom to choose is power. It is why He allows evil to exist. (Read **Dt 7:9-11** and note the connection between actions—obedience—and the choice to love. See also **1 John 5:3-4**.)

What does this mean to me?

We cannot approach the Holy One... As we have already learned, God's oneness (the *Shema*) means he is perfectly holy (*kadosh*—"set apart") and holiness by definition means separation from anything profane. This is another way God's omnipresence is limited. See **Habakkuk 1:13** where the prophet says God "cannot tolerate wrong," a clear Biblical acknowledgment of self-limitation by God. See also **2 Tim 2:13** for a similar statement in the Bible about

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something God “cannot” do. Just as God’s perfect holiness means He must be “separate” (set apart) from anything profane, it also limits us, because we cannot “approach” Him if we are not holy ourselves. This is the central problem of humanity. See **Ps 5:4-5** and **Ex 19:20-22**.

...so He approached us. Jesus (who is God) demonstrated self-limitation when he lived and died and rose again for the sake of those who will accept his sacrifice on their behalf. This is a natural extension of the self-limitation God accepted “in the beginning” to make space for the universe. Jesus died (a limitation on his immortality) and was somehow separated from the Father, thus withdrawing, or becoming divided even from Himself, and through that final form of *tsimtsum* (withdrawing) or *badal* (dividing), he began the process of creating a “new heaven and new earth.”

Now we must respond... The first accomplishment of Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection is to purify those who place their trust in Him, thus allowing us to be holy and approach the Lord. Consider **Heb 4:14-16** in connection with this. The only proper response to God’s “self-limitation” on the cross and in the tomb is to respond with love, and again, that means “doing love” (*agape* love) through obedience. (**Gal 5:13-15** and **1 Peter 1:15-16**—quoting **Lv 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:26, & 21:8**) This obedience—this “doing love”—is how those who have been made holy can approach God through Jesus, becoming more like him (more holy, as he is holy). Holiness (expressed in love) is also part of what it means to be created in God’s image. In the following scripture, note the connection between holiness and the verb *badal*, which was used earlier to describe how God created the universe:

You must distinguish (badal) between the holy (kadosh) and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses.” (Lv 10:10-11) NIV

- ▶ If the decision were yours, would you give up all love on earth in order to eliminate all evil?
- ▶ If God is perfectly holy in the Hebrew sense of *kadosh* (“set apart” from that which is not holy) how can He interact within a world where the unholy exists without becoming “not set apart,” (i.e. tainted by contact with the unholy)? (Hint: see **1 Corinthians 8:6**)
- ✓ Note in **1 Cor 8:6** that all things come from the Father through the Son.
 - Jesus has always been the point of intersection between Creator and creation, even before the Fall. (He was God in the Garden making sound as he walked—**Ge 3:8**.)
 - Now, after the Fall, Jesus is God’s “sin-filter,” or “earth suit”—that aspect of God that is able to act within an imperfect, sinful, unholy environment without allowing the fallen world to contact his own perfect, sinless and holy state of existence.

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- Jesus is able to exist within a fallen world without destroying it with an overdose of perfect holiness. (Remember Nadab and Abihu.) Without him, there would be no possible interaction between us and God.
- ▶ Typical Christian doctrine says Jesus claimed he is the “one way” to communion with God because we must approach God humbly, on His terms instead of ours. What alternative paradigm does the “self limited” God idea lend to reasons for “one way”? (Hint: consider the first sentence of **Habakkuk 1:13**—what would happen to God if it were not true?)
 - ✓ While it is true that justice requires us to approach humbly, there is also just “one way” because God’s “set-apartness” must be maintained, meaning all that is not holy must or will cease to exist in his presence.
 - ✓ As imperfect, corrupted beings, any means of approach that involves drawing near to God directly is impossible if He is to remain holy. (Remember the earlier discussion on what happened to Nadab and Abihu.)
- ▶ In this chapter the **Malachi 3:6** was quoted. What does it mean? (Hint: See **Heb 13:8**, then **Ro 11:36**, **Col 1:16-17** and **Heb 1:3**)
 - ✓ We usually think of God’s creation as a seven-day process, but God’s creative work did not cease at the dawn of time. He continues to sustain the universe every instant as the ongoing source of everything.
 - Note the use of present tense in all of the verses above.
 - God exists outside of time, so in a sense, His every act is “now” and that includes creation—the giving of life.
 - ✓ As the ongoing source of everything, if God changed, everything as we know it would change, too. That would probably bring about our destruction. Analogies include:
 - What happens to creatures in a river when the river changes course.
 - What happens to a business when the cash stops flowing.
 - ✓ As already discussed, Jesus is the point of contact between God and creation. Jesus created everything, and Jesus sustains everything.

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