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“But Now My Eye Has Seen You”: Yissurin Shel Ahavah as Divine Intimacy Theodicy

1. Introduction

How do approaches in Jewish thought and tradition to the problem of evil or suffering compare with the various positions adopted in contemporary philosophy of religion?¹ To respond comprehensively to this question, one would have to consider the whole chronological range of relevant Jewish sources, from the biblical and

1. Eleonore Stump (*Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* [Oxford, 2010], 4) argues that “the problem of suffering” is preferable to “the problem of evil” since it is suffering which constitutes the nub of the theological problem. For example, if there were no sentient beings who suffered from natural disasters, there would be no problem. However, I am grateful to David Shatz and an anonymous referee for this journal for pointing out in response to Stump that suffering can pose a theological problem only on the assumption that it is evil, or bad. Thus “the problem of evil” may be preferable after all. Although there are kinds of evil that involve no suffering to the person who undergoes them (putting aside the suffering caused to the person’s family and friends), such as sudden death or dementia, which nevertheless raise the theological problem, suffering is a central sort of evil, and therefore “the problem of suffering” is an acceptable way of referring to the theological problem. I will refer in this article to “the problem of suffering,” though this usage is not intended to suggest that “the problem of evil” would not be equally acceptable.

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rabbinic through medieval and modern thinkers. Even restricting the discussion to classical rabbinic thought would involve the consideration of many pertinent texts, particularly from the Talmud Bavli, which, as Yaakov Elman and David Kraemer have argued, is much more open than the Talmud Yerushalmi to the idea that suffering is not necessarily divine punishment for sin and contains “the most original and radical responses in rabbinic Judaism to the problem of suffering.”² For example, one could relate passages in *Ta’anit* 11a, *Kiddushin* 39b and 40b and *Yoma* 86b-87a, which appeal to life in the world to come after death to solve the problem of suffering in this world, to, for instance, the argument presented by Marilyn Adams that a post-mortem beatific vision of God can retrospectively comfort even one who has suffered horrendously and can give meaning to his or her suffering.³ Or one might consider passages in *Berakhot* 7a and *Menahot* 29b, among others, in light of some contemporary discussions of what is known as sceptical theism.⁴

In this article, I want to focus on just one well-known rabbinic concept discussed in the Talmud Bavli and bring it into conversation with some contemporary discussions of the problem of suffering in the philosophy of religion. This rabbinic concept is the well-known one of *yissurin shel ahavah*, “the sufferings (or “afflictions”) of love”⁵ (henceforth YSA) as it appears in its *locus classicus*, namely the extensive discussion in the Bavli at *Berakhot* 5a-b.⁶ The exploration of the theme

2. David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York, 1995), 16; see also 113. For Elman’s view, see e.g., his “The Suffering of the Righteous in Palestinian and Babylonian Sources,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 80 (1990): 315-39; “Righteousness As Its Own Reward: An Inquiry Into the Theologies of the Stam,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1990-1991): 35-67.

3. See, e.g., Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford, 1990), 209-21.

4. I hope to do this in a future article.

5. The Soncino Talmud’s translation of *Berakhot* 5a-b, while translating *yissurin* as “sufferings,” translates *yissurin shel ahavah* as “chastenings of love” or “chastisements of love.” As David Shatz pointed out to me, however, R. Ammi’s statement in *Shabbat* 55a *ve-ein yissurin be-lo avon*, “there are no *yissurin* without iniquity,” seems to assume that the term *yissurin* does not by itself (despite some well-known biblical usages of the root *y-s-r*) have a punitive or corrective connotation, for otherwise it would not need stating that there are no *yissurin* in the absence of sin. The standard translations of *yissurin* as “suffering” and *yissurin shel ahavah* as “sufferings (or “afflictions”) of love” thus appear justified and I will use these translations in this paper.

6. Elman, “The Suffering of the Righteous,” 337, n. 58, points out that YSA is the sole exception to the view of suffering as punishment for sin in Palestinian sources. YSA appears explicitly in *Gen. Rabbah* 92:1.

of suffering in *Berakhot* 5a-5b is the longest treatment of that topic in the entire Bavli and indeed “the longest deliberation (by far) on suffering as such in all classical rabbinic literature.”⁷ I will examine some of the ways in which the concept of YSA has been or could plausibly be interpreted, and explore how these readings of YSA relate to some of the theodicies analysed in contemporary philosophy of religion. This exploration will hopefully enable YSA and these theodicies to shed light on each other. Eleonore Stump has noted the importance of bringing contemporary philosophical reflection on the problem of suffering into contact with the rich tradition of Jewish thought on it. She has done this in the context of Sa’adyah Gaon’s interpretation of the Book of Job and his theodicy, as well as by focusing on some key narratives in Tanakh.⁸ YSA, justifiably termed by David Shatz “the most interesting concept in Jewish discussions of suffering,”⁹ is certainly worth considering in light of relevant contemporary philosophical theodicies.

I do not aim in this article to present anything like a full argument in favor of any particular theodicy that I connect with YSA, nor to deal comprehensively with objections that can be raised against any theodicy, though I do consider some objections to the particular theodicy which is most central to this paper, namely “divine intimacy theodicy.” Moreover, while I cite and discuss a significant range of post-talmudic rabbinic teachings regarding YSA, including key medieval sources, I do not claim that the roster considered here is anything approaching comprehensive. I aim to consider enough of the most important sources to make the inquiry worthwhile.

In the second section of this paper, I briefly survey the debate among important rabbinic thinkers and commentators concerning whether or not YSA should be interpreted as a punitive doctrine. According to those who understand YSA as constituting punishment for sin despite the element of love which distinguishes YSA from *yissurin simpliciter*, YSA can be easily located on the historical map of theodicies in Western thought: for them, it is a punishment theodicy, one of the most influential kinds of theodicy (though not a popular one in contemporary philosophical discussion). If YSA is not read as a punishment theodicy,

7. Kraemer, 188.

8. Eleonore Stump, “Saadia Gaon on the Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997): 523-49; *Wandering in Darkness*, chs. 9-11.

9. David Shatz, “On Constructing a Jewish Theodicy,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Chichester, 2013), 314.

following the other view in the debate, then it becomes a more interesting concept and the question arises as to whether it parallels some other theodicy or theodicies in the philosophical debate. In Section 3 of the paper, I consider several ways in which YSA might be construed as what is often termed a “soul-making theodicy” and how this plays out in the reflections on YSA of some major rabbinic thinkers. In section 4, I distinguish between “soul-making” and what has been called in contemporary philosophy of religion “divine intimacy” theodicy, and in the fifth section, I argue that YSA is most compellingly construed as a “divine intimacy” theodicy. I suggest various ways in which this might be so and consider significant rabbinic writers on YSA who seem to have understood YSA in this kind of way.

2. YSA: Punitive or Non-Punitive?

In order to begin our analysis of the concept of YSA as it appears in *Berakhot* 5a-b, let us quote the opening of the relevant *sugya* at *Berakhot* 5a:

Rava (some say, R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: “Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord” [Lam. 3:40]. If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said: “Happy is the man whom You chasten, O Lord, and teach out of Your law” [Ps. 94:12]. If he did attribute it [thus], and still did not find [on further examination a defect in this respect], let him be sure that these are sufferings of love [*yissurin shel ahavah*]. For it is said: “For whom the Lord loves He corrects” [Prov. 3:12].¹⁰

A person visited by sufferings is advised in the first instance to assume that his or her sufferings constitute punishment for sin. If one can identify no sin, including neglect of Torah study, then the suffering certainly constitutes YSA. Although the implication of this is not necessarily that YSA is non-punitive suffering, most—as detailed in this section—have understood YSA in this way.¹¹ This, indeed, is how Rashi in his commen-

10. All translations from *Berakhot* in this article are by Maurice Simon in the Soncino edition of the Talmud, in most cases with some emendations. In this extract I have, *inter alia*, amended the spelling of the opening word to “Rava” from “Raba” to make clear the identity of the sage being referred to. All other translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise stated.

