Dealing with Painful Emotions & Anger at G-d – Part 2 – JewishClarity.com

Rav Matis Weinberg conveyed a beautiful insight from his father, **Rav Yaakov Weinberg**, on the importance of expressing our emotions in a healthy and normal manner. Rav Yaakov Weinberg asked — What is the message of the verse in the Torah that says, "*v'yidom* Aharon — [that] Aharon was silent," following the sudden death of his two sons? Does the Torah need to inform us that Aharon HaKohen, the High Priest for the entire Jewish people, had no actual **complaints** against Hashem for the death of his two sons? Would we really have imagined that he **would** have had such complaints against Hashem?

Rav Yaakov Weinberg explained that the message of this verse in the Torah is actually a very different one. The **normal** human reaction for a father upon the death of his children would certainly be to cry out in pain. The Torah tells us that Aaron HaKohen didn't express even this normal human reaction because, as the *Kohen Gadol*, he was constantly "on call" in his service for the Jewish nation. Everyone else, however, is not only **allowed** to express these types of normal human reactions of pain and emotion; it is actually **positive** for them to do so.

Pain In Proper Measure

At one end of the emotional spectrum, the *Gemara* (*Mo'ed Katan* 27b) warns us not to be *mit'kashe al meito yoteir midai* **—** not to express pain for the loss of a loved one with an intensity far beyond the norm. One of the commentaries, with the striking name of Rav Shlomo ben HaYatom (Rav Shlomo, the son of the orphan), explains that one should not **magnify** the pain beyond its true extent. As Hashem tells us — "You are not more compassionate for [the deceased] than I am."

The Rambam codified this in *Hilchot Eivel* (The Laws of Mourning 13:11):

Al yitkashe adam al meito yoteir midai — s*h'zehu minhago shel olam*, *v'hamitzta'er atzmo* y*oteir al minhago shel olam — harei zeh tipeish* —
One should not express pain for the deceased excessively, since [death] is the way of the world. [In fact,] one that **causes pain** to himself beyond the way of the world is considered to be foolish."

This prohibition is not at all about undergoing the "normal" pain of bereavement, but rather choosing to magnify and maximize the pain of loss — "*v'hamitz'tayeir atzmo*" — "**causing** pain to himself" — far beyond the norm.

While the Rambam forbids us here to express an **excessive** degree of pain, in the very next *halacha* (13:12) he cautions us against not mourning enough:

"*Kol mi she'eino mitabeil k'mo she'tzivu Chachamim — harei zeh achzari. Ella yifchad, v'yidag, v'yifashpeish b'ma'asav v'yachazor b'teshuva…. kol zeh l'hachin atzmo v'yachazor v'yei'or mi'shnato* — Whoever does not mourn as the Sages commanded is considered to be cruel. Rather, one should be afraid and concerned, and search one's actions, and return in *teshuva*… All of this is to prepare oneself to return and wake up from one's sleep."

The principle in this second *halacha* is really the same — just as the expression of an excessive degree of pain is a choice, to not express the proper, normal degree of pain is also a choice.

The ***Shulchan Aruch*** (*Yoreh De'ah* 394:1,6) succinctly sums up the Torah view of both ends of the emotional spectrum:

a. On the one hand — "*Ein mitkashin al hameit yoteir midai* — Don't **pain yourself** excessively for the deceased . "
b. But, at the same time **—** "*Kol mi sh'eino mitabeil k'mo she'tzivu Chachamim, harei zeh achzarei* — Whoever does not mourn as the Sages commanded is considered cruel."

The Torah makes Allowances for Pain

One of the most helpful books on the topic of *yissurim* — "severe challenges and difficulties in our lives" – is *Making Sense of Suffering*. It is based on a series of talks from Rav Yitzchak Kirzner on the issue of *yissurim*. He gave these talks while undergoing chemotherapy for the cancer that he ultimately passed away from.

He explained that many sources indicate the sensitivity that Judaism has to our emotions. For example, the Torah recognizes that during periods of extreme pain and suffering (like a woman during the birth process) we may act in a manner that does not reflect our essential self. It therefore provides a [*chattot*] offering [for her to bring in the *Beit HaMikdash*] to help her remove the consequences of her emotions.

