Appreciating the Benefits of *Yissurim* (Difficulties and Challenges) – Part 1

Every Shabbat we request from G-d in our *davening* (prayers):

Sab'einu mituvecha v'samcheinu bishuatecha — Satisfy us from Your goodness, and give us *simcha* (joy or happiness) with Your salvation.

These words seem quite puzzling. If something is from G-d's **own** good, then why do we need to ask G-d to "satisfy" us? Won't that happen automatically? And if what occurs to us is truly G-d's salvation, then why do we need to ask G-d to ensure that it will "give us *simcha*?" What is it that we are really asking for in these prayers?

When it comes to *yissurim* (difficulties and challenges), this awareness is neither simple nor obvious. Even that which is both the ultimate good and salvation from G-d Himself can sometimes be extremely hard for us to see and appreciate. Perhaps this is what we are asking G-d to help us with. That would explain why these prayers come right after our request to G-d of "*v'tein chelkeinu b'Toratecha* — Grant us a portion in your Torah." The understanding which we derive from the Torah, will help us enormously to be able to feel satisfaction and *simcha* from even our most painful challenges.

When people think about *yissurim*, which is usually, and badly, translated as "suffering," their most ambitious goal is often to simply try to cope with them and endure them. Even those who have learned and grown significantly from their *yissurim* rarely speak about *yissurim* in positive terms. In fact, the very process of focusing on and trying to appreciate benefits within *yissurim*, may cause others to become upset with us for our presumed insensitivity. However, when one looks at the multitude of Torah sources that speak about *yissurim*, and really takes these sources seriously, one gets a very different message. G-d willing, that extremely positive message will help us to view *yissurim*, as well as life in general, with the proper Torah perspective.

Classical Jewish sources have always viewed *yissurim* as the ultimate expression of G-d's love for us

The clearest verse that teaches that *yissurim* should be seen in positive, not negative, terms is ***Devarim* (8:5)**:

*V'yadata im levavecha, ki ka'asher **y'yaseir** ish et b'no, Hashem Elokecha **m'yasreka*** — And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent gives *yissurim* to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you *yissurim*.

No one would translate this verse as — "Just like a parent gives suffering to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you suffering." The comparison of G-d to a parent teaches us that *yissurim* are **always** given from love, and exclusively for our benefit.

This positive view of *yissurim* is similarly clear in ***Tehilim*** (94:12):

Ashrei hagever asher t'yasrenu Hashem, u'm'Toratecha t'lamdenu — **Fortunate** is the one that gets *yissurim* from G-d, and whom You teach from Your Torah.

The ***Orchot Tzadikim* (*Sha'ar Simcha*)** wrote:

The Sages say — "***Chavivim Yissurim*** — *Yissurim* are precious" (*Baba Metzia* 85a). One should accustom his mouth to say — "*Gam zu l'tova* — Also this is for the good" (*Ta'anit* 21a), and "*Kol*

mai d'avid Rachmana, l'tav avid — All that the Merciful One does is for the good" (*Brachot* 60b) since there are many *ra'ot* (negatives) that in the end will be [seen as] *tovot* (positives).

The *Gemara Nidah* (31a) thus explained the verse — "I thank you Hashem for having been angry with me, Your anger turned away and [then] You consoled me" (*Yeshayahu* 12:1) with an analogy of two men who were about to travel on a boat. A thorn embedded itself in the foot of the first and he could not travel. He cursed his bad luck as the second one managed to go on the ship. Some time later he heard that the ship had sunk and all aboard had been lost. He then began to praise the Blessed Creator, since he **saw** that he had been kept alive through this mishap. One should, [therefore, always] have *simcha* in *yissurim*, and in any other losses which occur to him, since **one never knows** what future benefit will come to him from them. This was the attitude of Nachum Ish Gamzu (*Ta'anit* 21a).

The **Ramchal** added in *Da'at Tevunot* (54):

G-d's ways will become known **in the future** to the eyes of all of Yisrael — how even the rebukes and *yissurim* were given only for good, and prepared exclusively for blessing, since G-d desires only to rectify His creation.

A simple way to appreciate *yissurim* is to realize just how limited our present-day perspective can be. People often look back on something which, at the time, they considered to be the "worst possible thing" they could imagine happening. And then, in hindsight, they realize that what occurred was not nearly as bad as they had initially thought. There are even cases where they then see what happened to have been extremely helpful for their life.