11. It should be noted that though YSA can easily be interpreted as non-punitive at this stage of the *gemara*’s discussion, this conception of YSA does not remain stable throughout the *sugya*. At least at one later point at 5b, the suggestion of the *gemara*

tary to this passage explicates YSA: “The Holy One, blessed be He, brings suffering on him in this world without [his having committed] any sin or iniquity, in order to increase his reward in the world to come beyond [what] his merits [deserve].”¹²

Other major rabbinic thinkers similarly construe YSA as a non-punitive notion. In the introduction to his commentary to the Book of Job, Sa’adyah Gaon presents a non-punitive interpretation of YSA without mentioning YSA explicitly, but instead using the terminology of “trial and testing.”¹³ He distinguishes this “trial and testing” from suffering inflicted by God as a means of “purgation and punishment”¹⁴ and describes it much as Rashi elucidates YSA: “An upright servant, whose God knows that he will bear sufferings loosed upon him and hold steadfast in his uprightness, is subjected to certain sufferings, so that when he steadfastly bears them, his Lord may reward him and bless him.”¹⁵ This kind of suffering, according to R. Sa’adyah, is what God inflicts on Job. A little later, R. Sa’adyah states that a trial or test is suffering in instances where “we have searched ourselves and found nothing requiring . . . punishments.”¹⁶ Again, R. Sa’adyah does not explicitly mention YSA here, but the reference to examining oneself and finding nothing deserving of punishment seems to be a clear reference to the opening of the *Berakhot* 5a discussion of YSA cited above.¹⁷

In his commentary to the Torah, R. Bahye ben Asher also explicitly interprets YSA non-punitively and states that its purpose is to increase

seems to be that YSA is punitive. Moreover, at several further points in the *sugya* it is not fully clear whether the *yissurin* being referred to are YSA or not, which leads to differences of opinion between commentators.

12. s.v. *yissurin shel ahavah*. However, at certain points later in his commentary on the *sugya*, Rashi seems to suggest a punitive reading of YSA.

13. *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. by Lenn Evan Goodman (New Haven, 1988), 125. Goodman understands R. Sa’adyah as having YSA in mind, and I follow this suggestion because of R. Sa’adyah’s allusion to *Berakhot* 5a, as explained below. In general, though, the identification of “trial and testing” or *nissayon* with YSA is by no means uncontroversial. Maimonides and Nahmanides explicitly reject it; see n. 29 below.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 125-26.

16. *Ibid.*, 130.

17. Stump, “Saadia Gaon on the Problem of Evil,” argues that R. Sa’adyah’s conception of this kind of suffering is more complex and involves the idea of the purging of the soul in order to avoid attenuation of heavenly reward. This is still a non-punitive conception, however. Stump’s Sa’adyah has affinities with the positions of several thinkers on YSA discussed below.

later reward.¹⁸ Maharal, in the main discussion of YSA in his writings, also maintains that YSA is non-punitive and is visited on a person who is “righteous and fit for the supreme [spiritual] level.”¹⁹ A mystical non-punitive understanding of YSA is presented by R. Isaiah Horowitz, the Shelah, based on the kabbalist R. Avraham Galanti’s *Kol Bokhim*.²⁰ R. Yehezkel Landau in his Talmud commentary *Ziyyun le-Nefesh Hayah* (*Zelah*) offers what sounds like an unpacking of Rashi: because it is relatively easy to serve God in strength and health, God sometimes brings illness or weakness on the righteous so that they overcome significant obstacles in serving Him and attain greater divine reward because of the Mishnaic principle that “according to the effort [or pain] is the reward.”²¹ R. Yosef Albo presents three understandings of YSA which will be discussed in the course of this paper; the last two are clearly non-punitive, and I will argue later that the first is as well. We will also encounter further non-punitive interpretations of YSA.

However, other key figures take contrasting and sometimes conflicting positions. Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:17 understands YSA in a similar way to Rashi, but in 3:24 criticizes this idea of suffering not preceded by sin for the sake of greater reward as incompatible with God’s justice. Thus, while Maimonides agrees with the non-punitive interpretation of YSA, he holds that this renders the whole notion deeply problematic. Me’iri takes this line of thought a step further and interprets YSA as punitive: the more righteous a person is, the more exacting God is regarding his or her misdemeanours.²² Nahmanides in *Sha’ar ha-Gemul* interprets YSA punitively, emphasizing that “even these afflictions are for the purpose of atonement and

18. Commentary to the Torah, Ex. 5:22.

19. *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Yissurin*, ch. 1 (ed. Haim Pardes [Tel Aviv, 1988], vol. 2, p. 427). Sometimes in this chapter and the following one, Maharal mentions YSA in the context of sin, but this seems to be sin in an extended sense, meaning attachment to the material world. For further discussion of Maharal’s view of YSA, see below.

20. R. Isaiah Horowitz, *Asarah Ma’amarot, Ma’amar Shelishi u-Revi’i*, section 134; *Ma’amar Hamishi*, section 180.

21. *Zelah ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 5755) on *Berakhot* 5a; *Mishnah Avot* 5:23.

22. *Beit ha-Behirah* to *Avot* 4:15. See also *Penei Yehoshua (Penei Yehoshua ha-Shalem [Jerusalem, 1973])* on *Berakhot* 5a, s.v. *kal va-homer mi-shen va-ayin*. Me’iri, in *Hibbur ha-Teshuvah* (New York, 1950), *Ma’amar* 1, ch. 4, 586-87, presents YSA as punitive as in *Beit ha-Behirah*, but adds the idea that sometimes a righteous person is afflicted with YSA to a greater extent than is strictly justified by his or her small transgression, in order to prompt that person to examine his ways and repent. This thought seems to construe YSA as partly a punishment theodicy and partly a soul-making theodicy. On soul-making theodicies, see Section 3.

purging [relatively minor] sin.”²³ Abarbanel, too, insists that all suffering is punitive.²⁴

R. Ya‘akov Yehoshua Falk, in his well-known work *Penei Yehoshua*, presents two main interpretations of YSA.²⁵ The first is non-punitive and will be discussed in Section 3 below. The second interprets YSA as vicarious atonement: God brings suffering on the righteous person who has not sinned in order to atone for the sins of the spiritually middle-ranking and the wicked. The righteous person is later compensated in the world to come by having proportionate additional reward added to his or her own reward from the spiritual “accounts,” as it were, of the wicked and the middle-ranking. This interpretation of YSA seems to understand it at least in part as a punishment theodicy: part of what justifies the suffering of the innocent righteous person is that his suffering is atoning punishment for the sins of others (added to the fact that he receives later compensation). *Penei Yehoshua* stresses that punishment is required (presumably because of the demands of justice); it is just that God inflicts the punishment on the righteous individual rather than the non-righteous, because the non-righteous would rebel were punishment inflicted upon them.²⁶

If YSA is interpreted punitively, as we have seen it is by a number of key thinkers, then it is a punishment theodicy: the suffering of the individual is justifiably allowed or inflicted by God as punishment for sin. If, however, we take our cue from the many important Jewish thinkers who view YSA in non-punitive terms, the obvious question that then arises is:

23. *Kitvei Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nahman*, ed. Rabbi C. D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1964), 270. See also *ibid.*, 271. In a different way from Me’iri in *Hibbur ha-Teshuvah* (see previous note), Nahmanides also seems to combine an element of soul-making theodicy with his punitive reading of YSA. Since every sin in some way contaminates the soul, Nahmanides writes, even the righteous soul requires the cleansing which is accomplished by YSA in order to attain the spiritual level in the world to come appropriate to the good deeds it has performed.

24. Commentary to the Torah, Gen. 15:1, fifteenth question.

25. *Penei Yehoshua* on *Berakhot* 5a, s.v. *talah ve-lo maza*.

26. One might object that *Penei Yehoshua*’s interpretation of YSA here is not a punishment theodicy at all. The term he uses throughout is *yissurin*, which could mean either “suffering” or “punishment,” as opposed to, say, the unambiguous term *onesh*, and one might interpret him as meaning that suffering is metaphysically necessary in order to purge sin, but that this suffering is not punitive (cf. the discussion of R. Yosef Albo’s first type of YSA in Section 3B below). But the question would then arise how the suffering of the innocent righteous person works to purge the sins of others. Moreover, *Penei Yehoshua*’s language in the relevant passage as a whole does not seem to suggest this non-punitive explanation.

How might non-punitive understandings be developed, and what forms might they take? For our purposes in this paper, we must also ask: How might YSA, on different understandings, relate to theodicies discussed in the philosophy of religion?

3. YSA as a Soul-Making Theodicy

A traditional group of theodicies in the philosophy of religion that continues to attract significant attention centers on the notion of “soul-making.” Broadly, a soul-making theodicy argues that the justification of God’s inflicting suffering is that this facilitates the building and development of moral and spiritual character.²⁷ Although there do not seem to be any other obvious sources in the Babylonian Talmud for a soul-making theodicy, YSA could plausibly be interpreted in this kind of way.²⁸

In this section, I consider two ways in which YSA might be interpreted as a kind of soul-making theodicy.

