

***Klal Yissurim* – Understanding Communal Difficulties & Challenges – Part 1**

When we speak about *yissurim* (difficulties and challenges), we usually think about their impact and their justice in terms of individuals, as in the classical question — *Lamah yeish tzadik v'ra lo?* — Why do the righteous suffer? But, of course, just like there are *yissurim* for individuals, there are also *yissurim* for the *klal* (the community). What are the principles of *yissurim* which affect the *klal*, as opposed to *yissurim* which affect individuals?

How are we meant to relate to communal *yissurim*?

We read the ***Shema*** every single morning and every single evening. There is an extremely clear message to us in the second paragraph (*Devarim* 11:13–21): If we listen to the *mitzvot* that G-d commands us, to love G-d and to serve Him properly, then G-d will give rain to our land at the right time, so we will be able to gather in our harvest. G-d will provide grass in our fields for our cattle, so we will be able to eat and be satisfied. But if we are not careful, and we turn towards idolatry, then many difficulties will occur. There will be no rain, the land will not produce its crops, and we will quickly be banished from *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel).

We also read a long section of *tochacha* (rebuke) twice a year.

In ***Bechukotai*** (*Vayikra* 26:3–46) it says — If the Jewish people observe the Torah, they will receive a multitude of blessings, including prosperity in *Eretz Yisrael*. And if they do not follow the Torah, then they will be subject to a horrific series of frightening consequences, including desolation in *Eretz Yisrael*.

And, in ***Ki Tavo*** as well (*Devarim* 28:1–69) — following the Torah leads directly to many blessings, including prosperity in *Eretz Yisrael*; while laxity with the Torah results in a huge number of terrible decrees, including, once again, desolation in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Even the ***mishnayot*** in the fifth *perek* of *Pirkei Avot* (5:11–12) spell out a direct, observable relationship between our transgressions and the devastating consequences which will then occur in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The ninth of the thirteen attributes of G-d is *v'tashlich b'metzulot yam kol chatosam* (And You will cast all their transgressions into the depths of the sea). The ***Tomer Devorah*** (1:9) characterizes this in a positive manner, by focusing on the spiritual achievement of the Jewish people, not the often painful physical process it will take for them to get there. He wrote — “This is [actually] a wonderful attribute of G-d — For if Israel transgresses, they will first be given over to the hands of an evil ruler, and then they will do *teshuva*.”

We see this pattern very clearly numerous times in *Shoftim*:

- a. The Jewish people did evil.
- b. They were attacked and persecuted.
- c. The Jewish people did *teshuva* (a spiritual return).
- d. G-d sent a prophet or deliverer to save them.
- e. Then the Jewish people had peace and quiet for a number of years until, tragically, they chose to do a different type of evil. And then this destructive pattern recurred once again.

Why do *klal yissurim* happen?

In light of all these sources, the prophet ***Yirmeyahu*** (9:11–12) asks a puzzling question — one that would seem to have had an obvious, straightforward answer — “Who is the wise man who will understand this, and who is the one that G-d has spoken to, who may explain this? **Why has**

the land [of Israel] become desolate, and become parched like a desert, so that none pass through?"

The **Gemara Nedarim** (81a) explains that this question was posed to the Sages and the Prophets, but none could explain why *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel) had become desolate.

And then Yirmeyahu himself answers — "But G-d has said — Because they abandoned My Torah that I placed before them, and did not listen to My voice, nor follow it."

What could explain this question and answer of Yirmeyahu? How could it be that no one but G-d Himself could see the seemingly crystal-clear relationship between our abandonment of the Torah and the destruction of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Rav Nosson Weiss, a *Rebbe* at *Aish HaTorah*, points out that, all throughout Jewish history, *yissurim* to the *klal* have happened specifically because of *avoda zara* (idolatry) or some other critical *klal* (communal) issue. The most extreme expression of *klal yissurim* is *churban* — total destruction. This comes to address some fundamental problem in the world which cannot be solved except through a complete destruction and then rebuilding from the rubble.

Rav Noach Orlowek explains the phenomenon of *klal yissurim* somewhat differently. When something which is meant to be positive is no longer helping the Jewish people, but may actually be hurting them, G-d then takes it away from them. Examples include — the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple in Jerusalem), *Eretz Yisrael*, and sometimes even one of the *gedolei ha'dor* (greatest sages of the generation).

