

Pain Is a Reality, Suffering Is a Choice — Why Painful Things Happen to Good People — Three Essential Prerequisites — JewishClarity.com

First — Definition of *Yissurim*

The Hebrew word *yissurim* deals with the classical theological and philosophical issue — “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and “Why do good things happen to bad people?” While *yissurim* is often translated as “suffering,” if we examine a verse in the Torah containing the word *yissurim*, we will see why that translation is problematic.

Devarim 8:5 tells us — “And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent gives *yissurim* to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you *yissurim*.” It is obvious that we should **not** translate this verse as — “And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent causes his child to suffer, G-d your L-rd causes you to suffer.” The Torah is teaching us the **meaning of *yissurim***. Just as a parent will sometimes give something painful to a child, for the benefit of the child and from the love of the parent, G-d will also sometimes give us **something painful**, but specifically **for our benefit and from His love**.

Second — Asking Questions about *Yissurim*

People sometimes think that it is wrong to ask questions about the topic of *yissurim*. After all, who are we to question or challenge G-d about this complex theological subject? This is not, however, a proper Jewish perspective. The Talmud (*Brachot* 7a) tells us that Moshe himself asked G-d about the righteous that appear to suffer and the wicked that appear to prosper. G-d's response seems to have been that, as a human being, Moshe couldn't possibly understand how every single detail made sense for every particular person and every specific situation.

It is perhaps this degree of specificity regarding how *yissurim* impact different people and situations that the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* (4:19) is referring to when it says it is “not in our hands [to understand] the tranquility of the wicked and the *yissurim* of the righteous.” What is possible, however, and what we should strive to do, is to try to understand the general principles of *yissurim* as much as we can.

Third — Challenge or Support to G-d and Religion?

The widespread perception is that the issue of *yissurim* may be the greatest difficulty or challenge to belief in both G-d and religion. Paradoxically, however, the situation is almost exactly the opposite. Why are we so bothered by the righteous that seem to suffer and the wicked that seem to prosper? What are we expecting to occur? Obviously, that the righteous should not suffer and the wicked should not prosper.

Let's consider why it is so obvious to us that the righteous should not suffer and the wicked should not prosper. If we believe in G-d, and we think that G-d is good and just, then it seems very logical that the righteous should not suffer and the wicked should not prosper. But if we don't actually believe in a good and just G-d, there is then no reason at all to assume that the righteous should not suffer and the wicked should not prosper. Remarkably, therefore, not only is the question of why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper not a contradiction to belief in G-d, it actually shows that we are believers!

There is, however, a basic objection that may be raised to this. One can claim that this question of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering shows nothing at all about one's own beliefs. The question is simply posing a challenge to the one who already believes in G-d. In other words,

how can one believe in a G-d Who is good and just, when there seems to be so much evil and injustice all throughout the world?

In theory, this sounds like a valid point. If we examine this objection more closely, however, we will see its essential flaw. The question of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering is not merely an interesting abstract discussion. It is one that deeply disturbs us and fills us with outrage. What is the basis of all outrage? It is when our expectations have been violated. As an example, imagine that someone, G-d forbid, betrayed you. You would very likely feel outraged by this. Now consider how you would feel if this person was a friend of yours. A greater sense of outrage. And if it was your best friend? Even more outrage. And, G-d forbid, if it was your relative that had done this? Much more outrage. Your close relative? Still more outrage. This shows us how the dynamic of outrage works. The greater our expectation that something should not occur, if it then actually does happen, the greater our outrage will be.

The very outrage we feel when we think about the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering shows how strong our expectation is that this will not occur. The key question, of course, is what is the basis of this expectation? If we believe in a G-d Who is good and just, then there is a logical basis to this expectation. But if we claim not to believe in G-d, then our expectation of goodness and justice really makes no sense. As much as injustice may bother us, with no G-d, why should the righteous not suffer and the wicked not prosper?

Furthermore, not only does the outrage behind the question of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering show our belief in G-d, it actually shows that we believe specifically in the Jewish concept of G-d. Judaism speaks not only about G-d being good and just, it also teaches that G-d plays an active role in the world. And G-d's involvement in the world is essential to our expectation of justice.

One final point is that this outrage, based upon our expectations, is truly universal. Although many people are quite jaded and desensitized in today's largely unfiltered world, every human being is still sometimes outraged by the appearance of injustice. At the end of the day, we all do expect that the righteous should not need to suffer, and the wicked should not be able to prosper.

Important clarification — This is not a proof for the existence of G-d. It is rather a proof that all human beings **already do believe** in G-d. This is the paradox that we touched on previously. Not only is the issue of *yissurim* no difficulty or challenge to belief in G-d, it is a remarkable support to show just how widespread the belief in G-d actually is.

Summary of These Three Essential Prerequisites:

Yissurim are painful challenges and difficulties (not “suffering”), within the context of a loving relationship with G-d.

The question of the righteous that seem to suffer and the wicked that seem to prosper is proper, as long as it is asked to understand, not to attack. It was asked even by Moshe to G-d.

The issue of *yissurim* is actually a support (not a challenge) to the Torah view of G-d. Our outrage at the seeming lack of justice is only because we **do** believe in an all-Powerful, all-Knowing, benevolent G-d.

Part One – Why Do Any Painful *Yissurim* Exist?

Separate from the perceived injustice of the righteous that seem to suffer and the wicked that appear to prosper, why does any pain and suffering exist at all? Couldn't an all-Powerful, all-Knowing, benevolent G-d have created a world completely free of pain and suffering?