A. *Actualizing Potential*

One way in which YSA might be read as a version of soul-making theodicy is that the potential of the sufferer to withstand suffering and maintain his or her moral excellence is realized, made actual, and this elevates the sufferer to even greater spiritual heights than he had attained previously. This understanding of YSA can be connected to the concept of *nissayon*, a divine test or trial, the archetype of which, of course, is Abraham’s trial at the *Akedah*, explicitly described by the Torah as a test in Gen. 22:1. If the test is successfully passed by the sufferer, he or she will grow spiritually.

27. See, e.g., the classic contemporary articulation of soul-making theodicy, John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* (2nd ed., Basingstoke and New York, 2010); Daniel Speak, “Free Will and Soul-Making Theodicies,” *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ch. 14. Hick places far more emphasis on moral than on spiritual development.

28. David Shatz has already made the suggestion that some interpretations of YSA can be seen as potential precedents for soul-making theodicies. See David Shatz, “Does Jewish Law Express Jewish Philosophy? The Curious Case of Theodicies,” in Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies and Moral Theories* (Boston, 2009), 293 and 301, n. 10. See also his “On Constructing a Jewish Theodicy” in *The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil*, 309-25. In this section, I expand on Shatz’s suggestion by categorising different ways in which YSA can be read as a soul-making theodicy and offering an analysis of some of the relevant sources. As I will argue in Section 5, however, I believe that YSA is better read in the light of divine intimacy theodicy than soul-making theodicy.

R. Yosef Albo provides a detailed analysis of YSA in *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, offering three possible understandings of the concept, each of which he considers legitimate, and to each of which he applies the term *nissayon*.²⁹ R. Albo's third type of YSA, which he identifies as the most important category, are visited only on the completely righteous who have already undergone the first two types of YSA (we will return to discussion of the first two kinds later). The purpose of this third type of YSA is to increase the reward of the sufferer so that he or she receives "the reward of the good deed and not just reward for a good intention" because the sufferer has actually *gone through* trouble and difficulty in showing love of God through a particular deed, rather than simply being *willing* to undergo difficulty. The example given by R. Albo is the *Akedah*. Despite the focus on reward, there is undoubtedly also a strong soul-making element in R. Albo's third category of YSA. R. Albo writes that the righteous sufferer will be worthy of his greater reward "because through the deed his heart will be strengthened in the love of God, since every action establishes a stronger disposition in the soul than can be achieved without action." Doing the deed required by God, which is the third kind of YSA, improves the soul. This is emphasised again later in his discussion: "A person does not reach the level of complete love [of God] until he actually suffers difficulty and toil for the love of God."

B. Purging the Soul

We can identify a second way of understanding YSA as a type of soul-making theodicy by referring once again to *Penei Yehoshua* on *Berakhot* 5a.³⁰ In Section 2 above, we noted Rashi's explication of YSA. *Penei Yehoshua* raises a straightforward but powerful difficulty for Rashi's analysis: Why can't God, Who is omnipotent, just give all the benefits of the world to come to the righteous person without that person first having to endure suffering?³¹ *Penei Yehoshua* responds that

29. *Ma'amar* 4, ch. 13. Maimonides in *Guide* 3:17 explicitly rejects the idea that the trials mentioned in the Torah, such as that of Abraham at the *Akedah*, come under the rubric of YSA. YSA, for Maimonides, is a rabbinic concept which does not feature in the Torah itself. Nahmanides in *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* (*Kitvei Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nahman*, 272-73) does not consider a *nissayon* to be YSA or any kind of punitive suffering.

30. S.v. *talach ve-lo maza*. *Penei Yehoshua*'s interpretation of YSA, which I present in this section, is the first of the main two interpretations which he offers, and the one which he himself believes is more suited to the language of the *gemara* in *Berakhot* 5a. We mentioned earlier his second interpretation, focusing on vicarious atonement.

31. Sa'adyah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New

subsequent to the damage done by the serpent of the Garden of Eden to all future souls, even the souls of the completely righteous, it would be impossible without suffering to purge the soul of the righteous person from the material and physical and allow that soul to achieve its full spiritual reward in the world to come.³² Even without Adam's sin caused by the serpent, *Penei Yehoshua* continues, the human soul would have been too attached to the material to be able, without the purging effected by suffering, ultimately to receive the supernal light of the higher worlds. As noted earlier, Nahmanides' understanding of YSA includes this kind of soul-making element, but for Nahmanides, the damage to the soul has been caused by the sufferer's own sin, not by the Edenic serpent. Additionally, *Penei Yehoshua's* interpretation of YSA is non-punitive, as opposed to Nahmanides' punitive conception.

R. Yosef Albo's treatment of YSA is again relevant in this context. As noted above, R. Albo in *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* presents a detailed analysis of YSA and divides YSA into three categories. It is the first category which is germane here. At the beginning of his discussion, R. Albo defines the first type of YSA as suffering inflicted by God on a very righteous person out of love in order to "purge some impurity or uncleanness in his soul caused by sin." Some of the language used by R. Albo in the continuation of his discussion of his first category of YSA is Nahmanides', and he explicitly cites Nahmanides' view that all suffering, including YSA, is a result of sin. It seems at first glance, therefore, that R. Albo's position regarding his first type of YSA is identical to Nahmanides' overall position regarding YSA, namely a punitive understanding combined with an element of soul-making theodicy.³³ However, a close reading of the first paragraph of R. Albo's analysis reveals that he does not in fact see the first type of YSA as punitive. He says that even a very righteous person cannot avoid various types of

Haven, 1948), 214-15, raises the same difficulty for the view that an innocent individual might be subjected to trials in order to later receive compensation for them. R. Sa'adyah does not explicitly refer to YSA in that discussion but cites Prov. 3:12, which, as we saw above, is quoted in *Berakhot* 5a as soon as the concept of YSA is introduced. R. Sa'adyah's response to the difficulty is that goods conferred by God on human beings by way of compensation are valued more highly than goods distributed purely by divine grace.

32. Fascinatingly, *Penei Yehoshua's* view here is close to that of Aquinas, for whom "suffering is medicinal for the cancer of the will innate in all post-Fall human beings. Unless that cancer is cured, human beings cannot be united to God in the afterlife" (Stump, "Saadia Gaon on the Problem of Evil," 532).

33. See above n. 23 on Nahmanides' position.

minor sin, but that these sins “are not deserving of punishment” (*einan re’uyin le-onesh*). Nevertheless, he continues, in language very close to Nahmanides’, “since they [the minor sins] pollute and impurify the soul, they can be a cause of reducing its spiritual level in the world to come.” He then repeats that the minor sins of the righteous person are not deserving of punishment, but “even though it [the minor sin] is not deserving of punishment, it requires atonement” (*af al pi she-einah re’uyah le-onesh zerikhah kapparah*). This is a clear departure from Nahmanides’ view of YSA as punitive.

What R. Albo is introducing here is a subtle distinction between punishment and atonement. He is suggesting that suffering can be inflicted by God to atone for sin without that suffering constituting a punishment for sin. Its goal is rather the essential cleansing of the soul from the stain left by the sin. He sums this up in the final sentence of the paragraph: “It is from the love of God for the righteous person that he brings suffering upon him, to purge the dirt and impurity that is in the soul, in order that it achieve the spiritual level that is appropriate for it according to its good deeds and that nothing will impede this.”³⁴

R. Albo (regarding his first category of YSA) agrees with Nahmanides, whom he cites in his next paragraph, that “there is never suffering without sin.” However, despite his citation of Nahmanides and his appearing to identify his position with that of Nahmanides, R. Albo differs with Nahmanides as to whether the suffering consequent on sin is necessarily punitive. For R. Albo, the purpose of the first category of YSA is soul-making rather than punishment.³⁵

We have identified two ways in which YSA might be interpreted as a kind of soul-making theodicy. David Shatz argues, however, that the idea found in Jewish sources that YSA enhances the spirituality of the sufferer differs from standard soul-making theodicies in contemporary philosophical discussion in three important respects.³⁶ First, contemporary soul-making theodicies usually aim to justify God’s allowing suffering,

34. R. Albo’s position thus ends up being very close to that of Sa’adyah Gaon on Stump’s interpretation of him; see n. 17 above.

35. It might be objected that the focus of the interpretations of YSA of *Penei Yehoshua* and R. Albo discussed in this sub-section is not so much soul-making as preventing diminution of the righteous person’s eternal reward. However, it seems fair to take the purpose of YSA on these interpretations as soul-making since the preservation of full reward and the achievement of the appropriate spiritual level in the afterlife are inseparable.

