

Appreciating the Benefits of *Yissurim* (Difficulties & Challenges) – Part 2

Yissurim* weaken our attachment to physicality, to purify us in preparation for *Olam Haba

The ***Gemara Brachot*** (5a) discussed a sequence of three ways to understand and relate to *Yissurim*:

First, one should examine his deeds; Second, he should attribute them to *bitul Torah* (wasting time from learning Torah); and if neither of these make sense as the cause of these *yissurim*, then one should view them as *yissurim shel ahavah* (difficulties from love). Rashi explained [regarding *yissurim shel ahavah*] that — “G-d afflicts those whom He loves, even if they have not committed any *chet*, in order to give them greater benefit in *Olam Haba* than their merits would otherwise have justified.”

The **Maharal** (*Netiv HaYissurin* — *aleph*) explained this *Gemara*:

When a person transgresses, and [necessarily becomes] deficient [i.e., the first possibility that the *Gemara* spoke about], it is appropriate that *yissurim* should come upon him...

If one is lax with learning Torah [i.e., the second possibility], then even though he isn't inherently lacking, he is still considered deficient because...he is lacking the perfection which it was possible for him to have gotten from the Torah, and [therefore] *yissurim* will come upon him.

[The final possibility of the *Gemara*] is to assume that they are *yissurim shel ahavah*. The explanation is — When a person is a *tzadik*, and fitting for the most exalted level, but in terms of his body and connection to the physical, there is an aspect that is not fit for that level, G-d brings *yissurim* upon him in order to cleanse the *nefesh* (soul) until he becomes purified... Since G-d loved him and wanted to bring this person closer to be able to cling to Him, and he was the one preventing and blocking this because he was not fit for this close connection, they were, therefore, called *yissurim shel ahavah* — it was because of G-d's love that He brought them upon this person... Therefore, they should [also] be accepted from love, otherwise there will be no connection (*d'veikut*) in them...

The Maharal then quoted the continuation of this *Gemara*:

“When Rebbe Yochanan was ill, Rebbe Chanina went to him and asked him — ‘*Chavivin alecha yissurin* (Are these *yissurim* precious to you)?’ and he answered him — ‘Neither them nor their benefit!’ which sounds like he felt that these *yissurin* were [really] not valuable!”

The Maharal explained:

This is not a difficulty (*kashe*), since a *tzadik* may certainly worry that he will not be able to stand up to the *yissurim*, and will [end up] doing what *Iyov* did [i.e., cursing and blaspheming G-d]... And it is very clear that they will only be *chavivim* when one can bear them, since they will then purify the soul, until they bring the person to cling to G-d.

The **Maharal** (*Netiv Hayissurin* — *gimmel*) explained further:

Yissurim are more precious than all other levels...since they cleanse, purify, and elevate the soul, until it becomes removed from the physical...and the one with *yissurim* becomes separate from the material until he becomes a *ben Olam Haba* (one fit for the world to come)...

When *yissurim* come upon *Yisrael*, they are humbled and they cry out to G-d... As long as the *yissurim* continue to come on them, their [physical] deficiency that distances them from G-d is removed until they become close to G-d. When the physical body is [minimized], they cling to G-d, and therefore they call out to G-d in their time of distress... And as long as *yissurim* continue to come on them, they acquire more of a connection (*d'veikut*) to G-d.

The **Zohar** focused very strongly on this purifying quality of *yissurim*:

Come and see, at the moment that G-d desires to enlighten the *neshama* (soul) of a person, he strikes the body in order to empower the *neshama*, because as long as the *neshama* and the body are equal, the *neshama* is not able to be in control. And when the body is broken, the *neshama* is in control. (*Toldot* 90).

A person needs a weak body and a strong soul to overpower it, and then G-d will love him... G-d [therefore] gives difficulties to the *tzadik* in *Olam Ha'zeh* to give him merit in *Olam Haba*. (*Vayeishev* 27).

Rebbe Elazar said — All that G-d does is with judgment (*din*), and if he brings *yissurim* on a *tzadik*, [it is] in order to purify his soul to bring him to *Olam Haba*...and to remove from him the physical impurities (*zuhamah*) that he received in *Olam Ha'zeh*. Therefore, the body is broken and the soul is purified. (*Vayeishev* 36).

These are called *yissurim shel ahavah*, because they are [from] love, and not because of the person himself (*Vayeishev* 41).

The **Ramban** explains that *yissurim shel ahavah* help the *tzadik* to fix some small flaw, and are motivated by love, not judgment.