The short answer is that G-d actually did do this. He created *Gan Eden*, a “garden of paradise,” with no painful *yissurim* at all. *Gan Eden*, however, was made incomplete, in that it was able to become corrupted. It was the task of mankind (specifically Adam and Chava) to eliminate this vulnerability and thereby make it 100% complete. Had they done that, they would have become

partners in the creation of the perfect paradise. Unfortunately, not only did they fail to eliminate this vulnerability, they actually brought about the corruption.

Painful *yissurim*, therefore, initially entered the world as a result of mankind's negative free will choices. And they continue to exist because mankind hasn't worked hard enough to eliminate them. One way to see this is in the fact that most pain and misery in the world today, both our own and of others, stems directly from our negative free will choices. As the *Gemara* (*Kesubot* 30a) says — “*Hakol b'yidei Shamayim chutz m'tzinim pachim* — All is in the hands of Heaven except for colds and fevers.” While we tend to ascribe all problems in our lives to G-d, oftentimes, such as with colds and fevers, they are simply the result of our own irresponsible behavior, like walking outside in the rain without a raincoat.

Rabbi Pliskin wrote about what we could call “self-imposed *yissurim*” in his book called *Serenity* (pg. 18) —

“Awareness of what it is like not to be serene is a motivating factor for mastering serenity. Stress, tension, worries, fears, irritations, frustrations, resentment, anger, anxiety, etc., are the source of much human suffering. They create unpleasant feelings in the present, and are the cause of a long list of psychosomatic illnesses and pain. A person who suffers from stressful and unresourceful states will usually not treat other people with sufficient kindness, respect, love, and compassion. It is difficult to empathize with others when one is preoccupied with one's own suffering. The root of many addictions such as overeating, smoking, drinking alcohol, etc., come from stress and anxiety. Serenity is the best antidote.”

Even these types of “self-imposed *yissurim*,” however, can end up playing a meaningful role in our lives depending on how we **choose** to react to them. They can elevate us (since all pain reduces our attachment to the physical world), bring out untapped potential (if we assume personal responsibility for what occurred), and allow us to become good role models (if we respond properly to them).

As an analogy to how we should relate to the prevalence of *yissurim* in the world, think about a teenager with a very messy room whose mother asks him to clean it up. Imagine that he would respond to his mother — “Why should I clean up my room? Maybe you should be the one to clean it up.” His mother answers him — “Of course I could clean up your room. But do you want to remain a child your whole life, making messes and having others clean them up for you?!” The teenager considers this and says — “I suppose you are right. I do want to be an adult. I made the mess, so I should be the one to clean it up.” But then he looks around the room and exclaims — “But why is it **so** messy?” The answer, of course, is — because he was the one to make it so messy! In a similar manner, we often look around the world and complain — “Why are there **so** many problems?” without realizing that, for many of them, the answer is the same — We (i.e., mankind) are the ones that made them, so we should be the ones to try to fix them up.

Part Two — Understanding G-d's Distribution System — Why Not Run the World with Transparent Justice?

In order to understand why good people sometimes **seem** to suffer and wicked people sometimes **appear** to prosper, we first need to appreciate the critical importance of free will. Without it, our lives would have no meaning or significance at all. We would simply be intelligent animals with our actions entirely determined by outside factors. This explains the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* 3:18 — that free will is the greatest expression of G-d's love for mankind — since it is the prerequisite to all meaning in our lives.

Real vs. Theoretical Free Will

Once we have an appreciation for the importance of free will, let's divide free will into two different types. We could call these “real free will” and “theoretical free will.”

As an example, imagine someone sitting down to fill out his tax forms. Does he have a **real** free will choice to fill them out either honestly or dishonestly? Of course he does. Now imagine that just before he begins, he receives a phone call from a friend who works for the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) who tells him that he is on a list of those whose taxes will be audited this coming year. What just happened to his free will once he got that phone call? It went from being **real** to being **theoretical**. In other words, while he **theoretically** still has the free will to cheat on his taxes, we know that he is **really** unlikely to do this.

Not only has his free will decision become theoretical, but any meaning that he could have derived from this choice has similarly become theoretical. To illustrate this, if he would assure his friend (in the IRS) when he next spoke with him that he had been scrupulously honest in filling out his taxes, would his friend view this as proof that he was a good and honest person? Of course not. He would simply see him as having been smart enough to do what was clearly beneficial for himself. And conversely, if despite the warning phone call, he had actually decided to cheat on his taxes, his friend wouldn't view him as immoral, but rather as stupid. While before the phone call, his choice was moral and meaningful, after the phone call, it was purely pragmatic.

What is it which separates between real and theoretical free will? **Clarity of consequences**. In other words, the clearer the consequences, both positive and negative, the more theoretical our free will is going to be. And, conversely, the less obvious it is that good behavior will be rewarded and negative actions will be penalized, the more real our free will ends up being.

Theological Problem or Necessity?

As we discussed in the third of the three prerequisites at the beginning, many feel that the “righteous who suffer and the wicked who prosper” is the ultimate theological difficulty. Based on what we have just said, however, it seems to paradoxically be a theological **necessity** — for both real free will and real meaning to exist. After all, when people ask about the “righteous who suffer and the wicked who prosper,” they certainly don't think that every single good person suffers, or that every single bad person prospers. Their question is rather, how can even **some** good people be allowed to suffer, and how can even **some** bad people be able to prosper! What type of a world are they thereby suggesting would be ideal? A world in which not even a single good person **ever** appeared to suffer, and not even a single bad person **ever** appeared to prosper. But, as we have just seen, a world of perfectly clear consequences is necessarily a world with only theoretical free will and no real meaning.