36. Shatz, “On Constructing a Jewish Theodicy,” 317.

rather than His inflicting it. Second, they do not aim to justify the sufferings of the righteous in particular. Third, soul-making theodicies justify suffering in terms of the moral improvement it fosters in others, not in the sufferer. Nevertheless, as Shatz puts it, “we have a close enough fit [in Jewish sources] to furnish a potential precedent for a contemporary-style SMT [= soul-making theodicy].”³⁷

In one respect, I believe that the fit between YSA and soul-making theodicies may be somewhat stronger than Shatz suggests. In general, Hick seems in *Evil and the God of Love* not to conform to Shatz’s template, but instead to focus his soul-making theodicy both on the sufferer him- or herself and on others. Admittedly, however, Hick does focus solely on the moral improvement of people other than the sufferer in justifying what he terms excessive or “dysteological” suffering, i.e. suffering which is entirely counter-productive to the soul-making of the sufferer or simply outright destructive, such as brain disease or an earthquake. Hick argues that these must exist “in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others,”³⁸ evoking “the unselfish kindness and goodwill which are among the highest values of personal life.”³⁹

Richard Swinburne, although developing a theodicy that goes beyond soul-making, clearly draws on the tradition of soul-making theodicies⁴⁰ and explicitly favors theodicies which appeal to the moral growth of both the sufferer and others:

Very many Christian writers have stressed the value of suffering for the human beings who suffer, in enabling them to form their souls for good. By showing courage and sympathy in the face of their suffering and that of others, people can become naturally good people. That is a theme especially prominent in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which I shall warmly endorse.⁴¹

Similarly, he writes that good character

. . . is the sort of character which responds readily to suffering (in others and in oneself) in the right way. Natural evil provides the opportunity not merely to be heroic but to make ourselves naturally heroic. Without a

37. Ibid. See also Shatz, “Does Jewish Law Express Jewish Philosophy?” 293.

38. Hick, 334.

39. Ibid, 335.

40. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 1998); Speak, 211-215.

41. Swinburne, 42.

significant amount of natural evil, we simply would not have the opportunity to show patience and sympathy on the heroic scale required for us to form heroically good characters.⁴²

Despite this perhaps even closer fit than Shatz suggests between YSA and soul-making theodicies, I want to argue that a different contemporary philosophical theodicy, namely divine intimacy theodicy, is worth carefully considering in the context of reflection on YSA and promises a still closer fit with YSA. In order to do this, it is necessary first to consider the relationship between the soul-making and divine intimacy types of theodicy.

4. Soul-Making Theodicy and Divine Intimacy Theodicy

Laura Waddell Ekstrom argues that some suffering can constitute a religious experience and a path to knowledge of God, to intimacy with the divine.⁴³ Ekstrom calls this “the divine intimacy theodicy.”⁴⁴ On this theodicy, God sometimes permits personal suffering “in order to provide occasions in which we can perceive God, understand him to some degree, know him, even meet him directly.”⁴⁵

More will be said about divine intimacy theodicy in the following section, but the above characterization is sufficient to pose the question of the relationship between soul-making and divine intimacy

42. Ibid., 169. Some of the literature dealing with objections to soul-making theodicy also focuses on the moral development of both the sufferer and others. In his “An Examination of the ‘Soul-Making’ Theodicy,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7:2 (April 1970), Clement Dore, in summarizing the soul-making theodicy, lists “steadfastness, charity and forbearance” as examples of the virtues that suffering makes possible (119). Later in the article, he refers to bearing suffering courageously (120). H.J. McCloskey, “God and Evil,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 10:39 (April 1960), discusses (and opposes) soul-making theodicy at 104-09 (though without using this term). He consistently understands the theodicy he is criticizing as focused equally on virtues that suffering can evoke in the sufferer and on virtues that it can evoke in others, referring to “courage, endurance, benevolence, sympathy” (106), twice on 108 to courage, endurance, charity and sympathy, and on 109 to “fortitude in his own sufferings, and sympathetic kindness in others.”

43. Laura Waddell Ekstrom, “Suffering as Religious Experience,” in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, 2004), 95-110. Ekstrom also presents the divine intimacy theodicy in Laura W. Ekstrom, “A Christian Theodicy,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 266-80.

44. Ekstrom, “Suffering as Religious Experience,” 96.

45. Ibid., 97.

theodicies.⁴⁶ The idea of intimacy with God seems important to Hick's soul-making theodicy. Daniel Speak, for example, summarises Hick's theodicy in the following way: Hick holds that God aims to bring human beings into deep intimacy with Him. But this can happen only if human beings have first reached an elevated moral standard, if our souls have first undergone the necessary transformation. The existence of suffering in the world is necessary, in turn, for this transformation to take place.⁴⁷ From this description, Hick's soul-making theodicy sounds like a kind of divine intimacy theodicy.⁴⁸ The description also makes clear that Hick's soul-making theodicy is "forward-looking" in the sense that it construes suffering as a *means* to desirable ends rather than as *itself* an expression of God's love. As elaborated below in Section 5, one type of divine intimacy theodicy also construes suffering as a means to an end rather than as being itself an expression of God's love. Since this "forward-looking" character is shared by soul-making theodicy and one type of divine intimacy theodicy, it might be argued that this kind of divine intimacy theodicy should simply be considered a version of soul-making theodicy.

However, a crucial difference between the soul-making theodicy and all types of divine intimacy theodicy is that, as we shall see more elaborately in the next section, divine intimacy theodicy construes the intimacy of the sufferer with God as something that is achieved in the here-and-now, in this world (though no doubt proponents of divine intimacy theodicy would concede that the intimacy can be further intensified in a life beyond the grave). Hick, however, concedes that "the soul-making process does in fact fail in our own world at least as often as it succeeds"⁴⁹ and that to solve this problem one must appeal to Christian eschatological belief: "Belief in an after-life is . . . crucial for theodicy."⁵⁰ The process of soul-making must continue beyond the grave if soul-making theodicy is to be plausible. He states that "[t]heodicy . . . must look towards the future, expecting a triumphant resolution in the eventual perfect

46. I am very grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for detailed and helpful comments highlighting the need to clarify this relationship and hence the need for this section of the paper.

47. Speak, "Free Will and Soul-Making Theodicies."

48. The theme of intimacy with God is also stressed by Marilyn McCord Adams in her summary of Hick's position in her Foreword to the 2010 reissue of *Evil and the God of Love*.

49. Hick, 336.

50. *Ibid.*, 338.

fulfilment of God's good purpose."⁵¹ Hick describes the "bare bones" of his theodicy thus: "[T]he evils of this life are necessary to prepare us as moral personalities for the life of the future heavenly Kingdom, and . . . they are justified by the fact that in that Kingdom all evil will have been left behind and unimaginable good will fill our lives."⁵² So intimacy with God (in fact, Hick talks of "fellowship" with God)⁵³ is attainable only in the hereafter rather than in this life, and the good which does the work of theodicy and which justifies the suffering of this world is a good located in the *eschaton*. Ultimately "our theodicy must find the meaning of evil . . . in the magnitude of the good to which it leads . . . a kingdom which is yet to come in its full glory and permanence."⁵⁴

In sum, the classic contemporary presentation of soul-making theodicy, namely Hick's, is impelled to maintain that a close relationship with God facilitated by suffering is attainable only beyond this life—in an eschatological future—and only after a very long process of personal moral and spiritual development. It is "forward-looking" towards a close relationship with God only in this eschatological sense. This clearly distinguishes Hick's soul-making theodicy from divine intimacy theodicies which, as we shall now see in section 5, emphasize the much more direct achievement, through suffering, of intimacy with God in this world.⁵⁵

5. YSA as Divine Intimacy Theodicy

Intimacy with God through Suffering versus Intimacy in Suffering

In a similar vein to Ekstrom, Diogenes Allen makes an observation linking suffering and love: "Some religious people report that

51. *Ibid.*, 340.

52. *Ibid.*, 351.

53. See *ibid.*, 196, 198, 237.

54. *Ibid.*, 261.

