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**The World Pursues its Natural Course:  
Rabbi David Hartman's Theology  
of Divine Limitation and Human Responsibility**

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**1. David Hartman, *A Living Covenant*, pp. 198–9**

Rabbinic teachers did not offer one single model of how to respond to suffering and how to anticipate the divine response to observance of the *mitzvot*. The context, the situation, all that has occurred in a person's life, will influence the type of perception that that person will bring to God in a particular situation. The consciousness of a living personal God that grows out of the biblical story of God the Creator and Sustainer of life, God the Redeemer of Israel from slavery, and God the Source of the commandments at Sinai does not permit a consistent single-dimensional theology. Rabbinic Judaism forswore systematic theology, not because the rabbis could not think in a coherent philosophical way, but because systematic theology could not do justice to the vitality and complexity of experience.

Within human relationships, there are moments of happiness, love, tenderness, and intimacy; there are feelings of mutual appreciation, respect, dignity, and creativity. There are also, however, moments of pain, fear, rejection, loneliness, estrangement, terror, anger and intimidation. Mature human relationships have ways of incorporating the whole range of these feelings and attitudes. Similarly, one cannot expect that worship within a theistic framework could be understood and contained within one model or posture, especially if one seeks to make all of life an occasion for worship. The alternative rhythms of reality, the pains and joys, sufferings, loneliness, ecstasy, terror – all these complex feelings will have to find some way of being absorbed in one's personal relationship with God...

A personal God Whose actions in history cannot be predicted, Who is not tied to the universe through patterns of causal necessity, Who is considered to be the source of all that occurs in reality, will always be perceived in multiple relational models by those who seek to relate to Him, just as all dynamic human relationships that contain aspects of unpredictability and uncertainty have to be organized from more than one perspective.

## 2. Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 54b

גמ' ת"ר שאלו פלוסופין את הזקנים ברומי אם אלהיכם אין רצונו בעבודת כוכבים מפני מה אינו מבטלה אמרו להם אילו לדבר שאין העולם צורך לו היו עובדין הרי הוא מבטלה הרי הן עובדין לחמה וללבנה ולכוכבים ולמזלות יאבד עולם מפני השוטים אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין דבר אחר הרי שגזל סאה של חטים [והלך] וזרעה בקרקע דין הוא שלא תצמח אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג והולך ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין דבר אחר הרי שבא על אשת חבירו דין הוא שלא תתעבר אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג והולך ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין והיינו דאמר ריש לקיש אמר הקב"ה לא דיין לרשעים שעושין סלע שלי פומבי אלא שמטריחין אותי ומחתימין אותי בעל כרחי

The Sages taught: Philosophers asked the Sages in Rome: "If it is not your God's will that people engage in idol worship, for what reason does God not eliminate it?" They replied: "If it were something of which the world had no need that was worshiped, God would abolish it. But people worship the sun, moon, stars, and planets. Should God destroy the world on account of fools? ***Rather, the world pursues its natural course***; and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.

Another illustration: suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and went and sowed it in the ground. It is right that it should not grow. But ***the world pursues its natural course***; and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.

Another illustration: suppose a man has intercourse with his neighbor's wife. It is right that she should not conceive. But ***the world pursues its natural course***; and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account."

This is similar to what Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said: "The Holy One, blessed be God, declared: 'It is not enough that the wicked put My coinage to vulgar use, but they trouble Me and compel Me to set My seal thereon!'"

