

## 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 eternality of the *neschama*, 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 eternality of the *neschama* 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).

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

**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 aтем 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 Yesharim* (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 Yesharim*] 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 Yesharim* 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*, pg. 176–8).

**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)

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

### 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 *gabei* distributing the *aliyot*, seemingly at random.

This visitor cannot understand the *gabei's* logic, and questions his decisions. The *gabei* 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*, pg. 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**