55. In her two articles cited above, n. 43, Ekstrom, though not making the contrast with soul-making theodicy that I have drawn here, clearly perceives divine intimacy theodicy as distinct from it. In "A Christian Theodicy," where she writes, at 267, that divine intimacy theodicy is supplemental to all standard theodicies, she clearly seems to intend "supplemental but distinct." She does not speak of divine intimacy theodicy as having any relationship with soul-making theodicy in particular. At 272, n. 8, she talks of divine intimacy theodicy as a supplement to free will theodicy in the sense that it provides further explanations, in some cases, of evils that are already explained by free will theodicy. Her focus in the whole article is very much on the intensified relationship with God that suffering makes possible rather than on the moral or spiritual improvement of the soul.

suffering, instead of being contrary to the love of God, is actually a medium in and through which his love can be experienced.”⁵⁶ Simone Weil writes: “I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love.”⁵⁷ This idea suggests itself as a plausible interpretation of YSA.⁵⁸ YSA can be understood as suffering visited by God upon a person whom He loves in order to provide for greater closeness and heightened love between God and that person. Linking suffering with divine love is a possible response to the problem of suffering, a theodicy.⁵⁹

The idea suggested by Ekstrom, Allen, and Weil that one can arrive at a heightened knowledge of God through suffering is amplified in Eleonore Stump’s treatment of the Book of Job in Chapter 9 of her *Wandering in Darkness*. Referring to Job 42:5, “I had [previously only] heard of you, but now my eye has seen you,” Stump writes:

While God has been talking to him [following all of Job’s suffering], Job has been, somehow, seeing God. The communication between God and Job is thus, in some sense, face-to-face communication . . . in the course of the divine speeches, God has been somehow directly present to Job, where the presence at issue produces the kind of cognition that would require the literal sight of a human face if the cognition in question were of a human being . . . God is present to Job with significant personal presence.⁶⁰

This knowledge of God, “[l]ike knowledge of persons . . . is non-propositional.”⁶¹ So Job comes to a new, deeper, and closer kind of knowledge

56. Diogenes Allen, “Natural Evil and the Love of God,” in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Adams and Adams, 189.

57. Quoted by Allen, *ibid.*, 197.

58. The commonality between Weil’s thought and the concept of YSA is also noticed by N. Verbin, *Divinely Abused: A Philosophical Perspective on Job and his Kin* (London, 2010), 47-48, though Verbin does not discuss divine intimacy theodicy.

59. Although he does not refer in his remarks to YSA or suggest a theodicy (indeed, he famously repudiates the enterprise of theodicy), R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik relates in a moving passage how when he was very ill and awaiting an operation, feeling cut off from even his closest relatives, he felt himself to be alone with God: “A lonely being meeting the loneliest Being in utter seclusion is a traumatic but also a great experience.” See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City, N.J., 2003), 134. I am grateful to David Shatz for pointing out the relevance of this passage to my discussion.

60. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 192.

61. *Ibid.*, 193. Shatz, “On Constructing a Jewish Theodicy,” 317, quotes Job 42: 5 to show that a crucial element of the soul-making theodicy appears in the Book of Job. This verse, Shatz argues, “intimates a sharpened religious perception”—Job has grown spiritually. It seems to me that the verse more powerfully suggests a new intimacy with

of God through suffering. One could similarly interpret YSA as suffering that God brings upon a person in order to facilitate this more profound knowledge of Him, this intensified relationship with Him that can be described as love.⁶² Interestingly Stump, who does not refer to YSA in her discussion, uses the word “love” to characterize Job’s face-to-face experience with God that comes about because of his suffering.⁶³

There are several possibilities regarding how exactly the suffering visited on a person in YSA might facilitate greater intimacy between God and the sufferer. YSA might, as Weil envisages regarding suffering, lead to greater intimacy with God by, for example, the sufferer yielding to his or her suffering and experiencing greater closeness with God as a result. We have already mentioned *Penei Yehoshua*’s two main interpretations of YSA. Slightly later in his commentary to *Berakhot* 5a, he seems to offer a concise third reading of YSA along these Weilian lines.⁶⁴ He writes that “the righteous through suffering [*yissurim*] come out of the dimension of servitude, having been called servants of God, and from now, after their suffering, are called children of God and come closer under the wings of the Divine Presence.” *Penei Yehoshua* seems to be referring in this extract to YSA, even if he might also be referring to *yissurin* in general; the fact that he refers to the suffering of the *righteous* suggests this. Moreover, he is explicit later in this section of his commentary that he takes the stage in the *gemara*’s argument on which he is commenting to refer to YSA as well as to other kinds of *yissurin*.

Weil maintains that there is also a level beyond suffering, which she terms “affliction” (*malheur*), summarized by Marilyn McCord Adams as “a condition associated with long-term physical pain, which crushes the

the Divine, a second-person loving relationship.

62. Indeed, Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:6 famously links knowledge of God with love of God.

63. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 196. This paragraph is not intended to suggest that Stump explicitly advocates a divine intimacy theodicy in her treatment of Job (in fact, she never uses the terminology “divine intimacy theodicy”). Indeed, Stump emphasizes in Chapter 13 of *Wandering in Darkness* that one can’t just reduce enormously rich biblical narratives to neat theodicies. But she clearly believes that her reading of Job at least gestures in the direction of plausible theodicies. At one point, she writes, for example: “[T]he ultimate aim of God’s providential care in the narrative [of the Book of Job] is closeness to God and the greatness consequent on that closeness” (222). “Closeness to God” suggests divine intimacy theodicy and “greatness” hints at a soul-making theodicy.

64. S.v. *kal va-ḥomer mi-shen va-ayin*.

afflicted by destroying social relations and filling them with self-loathing, shame, and defilement almost in proportion to their innocence.”⁶⁵ In “affliction,” God’s love is experienced not just *through* suffering but—a distinction emphasised by Allen—in suffering.⁶⁶ The suffering *itself* is experienced as God’s love, like the physical embrace of a friend which is so tight that it hurts.⁶⁷ Weil links this with Jesus’s affliction on the cross, but it is not necessary either to follow this distinctively Christian route or to understand YSA as involving “affliction” in the Weilian sense in order to see that YSA might facilitate greater closeness between God and the sufferer either because 1) it is suffering which *results in* such closeness or, more radically, 2) it is suffering which is *itself* God’s love, His embrace, as it were. The passage quoted above from *Berakhot* 5a continues with a further teaching concerning YSA:

Rava,⁶⁸ in the name of R. Saḥorah, in the name of R. Huna, says: If the Holy One, blessed be He, is pleased with a man, he crushes him with painful sufferings. For it is said: And the Lord was pleased with [him, hence] he crushed him by disease [Is. 53:10].⁶⁹

“Pleased with” in the Soncino Talmud translation of this passage seems to me a rather anodyne rendition of *ḥafez*, the term used both by Is. 53:10 and R. Huna. The term seems very often to connote strong desire, something approaching love.⁷⁰ So R. Huna is almost explicit about YSA involving God’s crushing, loving “embrace.” This is alternative 2 (or, if one is not prepared to allow that love is connoted by *ḥafez*, alternative 1: someone whom God strongly desires and wants to bring closer to Him he crushes with suffering which will lead to greater intimacy).⁷¹

65. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), 161.

66. Allen, 199, 201.

67. See Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crauford (London, 1973), 76-94.

68. I have again amended the spelling from “Rabbah.”

69. The *gemara*’s citation of this text from the “suffering servant” passage is doubtless part of the motivation for those who offer vicarious atonement interpretations of YSA. The *gemara* also cites another part of this verse in this *sugya*. Alshikh actually cites Is. 53:10 when presenting a vicarious atonement reading of YSA in his commentary to Prov. 3:11. For further discussion of Alshikh’s views, see below.

70. See e.g. Gen. 34:19; I Sam. 19:1. In the well-known verse of Ps. 34:13, the root *ḥ-f-z* is used in parallel to the root *a-h-v*.

71. An anonymous referee for this journal acutely pointed out that the opening statement of Rava in the *sugya* (quoted at the beginning of Section 2 above) cannot be interpreting YSA according to alternative 2, since the statement focuses on a person who suffers and does not understand why he or she is suffering. But if the person

Significantly, the *gemara* goes on immediately to insist that R. Huna's statement applies (which I take to mean that the sufferings count as YSA⁷²) only if the afflictions are accepted by the sufferer with love. This ideal of acceptance is also highlighted by Alshikh at the conclusion of his commentary to Prov. 3:11.⁷³ While there is a general ideal posited in many Jewish sources of accepting divinely-imposed suffering with love and joy, or at least without complaint,⁷⁴ willing acceptance seems to be partly *constitutive* of YSA.⁷⁵ This underlines that central to YSA is relationship with and closeness to God.

Some Objections to Divine Intimacy Theodicy and Its Use in a Jewish Context

Before considering further possibilities regarding how exactly the suffering visited on a person in YSA might facilitate greater intimacy between God and the sufferer, we should consider some likely objections to divine intimacy theodicy, and in particular to its use in a Jewish context.

The first objection is that divine intimacy theodicy is appropriate for a Christian theological context but not a Jewish one. As already indicated, divine intimacy theodicy resonates from a Christian perspective. As Ekstrom puts it, "Is not suffering as a means to intimacy with God exactly what one would expect of a God who, on Christian scripture

experiences God *in* the suffering, the suffering will be explicable and he will not wonder why it is occurring. In my view, the best reading of the opening two statements of the *sugya* is therefore that the first statement interprets YSA according to alternative 1 and the second interprets it according to alternative 2.

