

Understanding and Accepting *Nechama* – Part 2 – JewishClarity.com

Rav Moshe Weinberger, based on an essay from **Rav Kluger**, explained the meaning of *nechama*:

“A family was sitting *shiva* for their loved ones that had died in a terrible accident. They were trying to think what they could accept upon themselves to do to improve, perhaps through working on their *middot* (character traits) or their actions. Right then, a prominent Rav entered to pay a *shiva* visit to them. The eldest told him what they had just been speaking about and asked the Rav what they should accept upon themselves as a result of what had happened. He answered that what they should accept upon themselves was *tanchumim* (to **receive *nechama***). While it is obviously always good to try to do more *mitzvot* and less *aveirot* (transgressions), that was not what he told them. Rather what he told them to accept upon themselves at that time was specifically *nechama*.

An important aspect of *nechama* is the reassurance from Hashem that we are not alone. And that whatever happens to us is for our eternal good. There is a purpose to every pain and difficulty of both the body and the soul. Whatever happens to us, in any area of our life, no matter how small it may be, has a beneficial goal.

The key question, of course, is — What exactly **is *nechama***? In general, we need to understand how there can even **be *nechama*** after *aveilut* (mourning). If it was really appropriate, and Hashem had wanted us to initially have this pain and anguish, then what is the point of the *nechama* [to then minimize it]? And if there is really the possibility to give *nechama* to one who is suffering, then what was the point of the pain in the first place?

Nechama is actually the transition between the *aveilut* to the state that comes afterwards. Accepting *nechama* for some pain or loss means that one has now agreed to change how he views this pain or loss, to a new way of thinking and feeling.

At the moment when the loss first occurs, one is incapable of seeing beyond that very painful place. People will often say — “I don't know how I will be able to go on living without that person, or with this tremendous loss!” What is the transition that allows one to continue to function, to be able to get up the next morning? *Nechama* takes you to a new way of looking at things that you weren't capable of seeing or hearing at the time of the loss.

Discussing lofty ideas in a *shiva* house, arranging for *mishnayot* to be learned, and accepting upon oneself to do various *mitzvot* are all wonderful, and they may possibly lead to *nechama*, but they are not at all what *nechama* actually **is**. *Nechama* is specifically coming to that place, and possibly bringing others to that place, where there could really be a new way of thinking. There may certainly still be much pain, but one is no longer overwhelmed or incapacitated by it.

This is what we find explicitly in the Torah itself. Rav Tzadok explained that the first place any word is found in the Torah is what its essential meaning is. At the end of *Parshat Bereshit* (6:6–7) [*nechama*] specifically means *charata* (regret) and a change in thinking. Acceptance of *tanchumim*, therefore, means the willingness within one's heart to view the situation differently, and to thereby be able to continue with one's life.

At the moment of the pain, the mourner saw only black. *Nechama* elevated him to be able to view the situation in a manner in which the heart can now accept it, and one is now willing to continue living his life, even with the terrible loss.

Every one of us, in the details of our personal lives, and certainly the entire Jewish people in every generation, have painful situations and occurrences, both physically and spiritually. We feel completely helpless, with no clue how we will be able to cope and continue to function. Our heart cries

out within us — “Why is Hashem so far removed from *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) and myself, and why is He hidden from us at this terrible time of crisis?”

However, this is all at that initial moment of shock and confusion. After this, when the person begins to be open to *nechama*, he returns to the understanding that there is no place or situation, as difficult or painful as some may be, where Hashem is not right with him, and accompanying him. There is no reality in this world which Hashem is not directly causing to occur at that very moment. He returns to the calm, peaceful awareness within himself that even when I am “walking within the valley of death” that “*atah imadi* — You (Hashem) are [always] with me” — with all of Your *rachamim* (mercy), *chassadim* (kindnesses), and *tov* (goodness). Even at the very moments of constriction and challenge, he understands that Hashem has never abandoned him. This, however, was certainly not what he was thinking when the difficulty first began.