The **Torat Avraham** (*Shleimut v'Yissurim* — *dalet*) wrote:

One of the most powerful means for controlling physicality, which is the source of all bad *middot* (character traits), is *yissurim*. *Yissurim* intrinsically weaken our desires, and gradually separate us from our attachment to all physical matters. We see that it is possible to live without desires, comforts, petty arrogance, and illusory honor. Bit by bit, we free ourselves from our soul being enslaved and our limited perspectives until we are finally able to see our true essence.

Just as an excess of physical matters influences us to increase our arrogance and to forget our Creator, similarly will a limitation in these matters enhance our humility and our connection to our Creator.

In this manner, **even *yissurim* without *teshuva*** can bring us to *shleimut* (completion) — first of *middot*, and then of both *deyot* (character traits) and *hashkafot* (perspectives). This is because *middot* are the root of our character.

However, while *yissurim* with *teshuva* can achieve *shleimut* quickly and directly; without *teshuva* and contemplation, it is a slow and difficult process.

Rav Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* — 4:240–246) explained:

Once a person has transcended and nullified his physicality to the point that it no longer has any hold over him...he is then able to receive the light from the upper realms of wisdom.

In order for a person to be able to grasp the hidden exalted wisdom through *yissurim* requires three conditions:

One must have *emunah* that the ***hashgacha pratit*** (Divine supervision) from Hashem covers **every** single aspect of his life... as the Sages teach — “No person [even] stubs his toe below unless it was decreed upon him from above” — *Chulin* 7b.

It is clear to him that the judgments of G-d are absolutely **true** in every single detail...

One grasps that — “*Kol mai d'avid Rachmana, l'tav avid* — All that the Merciful One does is for the good.” In other words, one must believe in his heart that everything G-d does for him is absolutely good, and its purpose and intention is exclusively for the benefit of man, even if he doesn't always grasp what this hidden good is...

The deepest secret of *yissurim* is that the *yissurim* we need to deal with are exclusively in this illusory world, and only for those who relate to these illusions [as real]... While this is [the situation] with the enormous *yissurim* for the greatest *tzadikim*, we can also fulfill this on our own lower level...

Every aspect of freeing ourselves from under the yoke of the body and its leanings, will uncover the light of the redemption. One sees something that was very difficult for him yesterday, and [really] bothered him yesterday, which is [now] merely an illusion. With this, he redeems himself with a spiritual redemption. This is the path of elevation from level to level — to see and to discern that what previously, on his lower level, appeared to be insurmountable, is [now] only an illusion, and to cling to a life of spirituality where he really lives the truth and is fully alive.

Is our primary frame of reference — *Olam Ha'zeh* or *Olam Haba*?

Pirkei Avot (4:21) stated:

Ha'olam Ha'zeh is like a passageway leading towards *Ha'olam Haba*; prepare yourself in the passageway in order to be able to enter the palace.

Understanding that the fundamental purpose of *Olam Ha'zeh* is to prepare us for *Olam Haba* will shift our focus away from *Olam Ha'zeh*, and thereby help us to deal much more effectively with whatever *yissurim* we have in our lives.

Rav Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* 1:19–20) expressed this critical focus on the reality of *Olam Haba* very beautifully:

Every believer knows that [it is] through our good deeds in *Olam Ha'zeh* that we will merit life in *Olam Haba*, which is the main life and the eternal life. However, there are those who think that life in *Olam Ha'zeh* is also a life...

Therefore, we come to all of these great and difficult questions — Why does this person merit a wonderful life while this other lives a life of difficulty? Why does this *tzadik* need to endure many *yissurim* and a life of *Gehenom* (pain and difficulty), while all of the days of this *rasha* are like a holiday?

There are those with a complete *emunah* who don't have these questions. Since the Judge [of the world] is G-d, and we are simply human beings, how can we think that with our limited intelligence we would be able to understand the depth of the justice of G-d? However, there are also many who don't [find] this clear answer to be sufficient. Their hearts are questioning G-d's traits — since

He is good and compassionate, why is our life so bitter? And if He is punishing us, why is the punishment so great for the *tzadik*, while nothing [seems to] happen to the evil ones? There is a great danger that through the enormous [difficulties] people have to bear, they will come to complain about the justice of G-d...

There are people that this question bothers greatly in their [ability to] serve G-d from their hearts; [in fact] these complaints come out from the depths of their hearts, and they think — “What will we gain by serving [G-d]?”

However, all of this comes to us because we see *Olam Ha'zeh* through the perspective that we mentioned [that it has an independently significant existence]. However, for those who aspire to be able to see the world from the perspective which the Sages taught us, then these questions automatically disappear.