In general, the Torah does not hold one fully accountable for the vows he [or she] makes under pressure. G-d knows that under duress there is little a person can do to control [their] 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 [G-d says,] I don't take those statements made in the throes of intense pain as representing you."

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

We Control our own Perception

At the same time, we are not completely powerless to control our emotions. Properly framing our situation through intellectual clarity, particularly the recognition that Hashem is not taking revenge against us through our *yissurim*, can help us enormously. Feeling abandoned by Hashem 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 much of what we suffer is unconnected to our past mistakes, can provide a safety net to prevent us from emotionally free-falling out of control.

In terms of reframing how we view the difficulties in our lives, Rav Kirzner emphasized the difference between proper vs. improper questions:

a. We need to ask questions **to** G-d, not questions **against** G-d. Asking "Why?" is absurd and wrong if it is to "**judge** G-d," but is positive, and even essential, if it will help us understand our relationship with G-d.
b. 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 we ever could by intellectual means alone.
c. The strength of our relationship with G-d depends on our trust that G-d wants only what is best

for us. That trust can only develop, however, if we don't limit our relationship with G-d to what we are able to fully comprehend.

Rav Kirzner explained that lashing out against G-d for His perceived indifference to our pain can actually increase the pain. If G-d were truly insensitive to our pain (G-d forbid), our difficulties would **then** become completely meaningless, which would ultimately be the greatest suffering of all.

The Comfort of Connection

In *Mizmor l'David* (*Tehilim* 23), David HaMelech spoke about two different sticks — a *mishenet* (walking cane for support) and a *sheivet* (rod for hitting) — "*Shivt'cha umishantecha heima y'nachamuni* — Your *sheivet* and Your *mishenet* — they [both] comfort me." He used them as a metaphor for the two different ways that G-d related to him, along with all people. The reason, he explained, that they were **both** able to comfort him was — "*ki Atah imadi* — because You [G-d] are with me." The awareness of one's constant connection to G-d, whether that connection happens to be pleasant or even very painful and difficult at the moment, is the key to being able to cope with *yissurim*, (painful difficulties and challenges).

This is similar to how the Torah (*Devarim* 14:1,2) presents the prohibition of "*lo titgod'du*" — not to slash our flesh in grief when a close relative passes away. The Torah precedes this prohibition by declaring — "*Banim atem l'Hashem Elokeichem* — You are children to G-d your L-rd." Only after this reassurance are we warned — "*Lo titgod'du v'lo tasimu karcha bein eineichem l'meit* — don't cut your flesh, and don't make a bald spot between your eyes for the dead." The Torah then concludes this section by explaining — "For You are the *Am Kadosh* (Holy Nation)*…*and G-d chose You to be His treasured nation from among all of the nations." Knowing how beloved and precious we are to G-d gives us the spiritual strength to not slash ourselves in our grief.

The worst *yissurim* is actually distance from G-d. In fact, virtually all of the pain expressed by David HaMelech and others throughout *Tehilim* is the perception of concealment, rejection, and abandonment by G-d.

Many different sources on the topic of dealing with anger at G-d, therefore, make this critically important distinction between anger, which is problematic, and pain, which is very normal and healthy.

The *Aish Kodesh* (Holy Fire)

One of the most powerful works that grapple with how to deal with overwhelming pain and difficulty is the *Aish Kodesh*. It is a collection of talks which were delivered by Rav Shapira, the *Piaseczner Rebbe*, in the Warsaw Ghetto from 1939 until the very beginning of 1943. Nechemia Polen, in *The Holy Fire*, a discussion of different themes in the *Aish Kodesh*, wrote:

There is in Judaism a respected tradition of arguing with G-d that has its roots in the Biblical stories of such figures as Avraham, Moshe, Yirmiyahu, and Iyov. This tradition is continued in the Rabbinic period…characterized by frequent rhetorical questions and demands for justice… In the medieval period, we find challenges directed to G-d in response to the massacres of Jewish communities that took place during the Crusades, as well as other calamities… It should not surprise us, then, to find in *Aish Kodesh*, alongside the teachings of radical acceptance of Divine will, statements by Rav Shapira that continue the ancient Jewish tradition of arguing with G-d.

