Understanding and Accepting *Nechama* – Part 3 – JewishClarity.com

Guidance of what to say, and what not to say, at a *shiva* (house of mourning)

As helpful as many ideas may be for our **personal** understanding and acceptance of *nechama*, it is extremely important to realize that they may be very different from the **practical** question of what one should actually say, or not say, to a mourner at a *shiva*. **Rabbi Bulka**, the author of *Comforting Mourners: What to Say When There Is Nothing to Say* addressed this critical issue with some basic guidelines:

"As sensitive and caring people, we try to do the right thing. Sometimes, however, trying to do the right thing, and not succeeding, can do more harm than good. Such is the case with comforting the bereaved. One of the worst things that consolers can do is to resort to clichés that are not only worn out, but downright silly.

One cliché is, "He or she is in a better place." How can anyone know such a thing? This statement is not helpful to the mourner. What we do know is that **this** world is a good place — for it is a place to do good. Death, therefore, is a tragedy. Another remark that turns mourners off is that G-d needed the deceased more than the living needed him. Again, how can anyone know that? Moreover, it makes G-d into some sort of self-absorbed entity who wreaks tragedy in this world for the purpose of drafting people onto His heavenly team. Yet another no-no is to suggest, usually following the death of a person who has lived well into their eighties or nineties, that "at least he or she lived a full life." No matter how well intended these words are, they are a cruel invasion of the mourner's emotions. They trivialize the mourning and make whoever is in despair feel as if they are grieving unnecessarily. This disconnects the mourner from the consoler, when the purpose of offering *nechama* is primarily to connect.

Many people who have gone through mourning for parents have complained to me about receiving this comment. They claim that such rationalizing is demeaning and undermines their feelings. They believe that the experience of many years together with parents makes separation after death *more* difficult, rather than less so.

A couple was grieving the loss of a six-month-old daughter. A well-meaning person came by and offered that, "She died as a perfect soul, never having had the chance to transgress." He meant well, and truthfully many people in similar circumstances might be comforted by this remark. But these parents were in fact very upset by the comment. It is true that the young girl had no opportunity to transgress, but she also had no opportunity to do good, and that was the unaddressed, even ignored, lament of the grieving family.

The problem, and the challenge, is that it takes more than good intentions to be an effective consoler. And presumptuous comments about the good side of a terrible tragedy are tricky at best, highly damaging at worst. A young widow, during the mourning for her husband, was hurt by a friend who suggested, with the best of intentions, "You are young and pretty, you will soon find someone."

Without getting too deep into more examples, we can add to the collection of no-no's such phrases as, "I know how you feel," "Life goes on," "You will heal," "Count your blessings," "You have other children," "Your grief will pass," and "You have your whole life ahead of you." All these expressions trivialize the mourning, rather than appreciating the gravity of the grief.

Condolence visits challenge us to be exceedingly sensitive and careful with our lips. Once the words come out, they cannot be taken back. It is nice when the mourners themselves are understanding and appreciate our good intentions, but we should not rely on this.

You may ask, “If everything I say is potentially no good, what **should** I say?” That is a great question. And the answer is that it is **not** the obligation of the consoler to offer **words** of *nechama*. The consoler's obligation is to **give** *nechama*, plain and simple.

How can one give *nechama* without saying anything? *Nechama* is achieved simply by being there, with the mourner, even in silence. Everyone would agree that coming and saying nothing is preferable to coming and saying something silly or unwelcome. Of course, the best result is attained by coming and sharing wise thoughts and reflections.

But how can one know what is appropriate when every mourner thinks differently? The answer is — through silence, through coming with lips sealed and ears wide open. That is the Jewish protocol, an often-ignored protocol, for mourning visitation. Come there, sit, and listen. The mourner will start talking, and you will then know where the mourner is. You can then respond. This is the safe, sensitive, and sensible way to be a comforter.

