

Understanding and Accepting *Nechama* – Part 1 – JewishClarity.com

Definition of *Nechama*

Rav Hirsch (*Bereshit* 5:29) writes that *nechama* refers to **being comforted, altering one's decision, or having remorse or regret** for something that one has done. He explains, however, that the primary meaning is “to change one's mind.” By extension, we get the meanings of “remorse” and “change in decision.”

Consolation certainly changes the way we feel about what happened. While a painful loss will set us in motion internally — consolation brings us rest, soothes our mind, and quiets our raging emotions.

The verse which most clearly expresses this **primary meaning** of *nechama* as **reconsideration** is *Bereshit* 6:6–7: “*Vayinachem Hashem* (G-d **reconsidered**) having made man on earth, and He was pained in His heart. And Hashem said — I will blot out man whom I created from upon the face of the earth...*ki nichamti ki asitem* (for I have **reconsidered** having made them).”

Rashi explains — “*nehefcha machashavto shel Makom* (the thought of G-d was transformed)... *kol lashon nichum sh'b'mikra* (every usage of *nechama* in a verse) means *nimlach mah la'asot* (reconsidering what to do)...they all mean: to have *machshava acheret* (a different thought).”

Rav Shimon Schwab demonstrated that *nichum aveilim* (giving *nechama* to the mourners) must mean to change the minds of the mourners, and not merely to comfort them. After the death of Yaakov Avinu, Yosef spoke to his brothers — “...*Vayenachem otam vayedaber al libam* — he gave them *nechama* and spoke to their hearts” (*Bereshit* 50:21). Since “*vayedaber al libam* — he spoke to their hearts,” means that he comforted them, then the word “*vayenachem*” must clearly mean something else.

Rav Schwab explained that “*Vayenachem otam*” referred to Yosef [trying to] change the minds of his brothers, to convince them that they had been wrong in what they had done.

This is also what is meant by — “*Nachamu nachamu ami*” (Give *nechama* to my nation) (*Yeshaya* 40:1). G-d will change our minds about the tribulations of *galut* (exile). We may think that they were bad for us, but, in the end, He will show us that they were actually for our benefit.

And, finally, the phrase, “*HaMakom yenachem etchem b'toch she'ar aveilei Tzion v'Yerushalayim* — G-d should give *nechama* to [the bereaved] among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem” means this as well. It is a plea that Hashem should change the minds of the bereaved by showing them how all was ultimately meant for the good, just as He will also show the mourners of “Zion and Jerusalem” how the destruction of the Temples was for the good. (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 166–8).

An additional aspect of *nechama*, separate from its definition, is for the deceased to be forgotten from the heart (after a close relative passes away). In fact, the *Gemara* (*Pesachim* 54b) says that this forgetting from the heart is one of the three things that, even if Hashem hadn't decided to create them, would have **needed** to have been created, because without them, man would be unable to survive.

Rav Nosson Weiss, a *Rebbe* at *Aish HaTorah*, explains that when a significant loss or trauma occurs to us, we are no longer able to live the same life which we had lived up until that point. *Nechama* allows us to move on with our life — in a full way, not a half-way. The major difficulty of moving on, with *aveilut* (mourning) specifically, is the pain of the loss of the deceased. We need to

accept that our old life with this person is really over. *Chazal* (Our Sages of blessed memory) tell us that there is a degree of forgetting after twelve months, and this is what allows us to be able to move forward with our lives. Yaakov Avinu, however, refused to accept *nechama* for the 22 years he thought his son Yosef was dead. Since Yosef was really alive, Yaakov was incapable of moving forward with a new life, and a fresh perspective, because his old life was actually still existent.

The *sefer Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama* (pg. 251) points out from the words of Rashi (above) that [the main meaning of] *nechama* is *machshava acheret* (a different thought). When [dealing with] difficulties [in life], we certainly need to view these challenges through the eyes of the Torah. In other words, the *nechama* of *machshava acheret* needs to be a *machshava shel Torah* (Torah thought). Through this we will be able to be strengthened and to accept *nechama*.

HaPetirah einah aveidah elah preidah — Death is not loss, just separation

Perhaps the single most powerful and paradigm-shifting *machshava acheret* — *machshava shel Torah* — is the simple fact that the deceased continues to exist, just not in this world. (*Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama*, pg. 263–5).