While the situation of some good people appearing to suffer and some bad people appearing to prosper now seems to be necessary (for both real free will and real meaning to exist), this, of course, creates a significant new difficulty — the perception of injustice. Justice would seem to require that all good people have exclusively good lives, and all evil people have entirely negative lives. How, then, do we address this seeming requirement of at least some cases of the appearance of injustice?

The Solution and Problem of *Olam Haba*

The resolution which addresses this issue of seeming injustice is the existence of *Olam Haba* (the World to Come). While this will create a new problem (with its own solution, as we will see), we need to first appreciate that *Olam Haba* fully solves the problem of the appearance of injustice. Whatever seems truly unjust in this world can be taken care of in *Olam Haba*. And as painful as challenges and difficulties in this world may be, they are ultimately all temporary. *Olam Haba*, by contrast, is eternal.

What seems unsatisfying about *Olam Haba* as a solution to this problem of perceived injustice is a principle known as “the distancing of the witnesses.” To illustrate this principle, let's imagine that someone borrows \$1000. When the time for repayment arrives, he begins to look for ways to avoid repaying the debt. What are his options?

- a. He could deny ever having taken the loan in the first place. The problem with this, of course, is that the other guy has the IOU with his signature on it.
- b. He could acknowledge that he originally took the loan, but claim that he subsequently paid it back. This has a similar problem — the other guy has the IOU with his signature on it, and he has no receipt to prove his repayment.
- c. The best lie would be to say that he paid back the loan, and it was in front of two eye-witnesses, but unfortunately, they are presently unavailable (i.e., in Australia).

The principle of “the distancing of the witnesses” is that there is a distinctive way that a liar speaks, namely to claim that he **has** evidence, but it is simply unavailable right now. This is what bothers many people about *Olam Haba* as an answer to the perception of injustice. It sounds like a convenient “cop-out,” since we are, of course, unable to prove that it is true. We see only the situation in **this** world

Judaism, however, has an answer for this problem of “the distancing of the witnesses.” We can see this through examining the first two paragraphs of the *Shema*, and the two significant differences between them:

- a. The first paragraph, written in the singular, addresses every single member of the Jewish nation **individually**. The second paragraph, written in the plural, addresses the entire Jewish nation as a single **communal** unit.
- b. The first paragraph simply lays out a number of central obligations in the Torah — to love G-d, teach Torah, put on *tefillin*, and attach a *mezuzah* to our doorposts. The second paragraph repeats these four *mitzvot*, and spells out clear, **observable** consequences that will occur to us in **this** world depending on whether we do or don't follow the *mitzvot*.

The Torah is hereby outlining its system of how it metes out consequences. While the benefit and loss with *mitzvot* for the **individual** will primarily be in *Olam Haba*, the consequences for the community will be observable in **this** world. This addresses the problem of “the distancing of the witnesses,” since the Torah is clearly not “copping out.” In other words, where the Torah could promise observable consequences in this world, without damaging real free will and meaning, namely on the level of the community, it tells us that we will see them. It is only where observable consequences in this world will preclude real free will and meaning, namely on the level of the individual, that it tells us we will not always be able to see them.

There are many important benefits that follow from how G-d distributes the consequences in this world:

- a. There is real free will and real meaning for every individual.
- b. There is full justice for every individual (partly in this world and partly in *Olam Haba*).
- c. Judaism is not copping out.
- d. Every individual has a vested interest in caring about the rest of the community, since G-d relates to us in this world as a group, not as separate individuals.

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

Pain Is a Reality, Suffering Is a Choice — Part 3 — How G-d Runs the World

The classical Jewish understanding of G-d is that He is a Creator, Sustainer, and Supervisor. He **created** the entire world from absolutely nothing, He continually **sustains** its existence from that first instant and onward, and He **supervises** whatever occurs in the world.

In sharp contrast to this traditional perspective is a well known book on the topic of *yissurim* titled — *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, written by a Conservative Rabbi named Harold Kushner. He wrote the book in response to a terrible personal trauma. His son was born with an extremely rare genetic disorder called progeria, in which symptoms resembling aspects of aging are manifested at a very early age. This child tragically died at the age of 14.

In his attempt to reconcile a loving G-d with the existence of painful *yissurim*, he describes a G-d completely removed from the world, incapable of either intervention or supervision. His answer to “why bad things happen to good people” is that G-d did not cause the difficulties to occur, nor could He have even prevented them from happening. As he wrote — “No matter what stories we were taught about Daniel or Jonah in Sunday school, G-d does not reach down to interrupt the workings of laws of nature to protect the righteous from harm... **G-d does not cause it and cannot stop it**... Fate, not G-d, sends us the problem... Life is not fair. The wrong people get sick and the wrong people get robbed and the wrong people get killed in wars and in accidents.”

Three Fundamental Problems with the Book

First, it is **illogical**. Once we accept that G-d created the world, it doesn't make sense to say that He isn't supervising it. And it is especially strange to say that He is **incapable** of supervising it.

Second, Kushner's approach is **profoundly un-Jewish**. His understanding of G-d is antithetical to the traditional Torah understanding of a powerful and benevolent Creator Who personally supervises the events in all of our lives.

