

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 coping 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*