A dramatic example of this involved someone who had battled cancer successfully for a number of years. After this excruciating process had ended and he was finally healthy, he told a friend that he wouldn't wish the pain and trauma which he had endured on his worst enemy. But, at the same time, now that he had actually gone through it, he wouldn't give up the growth and lessons he had gained from this ordeal for all of the money in the world.

Yissurim **teach and guide us all throughout our lives**

Three sources in ***Mishlei*** spell out this critical function of *yissurim* to teach and guide us:

"*Mussar Hashem b'ni al timas, v'al takotz b'tochachto. Ki et asher ye'ehav Hashem yochiach, u'ch'av et ben yirtze* — Don't disparage the *mussar* (moral guidance) from G-d, my son, and don't reject His *tochacha* (chastisement or rebuke), because He chastises [only] the one He loves, and is reconciled [to him] like a father to his son" (3:11–12).

"*Derech chaim tochachat mussar* — The path of life is corrective rebuke" (6:23).

And the most well-known of all — "*Choseich shivto* ***sonei*** *b'no,* ***v'ohavo*** *shicharo mussar*." This is commonly and incorrectly translated as — "Spare the rod, spoil the child." It **actually** means — "One who spares his rod — **hates** his child, but he who **loves** him — disciplines him in his youth" (13:24).

The ***Medrash*** (*Shemot Rabba* 1:1) explained this verse:

"One who spares his rod — **hates** his child, but he who **loves** him — disciplines him in his youth" — All who withhold discipline from their child, their [child] will eventually go out to bad behavior, and the parent will [end up] hating him. We find this with Yishmael…Eisav…Avshalom…[and] Adonia.

[The continuation of the verse] — “but he who loves him disciplines him in his youth” — refers to Hashem, Who loves the Jews and [therefore] **increases** *yissurim* for them… [And] whoever gives *yissurim* to his child increases the love of his child to him [the parent]; his child will then honor him… We find this with Yitzchak…Yaakov…and all twelve of the sons of Yaakov.

Medrash Rabba (*Bereshit* 9:8) added:

[If the verse about the creation of the world would have said] — “Behold it is **very** good” [I would have said that it is referring to] — *middat hatov* (the quality of good). [Now that it is actually written —] “**And** behold it is very good” — [this refers to] *middat* (the quality of) *yissurim*… [The *Medrash* then asks —] Which is the path that brings a person to life in *Olam Haba*? The quality of *yissurim*.

And one more ***medrash*** (*Eichah Rabba* 4:25) says very simply that:

Yissurim were created [specifically] to escort us to our intended destination.

The ***Zohar*** (*Bechukotai* 42) wrote:

How beloved is *Yisrael* before G-d! G-d wants to correct them and lead them in the straight path, like a parent who has mercy on his child. And from this love towards him, you find that His rod is constantly in His hand to lead him in the straight path…

As it says (*Mishlei* 3:12) — “for G-d chastises the one that He loves.” And whoever G-d doesn't love and [actually] hates, He removes *tochacha* from him [and] removes the rod from him.

The **Ramchal** (in *Da'at Tevunot* 154) asked:

How does this *mussar* (corrective discipline) originate from love? No parent who loves his child wants him to be filled with bad *middot* (character traits), but rather, because of his love, wants to straighten his path…[therefore,] from the source of the love itself flows all of the traits of *mussar*, that is — the kindness, the judgment, and the mercy all blended together…but never [G-d forbid] from cruelty or anger.

Rav Hirsch explained the verse:

“And you should know with your heart that just like a parent gives *yissurim* to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you *yissurim*” (*Devarim* 8:5).

The meaning of the root of *yissurim* is evident from [various] sources…[including] the noun “*mussar*.” All these are sufficient proof that the root…does not denote strictly chastisement as punishment… The basic meaning is to teach someone a lesson, shape their character, and inculcate values… Our moral perfection to be attained through instruction and practice, is a matter of close concern to G-d. His Providence therefore shapes our destinies in accordance with the requirements of our moral training and instructs us through personal experience, training our moral strength through constant practice… G-d relates to us, through His Providence, like a father, and all that He sends to us, whether joy or sorrow, is meant for our betterment and moral refinement.

The ***S'fat Emet*** (*Devarim* — *Re'eh*) added that G-d told the Jewish people:

I didn't place the blessings and curses in front of you to hurt you, but rather to show you the good path, because the *yissurim* are themselves Torah and teachings for the Jewish people…a person should [therefore] find Torah and lessons [even] in the midst of their *yissurim*.