72. The Schottenstein translation of the Talmud understands this differently: YSA "are visited upon a person only if they are accepted with consent." See *The Babylonian Talmud*, The Schottenstein Edition, the Artscroll Series (New York, 1997). In any event, on the Schottenstein translation, willing acceptance of the suffering is crucial—it is a necessary condition of YSA's being visited.

73. R. Bahye ben Asher in the passage from his Torah commentary referred to above also emphasizes this element. The specific suffering he is dealing with there is that of the Israelites in Egypt. He states that that suffering is YSA designed to increase the Israelites' reward "if they withstand that suffering and bear it with love."

74. See e.g. *Avot* 6:5; *Ta'anit* 8a; J. T. *Shekalim* 5:4; Maharal, *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Yisurin*, ch. 1.

75. This is brought out strikingly by Alshikh in his commentary to Prov. 10:16. There he refers to the stories of the sages afflicted with YSA near the end of the *Berakhot* 5a-5b *sugya* (the stories are discussed further below). Alshikh states that God removed the sufferings of these sages because they were not prepared to gladly accept them—the *raison d'être* of the sufferings, and therefore their continued existence itself was crucially dependent on their being gladly borne. (The essence of the same idea lies behind the Schottenstein translation; see n. 72 above). See also in this connection Alshikh's commentary to Lam. 3:26.

and tradition, took on human form and suffered along with and for the world?”⁷⁶ Ekstrom develops her divine intimacy theodicy in this distinctively Christian direction.⁷⁷ But the core idea of suffering as intimacy with the divine is, as we have noted, certainly reminiscent of YSA. Moreover, as we have also argued, Job 42:5 indicates how the idea of suffering as leading to intimacy with God can be solidly grounded in a biblical perspective. The idea of suffering as productive of intimacy with God also seems to be supported by the well-known teaching of Ḥazal that God sometimes causes suffering because He longs for the prayers of the righteous or of His people. God sometimes invites a person or group, through suffering, to make a deeper connection with Him and to call out for His Presence alongside him or them.⁷⁸

Although, as just noted, Ekstrom develops the divine intimacy theodicy in some specifically Christian ways, arguing that God sometimes allows human suffering in order that the sufferer can share something of the experience of suffering on the cross, she emphasizes that even if one adopts the doctrine of divine impassibility (as some traditional Christians do), a divine intimacy theodicy is still feasible: “There remains the possibility that God shows himself to a human sufferer in a unique way, even if there is no divine suffering.”⁷⁹ Given Maimonides’ famous antipathy towards anthropopathism, it may seem that the wisest course for Jews attracted to divine intimacy theodicy would be to opt for this “divine-impassibility-compliant” version of it. But even if the idea that God is able to suffer is essential to a divine intimacy theodicy, it is an idea to which traditional Jews can at least relate.⁸⁰ It is, of course, not just Tanakh but the literature of Ḥazal as well—sometimes drawing on biblical texts for this purpose—that makes occasional reference to God’s suffering. Let me briefly list some well-known examples.⁸¹ *Exodus Rabbah* 2:5 portrays God saying to Moses: “Do you not sense that I am in pain just as the Israelites are in pain [as slaves in Egypt]

76. Ekstrom, “Suffering as Religious Experience,” 96.

77. Marilyn McCord Adams also takes the idea that suffering can deepen one’s relationship with and knowledge of God in Christian directions in her article “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God” and in her book of the same title.

78. See, e.g., *Yevamot* 64a, *Ex. Rabbah* 21:5.

79. Ekstrom, “A Christian Theodicy,” 274.

80. I thank Sam Lebens for suggesting putting the point in this way.

81. Such examples, as well as others not mentioned here, are frequently cited. See, for instance, the succinct discussion in Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut* (London, 1978), ch. 8: “The Suffering God.”

... I am, as it were, a partner in their pain.” Another midrashic passage teaches: “At every time at which Israel is enslaved, the *Shekhinah* is, as it were, enslaved with them.”⁸² There is also the celebrated notion of the *Shekhinah* being in exile with the Jewish people and returning from exile with them.⁸³ *Berakhot* 29a and *Ḥagigah* 5b refer to God weeping, *Eikhah Rabbati Petiḥta* 8 depicts God crying because of the Exile from Zion, and *Petiḥta* 24 His suffering and weeping because of the destruction of the Temple. Psalm 91:15, which reads, in part, “I am with him in trouble,” is interpreted by Ḥazal to mean that God shares the afflictions of each individual Jew.⁸⁴ Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 6:5 (46a) describes the *Shekhinah* participating in human pain.⁸⁵ Statements in Ḥazal regarding the suffering of God may be intended as metaphorical, but, as Shalom Carmy points out, Ḥazal clearly considered such language acceptable.⁸⁶ The idea that God might in some sense suffer is not an utterly alien and unacceptable one to them.⁸⁷

Nehemia Polen has noted that “hasidic masters, in contrast to thinkers committed to the tradition of philosophical rationalism, were

82. *Mekhilta, Massekhta de-Pisha*, ch. 14 (p. 51 in the Horovitz-Rabin edition).

83. *Ibid.*; see also *Megillah* 29a.

84. *Ibid.*; see also *Sifrei, Beha' alotekha, piska* 84.

85. Though Eliezer Berkovits, in the course of a critique of A.J. Heschel's doctrine of divine pathos, argues that in *Megillah* 29a and *Sanhedrin* 46a “the very fact that the term *Shekhinah* is used, and not that of God, is in itself an indication how strongly rooted in the Jewish consciousness is the thought of God's impassibility” (Eliezer Berkovits, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism* [New York, 1974], 218). Berkovits goes on to provide instances in which the *Shekhinah* is not explicitly mentioned and the term *kivyakhol* is used; anthropopathic language in Ḥazal is, for Berkovits, always metaphorical. R. Aharon Lichtenstein also notes the use of *kivyakhol* or other qualifications in *midrashim* concerning the destruction of the Temple and exile in *Eikhah Rabbati* (Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” in *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, ed. Shalom Carmy [Northvale, N.J., 1999], 51-52). Berkovits also insists that references to “the sorrow of the *Shekhinah*” and “sorrow on High” in kabbalistic and Ḥasidic literature are fully compatible with the notion of God's impassibility (218-19). In Judaism in general, for Berkovits, “the theological climate is determined by a long tradition of affirmation of divine impassibility in face of numerous biblical texts to the contrary” (224).

86. Shalom Carmy, “The Long and Winding Road: By Way of Introduction,” in Carmy (ed.), *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, 10.

87. For a stimulating discussion concerning issues arising in philosophical theology and Jewish theology in talk about God, with particular reference to the idea of God's suffering and the use of the term *kivyakhol*, see Aaron Segal, “A Religiously Sensitive Jewish Philosophical Theology,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 16 (2012-13): 186-202 (review of R. Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot*, trans. by David Silverberg [Jerusalem, 2011]).

generally warmly disposed to the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic tendency within Judaism.”⁸⁸ In his work *Esh Kodesh*, written in Warsaw during the Holocaust, the Ḥasidic master Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira (1889-1943) develops a theology in which the idea of divine suffering is central. R. Shapira describes God’s suffering as infinite and beyond human comprehension.⁸⁹ This kind of theology, as Polen points out, “does not emerge from a vacuum; it is strongly rooted in a Kabbalistic-Hasidic worldview . . . [t]he theme of infinite Divine suffering cannot be viewed as an isolated and idiosyncratic utterance of a religious leader flung about wildly in a cruel maelstrom.”⁹⁰ Interestingly, at one point in his writings, R. Shapira actually mentions God’s suffering along with the sufferer of YSA (as well as with other kinds of sufferers): “[T]here are some sufferings which we suffer on our own account—whether for our sins, or as sufferings of love in order to purge and purify us—in which case He, blessed be He, just suffers along with us.”⁹¹

Although, as mentioned at the outset, I do not intend to deal systematically with objections to the theodicies discussed in this article, it is worth noting two other objections to the divine intimacy theodicy which are potentially so damaging that if they cannot be rebutted they render it very implausible, and with it any reading of YSA as a divine intimacy theodicy.

One is termed by Ekstrom “the objection from cruelty.”⁹² Permitting suffering seems to be a cruel way of fostering intimacy; it is implausible to hold that a wholly beneficent God would operate in this way. To take Ekstrom’s example, a parent who installed no safety gates on the stairs at her home so that her child would fall down the stairs and run to her for comfort would justifiably be considered cruel. Ekstrom’s response to this objection is that suffering is not a globally necessary condition of attaining intimacy with God. Rather, the proposal of divine intimacy theodicy is that “perhaps, *some* occasions of suffering enable *certain* individuals’ coming to love of and intimacy with God,” an intimacy

88. Nehemia Polen, “Divine Weeping: Rabbi Kalonymos Shapiro’s Theology of Catastrophe in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Modern Judaism* 7, 3 (October 1987): 261.