The **Ohr HaChaim** (*Devarim* 14:1–2 — “*Banim atem l'Hashem Elokeichem* — You are children to G-d your L-rd, *lo titgod'du* — don't gash yourselves [in grief when a close relative passes away]”) wrote:

We need to realize that death is **not a loss** to the deceased; he has simply departed for a different place, like a person who travels abroad for an extended stay. (*Ohr Yechezkel; Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 198).

The **Ramban** explained that — “the Torah never prohibited crying [with bereavement], since the nature of a person is aroused to cry when separating from someone close, even while both are still alive.” The crying, however, should be because of **preidah** (separation), **not aveidah** (loss).

This *hashkafa* (perspective) is certainly a major part of *nechama*. *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world) is only a temporary world, not permanent, a mere passageway we need to go through to reach *Olam Haba* (the world to come). When we come to this recognition, and realize that the main aspect of a person is his pure soul [which will continue to exist in *Olam Haba*], then our *hashkafa* on difficulties turns upside down... When we see our difficulties with the *hashkafa* of *Olam Haba*, we will change the way we are living our lives. Perhaps this is what Hashem really wants from us — **to live with the hashkafa of Olam Haba [even while living] in Olam Ha'zeh**. (*Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama*, pg. 263–5).

Eliyahu Dovid Hayman, whose daughter Shoshana was tragically killed in the Sbarro terror attack, wrote:

“The first element of a Torah lifestyle from which we drew strength is the fundamental principle of the eternity of the *neshama*, the soul.

There seems to be a contradiction between the fact that when people leave this world, they go to a much better place, but we — friends and family that are left behind — are crying. The answer is that we are not crying for the person who has left this world; we are crying for ourselves, who must go on with our lives without that person... The greatest comfort we can provide to our departed relatives is to let them see that, following the prescribed mourning period, we can lead our lives as productive people, continuing those activities that we know will make them proud of us... We have to remember that the concept of the eternity of the *neshama* means that the *neshama* is in the physical world only for a limited time in order to accomplish certain goals. Following its mission, the

neshama returns to its source. Ultimately, all souls will be reunited, as taught in one of the fundamental principles of the Jewish nation, *techiyat hameitim*, the revival of those who are no longer among us.”

Rav Mattisyahu Salomon, the *Mashgiach* of the Lakewood *yeshiva*, spoke about *kabalat ol malchut Shamayim*, acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. We have an opportunity to reaffirm [the eternity of the *neshama*] every day of the year. Each morning, when we wake up, we recite a *bracha* (blessing) called “*Elokai neshama*.” We say — “*Elokai, neshama shenatata bi, t'hora hi* — My G-d, the soul You placed within me is pure. You created it, You fashioned it, You breathed it into me, You safeguard it within me, and eventually You will take it from me, and restore it to me in the time to come.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 146–153).

The *Mishnah* in ***Pirke Avot*** (4:22) tells us — “*She'al karchach atah notzar, v'al karchach atah nolad, v'al karchach atah chai, v'al karchach atah meit* — Against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live, and against your will you die.”

Rav Meir Chadash asked:

“What could we imagine telling a fetus while it was still in the womb? Presumably we would say something like — “What do you have in your mother's womb? It is dark, narrow, and tiny. It would be better for you to go out into a world which is big and light, and you could accomplish so much!” The fetus would probably answer — “I don't want to go out. It is better for me here in my mother's womb. I have everything that I need.” And since we wouldn't be able to convince him, “*v'al karchach atah nolad* — Against your will you are born.”

And this is also true for the continuation of the *mishnah* — “*v'al karchach atah meit* — Against your will you die.” What could we imagine telling a person in this world? “It would be better for you to go out to the world which is entirely good, where the *tzadikim* (righteous) are sitting crowned with wisdom and basking in the pleasure of the *Shechina* (feeling G-d's presence). You will then receive the great benefit for all of the good that you have done. And all of the pleasures of *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world) don't equal even one moment of *Olam Haba* (the world to come)!”

What will the person answer? “I don't want to die. I don't want to leave *Olam Ha'zeh*. Here, I have my family that I love. I can learn Torah, *daven*, do *mitzvot*, etc. I definitely don't want to die.” Therefore, there is no choice, and — “Against your will you die.”