One example of Rav Shapira's advocacy on behalf of his people is his teaching for *Shabbat Shuva* of 5700 (September 3, 1939). The teaching [actually] instructs G-d (!) on the meaning of Divine *teshuvah*, and gives quite specific instructions on how His *teshuvah* should be carried out.

> "We are taught that G-d Himself observes the entire Torah; how then does He fulfill the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*? When He does *teshuvah* for the evil which He, Heaven forbid, has sent to His people Israel, or considered sending."

Another passage, delivered on November 22, 1939, records the *Chasidic* tradition that a moderate degree of suffering may be of benefit to [one's] spiritual development, but excessive tribulation is beyond endurance and is unacceptable. Rav Shapira's point of departure is the tradition that Sarah died as a result of the shock she sustained when she learned of the binding of Yitzchak and her son's near death.

> "One might…argue that Sarah's taking the binding of Yitzchak so much to heart that her soul left her body was a [deliberate] act taken on behalf of Israel. It was intended to demonstrate to G-d that Israel cannot endure an excessive amount of suffering. For even if, by the grace of G-d, one remains alive after the period of suffering, nevertheless, a part of his strength, mind, and spirit are broken and lost… This explains the point of the words — "These were the years of Sarah's life." In other words, all the years of Sarah's life were equally good, including those years [that she would have lived] after age 127. Even [the willful sacrifice of] those years was no transgression."

Sarah's death, then, is understood as a quasi-suicidal protest to G-d against excessive suffering. And the protest is ratified by the Torah since it was taken on behalf of Israel.

Another example of protest within faith from this period is a discourse delivered on October 18, 1941 (*Shabbat Bereishit* 5702). Well aware of the notion that suffering may contain hidden blessing, Rav Shapira pointedly argues that such a hidden blessing is beyond people's endurance, as he pleads to G-d —

> "But we have no strength to bear this type of hidden kindness!"

One final example of protest within faith comes from a homily delivered on February 14, 1942, during the third winter of the war. Rav Shapira, interpreting *Tehilim* 22:2 ("My G-d, my G-d, why have You forsaken me, and **are far from my help**…"), states:

> "We trust that you will save us and that You have not forsaken us completely, G-d forbid; but in this respect You **have** forsaken us — with respect to the fact that [as the verse says] — "[You] **are far from my help**" — that the salvation is so long in coming and the sufferings have dragged on for such a long time...
>
> How can You tolerate the humiliation of the Torah, and Israel's anguish? They are being tormented and tortured just because they fulfill the Torah.

The discourse soon reverts to a more traditional posture with a call to hold fast to the Torah and the *mitzvot* even in the face of the pain and tribulations. That having been said, it is still hard to imagine such words of protest and pain, or anything remotely similar, emerging from the Rav's pen during normal times.

We find, then, in *Aish Kodesh*, two apparently different responses to catastrophe — an attitude of radical and unconditional acceptance on the one hand, and a spirit of protest, confrontation, even outrage, on the other.

Rabbi Shapira himself addressed this [seeming contradiction] quite directly. Regarding the propriety of asking questions, he wrote (Chanukah of 1941):

> "Now if the Jewish person speaks this way as an expression of prayer and supplication, as he pours out his heart before G-d, that is good. But if, G-d forbid, he is posing questions, or even if he is not [actively] questioning, but, in the depths of his heart, his faith, G-d forbid, is weakened, then G-d help us!"

In other words, expressions of protest and challenge are quite proper when directed to G-d as part of an ongoing relationship with Him… For Rav Shapira, as for the Biblical and Rabbinic tradition in general, the two attitudes — submission and challenge — are in no way contradictory; they are two complementary aspects of a full and healthy relationship between the human being and G-d.

By the very nature of the parties involved, the relationship cannot be one of equality; G-d, after all, always has the last say. Nevertheless, the human party to the relationship has the right to question, to challenge, to resist, especially if it is on behalf of the community. The leader has the right, the duty, to demand justice and Divine beneficence for his people. At the same time, however, once the Divine will has been expressed, there must be self-surrender and unconditional acceptance… We must conclude, then, that in the *Chasidic* tradition, the leader's outraged protest to G-d is the consummate expression of his faith, not its denial.

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