Pirkei Avot (4:21) taught us — “*Olam Ha'zeh* is compared to a passageway and *Olam Haba* to the palace.” Every action that a person does is to attain whatever purpose he is aspiring to. When we see something as a great achievement, we are willing to work for it, even if it is very difficult...

The purpose of the entire creation, and necessarily the purpose of all of *Olam Ha'zeh*, is *Olam Haba*. And even if our path through this passageway is very difficult, and filled with obstacles and stumbling blocks, it is fitting for a person to go through it with a positive outlook, since there is no other way in front of him to reach his destination...

On a deeper level, every aspect of the substance of *Olam Ha'zeh* is exclusively as a passageway for *Olam Haba*; it is not an independent world. One who builds for himself a passageway without a palace [as its destination], didn't build anything, since it is [then] not even a passageway. This is exactly the situation with all of *Olam Ha'zeh*, and all that happens to us in it. All of it is only what is necessary for us to enter into *Olam Haba*.”

The **Gemara Kiddushin** (40b), therefore, told us very simply that:

G-d brings *yissurim* upon *tzadikim* in *Olam Ha'zeh* in order [to help them] to inherit *Olam Haba*.

The Medrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 30:2 — *Mishnat Chachamim*) explained:

David HaMelech asked G-d (***Tehilim*** 16:11) — “Show me the path of life” — Which path leads straight to life in *Olam Haba*? G-d answered him — “If life in *Olam Haba* is what you need, then you **need** *yissurim*.”

And on the flip side, the ***Orchot Tzadikim*** (*Sha'ar Simcha*) warned us that:

Whoever worries [and focuses excessively] about *Olam Ha'zeh* will have no *menucha* (tranquility) his entire life.

Rav Yeruchem Levovitz (***Ohr Yechezkel*** — *Michtavim*, pg. 184) pointed out that:

When G-d sends *yissurim*, many people become depressed and full of anxiety. **Our attitude [toward *yissurim*] is the litmus test to know just how strong our *emunah* [and internalized belief] is in *Olam Haba*...**and only one who really acknowledges *Olam Haba* is considered [fully] part of the Jewish people.

Rav Simcha Zissel (*Darkei Mussar*, pg. 58, quoted in *Gateway to Happiness*, pg. 253–4) expressed this with a simple *mashal* (analogy):

When one travels to the wedding of a close friend, he is happy the entire trip. Though the ride might not be comfortable and the food may be a bit stale, he still feels *simcha* because his mind is focused on the goal of the trip, where he will greatly enjoy himself.

Similarly, when a person focuses on the goals of his life, he is able to overcome the difficulties involved. When one's focus is on *Olam Haba*, he lives in a state of happiness even though he experiences many difficulties along his relatively short trip.

Three concluding essays:

The *Torat Avraham (Simcha b'Yissurim)* wrote:

The truth is that one who understands the goal of *yissurim* and strives to reach it, won't desire to **eliminate** *yissurim*, but rather to **fulfill** them, to thereby hear their message and to achieve a true *shleimut*. The verse (*Tehillim* 94:12) declares — “*Ashrei hagever asher t'yasrenu Hashem, u'm'Toratecha t'lamdenu* — Fortunate is the one who gets *yissurim* from Hashem, and whom You teach from Your Torah.” The one who understands this **treasure** (of *yissurim*) and learns from them, will have no desire to abandon this wealth.

This concept of *Simcha b'Yissurim*, however, is not only for special individuals, but rather for all of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people). We see this clearly from the *Mishnah* in *Brachot* as explained by the *Gemara* — that accepting *yissurim* with *simcha* is an **obligation** on **every** single Jew. This *simcha* comes through two different approaches — proper recognition of *gashmiyut* (physicality) and proper recognition of *ruchniyut* (spirituality).

It is obvious that we are incapable of evaluating what is truly *tov* (good) and what is truly *ra'ah* (bad) even when it comes to *gashmiyut* — the physical dimension. People are cognizant only of their immediate surroundings, and only in terms of the present moment...

Simcha b'yissurim [is] *simcha* from the awareness of our limitations in knowing what may be close by or what may occur quite soon. The very *ra'ah* that we find ourselves in may certainly be a mistaken [perception] — it may be what is actually forming the *tov* that will be evident soon...

After all, everything originates from the same source, from the source of boundless *tov* and *chesed*. This is the first approach to *simcha b'yissurim*, based on the proper recognition of *gashmiyut*.

The second approach to *simcha b'yissurim*, based on the proper recognition of *ruchniyut*, is based on our awareness [that every single person] is beloved in the eyes of Hashem. The verse says — “*et asher ye'ehav Hashem yochiach* — G-d chastises because of His love for a person”... In order to try to rescue the *rasha* from his transgressions, [even he is given] *yissurim* in the hope that he will turn from his evil path and be able to merit eternal life. *Yissurim* are the final attempt to get one to do *teshuva*.