Now let's think more about — “Against your will you are born.” If it would be possible to go to the infant a few days after his birth and say to him — “You didn't want to leave your mother's womb. You said that it would be better for you there. We have a way for you to go back there. What do you want to do?” The child would certainly answer — “That is crazy. Why would I possibly want to go back to such a dark, narrow, and tiny place?”

And this is just as true for the end of the *mishnah* — “Against your will you die.” When a person arrives in *Olam Haba*, and sees the bounty there, tastes the life of eternity, and merits to be close to the *Shechina* (G-d's presence), imagine that we could speak with him then. We could tell him — “You had not wanted to leave the temporal world, and you worked hard to stay there. But now we found a way to put you back there.” It is certain that he will refuse, just like the infant would not have been willing to go back into his mother's womb.

This is a *nechama* — knowing that the deceased is basking in pleasure [in *Olam Haba*]. The bereaved have the pain of their loss, but the deceased has found his final rest, where everything is good.” (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 184–5).

The ***Kli Yakar*** (*Bereshit* 37:35) wrote this explicitly:

The essential *nechama* is when the bereaved recognize that the deceased are benefiting from the treasures hidden for the *tzadikim*, and that they have separated from this dark world towards the eternal light. (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 169).

Rav Yechezkel Levinstein explained that the basis for all of our questions is that we think *Olam Ha'zeh* is real and permanent, while the truth is that *Olam Ha'zeh* is really illusory. (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 181).

This was expressed very beautifully and poignantly in a letter of consolation written by **one of the talmidim of Rav Yeruchem Levovitz** of the *Mir Yeshiva* (printed in *Alei Shur*, pg. 302). It was addressed to his children, to be read only after he had passed away:

To My Dear and Beloved Sons and Daughters,

The purpose of this letter is to console you for when I will not be with you anymore. A person does not know when his time will be up, but the day will come (may Hashem bless me with long life) when my place at home will be empty, and you will be orphans.

My beloved, I have seen many orphans, most of whom find themselves in darkness, without hope... Few are able to strengthen and brace themselves and to eventually elevate themselves after the tragedy in their lives. I therefore realized that before one can comfort a mourner, it is essential to teach him how to deal with the situation. I hope I succeed in this endeavor, and may you understand these words so that they illuminate your lives.

The key to the mystery of life is *emunah* (faith) in the true G-d, the Creator of the Universe! It is G-d's power that keeps the world going; every single blade of grass derives its sustenance from the Creator, and surely each human being [does]. This spirit of life is the essence of everything, and the most important part of a person is his spirit and soul.

I hope that I managed to raise you to have *emunah* (faith in G-d). I now encourage you to strengthen your *emunah* and to realize that this is also the secret to the mystery of death! If life would be over for one who died, it would be difficult to comfort a mourner. But that is not so! Although the body passes away, the person continues to exist!

Our great teacher (Rav Yeruchem Levovitz) wrote: "Death should be understood as one who moves from one city to another. This is the real truth. Your father has not died, may his memory be blessed, he has merely moved. To the understanding person, there is even more to say. The deceased is now even closer to you than before, for there are no longer any separations." He is aware of everything, and he is close to his relatives at all times! The one with *emunah* knows no death.

However, I realize that you will still be bothered by my seeming absence. What can fill this void?... Use the vision of me, your father, which is in your heart, to give you strength and encouragement. Keep in mind that the essence of a person is the spiritual, and that part continues to exist!

The most important message to bear in mind, for all people at any age, and particularly for the bereaved — is to strengthen one's *emunah*, to sense Hashem's Providence, and to realize how Hashem guides and leads a person daily, providing for all his physical and spiritual needs. You will not lack anything if you keep your *emunah* strong!

Only one who lives with this *emunah* will be able to have *nechama*. Normally, a person is surrounded by his family, his teachers, his friends — all of them help him to maintain his life properly, and also to grow. However, when a relative passes away, may Hashem spare us, one of

the supports has been removed. The process of *nechama* is to help replace the missing support, to raise his spirits, and to help him continue to grow.

Know with certainty that Hashem will give you *nechama* and help you to continue. Be strong in *emunah* and in Torah, and build yourselves loyal homes to be able to fulfill G-d's *mitzvot*. Your actions will also help me, as our Sages say, "When one's children observe the *mitzvot*, it is considered as if the parent has not passed away." This is my advice and last request of you.