This is *nechama* — not to mourn in bitter futility over our difficult situations, but rather to transform our hearts, to change our perspectives; to see everything with a fresh and different view that is encouraging, enlightening, and a *nechama*. This is what Yeshaya, the prophet, said — “*Nachamu, Nachamu Ami.*” It is the voice that is knocking on the entrance to our heart and desires to dwell within us...throughout all of the days of the year. We must not forget this true reality, as we say in *tikun chatzot* (the special prayer recited in the middle of the night) — “Hashem says — “I love you (the Jewish people). My only desire is to return to you in mercy. Return to Me and I will return to you. I am the One Who grants you *nechama.*””

Rav Weinberger also once spoke to a group of bereaved parents (at a “Chai Lifeline” event) near the beginning of the month of Adar. He quoted the *gemara* that says — “*Mishenichnas Adar marbim b’simcha* — When the month of Adar enters, we increase in *simcha* (joy).” This is a curious choice of words. Instead of *mishenichnas* (when Adar **enters**), it could have said, *k’she’ba* (when Adar **arrives**). The **Sfat Emet** derived from this that we can only feel *simcha* when we **permit** the *simcha* to enter ourselves. We must open our hearts to feel the *simcha* of a birth, a *bar mitzvah*, a wedding. Only one who allows the joyous month of Adar to enter within, will be able to experience happiness again, despite the loss that he or she experienced.

What are we welcoming when we allow Adar to enter? Wherein lays the abundance of joy that comes into the world with the month of Adar? The answer is **change**. Adar is *hachodesh asher nehepach* — the month that can change, *miyagon l’simcha* — from sadness to joy, *mei’evel l’yom tov* — from mourning to celebration.

There is a precedent for this concept with the *luchot*, the tablets. Moshe broke the first set of *luchot*... But there was another, permanent set of *luchot* that came afterwards. When we feel that our “set of *luchot*” was shattered, we need to open our hearts to receive Hashem’s gift of a “second set of *luchot*,” the belief that joy can and will find a place in our lives again, with a new set of *luchot* that will never be broken.

The words *kam*, *kamti*, *vayakam* all mean to get up. A word’s first appearance in *Tanach* establishes the essence of the word. Our first encounter with the root *kam* is when Avraham finishes burying his wife Sara. The Torah tells us — “*Vayakam Avraham mei’al pnei meito* — And Avraham got up...” While Avraham certainly never forget Sara, he was able to continue on with his “second set of *luchot*,” even after his first set had been broken. (*Reb Yochanan’s Bone*, pg. 425).

The *sefer Divrei Yeshua v’Nechama* explains:

“It is a mitzvah to encourage and strengthen anyone in the midst of a great or painful difficulty with words of *emunah* and *bitachon* (clarity and trust of G-d). This is the foundation and root of the mitzvah of *nichum aveilim* (**Shulchan Aruch** — *Yoreh De’ah* #335). And, similarly, this is the foundation of the mitzvah to help the poor and to strengthen them with words (*Baba Batra* 9b).

However, we need to understand, what exactly **is** the idea and the benefit of these words of *nechama*? The difficult situation is an established fact. Will these words change it at all?

The answer is that, while these words will certainly be unable to change the actual situation, the person himself or herself **can** change. While the reality will remain exactly as it was, how the person will accept it, and how he will relate to it, can definitely change through the words. These words of encouragement and *nechama* will deepen one's *emunah* in Hashem and allow one to strengthen himself and continue with his life.

Everything depends upon how a person chooses to view the difficulty that Hashem brought upon him. This is the concept of *nichum aveilim* and encouragement of all those who are having difficulties. It is to show the person how to view the situation, to help him to recognize that everything is from Hashem, and despite how difficult it is, to accept whatever happened to him with love. By understanding how to find the hidden kindnesses within the difficulty, one can become stronger through this challenge, and healed from despair.

Nosei b'ole im chaveiro (carrying the yoke with your friend) means exactly as it says — to divide up the burden. With a physical burden, everyone understands that this means to give their shoulder to their friend. When one carries the burden of *yissurim*, however, one needs to give their heart.

How does this help? When there is only one *aveil* (mourner), he must carry the entire burden on his own shoulders. When there are two *aveilim*, however, it is somewhat easier, since they are able to divide up the pain. Whenever any new person is pained along with the first person, the nature of people is that this lightens the burden.

In the story of *Iyov*, Hashem told the *Satan* that he could take everything from *Iyov* but his life itself. If so, why didn't the *Satan* take *Iyov's* friends away? Because if *Iyov* would have had to carry the burden of his *yissurim* all by himself, he would not have been able to stand up to it. Once he had a group of friends, however, the pain was divided up among them all.

The *Gemara* (*Sotah* 32b) says that a *metzora* needs to continually call out that he is *tamei*, to tell people about his pain, so that everyone will request mercy for him. While they can't physically help his situation, their sharing his pain and arousing mercy for him, **does** help him.