### 3. Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b

דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי למה נקרא שמן אנשי כנסת הגדולה שהחזירו עטרה ליושנה אתא משה אמר (דברים י, יז) האל הגדול הגבור והנורא אתא ירמיה ואמר נכרים מקרקרין בהיכלו איה נוראותיו לא אמר נורא אתא דניאל אמר נכרים משתעבדים בבניו איה גבורותיו לא אמר גבור אתו אינהו ואמרו אדרבה זו היא גבורת גבורתו שכובש את יצרו שנותן ארך אפים לרשעים ואלו הן נוראותיו שאלמלא מוראו של הקב"ה היאך אומה אחת יכולה להתקיים בין האומות ורבנן היכי עבדי הכי ועקרי תקנתא דתקין משה אמר רבי אלעזר מתוך שיודעין בהקב"ה שאמתי הוא לפיכך לא כזבו בו

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: "Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness. Moses had come and said: *the great, the mighty, and the awesome God* [Deut. 10:17]. Then Jeremiah came and said: "Aliens are frolicking in God's temple; where then are God's awesome deeds?" Hence [Jeremiah] omitted the 'awesome' [Jer. 32:18]. Daniel came and said: "Aliens are enslaving God's sons; where are God's mighty deeds?" Hence [Daniel] omitted the word 'mighty' [Dan. 9:4].

But [the Men of the Great Assembly] came and said: "On the contrary, therein lie God's mighty deeds that God suppresses God's wrath, that God extends long-suffering to the wicked. Therein lie God's awesome powers, for but for fear of God, how could our nation persist among the nations?" But how could sages [i.e. Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish something established by Moses? Rabbi Eleazar said: "Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be God, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false things to God."

### 4. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88a

"וַיִּתְנַצְּבוּ בְּתַחְתֵּית הָהָר", אָמַר רַב אֲבָדִימִי בֶר חָמָא בֶר חָסָא: מְלַמֵּד שְׁכַפָּה הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עָלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוּטָב, וְאִם לֹא — שָׁם תִּהְיֶה קְבוּרַתְכֶם. אָמַר רַב אֲחָא בֶר יַעֲקֹב: מִכָּאן מוּדְעָא רַבָּה לְאוּרֵייתָא. אָמַר רַבָּא: אָף עַל פִּי כֹן הַדּוֹר קְבֻלָּהּ בִּימֵי אֲחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ, דְּכָתִיב: "קִיְמוּ וְקַבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים" — קִיְמוּ מֵה שְׁקִיבְלוּ כְּבָר.

*And they stood under the mountain* [Exod. 19:17]. Rabbi Avdimi ben Hama ben Hasa said: "This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be God, overturned the mountain and suspended it upon them like a barrel and said to them: 'If you accept the Torah, well and good, but if not – there shall be your burial!'" Rabbi Aha ben Jacob observed: "This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah!" [i.e., a blanket excuse for nonobservance of a covenant ratified under duress]. Said Rava: "Yet even so, they accepted it again in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written: *The Jews confirmed and they assumed upon themselves* [Esther 9:27]; they ratified [with the institution of Purim] what they took upon them long before [at Sinai]."

## 5. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 20b

דַּרְשׁ רַב עֲוִירָא, זְמַנִּין אָמַר לֵה מְשַׁמִּיָּה דְרַבִּי אֲמִי וְזַמַּנִּין אָמַר לֵה מְשַׁמִּיָּה דְרַבִּי אָסִי : אָמְרוּ מְלַאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרַת לְפָנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא : רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, כְּתוּב בְּתוֹרַתְךָ "אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד", וְהִלֵּא אֵתְּהָ נּוֹשֵׂא פָנִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, דְּכַתִּיב : "יִשָּׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ"?! אָמַר לָהֶם : וְכִי לֹא אֲשָׂא פָנִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׁכַתְּבִתִּי לָהֶם בְּתוֹרָה "וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ", וְהֵם מְדַקְדְּקִים [עַל] עֲצָמָם עַד כְּזֵית וְעַד כְּבִיצָה.

The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be God: "Sovereign of the Universe, it is written in Your law: *[the great, the mighty, and the awesome God] Who is impartial and takes no bribe* [Deut. 10:17]. And are You not partial toward Israel, as it is written: *The Lord lift up God's countenance upon you* [Num. 6:26]? God replied to them: "And shall I not lift up My countenance for Israel, seeing that I wrote for them in the Torah, *And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God* [Deut. 8:10], and they are particular to say grace if the quantity is but an olive or an egg?"