To understand the proper Jewish view of anything, one needs to examine classical Jewish sources, ideally the Torah itself. If we look at the Torah from the beginning, when G-d interacts with Adam and Chava in the Garden of Eden, to the end, when He buries Moshe just outside of Israel, we see G-d very clearly supervising the world. There are, of course, many more dramatic examples of His Supervision, such as the 10 plagues, splitting of the sea, feeding the entire Jewish people for 40 years in the desert with the manna, and giving them the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Torah could not be clearer that G-d is not only a Creator but also an active Supervisor.

{The issue of Sustainer, while also fundamental to the Jewish understanding of G-d, is beyond the scope of this presentation.}

Rabbi Benjamin Blech (in his presentation on the topic of *yissurim*, *If G-d Is Good, Why Is The World So Bad?*) wrote — “In his conclusion...Kushner parted with some 3,000 years of Jewish teaching. Additionally, he refused to consider, in anything more than perfunctory fashion, the reasons *why* bad things happen. He made clear that he intentionally titled his book ***When Bad Things Happen to Good People***, not ***Why Bad Things Happen to Good people***. He has often stated — in his book and in his public lectures— that he is interested only in the aftermath: When it happens, what do you do? How do you recover from it? The *why* is both irrelevant and unanswerable.”

Third, his approach is **profoundly depressing**. By detaching G-d from whatever occurs in the world, there is necessarily no meaning or purpose to **anything**. Some things that happen will be pleasurable, and some will be painful, but none of them will have any ultimate significance at all.

It is very puzzling that a number of the reviewers of the book see his approach as actually providing comfort.

Comforting answers to the universal question: “Why me?” – Redbook

An unprecedented source of **comfort** and reassurance – Publishers Weekly

Will **comfort** and enlighten – Washington Post

Comforting vs. Comfortable

How could one find comfort within Kushner's chaotic universe which is necessarily devoid of reason, purpose, and meaning? What could be more bleak and depressing? Perhaps this is rooted in a basic confusion between two English words that sound similar but are actually very different — comforting and comfortable.

According to the traditional Torah perspective, God created the universe exclusively for our benefit and our pleasure. And not only did He create it that way, He continues to sustain and supervise everything for our ultimate good.

The other perspective, in which nothing is supervising the events of the world, may feel quite **comfortable** due to its lack of consequences and responsibility. However, it ultimately offers no possibility for **comfort** because there is no meaning, and no greater reality for all the events of our lives to fit into.

As we explained above, the traditional Torah perspective is that G-d supervises the entire world, both the major global events, as well as the details in all of our lives. This means that whatever happens to us is meaningful and significant, both in terms of this world and the next. That is incredibly comforting. However, it can also be quite uncomfortable since it involves clear obligations, responsibilities, and consequences.

Kushner's approach seems to be the exact opposite. There is no correlation between what we do and what happens to us. Therefore, by definition, there is never any reason to feel guilt or responsibility, regardless of what occurs. This can feel very comfortable. However, since G-d has nothing to do with the events in our lives, none of them can have any meaning or significance to them. Therefore, there is no possibility of being comforted at all. It is important to appreciate that, in his view, not only does G-d have no connection to the painful difficulties in our lives; He has nothing to do with the obviously positive events as well. They are equally meaningless, since they must have also come to us from fate, not from G-d. All in all, it is quite a sad and depressing view of life and of the world.

It is fascinating that not only are these two terms, comforting and comfortable, quite similar in the English language, they are also similar in Hebrew. *Nechama* is the word for “comforting,” and *no’ach* is translated as “comfortable.” In both languages, apparently, we need to be careful to not confuse these two different terms which sound similar but have virtually opposite meanings.

Seeing Meaning in Our *Yissurim*

This issue of how we view difficulties in our lives is quite significant. Beyond the pain and suffering involved with *yissurim*, another great challenge is specifically the feeling that there may be no ultimate meaning to them. A critical goal of Judaism has, therefore, always been to focus on the inherent meaning contained within every single difficulty.

One of the most articulate presentations of the critical need to see meaning in our *yissurim* comes from a Jew who was not himself traditionally observant. Victor Frankel was a psychiatrist who managed to survive the Holocaust in the concentration camps. He developed a treatment methodology based on his experiences in the camps, which he published in his classic work, *Man's Search for Meaning*. He explained that we can deal with the most horrific suffering in our lives as long as we are able to see some meaning in it. Without meaning, however, even the most trivial events can be devastating.

He wrote:

“...any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche's words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,” could be the guiding motto for all... efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why — an aim — for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost.”

Classical Understandings of *Yissurim*

To Clarify Reality — The *Torat Avraham*, a collection of essays from Rav Avraham Grodzinsky, *hy"d*, addressed the topic of *yissurim* by first discussing the concept of *nevuah* (prophecy). He explained that a prophet cannot communicate any new *mitzvot* or *halacha*; and if he attempts to do so, he will be judged as a false prophet. What, then, is his purpose? To clarify reality. As an example, the Jews know that they are supposed to actively help the weak members of the community, like the orphan and widow. While they may think that they are doing an adequate job, the prophet could tell them that they need to improve.

If that was the purpose of prophecy, how do we understand our situation today? Are we less in need of clarity of reality today than the Jews were thousands of years ago? If anything, we would imagine that we are now even more in need of clarity of reality. Rav Grodzinsky, therefore, explained that we do have a type of prophecy even today. This is one of the essential functions of *yissurim*. In other words, just like classical prophecy came to teach us and to help us correct our ways, *yissurim* perform a similar function in today's world.

