Alan Cooper is the Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies. He joined the faculty in 1997 as a professor of Bible, and has served as director of publications chair of the Bible faculty, and, from 2007 to 2018, provost of JTS. In 1998, he was appointed professor of Bible at the Union Theological Seminary, a nondenominational Christian seminary, becoming the first person to hold concurrent professorships at JTS and Union. Previously, he was a professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, where for six years he was director of its School of Graduate Studies. He also taught religious studies for ten years at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Dr. Cooper earned a bachelor’s degree in Religion at Columbia University. He went on to do his graduate work at Yale University, earning a master of philosophy degree and doctorate in Religious Studies. His doctoral dissertation was on the linguistic structure of biblical poetry. He also spent a year in Jerusalem as a Hebrew University postdoctoral fellow.

Dr. Cooper’s publications include a monograph on Canaanite divine names that appear in the Hebrew Bible, and many articles on biblical poetics and the history of interpretation. Recent articles include “Once Again Seething a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk” (in JSIJ [Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal]); “Some Aspects of Traditional Jewish Psalms Interpretation” (in The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms); and “Introduction to Leviticus” (in Engaging Torah: Modern Perspectives on the Hebrew Bible). His work in progress includes a commentary on Psalms 31 through 60 for the Jewish Publication Society.
1. **Lamentations 3:25-29**

[JPS:] The LORD is good to those who trust in Him.

To the one who seeks Him;
It is good to wait patiently
Till rescue comes from the LORD.
It is good for a man,
To bear a yoke when young;

Let him sit alone and be patient,
When He has laid it upon him.

Let him put his mouth to the dust—
There may yet be hope.

2. As punishment for King David’s adulterous union with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan announces that the first offspring of their relationship will die: (2 Samuel 12:14):

However, since you have spurned the enemies of the LORD by this deed, even the child about to be born to you shall die.

Despite the dire prophecy, when the child is born and becomes critically ill, David fasts and prays for the infant’s life (v. 16). As soon as the baby dies, however, David ceases his petitioning and almost immediately resumes his normal activities. When his servants ask him to explain his behavior, he says (vv. 22-23):

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1 According to Rashi and Redak, “enemies of the Lord” is a circumlocution for “the Lord,” although other commentators try to make sense of the text as it stands.

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Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies
“While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought:

‘Who knows? The LORD may have pity on me, and the child may live.’

But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me.”

3. In his commentary on 2 Samuel 21:21, Levi Ben Gershon [Ralbag, Gersonides] (France; 1288-1344) uses the allusion to Goliath’s disparagement of Israel (vv. 20-21; cf. 1 Samuel 17) as an occasion to enumerate 68(!) lessons (תועליות) that may be derived from the stories about David.

#44 is to teach how even though God has decreed to bring about evil, it is unfitting for a person to refrain from praying for God to remove that evil because He is gracious and renouncing punishment. In this respect, even though God had fated for David by means of His prophet that the child surely would die, David did not refrain from praying, fasting, and lying on the ground, greatly abasing himself
before God. **Maybe** God would be gracious to him and let the child live. From this we learn that when it says in the Torah, “When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered [before the LORD your God and be delivered from your enemies]” (Numbers 10:9), it means by way of prayer and fasting, as we explained in our Torah commentary.

[There is no explicit mention of prayer and fasting in Numbers 10:9. According to Ralbag, however, the sound of the trumpets is intended to inspire acts of penitence that evoke God’s mercy, וירחמם להתפללם אלוהים, “and God will have mercy on them for their praying to Him because it is the prayer along with the trumpet blast that occasions their being remembered.”]

#45 has to do with the commandments: it teaches that it is unfitting to fast and pray about a hardship that already has come to pass. It is unfitting to pray for something that is impossible for God except if it were a prophet praying and petitioning for a miracle. For this reason David said, “But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?” We also explained this in the Torah commentary from the fact that it says “an aggressor who attacks [is attacking/is about to attack] you,” not one who has attacked already.
4. In Esther 4:11, Esther expresses her fear that she will be executed if she enters the king’s presence unsummoned. Mordecai remonstrates with her (4:13-17):

The religious message that may be implicit in the Hebrew is spelled out in one of the Greek versions of Esther:

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<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Greek Alpha-text</th>
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<td>Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have</td>
<td>So Mardochaios sent to her and said to her, If you ignore your nation and do not help them, then surely God will be to them a helper and deliverance, but you and your father’s household will perish. And who knows if for this time you were made queen?”</td>
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attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” 15 Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai: 16 "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" 17 So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.

