

Dealing with Painful Emotions & Anger at G-d – Part 1 – JewishClarity.com

What is the **Torah view of anger**? Although the Rambam (*Hilchot Deyot* 1:4-7) wrote famously about the “golden mean” — that we should always strive for the midpoint with our character traits, avoiding the extremes at both ends — two traits are exceptions to this rule — anger and arrogance. With both anger and arrogance, the Rambam says that it is actually wrong for us to take the middle road. And after spelling out just how terrible anger is, he concludes (*Hilchot Deyot* 2:3), possibly based on the *Zohar* (*Bereshit* 2:16) — “*Kol hako'eis k'ilu oveid avodah zara* — One who gets angry...it is as if he worships idols!”

Our text of the *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 105b) seems to be quite different — “One who tears his garment, breaks his vessels, or scatters his money from anger — should be viewed **as if** he worships idols. This is the method of the *Yetzer Hara*: Today he tells you — “Do this”, and tomorrow he says — “Do that,” until he finally demands — “Worship idols,” and you will [then] go and worship.”

While, according to the **Rambam**, even anger that is not expressed in action is viewed as idolatry, the *gemara* qualifies this in three different ways:

- a. Only anger expressed in **action**.
- b. Only action which is **destructive**.
- c. The anger itself isn't viewed as idolatry, but rather anger will likely **lead one** to idolatry

Pirke Avot (5:14) lists four different types of temperament:

- a. Easily angered and easily pacified — his gain is offset by his loss.
- b. Hard to anger and hard to pacify — his loss is offset by his gain.
- c. Hard to anger and easy to pacify — a *chasid* (pious person).
- d. Easy to anger and hard to pacify — a *rasha* (evil person).

Based on this *mishnah*, the **Medrash Shmuel** points out that **everyone is subject to anger**. Even Moshe, our greatest teacher and leader, got angry. The issue, therefore, seems to be, not whether one will ever become angry, but rather how easily or often it will occur, and how one will then deal with it.

In terms of anger directed at G-d, there are different perspectives:

- a. Rebbitzen Feigi Twersky pointed out that even anger is an indication of a **relationship**.
- b. In a similar vein, Rabbi Zelig Pliskin said that anger towards Hashem is possible only for one with a **deep emunah** (awareness of G-d). **However**,
- c. Rabbi Shalom Carmy, a Rabbi at Yeshiva University, emphasized that there is always an intrinsic problem with anger. He quoted Aristotle who said that every case of anger involved a **moral** judgment — i.e., to be angry at X, I must believe that I was **unjustly** harmed by X.
- d. Rav Yisroel Reisman, a prominent *Rav* in Brooklyn, expressed a similar point — Rather than labeling anger at G-d as “bad,” he characterized it as **incorrect**, since it is some degree of rejection of *hashgacha pratit* — personal Divine supervision.

Anger vs. Pain

There is a fundamental distinction between anger and pain. It is important not to confuse our pain with the thought that we have a legitimate complaint against G-d. Our numerous expectations in life often cause us to devalue the blessings that we have, as well as to complain when our expectations are not met.

In fact, two of the classical codifiers of the *mitzvot* (the *Smag* #17 and the *Smak* #5) count a requirement to look for the righteousness in all of G-d's actions as one of the 613 *mitzvot*. This is based on the verse (*Devarim* 8:5) — “V'yadatah im l'vavecha ki ka'asher y'yaseir ish et b'no, Hashem Elokecha m'yasreka” — “And you should know with your heart, that just like a man chastises (gives *yissurim* to) his child, G-d your L-rd chastises you (gives you *yissurim*).” By comparing *Hashem* to a parent, this verse is clearly telling us that although *yissurim* are painful and difficult, they are given to us by G-d out of love and for our benefit.

When speaking about anger at G-d, therefore, the issue is how we should deal with pain in our relationship with G-d, and how the Torah views our efforts to deal with this pain.

Thought Evokes Emotion

The *Piaseczner Rebbe* and author of the *Aish Kodesh* (*Hashem yikom damo* — *Hashem* should avenge his blood), discussed the strong relationship between thoughts and emotions. How one **views** something will directly determine how one **feels** about it. This awareness is important in dealing with the various challenges of life.

“Everyone knows very well that if someone hurts him in any area of his life, but he immediately immerses himself in something else, with no chance to think about the harm that this person did to him, then he will feel no anger, and strong feelings [of revenge] won't express themselves inside of him. If, however, he gives these feelings some space, and thinks about this person and the harm that he did to him, and [allows] these thoughts to express themselves, then he will not only feel anger, but it will burn within him very intensely. This feeling of anger will [ultimately] overpower him until he will no longer be able to control it.”