Onesh is a second category of *yissurim*. The most common translation of the Hebrew word *onesh* is punishment. It is important to appreciate why that translation is so problematic. Punishment, particularly in the criminal justice system, is not necessarily concerned with the good of the recipient. While a parent needs to respond to a child with discipline, education, and appropriate consequences, it must always be concerned exclusively with what is best for the child. As we discussed at the beginning, based on the verse in *Devarim* 8:5, the Torah tells us that G-d is the ultimate parent. And, therefore, just as an ideal parent never punishes his or her child, G-d never punishes us. Rather, whenever G-d sends us something painful, it is exclusively for our benefit and from G-d's love. Perhaps the best translation for *onesh* would, therefore, be some combination of consequences and therapy for our actions.

Kaparah (spiritual cleansing) is closely related to *onesh*. It is based on the spiritual reality that every transgression damages us. Just like the physical reality has clear consequences for our actions, the metaphysical is also real, with inherent consequences for our actions. And just as vomiting could be viewed as a “physical *onesh* and *kaparah*” for swallowing poison, a spiritual *onesh* and *kaparah* also removes the spiritual damage and blockage that transgressions cause. *Kaparah* is, therefore, the process of repair to fix this spiritual damage.

Nisayon is a test or challenge. It is not an evaluative test which G-d gives us to see if we will pass it. That is what is known in Hebrew as a *mivchan*. Rather, a *nisayon* helps us to actualize our potential through the experience itself as well as our response to that experience. We will be fundamentally different once we go through the *nisayon* than beforehand. The classic example of tests were the ten that were given to help Avram become Avraham. Jews are compared to olives and flax — we all have dormant or underdeveloped qualities, and pressure often brings out our greatness. We should, ultimately, thank G-d not only for helping us to “pass our tests” in life, but also for giving us our tests (i.e., challenges and opportunities for growth) in the first place.

Self-Imposed *Yissurim*, which was already discussed in Part 1, is a fifth category of *yissurim*. It is based on the puzzling statement in the Talmud (*Kesubot* 30a) — “*Hakol b'yidei Shamayim*

chutz m'tzinim pachim — “All is in the hands of Heaven except for colds and fevers.” While we tend to blame G-d for our difficulties, they are sometimes the result of our own irresponsible choices, like with colds and fevers.

Yissurim of Love are a relatively narrow category. They help **tzadikim** specifically to purify themselves, actualize their potential, and bring them closer to G-d. The Ramban explains that this can help a *tzadik* to fix some small flaw, and is motivated by love, not judgment.

Gilgul (a reincarnated soul) is not a separate category of *yissurim*, but it may help us to understand certain particularly difficult cases of *yissurim*. As an example, imagine that someone died without having fulfilled his purpose in this world. His soul may then need to return to this world to complete that task. This may actually not be such an unusual situation. Both the **Arizal** and the **Gra** wrote that no new souls are created without a *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple in Jerusalem). Virtually everyone today, therefore, may be a *gilgul* of a previous lifetime or lifetimes.

The *Yerushalmi* (*Brachot* 2:8), plus various *Midrashim*, address the tragic issue of those who die young, *Rachmana litzlan* (the Merciful One should save us from this). The analogy they give is of a worker who left the field to go home midday — once he had already **completed** his particular job. Since this world is a preparation for *Olam Haba* (the world to come), death would be unjust only if it would inevitably prevent the completion of one's task or mission in life. And that, of course, is something which we can never possibly know.

Impact on Others — *Yissurim* are not relevant only to the ones most directly affected by them, but also to everyone around them, in terms of each of these previous categories. The relatives, friends, and neighbors also need to think about the *yissurim* that are impacting them through their connection to the one at the center of this difficult situation.

And finally, after discussing many possible factors that could be involved with judgment and *yissurim*, the **Ramchal** (*Derech Hashem* 2:3 — *B'Hashgacha Ha'Ishit*) concluded — “The key point is that the judgment is true and straight, as it says (*Devarim* 32:4) — “*HaTzur tamim pa'alo, ki kol d'rachav mishpat* — The Creator's work is perfect and all His ways are just.” No created thing can encompass G-d's thoughts or the profound depth of His plan... From all of this, we see that there are many different and varied reasons for everything that happens to an individual in this world, whether it is clearly good or not. It is important to realize, however, that this does not mean that every event is always the result of all of these causes. **These are merely all the possible causes, but things can sometimes result from one and sometimes from another... The details of this judgment, however, are beyond the grasp of man's understanding.** But to know its general concepts and categories is to know much, as we have explained earlier.

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

Pain Is a Reality, Suffering Is a Choice — Part Four — Emotionally Dealing with Painful Difficulties — Jewish Clarity.com

Perhaps the first point to understand in terms of Judaism's emotional perspective on *yissurim* is a *halacha* in *Shulchan Aruch* which states that it is considered to be cruelty if one doesn't mourn properly when a close relative passes away (YD 294:6). One might have imagined, with all we have said until now in trying to understand *yissurim*, that one should not even be sad when one close to us passes away. And if G-d runs the world, and everything is for the best, why should we even need to mourn?

Thinking vs. Feeling

The answer is that there is a fundamental distinction between how the Torah wants us to **think** about *yissurim* and how it wants us to **feel** about them. As we discussed, the verse in *Devarim* 8:5 teaches us very clearly that all *yissurim* are for our benefit and from G-d's love. At the same time, however, *yissurim* can be horrifically painful, and often involve a terrible long-term loss. To not recognize and acknowledge this pain and loss would be to fundamentally deny our very humanity. That would certainly not be healthy, and may not even be possible.