This *ahavah*, which expresses itself in *yissurim*, is not limited to trying to rescue the *reshayim* from *Gehennom*, but also works to elevate [everyone else] up to higher and higher levels of positive development...

It is specifically because of G-d's great love for the *tzadik* that He gives him *yissurim shel ahavah* — as a *nisayon* (test), and to elevate him through the *yissurim* to a much higher level than he could have ever gotten to without them.

Nisyonot (tests) as a means of elevation are an entirely separate matter; they are the path to elevation for the greatest of human beings. This path to elevation can also involve *yissurim*, and is included in the verse — “*et asher ye'ehav Hashem yochiach* — G-d chastises the one that He loves.” A special love can be seen in *yissurim*, love for the *tzadikim* and [even] love for the *reshayim*.

One must, however, be very careful that *simcha b'yissurim* not become *mivat b'yissurim* (a type of rebellious apathy in regard to *yissurim*)...

The difference between the two is one's feelings. *Simcha b'yissurim* means one that feels the *yissurim*, with all of their intensity, as *ra'ah* and not *tov*, *emmet* (truth) and not *chessed*, *din* (judgment) and not *rachamim* (mercy), and he therefore makes the *bracha*, “**Dayan HaEmet**” (“The True Judge”) and not “**HaTov v'HaMeitiv**” (“The One Who **is** good and **does** good”). But at the same time he is also obligated — “*likbulinhu b'simcha*” (to accept the *yissurim* with *simcha*) — to feel as much *simcha* on the *ra'ah* as he feels on the *tov* [since both come from Hashem's love]. A full *simcha* together with a complete recognition of the [pain and difficulty of the] *ra'ah* is a true *simcha shel ahavah* (of love).

One who doesn't really feel the [pain and difficulty of the] *yissurim*, however, and has simply become accustomed to them over a long period of time, until they have become like second nature to him, like the *Churban* (destruction of the Temple) and *galut* (exile) today, and is content to continue living a life like this; this person is not *same'ach* in his *yissurim*, but rather *mivat* (apathetic) in them. He is rebelling against these agents of Hashem and against the tangible *tochacha* (rebuke) which he has been given, besides making himself deaf to hearing their messages. At the same time, however, he thinks in his heart that he is a *tzadik* since he seems completely uninterested in all matters of this world. It doesn't bother him that he is living a life of pain and difficulty, since [he thinks] this shows that he is neither finicky nor arrogant.

In truth, however, this is not a person who is minimizing his importance in a positive way, but rather one who is maximizing his insignificance in a very negative manner.

He is actually closing his ear from listening and preventing his heart from understanding — not only ideas, but also feelings. He is not only very distant from one who truly loves Hashem, he is far removed from **regular** people with **normal** feelings as well.

Simcha b'yissurim first of all requires feelings and sensitivities towards life, where even the smallest pain will be significant to him. He needs to appreciate that *Yisrael* are *b'nei melachim* (the children of royalty) and, therefore, no one even stubs his toe in this world without an explicit decree above, in *Shamayim* (Heaven). Consequently, “when one puts his hand into his pocket to take out three coins but manages to remove only two” [*Gemara Arachin* 16b] — even such a small discomfort like this is considered a subtle aspect of *yissurim*. One who lives like this and is *same'ach* in his *yissurim* through recognizing just how limited the physical world is, or through his recognition of the great love that is expressed through them, this is one who has true *simcha b'yissurim*.

The *Torat Avraham* (*Shleimut v'Yissurim* — *aleph*) continued:

Up until this point we have spoken about the greatness of utilizing our thoughts and our feelings to attain very lofty goals. However, these types of ideas that *Chazal* (the Sages) tell us — about accepting *yissurim* — are not so obvious to the masses. The majority of people aren't such deep thinkers and most don't have enough time to contemplate such things. They do, however, still receive *yissurim*. Aren't their *yissurim* also included within the verse — “*et asher ye'ehav Hashem yochiach* — G-d chastises the one that He loves?” If so, we need to understand what type of a love can be found within *yissurim* to those who are largely devoid of thinking.

Yissurim contain two different benefits:

1. They push a person to examine his ways and to do *teshuva* (return to G-d).
2. *Yissurim* [inherently] provide a *kaparah* for one's *aveirot* in this world [similar to how *Gehenom* purifies the *neshamah* after death], sometimes before *teshuva* and sometimes following *teshuva*, through the weakening of the body and its desires.