“Our emotions are expressed only when we allow ourselves the space to think about them. Only through continuously thinking about the harm that one's enemy caused him, will one's feeling of anger grow and express itself; and if one doesn't think these thoughts, [then] one will not feel this anger. [We are] not [speaking about] thoughts that are weak; they will need to be extremely strong. This all comes to tell us that the expression, strength, and breadth of our feelings are all dependent upon our thoughts.” *Hachsharat Ha'Avreichim* (*Preparation for Yeshiva Students*)

Rav Shapira, the current *Piaseczner Rebbe* and nephew of the author of the *Aish Kodesh*, illustrates this principle with the following example:

Imagine that there is a person who never speaks with me. I may assume that he doesn't like me, and will, therefore, be likely to dislike him as well. I may think that he is angry with me, and this will cause me to be angry with him. The reality, however, may simply be that he is shy or lacking in self-confidence. If I would realize this and understand that he has no negative feelings towards me, then I would probably end up with no bad feelings towards him either. My thoughts about the situation literally **determine** what my feelings about it will be.

[This can also work in the opposite direction, with our emotions impacting how we perceive things. When one is depressed, everything that happens is seen in its worst possible light. But what seems devastating may in fact be a minor inconvenience, or even a tremendous growth opportunity. This is exactly how the Sages explain what happened with the spies in Israel. It was specifically their lack of self-confidence and their desire to find problems with the Land that resulted in their perception that the Land was bad for the Jewish people.]

A powerful example of the impact that our thoughts can have on our feelings is provided by Victor Frankel, a psychiatrist in Vienna before the Holocaust, who later developed a system of psychotherapy based on his experiences in the concentration camps. He explains in his classic work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that with a strong awareness of meaning in one's life, one will be able to deal with even the most horrific types of challenges. And, at the other end of the

spectrum, one that lacks meaning in his life can be overcome by even the most trivial events. 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.”

Rabbi Pliskin explains that anger is caused by one's perception that — “This is bad, and I don't like it.” Resentment is simply a lesser form of anger. The cure is, therefore, the different perception of — “*Kol mah d'avid Rachmana, l'tav avid* — All that Hashem does, He does for our benefit.” Rabbi Pliskin also points out that another key to dealing with anger is to internalize the message of the first chapter of *Mesilat Yesharim (Path of the Just)* — all of *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world) is only *nisyonot* (tests and challenges) to prepare us for *Olam Haba* (the world to come).

Anger at G-d

How does Judaism view a person who rebelled or lashed out against G-d as a result of not being able to withstand intense pain?

Rabbi Moshe Tendler explains that an individual's reaction to extreme pain or anguish cannot be used to evaluate his personality or moral and ethical perfection — extreme pain is an experience that surpasses human endurance. The *Gemara (Ta'anit 18b)* states that “Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya were all *tzadikim gamurim* (completely righteous)” who had all lived up to their fullest potential. Nevertheless, the *Gemara (Ketubot 33b)* discusses Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya accepting death rather than bowing down to the idol (the statue of the King) with the following observation — “Had Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya been tortured, they certainly would have bowed down to the idol.” Severe acute pain can overpower the wills of even the most perfect, righteous men. When an individual is subjected to intense intractable pain, his behavior cannot be viewed as an expression of his personality or ethical nature, rather his experience is superhuman and does not in any way reflect on his personality... This is not the patient talking. Pain has a voice of its own. Sometimes pain is so powerful that it drowns out even the voice of Hashem.

The classical source for this lesson is the story of Iyov (Job), the ultimate example of the *tzadik* that seems to have suffered unjustly. Despite his statements that were clearly **blasphemous**, i.e., denying Divine justice, *techiat hameitim* (revival of the dead), *hashgacha* (Divine Supervision), etc., the *Gemara (Baba Batra 16b)* tells us that Iyov received no punishment for saying these things. Rava, therefore, declares —

“*Mi'kan — she'ein adam nitpas b'sha'at tza'aro*” — “From here we see that one is not held accountable [for harsh words spoken] during the time of his pain.”

Rashi explains that this person is not held accountable for having spoken harshly because he spoke out of *tza'ar* and *yissurim* (pain and difficulties), not from *da'at* (clarity).