When the *Gemara* (*Baba Batra* 16b) says — “*O' chavruta k'chavrei d'Iyov o' mitutah* — Either friends like the friends of *Iyov* or death,” it means that if one would need to carry the pain all by himself, he wouldn't be able to stand up to it. Rather, he needs to have friends like the friends of *Iyov*, who divided up the pain and carried it together with him.” (*Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama*, pg. 179–182).

Feel the love and closeness of Hashem within the *yissurim*

There is a tremendous *nechama* when we are able to feel Hashem's relationship and love for us within the very challenges of our lives. The **Ibn Ezra** asked: Why did the Torah write — “*Banim atem laHashem Elokeichem, lo titgodedu* — You are children to G-d your L-rd, don't gash yourselves [in mourning for the dead]” (*Devarim* 14:1–2)? This teaches us that every difficulty that comes to us from Hashem, comes to us only from love, since no one cares more about a child than their parent.

Similarly, the **Kotzker Rebbe** explained why the month of *Av*, during which so many terrible tragedies occurred, is specifically called “*Av* — father”:

Hashem wanted to hint to us that all of the terrible pain that has come upon *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people), all came from *ahavah b'Shamayim* (love in Heaven), since bad doesn't come from parents. (*Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama*, pg. 207).

The *Medrash* (quoted by **Rashi** — *Bereshit* 37:25), explained why the verse specified that the caravan taking Yosef down to Egypt was carrying the unusual cargo of fragrant spices. This was a special benefit for Yosef, since he was a *tzadik*.

Rav Mordechai Fogarmanski asked:

“After all of the hardship and humiliation that Yosef suffered through being sold into slavery, what possible value was there to this tiny gesture that Hashem did for him in having the caravan carry nice-smelling spices?”

He answered with a *mashal* (analogy) of a boy who needed an operation —

“On the day of the operation, his family accompanied him to the hospital and gave him many presents and treats. When he got to the outside of the operating room, only his parents were able to stay with him. And when the surgeon took him into the operating room, the parents needed to wait outside. When the boy looked around the room and realized that he was all alone, without any family at all, he began to cry. However, when he saw that there was a small window in the door, and that his mother would still be able to see him, he immediately stopped crying and began to smile.

What changed? While the operating room was still very frightening, knowing that his mother was still watching over him changed the whole situation. When Yosef smelled the unusual cargo of fragrant spices, this was like Hashem watching over him through a window. He knew that he was not alone, and that whatever **could** be done to help the situation **would** be done. This was the message that David HaMelech expressed about himself — “Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” Knowing that Hashem is with us is a tremendous *nechama* for even the greatest of challenges and difficulties.” (*Lekach Tov* — *Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 114–115).

Rav Dov Yafeh (in his *haskamah* to the *sefer Lekach Tov* — *Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*) explained that the Sages say:

“**Without** *emunah* — in order to have *simcha* — You need to **forget** the truth.

With *emunah* — in order to have *simcha* — You need to **remember** the truth.”

It is similarly said in the name of the *Chafetz Chayim*:

“**With** *emunah* there are no questions, and **without** *emunah* there are no answers.” (*Lekach Tov* — *Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 212).

The traditional expression of *nechama* at a house of mourning is — “*HaMakom yenachem etchem b'toch she'ar aveilei Tzion v'Yerushalayim* — G-d should give *nechama* to you among the other mourners of *Tzion* and *Yerushalayim*.” **Rabbi Yisrael Rutman** asked:

“Why do we use the word “*HaMakom*” — the Omnipresent (literally, “The Place”) in this expression? It is but one of the many names of G-d, and not the one normally employed in blessings. Perhaps “*HaRachaman*,” the Merciful One, would be more appropriate?”

G-d is everywhere, true. But a person who has lost a loved one often feels that he has been abandoned by G-d; that there is no G-d where he is [now]. We say to the mourner, therefore, that *HaMakom* should comfort him: We pray that he be blessed by a renewed awareness of G-d's presence, for **the grief-stricken place in which he now finds himself is also *HaMakom*, the place of G-d.**

[In addition,] the contemplation of *HaMakom* during a time of pain, and coming closer to Him, can [also] comfort the mourner with the realization that their loved one's physical death is only a part of the bigger picture. Just as their life was a part of G-d's plan, so too is their passing from this world to another yet more real world." (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 217).