G-d's relationship to the *klal* and the *prat*

The **Ramchal** in *Da'at Tevunot* explains that there are two different ways G-d relates to the world — ***hanhagat hamishpat*** (through justice) and ***hanhagat hayichud*** (in terms of the unification of His Name):

Hanhagat hamishpat (G-d relating to us with justice) means that everything that occurs to us is a function of justice, although it is tempered with *rachamim* (mercy). G-d acts towards us in terms of what we deserve. (Rashi — *Bereshit* 1:1)

Hanhagat hayichud (G-d relating to us in terms of the unification of His Name) refers to the fact that everything in history is to bring about the goal of *yichud Hashem*. This is not just a response to our actions, but is also bringing the world to its ultimate perfection.

In *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world), perhaps *hanhagat hamishpat* is the primary way G-d relates to individuals, while *hanhagat hayichud* may be the main way He relates to the *klal*, even though the individual plays an important role within *hanhagat hayichud*. The example that the Ramchal gives of *hanhagat hayichud* in *Olam Ha'zeh* is *chevlei Mashiach* (the difficulties preceding the *Mashiach*) which are certainly *yissurim* of the *klal*.

The Ramchal is, however, careful to clarify that, ultimately, there is no contradiction between these two different systems. "We who have the true Torah don't view what happens to people as *keri* (randomness), but rather as *mishpat* (justice), as the Torah (*Devarim* 32:4) says — '*Hatzur tamim pa'alo, ki kol drachav mishpat* — The rock is perfect in His work, for all His paths are just.'"

The lesson that the Torah teaches is that whatever occurs to us, including those *yissurim* which come upon the community, are all complete justice. As the Ramchal himself expresses this — "It is certain that the ultimate *s'char v'onesh* (positive and negative consequences for our behavior) will be in *Olam Haba* (the world to come), to give everyone what is completely appropriate for them."

The **Gra** (at the end of *Megillat Esther* — *likutim*) discusses the relationship between the *klal* and the *prat* (the community and the individual) by questioning why the Torah grants exemptions to some soldiers (i.e., those who built a new house, planted a new vineyard, or just got married within the past year) in a non-essential war. They will thereby return home and not end up fighting. [Seemingly] they had either been decreed to die the previous Rosh HaShanah, in which case this exemption will not save them, even if they do return to their homes; or they had not been decreed to die, and therefore, they should have nothing to worry about, even if they do stay and fight in the war.

The **Gra** explains that, in this world, there is both *mazal klali* (general influence) and *mazal prati* (specific influence). If there has been a decree of death on a particular city or nation with *mazal klali*, it may then affect even those individuals who are physically there, yet had no specific decree on them independently. This is because the *mazal klali* of that place will overpower their *mazal prati* as individuals. And, therefore, it may help someone to leave a battle; since there may have been no *mazal prati* decree specifically on him.

The purpose of *yissurim* is to teach us to do *teshuva*

HaRav Yerucham Levovitz explains that the nature of *yissurim* can be seen from a verse in *Devarim* (8:5) — “*V'yadata im l'vavecha, ki ka'asher y'yaseir ish et b'no, Hashem Elokecha miyasreka* — And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent chastises (gives *yissurim* to) his child, G-d your L-rd chastises you (gives you *yissurim*).” Onkeles, in his classic translation and commentary on the Torah, explains that the word “*y'yaseir*” (referring to *yissurim*) actually means “*limud*” — to learn. Similarly, the *Gemara* (*Megillah* 14a) says — “*Gedolah hasarat taba'at yoteir m'mem-chet nevi'im*” — When King Achashverosh gave his signet ring over to Haman, signifying that he could now attack the Jewish people, that was a greater [benefit for the Jewish people] than the 48 *nevi'im* (prophets).” As much as the Jews attained from the 48 *nevi'im*, they must have attained even more from these *yissurim*. What did they gain from the *nevi'im*? Wisdom, understanding, and Torah. They, therefore, must have gained even more than this from these *yissurim*. (*Da'at Chachmah u'Mussar*)

The **Ran** (*Drashot* 6) writes — Sometimes calamity strikes in distant places and islands. The purpose of this is to arouse the Jewish People to do *teshuva*; they should see and become afraid, lest they suffer the same lot...but when they fail to become moved upon witnessing such things, the calamities continue, drawing closer and closer. Without a doubt, a person who sees these tragic events, which are in fact warning signals sent from G-d, yet still continues in his old ways is compared to a person who committed an offense, and was consequently warned against doing it again...*yissurim* are meant to arouse both the one directly afflicted, as well as the ones all around him, to do *teshuva*. (This Too Is for the Best — Reasons for *Yissurim* — pg. 51-52).