Affirming the mourner, and the mourning, is critical. Acknowledging the difficulty in finding the right words is a comforting gesture. Wanting to learn more about the deceased, when appropriate, is also welcome when one senses the mourner would like this.

One of the most effective sources of *nechama* is saying nice things about the deceased. Stories about the deceased, especially ones of which the bereaved were not aware, are a great source of *nechama*, often bringing a smile to the face of the mourner. Saying kind things to the mourner can also be quite comforting, such as expressing admiration for love shared, or care given.

Always remember that no matter how awkward you may feel when visiting a mourner, it's not about **you**. It’s about the **mourner**. What will make the **mourner** feel better (as opposed to yourself)? What will bring a smile to his or her face? The answer may be hard to come up with, or you may have many answers. The more effort that you put into answering this question, the more likely it is that you will really fulfill the religious and social obligation of comforting the mourner. And the more likely, then, that the mourner will be helped along on his way from grief to gratitude — gratitude for the life of his or her loved one.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 213–5).

Only Hashem can give *nechama*, not merely time, nor people

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach once went to give *nechama* to a young widow. He told her:

“People will definitely tell you that with time your pain will be forgotten, and with this they are trying to give you *nechama*. However, the truth is that it is impossible to forget, and therefore it is a mistake to tell you that you will forget. Rather, you will need to live with this situation, and together with this, to strengthen your *emunah* and *bitachon* in Hashem, and He will be the One to help you.” (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 139).

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz told Rav Rozovsky, the *Mashgiach* of *Ponovezh*, when his wife passed away:

“In order to give *nechama* to one in the midst of pain, one needs to feel this pain. However, since we are taught that the wife only fully dies to her husband, there is no one at all that could possibly feel the pain of a husband who lost his wife. No person has the ability to give him *nechama*, only G-d Himself Who knows how great his pain actually is. Therefore, he concluded — ‘*HaMakom yenachem etchem* — Hashem should give you *nechama* — *b'toch she'ar aveilei Tzion v'Yerushalayim* — among the other mourners of *Tzion* and *Yerushalayim*.’” (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg. 137).

Move past negative thoughts

A major element in achieving *nechama* is being able to get past guilt and blame for the death of those close to us. The *Netivot Shalom* brings this point out based on a well-known Rashi at the beginning of *Parshat Chayei Sara*. Rashi explained that the death of Sara directly followed the *Akeidah* because she died when she heard about how Yitzchak had almost been offered up on the altar by Avraham. This explains why the very next verse (*Bereshit* 23:3), after Sara's death, says — "*Vayakam Avraham mei'al p'nei meito* — And Avraham got up from eulogizing Sarah."

While eulogizing Sarah, it occurred to him that he might have had some degree of responsibility for her death by virtue of his willingness to perform the *Akeidah*. Once he recognized that this thought was only negative, he got up and departed from that line of thinking. It wasn't a constructive thought, it didn't help him, and on the contrary, it hurt him. So, "*Vayakam Avraham*," he removed this thought from his mind and never considered it again. (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 342–4).

While our perspective is now limited, all will be clear in the end

The Shabbat immediately following *Tisha b'Av* is known as *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of Consolation. We read the prophesy of Yeshaya to the Jewish people (*Yeshaya* 40:1), which begins "*Nachamu nachamu ami* — Console, console my nation." **Rav Berkowitz** explained this double language of consolation as referring to two different aspects of *nechama*, based on what will occur in the end of days.

The first is that there will come a time in history when all of the difficulties, both individually and communally, will finally be finished. And that is also a *nechama* now, since it tells us that the enormous degree of suffering we see all throughout the world has an end-point.

The second *nechama*, however, is even more significant. At that future time, when all of the painful *yissurim* will have finally ended, we will then be able to look back and understand why everything, including all of the difficulties throughout history, needed to have happened in the first place. Simply knowing that all of the pain and difficulty in the world fits into some larger picture, even if we don't understand how, is a tremendous *nechama* at the present time. And it can help us to deal with even severe pain right now.