And finally, the ***Torat Avraham*** (*Nevuah v'Yissurim — aleph*) explained that just like the function of the ancient *Nevi'im* (Prophets) was to help us to clarify reality, *yissurim* and *mussar* from G-d are our "modern-day" prophets to similarly help us to clarify reality today. He, therefore, wrote:

Yissurim are not merely a punishment for *aveirot* (transgressions) that we have already done, but rather G-d's agents to help us to avoid any additional *aveirot* in the future… While the *Nevi'im* were unable to get the Jews to do *teshuva* (return back to G-d), the *yissurim* were successful in getting the Jews to do *teshuva*…

[The *Torat Avraham* (*Nevuah v'Yissurim — beis*, *gimmel*) continued:]

This which is able to reveal the transgressions of both the individual and the community is an incredible level of *chessed* (kindness)…since there is no solution for one who is lacking awareness other than to force him to be aware… Can we imagine any greater level of *chessed* following a *chet* (transgression) than this?… The majority of *aveirot* that people transgress are some form of mistake — generally in terms of either the *halacha* (Jewish law) or the reality. People are, therefore, in great need of *yissurim* to clarify and reveal those matters which are hidden in their hearts… Since *yissurim* force us to introspect about the underlying causes of our *aveirot*, they are much more likely to lead to a true *teshuva m'ahavah* (return to G-d from love).

Yissurim provide a tremendous *kaparah* (spiritual repair and rectification) to fix up the damage that we caused to ourselves with our transgressions

Imagine that we had the ability to eliminate any single aspect from the current world situation. What would we choose to get rid of? The obvious first choice for many people would probably be *yissurim* (painful difficulties). It, therefore, comes as a big shock to many that Yitzchak Avinu (our forefather) actually **demanded** that there be *yissurim*:

He, thereby, inaugurated the concept of *yissurim* in the world… He said to G-d, "[If] a man dies without *yissurim* [to cleanse him of his transgressions] — the trait of Justice will completely block him [in the Heavenly court]. But once You bring *yissurim* upon him — the trait of Justice will no longer block him." G-d answered him, "By your life, you requested a good thing, and I will begin with you." From the beginning of *Bereshit* until here, no *yissurim* are written… [But now,] G-d gave him *yissurim* [as it says in *Bereshit* 27:1] — "And it was, when Yitzchak had become old, that his eyes dimmed from seeing." (***Medrash Rabba*** — *Toldot* 9:9)

Rav Simcha Zissel (*Chachmah u'Mussar*, *aleph* — 293) pointed out that:

This demand from Yitzchak Avinu for *yissurim* is a great comfort for those dealing with *yissurim*, because Yitzchak was [like] a perfect offering and one of the Patriarchs, and [even] he was afraid of the trait of judgment, and G-d [actually] agreed with him. Therefore, every person needs to see the justice in the judgment from Heaven, and to accept [their] *yissurim* with love.

The ***Tanna D'vei Eliyahu*** (*Seder Eliyahu Rabba* 18) stressed that:

When *yissurim* come upon [a person], they are coming upon him for his benefit, in order to save him from everything that he did. He should not say in his heart, "I am a *tzadik* (righteous person), I am straight, I am very giving — should *yissurim* come upon me?" When he gets *yissurim*, he gets them only in truth, as it says, "And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent

gives *yissurim* to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you *yissurim*." And is there a person in the world that wants to hurt his child, G-d forbid?

Rebbe Akiva in the ***Mechilta*** (*Yitro b'Chodesh* 10) contrasted the Jewish attitude toward *yissurim* with that of the rest of the world:

When good comes upon them [the non-Jewish nations], they give honor to their gods…[but] when difficulties come upon them, they curse their gods… However, when G-d brings good upon [*Yisrael*], they give praise, and when He brings *yissurim* upon them, they [also] give praise… And furthermore, *Yisrael* appreciates the *yissurim* more than the good, because a person surrounded by good all of his days would have no forgiveness for his transgressions. And what gives him forgiveness for his transgressions? *Yissurim*…[as it says (*Mishlei* 3:11–12)] — "Don't disparage the *mussar* from G-d…and don't reject His *tochacha*, because He chastises [only] the one that He loves."

