

Comments on David Benatar on Judaism and Antinatalism

David Benatar provides clever, careful and clear arguments for important conclusions. Nevertheless, his critics often misunderstand and malign him. Their reactions are guided by emotion, not reason. It must be frustrating being Benatar. But it is better for us to have him in being, even if, as he powerfully argues, it is better for us never to have been.

Religious critics reply to Benatar's pessimism by pointing to religious teachings in a more optimistic direction, e.g. Genesis on the goodness of our creation, and the command to have children. Benatar responds with religious texts in the opposite direction, especially pointing to pessimism from some of the prophets and rabbis over our existence.

When religious texts point us in different directions, each should be interpreted in light of the rest of the tradition, as well as what else we know about the world. The latter include theological arguments that e.g. God would not bring us about if it were better for us never to have been (see the Vilna Gaon's *Commentary on Jonah*, 4:3, but see the *Sheloh, Toldot Adam, Beit David*, 18, for a possible response—both on the relevant passage in Eruvin 13b). I won't carry out an extensive study. Instead, I'll draw from some of my previous publications:

1. In 'Judaism, Reincarnation and Theodicy', Beth Seacord and I argue that the doctrine of reincarnation helps answer the problem of evil. In his *Commentary on Jonah* mentioned there and above, the Vilna Gaon invokes reincarnation to interpret the pessimism in Ecclesiastes and the debate in Eruvin: the rabbis are actually debating about whether it is better to have one incarnation or many—whether it is better to have been born *again*, not whether it is better to have been born *at all*. On the one hand, reincarnation is the result of sin; on the other, it provides further moral opportunities.

This interpretation might look silly. But the Vilna Gaon is not generally inclined towards silly interpretations. Furthermore, he is familiar with other interpretations which look far less silly. So, I think that his interpretation is not silly.

2. In 'The Divine Proofreader', Sam Lebens and I argue that God will make it the case that there never was any harm or suffering¹. This means that, even if Benatar is *now* correct that it is better never to have been, he will turn out to be incorrect. Even if harm and suffering now make it better never to have been, after history is rewritten there will never have been harm and suffering, and it will not be better never to have been.

Though we had not noticed it, the view defended in the paper would harmonize both the pessimistic and the optimistic religious teachings: the pessimistic ones apply before history is rewritten; the optimistic ones apply after. The interpretative power of our view here lends it further Jewish support.

In the end, however we are to interpret certain religious texts, the final word of orthodox Jewish law is that having children is obligatory for men, and that abortion, even though on rare occasions obligatory, is generally forbidden—contrary to Benatar's antinatalism.

¹ We develop the argument in light of various Jewish sources, including another *Benatar*—Hayyim Ibn Attar, the *Or HaHayyim*. I suppose that our Benatar would prefer to go by the moniker the *Hoshekb HaHayyim*.