

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 horribly 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 prophecy 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*