G-d has a personal connection to each of us

Since G-d is so great and elevated above every aspect of the physical world, how could He possibly know or care about what happens here? **Rav Shimshon Pincus** (*Bein haMetzarim* — Deepest love of G-d for the Jewish People) explains that the enormous wisdom of Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon), so much greater than anyone else, is actually what allowed him to understand the animals. Similarly, G-d is able to know and care about what happens here specifically because He is so much greater and more elevated than we could ever imagine.

Not only does Judaism believe that G-d has a connection to this world, as many other religions also believe, and not only does it say that G-d is supervising and directing the world, it also speaks about G-d having a personal connection; a love and a concern toward every one of His creations.

While the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people is expressed through all of the *chagim* (holidays), the three weeks before *Tisha b'Av* express the deepest concern and the most

personal relationship between G-d and His nation, to the point where the *Gemara* (*Chagigah* 5b) tells us that G-d actually cries on *Tisha b'Av*.

These days also recall the many difficulties throughout the generations... The message of the three weeks is — **the Torah is not merely empty words**. When the Jewish people don't properly follow the Torah, the result is terrible destruction. Why is this situation so severe? Because maintaining the Torah is not a game. Besides this, there is an additional message. The fact that laxity in our fulfillment of the Torah results in such a catastrophe, shows the depth of the connection which exists between G-d and *Am Yisrael*.

Rav Pincus (*Sicha* on *Meah Brachot*) explains this with a principle concerning relationships — Wherever love is greater, like within a family, a split or anger will end up being that much more intense. Therefore, when there is anger and distance between G-d and *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people), G-d forbid, it necessarily results in awful calamities.

Principles of the Holocaust and *klal yissurim* from Rav Avigdor Miller

Rav Avigdor Miller, one of the greatest leaders within American Jewry, wrote and published many different books explaining Jewish fundamentals. The one book which he wrote but never ended up publishing was his perspective on the Holocaust, titled "Divine Madness." It was discovered and published by his family only many years after his death.

The following are sections from his book which explain essential principles of *klal yissurim* (communal afflictions and difficulties).

Discerning Hashem's conduct of history:

Rav Miller writes that it would [seem to] be proper, when considering the misfortunes of... some community, to declare that we are incapable of understanding Hashem's ways... [However,] on the contrary: belief in Hashem's conduct of history demands of us to study His deeds and to attempt to fathom their causes and purposes. As the verse in *Tehillim* (94:10) says — "He who chastises nations, is He not thereby correcting or rebuking? Is He not teaching men knowledge?" [Therefore,] could a believer deceive himself into thinking that Hashem would act without obvious reason?

How much could we discern the purposes of G-d's conduct? Although no human is capable of fathoming His purposes even in the smallest events...even our little minds can discern some reasons, purpose, and explanation of methods.

Every act of G-d has multiple purposes, including the phenomenon of Nature: how much more purposeful are His acts of history. One of the chief purposes of His works is to impart true knowledge and awareness of Him.

Thus the first and most fundamental of all purposes of events...is to awaken men from the lethargy of habit and materialism, and to cause them to think of G-d.

The *Gemara* (*Yevamot* 63a) tells us — "No misfortune comes upon the world except because of Israel." Rashi explains that Hashem brings a misfortune in order to frighten His people and to warn them to improve, to do *teshuvah*, to become better. They should think, "It could have happened to us!" Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to study the events of history...and to see what connection they had with Israel.

The Jewish Nation is not like the other nations of the world; it is a nation whose existence is only for the purpose of the Torah. This was the message which Hashem gave to us just before the giving of the Torah (*Shemos* 19:6) — "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation." Our function in this world is to speak of Hashem and to serve Him, and whatever

happens in the world is for the purpose of reminding us of this great mission. We must listen to history and understand that this is Hashem's voice speaking to us.