The ***Tanya*** (*Igeret HaTeshuva* — Chap. 12) wrote:

The reason for *simcha* with *yissurim* of the body, is that it is a great and powerful benefit for the soul that transgressed to become clean in *Olam Ha'zeh* (this present world), and to be saved from the cleansing of *Gehenom* (the purification after death). As the Ramban wrote in his introduction to *Sefer Iyov* (the book of Job) — "**even the *yissurim* of Iyov for seventy years [would be worthwhile for us if they would be able to save us from] the *yissurim* of the soul for [even] one single moment in *Gehenom*.** Since this world is built on *chessed* (kindness), [even] mild *yissurim* in *Olam Ha'zeh* can save one from harsh judgments in *Olam Haba* (the world to come)."

Rav Simcha Zissel (*Chachmah u'Mussar*, *Aleph* — 249) added [based on these words of the *Ramban*]:

[Realize] how much *simcha* a person should have from his *yissurim*. But [at least] see to it that one doesn't, G-d forbid, [ignore them] and fail to take *mussar* from them, to return from one's bad ways.

Based on the ***Gemara Chulin*** (7b) which stated that — "No person stubs his toe below unless it was decreed upon him from Above," the ***Chafetz Chaim*** (*Sheim Olam* — Chap. 3) pointed out that these principles also apply with *yissurim* that come to us through the actions of other people:

Every aspect of pain that one encounters, including from other people, is all from Heaven because of one's transgressions… And G-d does all of this for the benefit of man, in order to cleanse his transgressions through his shame. And when one carefully considers this, rather than thinking about how to get back at the one who hurt him, one should give thanks to G-d for arranging this matter for him to atone for his transgressions… When one understands very well what a great benefit occurred through this person, it will then be easy not to take revenge or bear a grudge because of this. For example, one would not be angry at one who scrubbed dirt off of him with hot water, even though, at the time of the cleansing, the heat was very painful for him.

The ***Chafetz Chaim*** (*Sheim Olam* – Chap. 3) continued:

"In general, a person should not complain at all about *yissurim*, as we see in the *Medrash* that Yitzchak Avinu, who recognized just how frightening the strict judgment would be in the future [world], **demanded** *yissurim*…

I heard in the name of the *Vilna Gaon*, that if not for *yissurim*, we would not be able to exist in that [future] world.

[The *Chafetz Chaim* then asked us to imagine the following scenario:]

A person passes away and his *neshama* (soul) ascends upward. He is shown a type of balance scale that weighs out his actions, to see if his positive overpowers his negative, or the opposite, G-d forbid. He listens as a Heavenly voice calls out and announces that all of the merits he has done his entire life have been gathered…

Immediately, all of the advocates that were created from his *mitzvot* are gathered and stand to the right side of the balance scale. Afterwards, another Heavenly voice announces that all of his transgressions have also been gathered. Behold these multitudes are gathered, dressed and wrapped in black. They become so numerous that the negative side is pulled downwards from their weight… When the person then sees this, he protests loudly and thinks to himself, "What will be my end? I will certainly be considered a *rasha* (evil person)!" In the midst of this, [another] Heavenly voice goes out and asks, "Where are the *yissurim* that he had while he was still in *Olam Ha'zeh*?"

Immediately, all of the *yissurim* that he had during his entire life are gathered, and they all run to the right side [where his *mitzvot* are] and that side is pulled down greatly. [This is because] through the *yissurim* he gains a huge *kaparah* (spiritual cleansing) for many of his transgressions, and [thereby] retains the status of a *tzadik*. He [would therefore] have [a great] *simcha* and give thanks to G-d for **every** [single one of the *yissurim*] that had come upon him!

And finally, the **Rabeinu Bachaya** (*Kad HaKemach* — *Kipurim* 1) reassured us that:

G-d gives strength to *tzadikim*, and reinforces their strength with the ability to withstand *yissurim*, since the *yissurim* are the atonement for their transgressions.

Yissurim serve as a *nisayon* (test or challenge) to help us actualize our potential

Bereshit Rabba 32:3 (from *Mishnat Chachamim*):

The craftsman…doesn't test the weak barrels. Why? Because once he hits them they break. And which ones does he test? The good barrels — because even if he hits them many times, they don't break. Similarly, G-d doesn't test the *reshayim* (evil people) [so much]. And who does G-d [particularly] test? The *tzadikim* whom He loves.

Shemot Rabba 31:3:

There is no person that G-d doesn't test [at all]. The wealthy one is tested [to see] if his hand will be open and he will give *tzedaka* (charity)…and He tests the poor person [to see whether] he will accept his *yissurim* with love and not rebel or be angry.