The *Gemara (Brachot 31b–32a)* tells us that a number of great individuals spoke quite harshly to Hashem, either out of their personal pain, or for the sake of the Jewish people. It refers to this as — *hitiach devarim klapei ma'alah* — flinging one's sharp words upward towards G-d.

Chana — “You created me to be able to nurse a child; now give me a child to nurse!”
Eliyahu — “You (Hashem) turned the hearts [of the Jewish people] backwards” — i.e., You allowed them to turn away from You. Even though G-d Himself later agreed with Eliyahu, it was still considered to be *hitiach devarim k'lapei ma'alah*, and improper for him to have expressed this

before G-d as a complaint.

Levi — After he decreed a fast for rain and no rain fell, he then challenged G-d — “*Ribono shel olam* (Master of the Universe), You have gone up on high and are not taking care of Your children!” Because of this disrespect, he later became lame.

Moshe — “*Ribono shel olam*, the gold and silver that You lavished upon Israel caused them to make the Golden Calf.” Here also, G-d Himself later agreed with Moshe that this was a mitigating consideration, although not a total defense, for the Jewish people.

The *Gemara* even teaches that Moshe “seized” *HaKadosh Boruch Hu*, like one who seizes a friend by the garment, and threatened — “I will not release You until You forgive and pardon them!”

While these may not have been actual expressions of **anger** at G-d, they certainly do show that great Jews have sometimes expressed much pain and frustration to G-d.

Perhaps the most well-known source which describes one speaking harshly to G-d is the famous story of Choni HaMa’agel (*Ta’anit* 19a) —

It once happened [during a time of severe drought] that [people] asked Choni HaMa’agel to pray for rain... He prayed but no rain fell. What did he do? He drew a circle, stood within it, and said before G-d — “Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, because I am so close to You. I swear by Your great Name, that I shall not move from here until You have mercy on Your children.” Rain began to trickle. He said, “That is not what I requested, but rain [to fill the] water holes, ditches, and caves.” It began to fall with fury. He said, “That is [also] not what I requested, but rains of good will, blessing, and benevolence. [The rains then] fell normally until the Jews had to leave Jerusalem for the *Har HaBayit* (Temple Mount) because of the rains. The people came and said to him, “Just as you prayed for them to fall, pray that they cease”...

Shimon ben Shatach sent to him “Were you not Choni, I would decree a ban of *nidui* (ostracism) upon you, but what shall I do to you? You misbehave towards the Omnipresent and He fulfills your will, like a son who misbehaves towards his father and his father fulfills his will. Concerning you the verse says — “May your father and mother rejoice, and may she who bore you be glad.”

The question, therefore, seems to be not whether it is permissible for one to express pain and frustration to G-d, but rather how exactly one should do it.

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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 — sh'zehu minhago shel olam, v'hamitzta'er atzmo yoteir 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 [*chattof*] 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 I'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 I'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.

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Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik very beautifully addressed many of the complex emotional issues associated with the death of a loved one in his essay *Aninut and Aveilut* taken from *Out of the Whirlwind*, a collection of his teachings on the topic of *yissurim* — difficulties and challenges in life.

There are two distinct phases in the process of mourning, and the *halachah* has meticulously insisted upon their strict separation. The first phase begins with the death of the relative...and ends with the burial. The second commences with burial and lasts seven, or...thirty days. The first we call *aninut*, the second *aveilut*.

Aninut represents the spontaneous human reaction to death. It is an outcry, a shout, or a howl... In spite of the fact that the *halachah* has indomitable faith in eternal life, in immortality, and in a continued transcendental existence for all human beings, it did understand...man's fright and confusion when confronted with death... It permitted the mourner to have his way for a while and has ruled that the latter be relieved of all *mitzvot*... [*Mitzvot* are] applicable to man who is preoccupied with life and not to one who has encountered death... How can the mourner pronounce a benediction or say "Amen" if he is "speechless"? He is still capable of producing sounds, but a benediction consists of spiritual words and not just of physical sounds.

Aveilut — At this point, the...*halachah*...makes an about-face. The *halachah* is firmly convinced that man is free and that he is master not only of his deeds but of his emotions as well. The *halachah* holds the view that man's mastery of his emotional life is unqualified and that he is capable of changing thought patterns, emotional structures and experimental motifs within an infinitesimal period of time... Man, the *halachah* maintains, does not have to wait patiently for one mood to pass and for another to emerge gradually. He disengages himself, quickly and actively... Hence, the *halachah*, which showed so much tolerance for the mourner during the stage of *aninut*, and let him float with the tide of black despair, now — forcefully and with a shift of emphasis — commands him that, with interment, the first phase of grief comes abruptly to a close and a second phase — that of *aveilut* — begins.