5. Jeremiah 18:5-10 contains an essential statement about the equivocal character of divine judgement:

וַיְהִ֥י דְבַר־הָ' לֵאֵל֣וֹם: הָכִ֔י מַ֥ה הָאָ֖זֶר לֹא־אוּכַֽל לַﬠֲשׂ֣וֹת לָכֶ֗ם בֵּ֥ית יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל נְאֻם־וֹ:

וְגַם כַּחֵם בְּיָדִ֖י בֵּ֥ית יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃ רֶ֣גַע אֲדַבֵּ֔ר לּ֖וֹ וְﬠַל־גּ֣וֹי וְﬠַל־מַמְלָכָ֑ה חֲשָׂ֖בְתִּי לַﬠֲשׂ֥וֹת לֽוֹ׃ וְרֶ֣גַע אֲדַבֵּ֔ר לּ֖וֹ וְﬠַל־גּ֣וֹי וְﬠַל־מַמְלָכָ֑ה לִבְנֹ֖ת וְלִנְטֹֽשׁ לַﬠֲשׂ֣וֹת לֽוֹ׃

וְלֵתָ֖ה לָֽהֶוָ֣ה אָרֶ֥י הָשָׁ֖בֶת לַﬠֲשׂ֣וֹת לֽוֹ׃ וְרֶ֣גַע אֲדַבֵּ֔ר לּ֖וֹ וְﬠַל־גּ֣וֹי וְﬠַל־מַמְלָכָ֑ה לִבְנֹ֖ת וְלִנְטֹֽשׁ לַﬠֲשׂ֣וֹת לֽוֹ׃

וְלָ֖הֶוָ֣ה אָרֶ֥י הָשָׁ֖בֶת לַﬠֲשׂ֣וֹת לֽוֹ׃ וְרֶ֣גַע אֲדַבֵּ֔ר לּ֖וֹ וְﬠַל־גּ֣וֹי וְﬠַל־מַמְלָכָ֑ה לִבְנֹ֖ת וְלִנְטֹֽשׁ לַ孓ּ֣וֹת לֽוֹ׃

וַיִּשָּׁ֔ר הָֽנֹ֔ף בְּקַ֥ולִי וְנִֽחַמְתִּי֙ לּ֖וֹ וְﬠַל־הָֽנְטֽוֹשׁ אֶֽמְרַ֖תַּהּ אֶֽמְרַ֖תַּהּ עִ֑ילָה לַﬠֲשׂ֖וֹת לֽוֹ׃

אָזַ֖הוּ:

11(15) Then the queen sent saying,

(16) Proclaim a religious service,
and petition God earnestly, and I and my girls will do likewise.

And I will go to the king uninvited, even if it be necessary that I die.”

12(17) And Mardochaios did so.
Then the word of the LORD came to me: O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?—says the LORD. Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel! At one moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be uprooted and pulled down and destroyed; but if that nation against which I made the decree turns back from its wickedness, I change My mind concerning the punishment I planned to bring on it. At another moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be built and planted; but if it does what is displeasing to Me and does not obey Me, then I change My mind concerning the good I planned to bestow upon it.

6. In Joel 2:1-11, the prophet depicts the advent of the Day of the Lord, when as punishment for sin the Divine Warrior and His troops will turn the land from a veritable Garden of Eden into a desolate waste (v. 3). But then the prophet declares (vv. 12-14),

גַּם־ﬠַתָּה֙ נְאֻם־ה' שֻׁ֥בוּ ָדַ֖י בְּכָל־לְבַבְכֶ֑ם וּבְצ֥וֹם וּבְבְכִ֖י וּבְמִסְפֵּֽד׃ וְקִרְﬠ֤וּ וְאַפַּ֙יִם֙ אֶל־הלְבַבְכֶ֔ם וְאַל־בִּגְדֵיכֶ֔ם וְשׁ֖וּבוּ �

לַבְבֵכֶ֘ם וְאֶל־בְּכָל־לְבָנָ֣ה אֲלֹהֵי֙ אֲלֹהִ֔ים אֲלֹהִ֖ים נְשׁוֹבָֽהּ וְרָֽחָם׃

רֹבֵֽךְ תַּנְבִּיטֵֽנָה לְיַעֲרֵֽהֱתָ֖ה: מִי יָשֻׁב יָשֻׁב הָרַשָּׁה אֲלֹהִ֑ים אֶֽת־ירָ֖שָׁה

מִנְחָֽה וָנֶ֔ס קִרְﬠ֔וּ אֵלֶּ֖יהוּ מִנְחָֽה

“Yet even now”—says the LORD—“Turn back to Me with all your hearts, and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting.” Rend your hearts rather than your garments, and turn back to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment. Who knows but He may turn
and relent, and leave a blessing behind for meal offering and drink offering to the LORD your God?