My Beloved Ones: Have *emunah* and your *emunah* will be fulfilled, and may your lives be successful forever!

With love, Your Father. (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 197-8).

Minimize expectations in terms of *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world)

HaRav Kanievsky once told someone who needed *chizuk* (strength), *idud*, (encouragement), and *nechama* — "*Al tarbeh l'hitamek b'kishyei ha'olam hazeh* — Don't be overly focused on the difficulties of this world."

He asked this person — "Are you aware of the difficulties that I myself had in this world? There were years where I lived in extremely great poverty. On Shabbat I ate [only] black bread, and I don't need to speak about the clothes that I had. And I had great *tza'ar gidul banim* (difficulty raising children)...enough *tza'ar gidul banim* for 100 people... If I would have immersed myself in all of this, I wouldn't have learned even a single page! However, Hashem did a great kindness for me, perhaps because I learned *mussar*, perhaps because of the little Torah that I learned in my youth, and I didn't [excessively] focus on any of this."

HaRav Kanievsky concluded with — "*Ein kol eitzah acheret elah shelo la'sim leiv l'Olam Ha'zeh* — There is no other advice except not to [overly] focus on this world." (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 105).

Eliyahu Hayman also wrote about our misunderstandings of the nature of this world:

"I will close with some lessons that we learned from Shoshana and her [tragic] death. It became clear to us that all of us have certain **expectations**. We **expect** that we will grow up, go to school or *yeshiva*, be able to earn a livelihood, get married, and raise a family. We **expect** that we will be able to watch our children grow up, get married, and raise families of their own. We **expect** that we will become grandparents, and will have the opportunity to spend the latter part of our lives with our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We **expect** that we will have good health, both mental and physical. As time passes, however, we often find that not all of our **expectations** come true, and that we had been living with a false sense of **entitlement**.

It is important for us to recognize that, in fact, we are not **entitled** to anything. While it is appropriate that we plan for the future as best we can, once that is done, we must approach our lives one day at a time, feeling *hakarat hatov* (gratitude) to Hashem for whatever blessings we have, and not taking anything for granted. To the extent that we are able to do this, our lives will have a greater sense of peace and contentment. We must approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur each year with a heightened awareness of the temporal nature of life, and with a sense of responsibility to infuse our lives with meaning and purpose. We must remember that we never know how much time we have in this world. We all have visions of living to our 70's, 80's, or 90's, but it doesn't always work out that way." (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 146–153).

Rebbetzin Feige Twerski said similarly:

“There is a cultural and generational gap between grieving practices of today and yesteryear. In both Europe and America, death was always very much an everyday, hands-on part of life. Infant mortality was very high.

Since they had a healthy way of dealing with death, [extra] rituals and ceremonies did not seem to be necessary. In our culture, there is an illusion perpetrated that if we are lucky, death does not have to be a part of life. Hence we have a tangible discomfort with the concept of death. We seek to keep it at a distance. It is kept sterile and anesthetized, and perhaps it is this discomfort that today necessitates [new] rituals for psychological closure.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 243).

Rabbi Gottlieb points out a widespread misconception that can often stand in the way of our willingness to accept *nechama*:

“There is a natural feeling that, according to the Jewish picture of how the world works, people who do well enough in the service of G-d should have happy and smooth lives, without any serious suffering.”

This picture, he explained, is a mistake —

“The greatest Jews of all time often led lives with considerable suffering, even excruciating suffering. What is more precious to a person than his children? What can cause more suffering, more pain, more anguish than problems with children? Now, let’s remind ourselves: Avraham had eight children — Yishmael before Yitzchak was born, and six more when he remarried after Sarah died. Seven out of eight were lost to him. Yitzchak had Yaakov and Eisav, and Eisav grew up to be a terrible criminal with whom there is strife and competition throughout the ages.

The death of a child seems the worst thing a person can go through. Well, Yaakov suffered when the brothers sold Yosef into slavery and he spent over twenty years believing that Yosef was dead. Yehuda lost two children, Aaron lost two children, and David HaMelech lost two children.

So, if we think that the life of a successful person serving G-d is going to be [only] smooth, easy, pleasant, and happy, we have to think again, because this is not the picture.