While these thoughts and feelings may sound somewhat contradictory, it is actually possible to experience both simultaneously. An extreme example of this involves Avraham. A very powerful *medrash* (*Bereishit Rabbah* 56:8) tells us that Avraham both cried **and** rejoiced as he was on the way to the *Akeidah* — where G-d had seemingly commanded him to offer his son Yitzchak on the altar. He was crying because he understood that he was about to lose his beloved son. But he was also rejoicing because he was successfully overcoming the greatest test of his life. We must be true to our feelings and pain, while recognizing that the greatness being actualized within us will benefit us forever.

Many Benefits in This World

As much as many of the classical sources emphasize *Olam Haba* (the world to come) in terms of dealing with *yissurim*, it is important to recognize that there are also many different purposes and benefits that apply specifically in **this** world. *Yissurim* are humbling. They shift and elevate our values. They help us to mature and grow, to redefine our lives, and also to develop many important sensitivities, such as the value of life and the ability to feel the pain of others. And they often bring us much closer to G-d than we would be likely to experience otherwise. As the well-known expression goes — “There are no atheists in foxholes.”

“You Are Children to G-d Your L-rd, Don't Cut Yourself”

One of the 613 commandments is the prohibition of “*lo titgodadu* — don't cut your flesh.” We are forbidden from cutting or slashing our flesh as an expression of grief over the death of a close relative. Rav Hirsch, in his commentary on the Torah, asks why we are supposed to tear our garments when a close relative passes away, but are prohibited from cutting our skin. By tearing our garments, we are expressing the fact that the pain we are feeling is as close to our bodies as our clothes are. If, however, we would actually slash the skin itself, that would be sending a very different message. Mutilating our bodies would be saying — “I have lost my value and significance.” That is something we should never think, and certainly never communicate with our actions. The Torah beautifully expresses this by placing the prohibition of “*lo titgodadu*” within a particularly inspiring context (*Devarim* 14:1,2):

“Banim atem laHashem Elokeichem, lo titgodadu, v'lo tasimu karcha bein eineichem, lameit. Ki am kadosh atah laHashem Elokecha, uv'cha bachar Hashem lehiyot lo l'am segulah mikol ha'amim asher al p'nei ha'adamah — You are children to G-d your L-rd, don't cut yourself, and don't make a bald spot between your eyes, for the dead. For you are a holy nation to G-d your L-rd, and G-d chose you to be His treasured nation from among all of the nations which are on the face of the earth.”

Why is the Torah telling us to “not cut ourselves and not make a bald spot (i.e., rip our hair out) between our eyes, for the dead?” Because we “are children to G-d... a holy nation to G-d... and G-d chose us to be His treasured nation from among all of the nations which are on the face of the earth.” This awareness that G-d is our loving parent is specifically what gives us the emotional strength to deal with even the most painful personal losses.

Closeness to G-d Is the Greatest Comfort

In *Tehilim* 23, which is traditionally sung at the third meal every Shabbat, David HaMelech (King David) speaks about two different types of sticks which G-d uses to relate to him (and us) — a *sheivet* (rod for hitting) and a *mishenet* (walking cane for support). He wrote — “*shivtecha umishantecha heima yenachamuni* — Your rod (for hitting) and Your walking cane (for support) are both a comfort for me.” Through the metaphor of these two different sticks, David HaMelech explained that G-d sometimes hits him and sometimes supports him. And yet, both are equally comforting for him. How is that possible? The beginning of the verse — “*ki atah imadi* — for You (G-d) are with me” is the explanation. David HaMelech is teaching us that whether we feel we are being hit (receiving painful *yissurim*), or being supported, the awareness that G-d is always with us is essential to receiving comfort. The converse of this is that the ultimate suffering would be to feel that G-d is distant from us (G-d forbid). While we generally define “good” vs. “bad” in physical terms as pleasurable vs. painful, Judaism defines “good” vs. “bad” as that which brings us closer to G-d vs. whatever distances us from Him. That means that we are the ones who ultimately determine whether something **will be** good for us or bad for us, depending on how we react to it.

Pain is a Reality, Suffering is a Choice

Based on the verse in *Devarim* 8:5 which characterizes G-d as the perfect parent, Who gives us painful *yissurim* exclusively from His love and for our benefit, we could formulate a very succinct definition of *yissurim* — **pain with purpose**. And the converse of this — **pain without purpose** — would then be the definition of suffering. This leads to a remarkable insight. The pain involved in *yissurim* is a reality which we often have limited ability to control. How we relate to them, however, is where we are fully able to exercise our free will. **Proper perspectives are the central issue with *yissurim***, because while **pain is a reality, suffering is a choice**. If we focus on the fact that there is some purpose to our painful situation, we then will have what Judaism refers to as *yissurim*. If, on the other hand, we choose to ignore the possibility of some purpose in our pain, we will then be left only with suffering.

It is important to appreciate that, while no one likes pain, if there is enough of a benefit, we will often embrace a painful situation. An obvious example of this is childbirth. Women are willing to undergo all of the pain and difficulty of pregnancy and childbirth because having a child at the end of the process makes it all worthwhile. Our goal in life is, therefore, not the avoidance of **all** pain, but rather the avoidance of any pain which is **lacking in purpose or meaning**.

A significant aspect of viewing *yissurim* properly involves how we identify ourselves. Every human being has a physical body and a spiritual soul. If our primary identification is in terms of our physical component and this world specifically, it may be very difficult for us to see some purpose in our pain, since that purpose will often be more in the spiritual realm. If, however, we identify primarily as a soul and view *Olam Haba* (the world to come) as the ultimate destination of our lives, then seeing purpose in our painful difficulties will be much more possible.