89. See Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale, N.J., 1994), chs. 6 and 8; Polen, “Divine Weeping,” 253-269.

90. Polen, “Divine Weeping,” 262.

91. *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1960), 191-2; translation from Polen, “Divine Weeping” 258.

92. Ekstrom, “A Christian Theodicy,” 275.

which those individuals could not achieve in any other way.⁹³ Similarly, as we have already noted, Ḥazal do not by any means intend YSA to cover all instances of suffering. It appears to be limited to quite rare cases and perhaps to quite rare individuals, and to depend on the response of the sufferer. YSA as divine intimacy theodicy should be understood as including these qualifications on its scope, just as a plausible divine intimacy theodicy will qualify its scope. This also suggests one reason why YSA is a closer fit with divine intimacy theodicy than with soul-making theodicies; a plausible divine intimacy theodicy is less global in its reach and does not attempt to explain the suffering of all.

A further objection is named by Ekstrom “the objection from lunacy.”⁹⁴ I think that it could be more accurately termed “the objection from masochism.” The idea is that viewing suffering as a path to intimacy with God seems easily to lead to an attitude that welcomes any suffering that one may encounter, taking delight in it because of its supposed spiritual benefits. Indeed, it appears able to lead smoothly to the deliberate infliction of suffering on oneself in order to attain closeness to God. Ekstrom cites the example of the Cistercian nun Beatrice of Nazareth, who is reported to have perceived suffering in this way and, *inter alia*, to have scourged herself and slept on thorns.⁹⁵ An interpretation of YSA as divine intimacy theodicy appears open to the objection from masochism.⁹⁶

The well-known episodes recounted near the end of the discussion of YSA in *Berakhot* 5b constitute a powerful response to this objection. The first of the three similar stories runs as follows:

R. Ḥiyya b. Abba fell ill and R. Yoḥanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

David Kraemer argues that these stories clearly legitimate protest against YSA.⁹⁷ But although Kraemer is correct that no justification of YSA is

93. *Ibid.*; emphases mine.

94. Ekstrom, “A Christian Theodicy,” 276.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Daniel Boyarin mentions YSA in his discussion of Jewish masochism. See his *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, 1997), 111-15. R. Norman Lamm anticipates the linkage of YSA with masochism: “The concept of *yissurim shel ahavah*, suffering in love, is not to be understood as a theological form of masochism or sadism” (Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*, [2nd ed., New York, 1986], 323).

97. Kraemer, 132-34.

offered, God's justice is not questioned.⁹⁸ Nor even is the value of suffering. It is simply acknowledged that the pain being experienced is such that it is legitimate to prefer not to suffer and not to reap the rewards of suffering. The stories concede that the fact that God is just and the fact that suffering is valuable and brings reward do not entail that it is not religiously legitimate to want to avoid suffering. The human cost and pain involved in suffering is fully acknowledged by the *gemara*, which shows us that even three great sages reach a point where they want no part of suffering. The *gemara's* position appears to be that it is not just that it is improper to masochistically inflict suffering on oneself but that even *ex post facto*, once suffering has been visited by God, one need not welcome it as an opportunity for intimacy with Him. It is fully legitimate to reject both the suffering and the closeness to God that it facilitates.⁹⁹

98. Marvin Fox argues that the series of negative answers of the sages in *Berakhot* 5b to the question "are your sufferings welcome to you?" constitutes "forceful anti-theodicy . . . [T]hey reject outright the theodicy of 'sufferings of love'" (Marvin Fox, "Theodicy and Anti-Theodicy in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature," in *Theodicy*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok [Jewish Studies Vol. 18] [Lewiston NY, 1997], 41). I suggest that the sages who respond in the three episodes do accept YSA as a valid theodicy but themselves want no part of suffering, even if the suffering is an expression of God's love.

99. In a similar vein, though without commenting on whether or not the three episodes constitute a rejection of YSA as a theodicy, R. Aharon Lichtenstein notes that "[a]t the personal level . . . Ḥazal recognized that even the greatest very well might prefer to forego both pain and its lucrative aftermath" (Lichtenstein, 46). He cites and translates (*ibid.*, 45) the following striking passage from *Midrash Tehillim* 6:3:

R. Yudan said in the name of R. Ammi: The congregation of Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Lord of the Universe, even though the verse states, 'God chastises those whom He loves' (Prov. 3:12)—'Do not rebuke me in Your anger' (Ps. 6:2). Even though the verse states, 'Blessed is the man whom God chastises' (Ps. 94:12)—'Do not chastise me in Your fury' (Ps. 6:2)."

See, however, Alshikh to Prov. 3:11, 10:16 and 10:17, where he states that one afflicted with YSA should not respond "neither they nor their reward." In his commentary to Lam. 3:27 he qualifies this and says that in old age, when one becomes weaker, "neither they nor their reward" is a legitimate response. Maharsha to *Berakhot* 5b, s.v. *havivin alekha yissurin* adopts the same basic position as Alshikh. He ingeniously argues that the sages in the three stories would not have responded "neither they nor their reward" had their suffering been YSA. It was only because their suffering was so severe that it was preventing them from studying Torah (and was hence by the Talmud's own definition, according to one opinion, not YSA) that they responded in this way. Maharal, *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Yissurin*, ch. 1 (p. 430 in the Pardes edition) suggests that the sages' response "neither they nor their reward" was legitimate, but only because they feared that they may not withstand the suffering and respond improperly as did Job. Nevertheless, it does seem that the straightforward sense of the talmudic text sees little wrong with the sages' response.

Less Direct Forms of YSA as Divine Intimacy Theodicy

There are further possibilities regarding exactly how the suffering visited on a person in YSA might facilitate greater intimacy between God and the sufferer. The connection between YSA and human intimacy with the Divine is interestingly highlighted in the commentary of R. Moshe Alshikh to Hosea 11:4. Alshikh states that there are two types of divinely-inflicted suffering (*yissurin*): those that are visited in response to sin and those—which he defines as YSA—which are visited without sin but in order “to atone for the generation.” (The idea here is vicarious atonement achieved for the community as a whole through the suffering of an individual or individuals who is/are themselves without sin.¹⁰⁰) Referring to the imagery of ropes employed in the biblical verse, Alshikh goes on to say that both types of suffering are means by which God draws the sufferer closer to Himself. However, attending to the two different terms used for “ropes” or “bonds” in the verse (*havlei*, the construct form of *havalim*, and *avotot*), Alshikh states that *avotot*, which he takes to be referring to YSA, are three times thicker and stronger than *havalim*, the term that he understands to refer to punitive suffering. YSA’s are thus much more effective than punitive suffering in “drawing towards and causing a person to cleave to Him, may He be blessed.” In his commentary to Prov. 3:11, Alshikh writes that through the YSA inflicted on the righteous person as vicarious atonement for the sins of his or her contemporaries, “He [God] will add to His love with which he loves Him a very intense love” and—no doubt taking his cue from the next verse, Prov. 3:12, “For whom the Lord loves He corrects, like a father the son in whom he delights”—the sufferer becomes a “child” of God rather than a mere “servant.”¹⁰¹ Alshikh emphasises this in the concluding sentence of his commentary on this verse: “Through *yissurin shel ahavah* the sufferer rises to exceeding love from Him, may He be blessed, as a father loves a son, and this is stated here in this verse [as Alshikh interprets it] to give a reason for *yissurin shel ahavah* so that one not reject and refuse to accept them [the sufferings].” God’s paternal love for the sufferer of YSA is stressed again in his commentary to the following verse.

What Alshikh presents here is YSA as a less direct kind of divine intimacy theodicy than those kinds we have discussed thus far. By means

100. In his commentary to Hosea 14:6 and Prov. 3:11, Alshikh explicitly links YSA to the notion of vicarious atonement.

101. Cf. *Penei Yehoshua*’s use of this theme in presenting a divine intimacy interpretation of YSA discussed above. The first part of Prov. 3:12, as we saw earlier, is quoted near the beginning of the discussion of YSA in *Berakhot* 5a.

of the sufferer vicariously atoning through YSA, he or she becomes more beloved of God. The intimacy plays an important role here—Alshikh’s great emphasis on it suggests that vicarious atonement is only a secondary factor in justifying the suffering of the righteous innocent person. His or her suffering is justified mainly because it brings him closer to God; it is divine intimacy which is doing the work of theodicy, of justification.¹⁰²

A further form of YSA as a divine intimacy theodicy is more direct than Alshikh’s but less direct than the Weil-type modes discussed earlier. It returns us to the idea of YSA as purging of the soul, which we encountered in our discussions of Nahmanides and *Penei Yehoshua*. This idea is also important in the interpretations of YSA presented by R. Nissim of Gerona (Ran) and Maharal, but in a different way.