The themes of the suffering are already built into the sources and into creation itself... The soul is *chelek Eloka mima'al* (an aspect of G-d above). What in this physical world could possibly please or satisfy the soul? What the soul experiences in this world is [actually] a great exile.

Indeed, the *Mishnah* says, “Against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live, and against your will you die.” The soul would not choose to come to this world, to be embodied in this world. For the soul, it’s anguish.

Thus the pain and suffering in the world, including the pain and suffering of the greatest people, is not a shock, nor a surprise, and the sources said that we can expect it.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 320–8).

Grief and mourning are necessary, but should not be excessive

While grief and mourning are a necessary and healthy response to the loss of those closest to us, **Rav Aryeh Levine** cautioned that there are times when this can be excessive. He said:

“I began writing on the subject of death, bereavement, and mourning over eighteen years ago when I was struck with the death of my two-year-old son Ephraim. Ten years ago, I watched for six months how the illness of cancer slowly took my beloved father away from me.

“Last year, before Rosh Hashana, I was invited to speak to a support group... Generally, I believe in all types of support groups, certainly for those who find them necessary and helpful. But the idea of people who have been bereaved for many, many years getting together before each Jewish holiday to discuss how they were going to get through another difficult *Yom Tov* troubled me somewhat. It seemed to me that this was a way of perpetuating and adding to the grief rather than dealing with it, accepting it, and trying to get on with life. At the end of the evening a gentleman arose and said, ‘Remember, it is not **we** who have to ask G-d for forgiveness on Yom Kippur; it is **He** Who has to ask **us** for forgiveness.’

“I deeply sympathize with all bereaved, and, having been an unfortunate member of this family, I truly feel a deep empathy for them. I commend the support group for their wonderful intentions and no criticism is meant. One is not held accountable for statements such as the above remark when they are uttered out of the depths of anguish. But the Torah view is that excessive grief is both nontraditional and, more importantly, from a practical sense, actually harmful both to the living and to the soul of the deceased. I tried to present this viewpoint that evening in the brief span of time that was allotted to me, as there were other speakers. Leaving the room that night I became more convinced that I must write a book to try to spread this lesson to the bereaved all over the world. It’s not a popular stance, nor is it one that is immediately accepted. But the truth must be stated. The Torah view must be expressed.

“There **are** appropriate times when we should remember: *Yahrtzeit* and *Yizkor*, and other times when we visit the cemetery, such as on *Tishah b'Av* and *erev Rosh Hashanah* and *erev Yom Kippur*. But life must go on. Our dearly departed do not benefit in any way when we offer them, throughout our lifetime, testimonials of tears and sadness and monuments of unabated grief. Is it a tribute to the memory of our beloved departed if in mourning their death, our grief causes us to also die while we are still living?” (*Reb Yochanan’s Bone*, pg. 166–8).

As difficult as it may be, a proper acceptance of *yissurim* (painful difficulties and challenges) is not only a lofty goal to aspire to, it is actually an obligation in *halacha*.

The *halacha* in the ***Shulchan Aruch*** (*Orach Chaim* 222:3 — Blessings for the good **and** also for the difficult) is that one is obligated to make a blessing for painful difficulties wholeheartedly and willingly, in the same way as he makes a blessing happily for the good. By accepting whatever Hashem decreed for us with love, we are serving Hashem, and this itself can give us *simcha* (joy or happiness).

The ***Mishnah Berurah*** explained that, in fact, all difficulties, whether bodily or monetary, serve as an atonement for transgressions, so that one will not have to suffer in the future world, where the consequences are much more severe. As the *Medrash* (*Bereshit Rabah* 65:9) says — Yitzchak [actually] **asked** for difficulties. He realized the severity of Divine Justice one would need to face in the future world. He, therefore, requested difficulties for himself in order to be fully cleansed of everything. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Yitzchak, “Upon your life, you have requested a good thing and I will start with you,” as may be seen from what is stated (*Bereshit* 27:1), “And it happened that when Yitzchak became old, his eyesight became faint.”

The ***Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*** (Laws of Consoling the Mourners, #207:4) says similarly: One should not say to the mourner: “What can you do? It is impossible to change what the Holy One blessed be He has done,” for this is like blasphemy. It implies that were it possible to change, we would do so. Rather, a person must accept upon himself the decree of the Almighty, blessed be He, with love.” (*Reb Yochanan’s Bone*, pg. 331–3).

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