Proper vs. Improper Questions with *Yissurim*

Rav Kirzner, a well-known educator who lived in New York, gave a series of talks addressing the issue of *yissurim* while he himself was undergoing chemotherapy for the cancer which he ultimately passed away from. The transcripts of these talks were collected and published in a modified format in *Making Sense of Suffering*. He discussed the difference between asking proper and improper questions about *yissurim*:

We should try to ask questions **to** G-d, not questions **against** G-d. Asking "Why?" is absurd and wrong if the purpose is to "judge G-d," but it is essential and positive if the goal is to understand our relationship with G-d.

Sharing our pain with G-d, particularly when we don't fully understand it, will form a bond of trust and bring Him into our lives much more deeply than would ever be likely to occur with our intellect alone.

But even after all of this, we must recognize and admit the limitations of our human understanding. While we will be able to understand general principles with *yissurim*, we will never be able to comprehend all of their applications to fully answer the question "Why me?" Once we admit and accept this, *yissurim* will then be able to enhance rather than detract from our relationship with G-d.

Rephrasing our questions can help us enormously when dealing with *yissurim*:

Rather than ask – "Am I enjoying this experience or not?" – think – "Is there any purpose to this experience?"

Instead of wondering – "How is this affecting me now and in terms of this world?" –

consider – "How will this impact me in the long run and in terms of *Olam Haba*?"

And when facing a challenge, don't ask – "Would I have chosen this for myself?" – but rather – "Now that I need to deal with this, how will it help me to actualize the potential of my soul, and thus prepare me for *Olam Haba*?"

Lashing out against G-d

How does Judaism view one who lashes out at G-d as a result of painful *yissurim*? Based on the story of *Iyov* (Job), perhaps the classical case of the *tzadik* who underwent horrifically painful *yissurim*, the *Gemara* (*Baba Basra* 16b) states that "one is not held accountable at the time of his pain." Rashi wrote, in his classic commentary, that we will not "be obligated or responsible for speaking harshly because of our pain and *yissurim*."

Rav Kirzner explained this critically important point:

The Torah recognizes that during periods of extreme pain and suffering (like a woman during the birth process) we may act [or speak] in a way that doesn't reflect our essential self. It therefore provides a *chattat* offering (which is usually brought by one who had committed a transgression) to help the woman to properly deal with the consequences of her emotions.

In general, the Torah does not hold one fully accountable for the vows he makes under pressure. G-d knows that under duress there is little a person can do to control his emotions. We are not expected to be able to push the pain aside, recognize that a higher purpose exists, and hold ourselves aloof. That would be unrealistic. G-d, in effect, tells us — "In moments of pain, you will lash out; you will say things, and you may even be absolutely convinced at that moment that they are true. But when the pain subsides, you will have the inner peace which will allow you to touch a deeper part of yourself and realize that what you said is not the way you really feel, that you do not believe what you said. And I don't take those statements made in the throes of intense pain as representing you."

While the new mother does require a *kaparah* (atonement) for what she said, the fact is that the Torah willingly provides this mechanism for her. We should, therefore, not compound our own difficulties by berating ourselves or feeling overly guilty.

At the same time, we are not completely powerless to control our emotions. Properly framing our situation through intellectual clarity, particularly the recognition that G-d is not taking revenge against us through our *yissurim*, can help us enormously. Feeling abandoned by G-d can sometimes be even more difficult than the physical pain and suffering itself. Remembering that the basis of all *yissurim* is G-d's love for us (as difficult as that may be to see), and that many *yissurim* are unconnected to our past mistakes, can provide a safety net to prevent us from emotionally free-falling out of control.

Pain Is a Reality, Suffering Is a Choice — Part Five — Concluding Ideas

Everything Is Ours Only on Loan

The *Medrash* tells us that the two sons of Rebbe Meir and his wife Bruria passed away on Shabbat afternoon. When Bruria wanted to inform Rebbe Meir about this terrible tragedy, she chose to do it through asking him a seemingly random question in Jewish law — What is the law if one that had loaned two jewels later requested their return? He responded that there is obviously an obligation to return them, and we should additionally express appreciation for having had them until now. She then showed Rebbe Meir their two deceased sons, telling him — “G-d asked for His two jewels back.”

What is the message of this cryptic *Medrash*? We tend to view whatever we have as ours by right. This is certainly how most see their children. If, however, G-d is the Creator, Sustainer, and Supervisor of the universe, then our sense of ownership and entitlement is clearly mistaken. My *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rav Noach Weinberg, zt”l, explained that a creation of something **from** nothing is inherently a creation of something **for** nothing. By definition, there is nothing we did, or possibly could have done, to earn or to be worthy of having been created. Our creation was necessarily an act of pure undeserved kindness, and our existence ever since then continues to be so.

Therefore, absolutely everything that we have, including our children, and even our own bodies, was never actually given to us as an outright gift. It is rather all a deposit or loan. That not only implies that everything should be used according to proper guidelines, it also means that any of it may be taken back at any time. That seems to have been the powerful message which Bruria conveyed to her husband, Rebbe Meir.

Dealing with *yissurim* often forces us to do what we really should have been doing all along — placing our difficulties within the larger context of what we still have, and recognizing that they all came to us from G-d. The blessing and acknowledgement of *Baruch Dayan Emmet* (Blessed is the True Judge), which is said by the close relatives of the deceased at a funeral, is put into perspective by its juxtaposition to the verse — “*Hashem natan v'Hashem lakach* — G-d gave and G-d took” (*Iyov* 1:21). Only once we first recognize that “G-d gave” can we then deal with the fact that “G-d took.”