It is self-evident that if one understands the real purpose of *yissurim*, one will examine his ways and do *teshuva*. Then, even the mildest of *yissurim* will be able to help cleanse the most severe of transgressions. However, even one without understanding, who lives his life like a horse racing through a battle, never stopping to think or consider his actions, and certainly never engaging in *teshuva*, will still benefit and be elevated from *yissurim*... *Yissurim* **always** have the inherent ability to perfect the *nefesh* of every single person.

This special quality of *yissurim* to elevate will be effective even when the *yissurim* become "*melumada*" (habitual) and lack both thinking and feeling. This lack of [both] thinking and feeling is relevant only to the first goal of *yissurim* — the examination of one's ways. In terms of the second goal of *yissurim*, however, *shleimut* (completion or perfection) of the soul of the person through the weakening of the body and its desires — this occurs automatically, independent of whether one does or does not think about the *yissurim*...

However, not only when one's *yissurim* become habitual will they still benefit him in terms of this second approach; they will benefit him even when he doesn't want their impact at all, and they only pain him greatly, leaving him broken-hearted. We might think that this type of a person would get no benefit at all from these *yissurim*, neither a benefit from thinking about them, nor from the actual *yissurim* themselves. On the contrary, we might think that these *yissurim* would simply cause him more anger and destruction. However, when we do look into this, we see that even one like this will be elevated through his *yissurim*. Was there ever anyone more bitter than *Iyov*? His continual cursing and complaining actually turned him into a transgressor, even though he was never held responsible for these "transgressions of the heart," since no one is ever held responsible for his pain...

In the end, however, it was actually the *yissurim* that helped *Iyov* to remain steadfast in his *nisayon* (test and challenge) and not to transgress with his lips. And this allowed him to continue receiving *nevuah* (prophecy) all throughout his long *nisayon*, even though he was filled with anger and bitterness without limit. Even these *yissurim* ultimately help one to acquire a higher level of *shleimut*, and are also in the category of — "G-d chastises the one that He loves."

Rav Shlomo Wolbe wrote in the *Alei Shur* (*Savlanut, vaad t'shi'i*):

"Those with *simcha* in their *yissurim* are described as...being totally fulfilled... Our Sages have revealed to us that the one who has achieved "total fulfillment" is specifically the one who can bear his burden. The person who can bear *yissurim*, and also have *simcha* in them is the strongest one of all... The entire world is established specifically in the merit of one who is able to bear his burden quietly.

One who bears *yissurim* is viewed by the world only with pity; they certainly wouldn't attribute strength to him. [However,] it is possible that he is even greater than one with many [good] deeds. G-d should protect us from *yissurim* — but we need to know that one bearing *yissurim*, and even carrying them with *simcha* without allowing his spirit to be broken by them, is actually the greatest of the great...

We can [also] apply this to the Jewish people during their exile. "Our Rabbis taught — We ask one who comes to convert during [the exile] — "What did you see that made you want to convert? Don't you know that during this time *Yisrael* is afflicted, pressured, oppressed and torn, and that

yissurim are coming upon them?” If he says, “I know and I feel unworthy of this,” then we accept him” (*Gemara Yevamos 47a*). Rashi explains his reply — “I feel unworthy” — as “I am unworthy to share in their suffering. If only I would merit to do so!”

Behold, this is the state of the Jewish people during the exile — to bear the burden of difficulties — and this is specifically the greatness of this holy nation. They can deal with their pain and not be broken by it. This is their strength. And only one who recognizes this greatness is able to become a proper convert...

We must know that this itself is the greatness of the Jewish people — that they can deal with their *yissurim* and [still] carry the Torah with exalted strength and without fear, and without minimizing nor rejecting the *yissurim* of the exile.”

Hashem should protect us, our families, and all of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People) from difficult and painful *yissurim*.

But at the same time, we need to know and remember that He **will** give us whatever *yissurim* we require — for our benefit, and because of His great love for us.

Sometimes we may see that benefit clearly in *Olam Ha'zeh*, and sometimes we may have to wait until *Olam Haba* to see it.

In all cases, however, we also need to know and remember that *yissurim* teach and guide us, provide a tremendous *kaparah*, help us to actualize our potential, bring us closer to G-d, and weaken our attachment to physicality in this temporal and transient *Olam Ha'zeh*, to purify us in preparation for the eternity of *Olam Haba*.

Through the understanding which is possible to get only from the Torah, Hashem should help us, in the words of the Shabbat davening (prayers), to feel satisfaction from even this type of goodness, and *simcha* from even this aspect of salvation. He should help us not merely to endure our *yissurim*, but to actually grow and gain from them in **both** *Olam Ha'zeh* and *Olam Haba*.

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