Ran states his view of YSA concisely in the tenth *derashah* of *Derashot ha-Ran*.¹⁰³ His conception of YSA is explicitly non-punitive. The purpose of YSA is to distance the righteous person from material matters and desires as far as possible. This appears to be the same kind of soul-making theodicy as we encountered in *Penei Yehoshua*’s first main interpretation of YSA. However, it is interesting that Ran uses the language of divine intimacy at one point in his brief treatment of YSA. He writes that it is impossible even in the case of a very righteous person who does not sin “*she-lo yatrduhu me’at ta’avot ha-olam me-hiddav-ek be-Bore’o*,” “that some this-worldly desires will not interfere with his cleaving to his Creator.”¹⁰⁴ While it appears that Ran’s main thrust in the single paragraph he devotes to YSA in this *derashah* is soul-making, the inclusion of the element of divine intimacy is perhaps significant.

We come now to the position of Maharal. Maharal mentions YSA in several places in his voluminous works, but his central discussion is in *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Yissurin*, chapter 1. As noted above, Maharal understands YSA as non-punitive. How, then, is it to be explained? Maharal’s answer is that YSA is necessary to cleanse and purge the soul of its attachment to the material so that it may attain the supreme spiritual level. Once again, this sounds very close to the first main interpretation of *Penei Yehoshua*. But if we attend to the way in which Maharal

102. This distinguishes Alshikh’s position from *Penei Yehoshua*’s second main interpretation of YSA discussed earlier, in which vicarious atonement appears to play a much more central role in justifying the suffering.

103. *Derashot ha-Ran ha-Shalem im Perush Be’erot Moshe*, ed. R. Aryeh Leib Feldman (Jerusalem, 2003), 402-403.

104. *Ibid.*

formulates this idea, it becomes clear that his position is substantially different to that of *Penei Yehoshua*. Maharal writes:

And they are called afflictions of love [*yissurin shel ahavah*] because God loves him [the sufferer] *and wishes to draw that person close to Him so that he may cleave to Him*, but the person has something preventing him which is *not fit to cleave to Him*. Therefore God brings suffering upon him to purge him *so that he is fit to cleave*, and therefore they are called afflictions of love. The [correct] interpretation [of YSA] is not that because of love He inflicts suffering on him, which would certainly be inappropriate, but that God loves and desires him *and therefore wishes to bring him close to Him*, but the person has not attained this level, and so God purges the material blemish in him *so that he is fit to cleave* [to God].¹⁰⁵

It is clear from this passage that the purging and improvement of the soul accomplished by YSA is not the real purpose of the afflictions but rather only a means, albeit a necessary means, to an end. That end, as repeatedly emphasized in the passage, is closeness to, cleaving to, intimacy with God in this world. While the idea of YSA as the purging of the soul makes the position of Maharal initially seem close to that of *Penei Yehoshua*, then, a careful reading of Chapter 1 of *Netiv ha-Yissurin* yields the conclusion that Maharal reads YSA as a divine intimacy theodicy rather than as a kind of soul-making theodicy, as if taking up the hint in Ran's treatment of YSA but going much further with it. A little further on, Maharal emphasizes the real purpose of YSA from his perspective: "The Holy One desires him, to bring him to Him so that he is close to Him."¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Maharal stresses throughout this chapter the theme of closeness to God and YSA as a means to it.¹⁰⁷ What Maharal presents in *Netivot Olam* is a divine intimacy theodicy: what justifies the suffering is the achievement of closeness to God in the here-and-now. Of course, one could argue that greater closeness to God is itself an improvement of the soul. But Maharal's emphasis on the attainment of intimacy with God in this world makes his position a divine intimacy rather than soul-making theodicy.

That emphasis also emerges in chapter 1 of *Netiv Ha-Yissurin* in his explanation of one of the differences of opinion in the *Berakhot* discussion of YSA. According to one opinion in the *gemara*, any suffering that causes *bittul Torah*, the negation of Torah study, cannot constitute

105. *Netivot Olam*, ed. Pardes, vol. 2, p. 427; emphases mine.

106. *Ibid.*, 428.

107. In *Netiv ha-Yissurin* ch. 2 (*ibid.*, 433-34), the idea of YSA as a means to closeness with God is underlined yet again.

YSA. According to a second opinion, any suffering that causes one to be unable to pray cannot constitute YSA. Maharal explains the first opinion thus: since Torah study is the best way of cleaving to God, suffering that causes distancing from God through inability to study cannot be YSA. Similarly, according to the second opinion, prayer is the quintessential method of achieving closeness to God, and so suffering which prevents the attainment of this intimacy cannot be YSA. The dispute between the two opinions focuses on whether Torah study or prayer is the optimum tool for achieving intimacy with the divine, but “both agree that *yissurin shel ahavah* cannot involve distance and separation from God.”¹⁰⁸

In articulating the need for willing acceptance by the sufferer of YSA, emphasized as we have seen in the *Berakhot sugya* and Alshikh as constitutive of YSA and crucial to the idea of intimacy, Maharal once again underscores the central role of intimacy with God in the here-and-now: “He [the sufferer] needs to accept them [the afflictions] in love, for if he does not accept them in love he does not cleave to Him, and how then will these be *yissurin shel ahavah*?”¹⁰⁹

6. Conclusion

The central argument of this paper has been that divine intimacy theodicy is the option in contemporary philosophy of religion that is most fruitful to consider in connection with YSA. We have surveyed a number of ways in which YSA might be interpreted as a divine intimacy theodicy and have argued that these are identifiable in talmudic or important later sources. Moreover, the idea that suffering can be productive of intimacy with God is, we have seen, found in Jewish sources even independently of YSA. And even if divine intimacy theodicy is construed in its more radical mode as involving the idea that God can suffer, this idea is far from an alien one in important strands of Jewish tradition. It would seem that divine intimacy theodicy is not just an interesting notion for Christian thinkers but is worthy of

108. *Netivot Olam*, ed. Pardes, vol. 2, 428.

109. *Ibid.* Maharal here seems to support my reading of *Berakhot* 5a as opposed to the Schottenstein edition’s; see n. 72 above. Maharal implicitly (or perhaps explicitly) suggests here—as others, e.g. R. Yosef Albo, sometimes do in their discussions of YSA—that *ahavah* in the phrase *yissurin shel ahavah* can be taken as referring to the love of the sufferer for God as well as God’s love for the sufferer. If YSA is read as any of the kinds of divine intimacy theodicy discussed in Section 5 of this article, the term *ahavah* in *yissurin shel ahavah* could similarly be interpreted not only as God’s love for the sufferer, but as the love of the sufferer for God, which is elevated to a new level.

consideration as part of a traditional Jewish theological approach to the problem of suffering, particularly in relation to the doctrine of YSA.

None of this is to deny that the talmudic *sugya* in which the concept of YSA is primarily embedded is far away from the formal presentation and categorisation of theodicies. As Louis Jacobs notes, in the *Berakhot* 5a-5b *sugya* “we are far removed from anything like a systematic treatment by the Rabbis of the theological problem of suffering.”¹¹⁰ It is a commonplace that Ḥazal generally eschewed systematic theological discussion. Perhaps that is a particular strength when it comes to the problem of suffering; many have argued for the inappropriateness and even callousness of attempting to deal with the complexities of this topic in a series of neat analytic propositions. Others disagree: John Hick urges that “to erect a general embargo upon the reasoned consideration of sin and suffering would be to abandon the vocation of philosopher or theologian.”¹¹¹ In a sentence which mentions together the two central concepts which have been the focus of this essay, R. Norman Lamm writes: “The theme of suffering, like that of love, is poorly served by normal theological discourse precisely because it is so central to and so massively problematical for the whole enterprise of religion.”¹¹² He suggests that “[l]iterature, with its liberal recourse to symbols and layered meanings and nuanced situations, is better equipped to explore and suggest and probe this most potent of all questions.”¹¹³ Those who find systematic philosophical or theological treatment of suffering ultimately inadequate may well feel that the non-systematic nature of the *Berakhot* YSA *sugya* and, like so many aggadic *sugyot*, its ability to straddle the border between theology and literature so effectively, enable it to combine open-endedness, deep insight, and an awareness of the ambiguities inherent in this most challenging area.

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110. Louis Jacobs, “The *Sugya* on Sufferings in B. *Berakhot* 5a, b,” in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem, 1981), 43.

111. Hick, 9.

112. Lamm, 313.

113. *Ibid.*