[In the following verse (2:15), the prophet calls upon Israel to “Blow a horn (shofar) in Zion, solemnize a fast, proclaim an assembly” in order to plead for divine compassion, which is granted in the form of an oracle of salvation (vv. 18-27).]

7. In Jonah 3:4-10, the uncertainty inherent in what sounds like an unequivocal oracle of judgement motivates the Ninevites to act. They seem to be acting out the scenario depicted in Joel 2:

Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day’s walk, and proclaimed: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a
fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: “By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish.” God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.

8. In Jonah 4:1-3, the prophet is profoundly disturbed by what is tantamount to the falsification of his oracle. Jonah’s certainty about the outcome had motivated him to flee from his prophetic mission, in contrast to the Ninevites’ whose uncertainty motivated their repentance:

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the LORD, saying, “O LORD! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I
The Certainty of Uncertainty

know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, LORD, take my life, for I would rather die than live.”

Trust ≠ Certainty

9. Abraham Maimonides (Maimuni; son of Rambam); Egypt (1186-1237), Kitāb Kifāyah al-`Ābidīn (“Sufficient Guide for Servants of God”), on tawakkul=biṭṭaḥon (“trust”) [adapted from trans. Samuel Rosenblatt]

Trust in God is among the elevated paths, one of the fundamental principles of the Law. None of the adherents of the Law would deny its obligatory character.... The essence of faith consists in the belief that God is the creator and provider, the one who gives life and brings death, makes sick and heals, makes rich and poor. Everything that happens in the world, in general and in particular, revert to God. God is the author who decrees and executes everything except for the matter of obedience and disobedience.²

[Maimuni describes three kinds of trust in times of crisis: (1) hope for a miracle, which is amply attested in Scripture but is presumptuous and misguided in the absence of authentic prophecy; (2) reliance solely on “proximate, external, ordinary means” rather than God, which is characteristic of unbelievers and the “wicked”; (3) taking ordinary measures to ensure one’s welfare while recognizing that their efficacy is dependent on God. This third kind of trust is “obligatory upon all adherents of the Law.” It entails the belief that “natural

² Cf. Berakhot 33b, “Everything is in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven.”
causes and ordinary means are disposed in accordance with the particular will of God with respect to every person at every time in every situation.” God may allow natural means (e.g., good nutrition, medication) to attain their natural result or cause them “to depart from their natural course.”]

10. Hazon Ish (Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz; Belarus/Israel (1878–1953), Sefer emunah u-vittahon (“Book of Faith and Trust”), ch. 2

A venerable error has been instilled in the hearts of many with respect to the concept of trust. The word “trust,” used by the pious to designate a praiseworthy and fundamental attribute, has come to connote the obligation to believe—in all circumstances in which people confront an uncertain future with two directions, one good but not the other—that surely the outcome will be good, and if one doubts and worries about the opposite of the good one it is on account of deficient trust.

This teaching about trust is incorrect. Whenever future destiny is not made explicit by prophecy, the future is undecided, for who knows God’s judgements and
The meaning of “trust” is the belief that there is no chance in the world: everything that happens under the sun is by divine decree.

When a person encounters an occurrence in which fear-inducing danger might naturally be expected, and depression weakens his recollection that chance does not lord over us (for there is no impediment to God’s rescuing him by reversing the course of events), at that difficult moment he must internalize the well-known truth, namely that no harm comes about by chance. Rather, everything is from God, for better or worse. The root of one’s faith should cancel out fear and encourage belief in the possibility of rescue, for the proclivity for a bad outcome is not greater than for a good one. This is what is called “the attribute of trust.”

“Doubt is unpleasant, but certainty is absurd.” (“Le doute n’est pas une condition agréable, mais la certitude est absurde.”) – Voltaire, Letter to Frédéric II, King of Prussia, April 6, 1767.

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3 In the idiom לטוב בין למוטב, “for better or worse,” the word מוטב is a euphemism.