Rav Shimshon Pincus (*Bi'ur Tefillat Nacheim*, pg. 277) articulated this point as well:

The *nechama* that we will merit when *Mashiach* comes will not merely be a forgetting of the difficulties through the passage of time. Rather, it will then be clear retroactively that all the difficulties of the long *galut* (exile) were never actually negative things.

The *Chafetz Chaim* (*Shem Olom — Shaar Shmirat Shabbat*, Chapter 3, in the footnotes) addressed our limited perspective in being able to understand the difficulties and challenges all around us, with the following *mashal* (parable). A traveler spends Shabbat in a new town. He observes the *gabai* distributing the *aliyot*, seemingly at random.

This visitor cannot understand the *gabai*'s logic, and questions his decisions. The *gabai* responds by chastising him — "How dare you, a visitor from out of town, question my judgment? If you wish to understand my actions, you must be here [at least] an entire year and see how I distribute the *aliyot*. You cannot even attempt to understand my system by observing me on only one Shabbat."

The *Chafetz Chaim* asks, who is this visitor who knows so little and yet demands to understand so much? This is each one of us. We are in this world for a very short stay and yet expect to

understand G-d's complete plan, which began far before our existence and will continue long after we're gone! [The *Chafetz Chaim* also says, in the name of the *Ari z"l*, that nowadays almost all of the souls are *gilgulim* (reincarnations).] We have no choice, therefore, but to go with *emunah* and trust that whatever Hashem does is for our best. (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 328–9).

When exactly this will occur on a global level is not something which we can know. The *Gemara Pesachim* says that one of the seven things which are hidden from a person is "*Yom HaNechama* — the time when all will have *nechama* from their various difficulties." (**Rashi**).

"There is a blessing within every curse"

Professor Michael Josephson, a teacher of ethics, told the following parable to shift how we view the events in our lives:

"A man and his companion lost their way in a forest. The companion despaired, but the man said maybe some good will come of this. They came upon a stranger who needed the man's help. The stranger turned out to be a prince who gave the man a beautiful horse.

His neighbors praised his good luck and said, "How blessed you are to have such a magnificent animal." The man said, "Who's to say whether this is a blessing or a curse?"

The next day the horse ran away, and the neighbors said, "How horrible that you were cursed with the loss of your horse."

The man replied, "Who's to say whether this is a curse or a blessing? Perhaps some good will come of this."

The next day the horse returned leading five wild horses. "You were right!" his neighbors exclaimed. "The curse was a blessing in disguise. Now you're blessed with six horses."

The man replied, "Perhaps, but who's to say whether this is a blessing or a curse?"

The next day his only son tried to ride one of the wild horses. He was thrown to the ground and broke his leg. The neighbors said, "How wise you were. Your blessing was really a curse."

The man replied, "There may be good yet. Who's to say whether this is a curse or a blessing?"

The next day soldiers came through the village and took every able-bodied boy to fight in a war where it was almost certain that all would be killed. Because the man's son was injured, he was the only one not taken. "How blessed are you to have your son!" the neighbors said.

The man replied, "Who's to say? I don't know whether there is a curse in every blessing, but I am sure that there is a blessing within every curse."" (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 506–7).

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the author of *On Death and Dying*, pointed out that we grow and gain enormously from the difficulties in our lives:

"The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen." (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 492).

How we relate to *yissurim* is always a choice

Victor Frankel, a psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust, expressed (in *Man's Search for Meaning*) a fundamental principal that extends far beyond the concentration camps:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity.

In the final analysis, it became clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him — mentally and spiritually.

He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. Dostoevski said once, “There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.” These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom, which cannot be taken away, that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete.

Do not think that these considerations are unworldly and too far removed from real life. Such men are not only in concentration camps. Everywhere, man is confronted with fate, with the chance of achieving something through his own suffering.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 446–7).