The ***Gemara Menachot*** (53b) asked:

Why is *Yisrael* (the Jewish nation) compared to an olive? To tell you that just like an olive gives forth its oil only through being squeezed, similarly *Yisrael* doesn't return to the good except through *yissurim*.

The ***Chafetz Chaim*** (*Sheim Olam* — Chap. 3) explained:

One should not be bothered that, since there is *hashgacha* (Divine Supervision) in the world — how can this person be poor and this person wealthy?… Even our difficulties are not for nothing… The Sages teach us that there is no person who doesn't have to deal with tests… [Since our awareness and perspective is so narrow and limited] we [simply] need to walk with G-d wholeheartedly, and to have *emunah* (complete belief) that all that G-d does is entirely for the good.

Rav Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* — 1:23) wrote:

Every person is surrounded by what is required for their particular situation… There are those who need to stand up to the *nisayon* (test) of wealth and pleasures in *Olam Ha'zeh* — not to become overly involved in physicality to the point that they forget their Creator entirely… And there are [others] who need to withstand the *nisayon* of poverty and many difficulties, and even so, not to question how G-d deals with them.

While we are in this world we can't know, but it is very possible that if we could ask a *neshama* before it would descend to here — which portion it would choose — whether to pass through the passageway [of *Olam Ha'zeh*] with wealth and comfort or [to choose] the path of poverty and difficulty, it is very easy to understand that it would choose the path of difficulties, because whoever's heart is broken is much closer to contemplating what his purpose is with his soul.

Yissurim bring us closer to G-d in *Olam Ha'zeh* — "No atheists in foxholes"

Medrash Tanchuma (*Ki Teitzei* 2):

A person needs to give appreciation to G-d when *yissurim* come upon him. Why? Because *yissurim* draw a person to G-d, as it says — "for G-d chastises the one that He loves."

The ***Medrash Tanchuma*** (*Nitzavim* 1) also asked:

Why are the non-Jewish nations liable to destruction, and we (the Jewish people) are still existing? Because when *yissurim* come upon them, they rebel in them and don't mention the name of G-d… But when *yissurim* come upon *Yisrael*, they are humbled and *daven* (pray)… Therefore, G-d says to them, "Although these curses come upon you, they are what establishes you, as it says (*Devarim* 8:16), 'In order to afflict you and in order to test you, to do you good in the end.'"

The ***Sifri*** (*Mishnat Chachamim*, pg. 511) wrote:

Chavivin yissurin (*yissurim* are precious) — because just like offerings cause acceptance by G-d, so too do *yissurim*…and furthermore, *yissurim* cause more acceptance than the offerings, since the offerings are [merely] with one's money, while *yissurim* are with one's body. (*V'etchanan* 32).

Everything which is closer and more internal to a person is more pleasing. Therefore, an offering which is similar to one's money is external, as opposed to *yissurim* which are themselves the body of the person.

Rav Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* — 1:21) explained that:

We need to know that *yissurim* are Heavenly assistance (*siyata d'Shimaya*) which G-d uses to help us to come close to Him without removing the possibility of choice from us. Although the *yissurim* are perfectly appropriate for us, to teach us, the lesson itself still depends on our choice.

We are capable of closing our eyes and stiffening our necks, and [using it] for the opposite — to complain against G-d.

The ***Shiurei Da'at*** (Rav Elya Meir Bloch, *Rosh HaYeshiva* of *Telshe* — pg. 126–127 — *Yissurim shel ahavah*) explained that:

While we know how difficult it is to serve G-d in the midst of pain and difficulties, and we *daven* (pray) that Hashem should save us [from them], at the same time we recognize how much benefit there is in them, and just how valuable they are — to acquire spiritual elevations that are impossible to attain at times of peace and tranquility… This is the advantage that people have over the *melachim* (angels) — that two opposing feelings are able to exist within one's heart at the same time… A person has the ability to feel pain to the point of crying and wailing, and even so, to have *simcha* with a full heart.

We find this with Avraham Avinu who was eager to carry out the command of his Creator to offer up his only son and to do the will of G-d with a full heart. At the same time, the Sages teach us that he was standing up to his knees in his tears. In truth, G-d has no desire for a person to kill his feelings. Rather, through his regular feelings, he should increase the required feelings in order to properly bring out from within himself the *mitzvot* of his Creator… While the Sages tell us that *melachim* have only a single heart [i.e., one emotional state at a time], man has two hearts [i.e., the ability to have even contradictory emotions simultaneously].

This should be *l'zechut ul'iluy nishmat* Ruchama Rivka, *a"h*, *bat* Asher Zevulun