This is Hashem's system; He cannot afford to keep quiet, because His chosen people must fulfill their function in this world, whether they want to or not. The prophet Yechezkel (20:33) declared to the Jewish nation — “With a powerful hand, an outstretched arm and poured out wrath, I will rule over you.” Either you choose, or I will choose.

What lessons can we learn from [communal tragedies like] the Holocaust? [There is one] great lesson [that we can certainly] learn: that **what is written in the Torah will come true**. And it's written in the Torah: If you will not listen to Me and you will scorn My laws, then I am going to chastise you, *sheva al chatoseichem* (seven times for your transgressions) (*Vayikra* 26:18), again and again.

[The opening verse in *Megillat Esther* says —] “**And** it was in the days of Achashverosh.” From the [seemingly extra word] “and,” we know that [the decree against the Jews] was a result of events that preceded it. This is important; it did not just happen that suddenly there was a Haman. It was a connection to past events. The sooner we get that into our heads, the more quickly we are going to become Jews, because without understanding that, one doesn't begin to be a Jew. **A Jew, first and foremost, believes that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is in control of the world.**

Anyone who reads *Chumash* could expect [calamities] to happen [in response to communal transgressions]. It's only...where people are ignorant and they're under the influence of propaganda, [that] they're able to be deceived.

The Holocaust was one of the strangest events in history:

Germany had, for 150 years, been the most disciplined and civilized of nations... The transformation of a nation of law and order into a nation of thugs and murderers is one of the strangest events in the history of mankind. It was indeed a manifestation of the Hand of G-d.

This hatred against Israel was especially remarkable in view of the tremendous disadvantages and losses that the Germans willingly undertook in order to still their blood lust... Yet, the Nazis took the trains, which were vitally needed for troop transport and for war materials, and diverted them for the senseless transportation of Jews to the killing centers... The Germans bled themselves white in order to kill as many as possible. This was an open miracle of the most horrible kind, and unequaled in ferocity.

The death trains were packed with Jewish scientists, medical specialists, industrialists, and with armies of free labor taken away from German factories.

In the times of the Kaiser, had someone told a German that someday his people would become such barbarians as to kill innocent Jews, he would have put his hands on his children's heads and sworn by his children that this could never happen in Germany. Germany was the most orderly, law abiding country in Europe and perhaps in the world, and for such a thing to happen was unthinkable.

The Torah (*Devarim* 28:59) foretells, “*V'hiflah Hashem et makotecha v'eit makot zarecha* — And Hashem will make wondrous plagues upon you and plagues upon your seed...” “Wondrous” implies “unexpected” and also “unequaled.” If any part of our history serves as a fulfillment of this, it certainly was the destruction of six million of our people, done by a nation that had prided itself on its superior civilization and highest criteria of good manners. This was the most surprising (“wondrous”) of all the plagues that ever befell our people.

The fact of universal hatred against our people is one of the great miracles of history... These were all miracles. They were the most horrible of events, but we are justified in calling them

miracles, because the idea behind good miracles and these horrible ones is the same. The purpose of a miracle is that people should open their eyes and see that there is something above man: there is a G-d who conducts the affairs of the world.

{Rav Shimshon Pincus says something very similar to this — Someone who doesn't believe that G-d is the guiding force behind all of Jewish history is not called a *kofer* (denier). He is simply called stupid.}

[Rav Miller continues –] Messages in the Holocaust:

Every Jew was required to carry a special identification card, and his passport and ration card bore the word “Jew”... Every man and woman was required to adopt a Jewish first name (unless he had one already).

There were lessons without number. The prohibitions of using exclusively German first names, of patronizing German restaurants and dining cars, and of relations with Aryan women (to cite a few examples out of many), were Torah lessons that were difficult to overlook. But they were ignored. The decrees of Nazi Germany were aimed at separating Jews from Gentiles in every possible manner. There would be no social contact: no business contact, no contact in schools, housing, travel resorts, shopping.