Life is filled with difficulties and challenges. Most are minor, some are major, and some can feel absolutely overwhelming. However, **Rebbetzin Heller** (with **Sara Rigler** in their book — *Let's face it: The 8 Essential Challenges of Living*) points out:

"In the Torah perspective, the worst situation of all would be for a person to have no difficulties or challenges **at all**. When nothing difficult or challenging happens in your life, it may mean that, for whatever reason, you've been given up on, and deemed not worthy of the test. While soldiers going through basic training may complain of the sheer ordeal and exhaustion of the experience, in fact those who were deemed unfit, physically or psychologically, were never even given a chance at the first hurdle. In the Divine plan, tests are only given to those who have the capacity to pass them.

Of course, this isn't the only interpretation of a tranquil life. Sometimes a person could be living a peaceful life and be moving and progressing through that life without needing any [extra] stimulus to grow. People who are not sleeping do not need a wake-up call. So, since a person's inner growth is impossible for [any] other person to assess, no one else can judge whether tranquility is a sign of steady growth or a total write-off. The latter, however, is considered to be the worst situation of all." (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 386).

It is possible to have *simcha* along with the pain

Many mourners are bothered by whether crying and pain are a contradiction to accepting the *din Shamayim* (Heavenly judgment) with love.

The basis of this question is the obligation to make a *bracha* (blessing) on the *ra'ah* (difficult) just like we make a *bracha* on the *tov* (positive). And similarly, the idea that we should be accustomed to say — "All that Hashem does, He does for the good."

The *Medrash (Bereshit Rabbah 56:8)* tells us a remarkable fact. While Avraham Avinu was on the way to the *akeidah*, to offer his son Yitzchak up on the altar, he was crying and he was also *same'ach* (joyful). The *Gra* explained that this *medrash* is telling us the great level of Avraham Avinu. And from this we can also understand the proper approach in our own service of Hashem:

Avraham began to think and picture within himself just how precious his son was and how great his love was for him. He also imagined in his heart just how great the pain would be for both Sara and himself if their son was missing from them, and he began to cry. **Then** he realized just how powerful his love was for *ratzon Hashem* (doing G-d's will), since he was going to fulfill it even to this degree.

These words show us how to accept difficult challenges, and how we should [try to] act. It is not merely permissible to cry and to feel pain [with a personal loss], but on the contrary, the intensity of the crying and pain can actually help the mourner to deepen the love of Hashem that he has in his heart, and to strengthen the foundations of his *emunah*. This is true even after the first three days, and even after many months, since *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) never intended to forbid crying that comes from a person's natural feelings.

A person should ideally direct these feelings and this pain toward strengthening himself and his family to accept the Heavenly judgment. In addition, one should strengthen the foundations of his *emunah* that there is absolutely no power besides Hashem, and since Hashem only wants our best, there is no doubt that this difficulty and pain is also for our good. Through accepting this challenge with

love, the pain and difficulty can actually be transformed into a part of our *avodat Hashem* (service of G-d). It is *ratzon Hashem* (G-d's will) that a person should [attempt to] walk in the path of Avraham Avinu who was crying while he was also *same'ach*. What is incumbent upon us is to try to understand how to connect our natural crying and pain to doing *ratzon Hashem* (G-d's will), and also to accept this *ratzon Hashem* with love. (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 205–6).

Rabbi Gottlieb, based on the *Mesilat Yescharim* (Path of the Just), written about 280 years ago, explains that the true service of G-d is to be in a state of continuous *simcha*:

“Now, [the *Mesilat Yescharim*] was written after the Patriarchs, after the Sages, after the *Churban* (destruction of the Temple), and after the pogroms. So the Ramchal knew about vast, vast Jewish suffering, and yet he says that the true service of G-d is to be in a state of continuous *simcha*. How can that be?

The answer is that the heart can simultaneously hold contradictory emotions. The heart is unlike the mind. If the mind has simultaneous contradictory ideas, then something's wrong; at least one of the ideas are false. But the heart **can** hold opposite emotions at the same time, and they can both be right! So when the *Mesilat Yescharim* says that the service of G-d involves being in a continuous state of *simcha*, that does not mean to be free of pain. One can have pain and *simcha* at the same time.

There is a *halacha* which may sound strange. A parent who was very wealthy dies, *Rachmana litzlon* (G-d should save us), and the child says two blessings: “*Dayan HaEmet* — The True Judge” on the death, and “*HaTov v'HaMeitiv* — The Good One Who does good” — on the inheritance of the money.