Hindsight with Yissurim

It is not uncommon for one to view something, as it is happening, as the “worst possible thing” we could imagine, but then, years later, see it very differently. With hindsight, we may realize that it wasn't actually so bad. And there may even be times that we will recognize it as the “very best thing” that ever happened to us. If this limited perspective is relevant even for the one directly going through the *yissurim*, how much more true is it for one who is viewing the situation of another from the outside? It is striking that the classical formulation of the question about *yissurim*, in both Hebrew and English, is specifically from the perspective of the onlooker. In Hebrew, the question is phrased — “*Lamah yeish tzadik v'ra lo, v'rasha v'tov lo* — Why does bad happen to the righteous, and good happen to the evil?” And in English — “Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?” While it is natural and appropriate to be bothered by any appearance of injustice we see around us, we need to recognize just how limited we are in any real understanding of the situation.

“*Lamah* — Why?” vs. “*L'mah* — For what?”

People often put great effort into trying to understand *yissurim*. The question generally asked is — “*Lamah* — Why? Why did this happen, or why is this continuing to occur?” There is, however, another approach. Rather than ask — “*Lamah* — Why?,” perhaps a more practical question would be to ask — “*L'mah* — For what?” This is asking — how can we take this painful difficulty and try to make something positive from it? In other words, rather than focus on the past, which is what “*lamah*?” is doing, focus instead on the future, which is the point of — “*l'mah*?” A beautiful example of this is the massive number of organizations that were founded by or are supported by those who went through difficult and painful *yissurim*. The Rabbis call this process of transforming difficult challenges into creative forces for good — “sweetening the judgment.”

***Nachamu Nachamu* — The Double Consolation**

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 explains the meaning of the double consolation of “*Nachamu nachamu*”:

The first *nechama* was an assurance that all of our present difficulties, both individually and communally, will eventually end. There will come a time when there will no longer be pain and difficulty in the world. For us to know that there will eventually be some endpoint to all painful *yissurim* is comforting even now.

The second *nechama*, however, will be 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.

Analogies That Highlight Our Limited Perspective

Imagine that someone enters a building, and after walking around inside, comes upon a frightening scene. He sees a man who is poised to attack someone with a knife while a number of onlookers seem to be doing nothing to stop him. The visitor lunges at the man with the knife and wrestles him to the floor. Within moments, two policemen enter the room and pull him away from the man with the knife. While it had seemed so obvious to him that he must stop this potential murderer, in reality, this simple villager had just arrived in a large city and had entered a hospital for the first time in his life. Not only was he no hero, but he had delayed essential surgery for a man about to have an urgent operation.

A salesman travels to a new village to do some business. He works a couple of days and then stays there for Shabbat. When he goes to the shul on Shabbat morning, he sees how various people are called up for the different honors. The first person was on the east side of the shul, and the second one on the west. The third from the east again, and then one from the south section. This continues in what seems to be a completely random distribution. After the davening (prayer service) finishes, he goes over to the gabbai to complain about this. The gabbai looks at him with amazement, and asks him how long he has been in the village. When he answers, “A few days,” the gabbai laughs at him. “Of course you don't understand. You just arrived here. I have a system for those I call up, but you could not possibly know it. The first man was the only Kohen in shul, so he was called up first. Next, there are three Levis, but the other two had been called up the previous two weeks. The third person called up recently returned from a trip, and the wife of the fourth one just had a baby!”

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 barely know what is happening in the world around us and yet expect to understand everything. Or to put this a bit differently, it would be like someone that read one page out of a thousand-page novel and then expected to understand the entire plot.

In the *Tehilim* (Psalm) which is read on Shabbat (#92), there is a puzzling statement — “The empty one doesn’t know and the fool doesn’t understand this.” What is this verse referring to? The *Tehilim* continues – “That the evil ones proliferate and prosper, although they are eventually destroyed.” This seems to be speaking about one of the classical issues with *yissurim* — how can the wicked appear to prosper? It certainly makes sense that “the empty one doesn’t know.” After all, this is one of the great theological mysteries. But why then does the psalm continue and say that — “the **fool** doesn’t understand this?” Even the intelligent ones struggle with this issue!

To appreciate why this person is called foolish, imagine the following scene. A high school class is taken on a tour of the NASA command center. At one point they enter a large room filled with numerous massive computers. The sight of all these impressive machines is dazzling. One student raises his hand to ask a question — “Why is the fifth button in the seventh row yellow? Why isn’t it blue?” The NASA workers all burst out laughing. One of them responds to the high school student — “And besides that particular button you asked about, everything else makes sense to you?” In other words, the high school student has no clue about anything going on in that room. For him to focus his question on one particular detail is to pretend a level of knowledge which he is obviously lacking.

To say “we don’t understand **this**,” seems to imply that we **do** understand everything else. This is what a fool says. When it comes to *yissurim*, we see whatever we see and often feel quite confident that we know what is happening around us, and what is best. But for everything which we do know, there is so much we clearly don’t know. As we have said, the question of *yissurim* and the appearance of injustice should bother all of us. But at the same time, we need to approach these critical life issues properly. We need a great deal of humility before we start making assumptions and demanding answers.

G-d willing, we should not have such great difficulties and challenges in our lives. But whatever we do have, G-d should help us to understand as best we can and to grow from all of them.

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