[And] the commandments of the Torah (as well as those of the Sages) aim at separation [as the verses tell us] “I separated you from the nations” (*Vayikra* 20:26); and “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation” (*Shemot* 20:6); and “Behold a people that dwells alone” (*Bamidbar* 23:9).

Historically, Jews always responded to *klal yissurim* with *teshuva*:

In every previous black hour, the Jews responded with prayer to G-d. In Egypt, *B'nei Yisrael* cried out to Hashem (*Shemot* 2:23–24, 3:7,9, 14:10)... Always, Israel utilized the peril or calamity as an occasion to cry out to G-d. Under the oppression of Aram they cried out to Hashem (*Shoftim* 3:9); also under the oppression of Yavin and Sisera (*ibid*, 4:3); they cried out for succor against Midian (*ibid*, 6:5); they cried out against Ammon (*ibid*, 10:10); when sorely beset by Yaravam, the tribe of Yehuda cried to Hashem (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 13:14); in Shushan they fasted and prayed for three days for Hashem's aid (*Esther* 4:16). In every instance they were rescued from their enemies “because they had faith in Him” (*Divrei Hayamim* I, 5:20). [And] the Maccabees [also] “cried out to G-d” (*Chashmona'im* 3:50, 4:9, 4:27).

At Haman's decree, the entire nation fasted and wept to Hashem (*Esther* 4:3). And thus the entire nation did in every generation when they were faced with some peril. The peril or oppression was sent by Hashem for our benefit.

[And] in every instance the nation improved as a result:

[The verse in *Megillat Esther* says —] “*Kimu v'kiblu hayehudim* — The Jews fulfilled and accepted” (*Esther* 9:27): “they fulfilled that which they had already accepted at Sinai” (*Shabbat* 88a). In most of these episodes, they were either entirely rescued, or the affliction was [at least] partially mitigated. Great catastrophes were visited when many failed to cry out to Hashem, because the people had been influenced by Menashe (*Melachim* II, 24:3), or at the Second [Temple] Destruction when many were demoralized by the *Tzadukim* (Sadducees) and the Herodians.

Such analysis of calamities has always been the distinctive practice of the people of Israel. In every generation the leaders rebuked the people for their transgressions; and in their sermons and in their books they pointed out the...faults of the people. Not only the leaders but the Jewish populace criticizes itself... Three times daily every individual declares his [transgressions]; and also in the Days of *Teshuva*; and constantly all day on Yom Kippur, and at every *Mussaf* when we state that because of our [transgressions] we are in exile, and numerous other times during the year. In all misfortunes that befell our nation, they justified G-d and put the blame on themselves,

[as it says in *Eichah* (3:42) —] “We have trespassed and rebelled,” and “Let us search and examine our ways, and return to G-d” (ibid, verse 40). **Every misfortune was utilized as an impetus to self-searching and self-betterment.**

When some public misfortune came, however small, the Sages and the people attributed it to their own [transgressions]... When men search themselves for transgressions, they discover them... We must be our own severest critics because great things are expected of us. The precious metals are examined for the smallest impurities...for our benefit...

Throughout Jewish History, our forefathers always attributed their misfortunes to their own transgressions. Now, it is not true that misfortunes come only because of transgressions... [But] the “good tiding” is that the Jewish nation will always utilize misfortune to become better.

[Rav Miller concludes –] *Olam Haba* (the world to come) is a key to dealing with *klal yissurim*:

In viewing the events of history, we must keep in mind the principle: “The world is judged according to the majority” (*Kiddushin* 40b), and the minority of the righteous undergo the tribulations sent because of the transgressing majority... But you cannot understand anything if you don't believe in *Olam Haba* [where any perception of injustice to individuals in this world will be taken care of]. *Olam Haba* is the *ikar ha'ikrim*, the heart of the matter.

Rav Shimshon Pincus (*Yad Hashem haysa bam l'ra'ah* — Struck by G-d's Hand) explains that throughout all of the generations, G-d showed us His strong hand, above the laws of nature. The message which G-d wants to teach us from the magnitude of the destruction and the strictness of the judgment is that the Jews are not living in the natural world according to the normal understandings of people. We are living rather in G-d's world, and He is guiding it according to His system. Both the degree of our obligations and the severe consequences when we don't live up to them follow G-d's system, beyond the boundaries of the physical world.

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