The Torah is very realistic about emotions. A person can experience a swirl of painful emotions, and at the same time, perhaps pride or excitement on the inheritance of money or a position. A person can feel both at the same time.

But if one's heart is divided, there can be limits to how much *simcha* can be achieved in a period of pain. Yaakov, thinking that Yosef was dead, went over twenty years without prophecy. Why?

Because one must be in a state of great *simcha* to experience prophecy, and Yaakov was not able to achieve this level of *simcha*. Now, I don't know anywhere that Yaakov is criticized for this. Surely he did his best, but under these conditions he couldn't achieve what he had achieved beforehand. Even Yaakov had limitations.

So one looks for *simcha*, for the *simcha* that's possible together with the pain, and one works to have as much *simcha* as one can. But there are times and circumstances where it's too difficult, and under those circumstances the inability to feel *simcha* should not be taken as a failure.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 320–8).

It is a *nechama* to know that we returned our deposit intact

The **Medrash** (*Avot d'Rebbe Natan* 14:6) teaches that when the son of Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai passed away, five of his students went to give him *nechama*. The first four spoke to him about others whose children had died — Adam HaRishon, Iyov, Aharon HaKohen, and David haMelech. Their message was that just as these four had all been able to accept *nechama* after the loss of their children, Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai should also be able to accept *nechama* after losing his son. In each of these cases, Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai said — “Isn't it enough that I have my own pain; you want to also tell me about the pain of these other people?”

The fifth student, Rebbe Elazar ben Arach, then told Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai a *mashal* (parable) — “There was a man who was given a deposit from the king to guard. Every day he cried out — “Woe is to me! When will I be able to return this deposit intact?” This was your situation as well, Rebbe. You were given a son who learned much and was taken from this world with no transgressions at all. You should be able to accept *nechama* since you returned your deposit intact.” Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai responded — “You gave me *nechama*, just as others got *nechama*.”

From this we see that there are two different types of *nechama* for one in the midst of his pain. The first is to realize that, as difficult as one's situation is, it is a part of life that has happened to many others, and they managed to have *nechama*. While this approach may be able to minimize the pain, the wound that one suffered will still remain in its place. The second type of *nechama* is to understand that, while one's situation may be very painful, what seems to be only a tragedy actually has some positive aspect to it as well. This has the ability to completely heal the wound. And this is what the fifth student, Rebbe Elazar ben Arach, was able to accomplish. (*Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama*, pg. 215–8).

The **Ben Ish Chai** explained this *Medrash* (*Avot d'Rebbe Natan* 14:6) with Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai differently. Initially, his great anguish over the death of his son was because he felt that his son had died before his time. He, therefore, assumed that his son had not been able to complete his task in life. The *mashal* of Rebbe Elazar ben Arach, however, alluded to the concept of *gilgulim* (reincarnation), where the *nefesh* (soul) returns to this world to perfect whatever element was lacking the previous time. In that case, his son had no need to live the full lifetime that is usually allotted to people, but rather only the time needed to repair the missing element. If so, his son actually died at his proper time, and was missing absolutely nothing. (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, p176–8).

Eliyahu Hayman wrote about how this perspective helped his wife and himself to find *nechama* after the tragic death of their daughter Shoshana [in the Sbarro bombing]:

“We were told, during *shiva*, that we have to look at Shoshana's *neschama* as a *pikadon* (deposit), something that was left with us for safekeeping. It was entrusted to us for 31 years, and at the end of that time, we were required to return it as intact as when we received it. As parents, we never know how our children will turn out. We do our best to raise them with proper values and character traits, but, ultimately, we cannot control how they will live as adults.

We drew strength in the knowledge that Shoshana accomplished goals in her 31 years that the Torah considers important, and that she turned out right. There is an ethical teaching of the Rabbis (*Kohelet Rabba*) that says the day of death is better than the day of life. This is shown by comparing life to the voyage of a ship. When a ship leaves the port on its voyage, we don't know whether the ship will return safely or not. When a ship arrives in port at the end of a voyage, however, we should rejoice in its safe homecoming. So it is with the *neschama*. When it leaves its source to journey in this world, we don't know whether it will accomplish its objectives, and in what shape it will return to its source. When it returns unblemished, its objectives met, this is a source of *nechama* and reassurance.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 146–153)

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