

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*