New beginnings are not new to Jews

In May of 2004, 34-year-old **Tali Hatuel**, a social worker who lived in the Gaza Strip, was gunned down on a Gaza highway by Palestinian terrorists along with her four daughters, Hila, 11; Hadar, 9; Roni, 7; and Merav, 2. As if the atrocity could not be any worse, Tali Hatuel was 8 months pregnant with her first son.

When their husband and father, **David Hatuel**, was asked if he hated G-d for what had happened, he replied — “But I am able to cope only **because** of G-d. Rather than focus on the horror of how my family was taken from me, I am focusing instead on the twelve beautiful years G-d gave me with my beloved wife and daughters. I just have to believe that G-d has a plan as to why that time was cut short.”

At a later date, when he announced that he was getting remarried, he said —

“My sight is set on the future. I am building again on a home that still is. My wife and daughters will never be erased. They will always be a part of me, and part of my life. The new home that Limor and I will establish will not replace the home that was destroyed. Rather, our home will be an additional floor upon that home's foundation. I am like a tree whose branches were cut off and now they are growing again.”

He continued, “After the tragedy, I realized that I had two choices: To fall and to be destroyed, or to continue to live. I am choosing life.”

While many wondered how it would be possible for him to go on, the sad reality is that, only two generations ago, millions of Jews started over under even worse circumstances: Holocaust survivors lost not only their spouses and children, but their parents, siblings, communities, and even nationalities. New beginnings, sadly, are not new to Jews. (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, 477–481)

Allen Bodner (in an article in Jewish Action Magazine) expressed the following realization after his wife Jill had passed away:

“*Nechama* does not mean to forget and move on. It does not even mean that we stop grieving… *nechama* means to reconsider what was originally thought, to reevaluate the situation. One year ago, at the funeral, we thought that we could not go on without Jill, and now we have learned that we must. In my *hesped* (eulogy), I said, “My tomorrow has been canceled.” Over the past year I have learned that I was wrong. **Tomorrow has not been canceled.** Not for me, not for my family, and not even for Jill.” (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 339).

In conclusion:

The words from David Hatuel and Alan Bodner very concisely expressed the essential quality of *nechama*:
No matter how painful or difficult our situation may be, we must always continue to choose life. That means to realize that — tomorrow is never, ever canceled. Not for us, not for our family and not even for the deceased.

The **Maharal** (*Netzach Yisrael* — chap. 41,56) explains that *nechama* is the ability to hope for the future. The *Atzmot Yosef* (on *parshat V'et'chanan*) adds that it is the refusal to give up, even when you feel such despair that you don't think you will be able to go on living. When someone close to us passes away, we also experience a type of death. Without the spiritual healing and the renewed wholeness and *shleimut* (completion) that we get from *nechama*, it would be impossible for us to continue to exist.

Rav Dessler (*Michtav m'Eliyahu* — 4:342) pointed out that:

“*Nechama* **is really against human nature**. The fact that people are able to get *nechama* is only the result of a special gift or miracle from Hashem. And the *S'fat Emet* (on *Birkat Hamazon*) added that only Hashem is called “*Ba'al HaNechamot* — the Master of *Nechama*.” He is outside of time and nature, and, therefore, only **He** is able to transform our pain into good. However, we need to know that **this** *nes* **(miracle) will only occur if we are willing to accept it**. As the *Pele Yo'etz* wrote — Just like it is a mitzvah to give *nechama*, in terms of any difficulty that may befall another person, **it is also a mitzvah to receive** *nechama* and to accept the Heavenly judgment with love.” (*Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, pg.173–4).

This collection of beautiful, inspiring, and uplifting ideas that define and explain the meaning of *nechama*, were largely taken from *Reb Yochanan's Bone*, written *l'iluy nishmat* Chana Hinda bat Boruch Chaim Kohen, as well as *Lekach Tov — Pirkei Emunah v'Nechama*, and *Divrei Yeshua v'Nechama*.

G-d willing, these ideas should strengthen all of us to accept a true *nechama* with whatever challenges we face in our lives, whether big or small.

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