With the commencement of *aveilut*, the *halachah* commands the mourner to undertake a heroic task — to start picking up the debris of his own shattered personality and to reestablish himself as man, restoring lost glory, dignity and uniqueness... Yes, the *halachah* tells man, death is indeed something ugly and frightening, something grisly and monstrous; yes, death is trailing behind every man, trying to defeat him, his ambitions and aspirations; all that is true. Nevertheless, the *halachah* adds, death must not confuse man; the latter must not plunge into total darkness because of death. On the contrary, the *halachah* asserts, death gives man the opportunity to display greatness and to act heroically, to build even though he knows that he will not live to enjoy the sight of the...construction..., to plant even though he does not expect to eat the fruit, to explore, to develop, to enrich — not himself, but coming generations... The ceremonial turning point at which *aninut* is transformed into *aveilut*, despair into intelligent sadness, and self-negation into self-affirmation, is to be found in the recital of *Kaddish* at the grave... When the mourner recites — "Glorified and sanctified be the Great Name...", he declares — No matter how powerful death is..., however terrifying the grave is, however nonsensical and absurd everything appears, no matter how black one's despair is...we declare and profess publicly and solemnly that we are not giving up, that we are not surrendering, that we will carry on the work of our ancestors...that we will not be satisfied with less than the full realization of the ultimate goal — establishment of G-d's kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life for man.

Another essay from Rav Soloveitchik — *Aveilut Yeshanah and Aveilut Chadashah* — *Old Mourning and New Mourning* (also taken from *Out of the Whirlwind*) — deals with this dichotomy.

Man, Judaism maintains and insists, is capable of determining the kind of emotional life he wants to live. Man has both actions and emotions at his disposal. Man must never be overwhelmed by his emotions. He can invite emotions as well as reject them, opening the door and inviting feelings and sentiments if they are worthy, and slamming the door on those which are degrading and unworthy of attention. In the same manner in which man has the freedom to abstain from engaging in an act to which his conscience objects on moral grounds, he can also disown emotions which the same conscience assesses as unworthy of being integrated into his personality. Likewise, he can assimilate such emotions which bear the stamp of moral approval — constructive noble feelings.

Bachya ibn Pakuda wrote a famous book called *Chovot haLevavot* (*Duties of the Heart*), in which he discriminates between *chovot ha'evanim*, the duties of our limbs, and *chovot ha'levavot*, the duties of the heart. But how can one speak about *chovot ha'levavot* if the heart succumbs hysterically to emotions, such as love for a person, object, goal, or idea which is in reality unworthy of one's love and appreciation?

Actually, many precepts in the Torah deal exclusively with human emotional attitudes and not physical actions: "Love your neighbor" (*Vayikra* 19:18), "You shall not covet" (*Shemot* 20:14, *Devarim* 5:18), "You shall rejoice on your holiday" (*Devarim* 16:14), "You shall not hate your brother" (*Vayikra* 19:17), "You shall love the stranger" (*Devarim* 10:19), etc.

Ibn Ezra raised [a famous question] vis-à-vis the command of *lo tachmod* — not to covet the property of one's neighbor. Coveting is an emotion, a feeling. How then can one be commanded to not covet, desire, or be envious? But in truth, one can be called upon to exclude an emotion in the same way one must abstain from a certain act which is considered unworthy. Ibn Ezra (in his commentary to *Shemot* 20:14) introduces a famous fable or simile. The ignorant peasant, he says, will never desire or fall in love with the daughter of the king, the princess. Ibn Ezra wants to show that emotions are guided by human reason. One desires only what is possible; whatever is impossible is not desired. Pascal spoke about the *logique de couer*, the reasons of the heart (*Pensees* #277). The freedom to adopt and accept emotions or to reject and disown them is within the jurisdiction of man.

Aveilut and the Control of Emotions — The precept of *aveilut*...rests completely upon this Jewish doctrine of human freedom from emotional coercion. However, man's task vis-à-vis *aveilut* is not always the same. At times, man is told to respond emotionally to disaster, to yield to the emotional hurricane and not master his feelings. He must not take evil as something inevitable, which warrants no emotional outburst, just because such a response would be an exercise in futility... Judaism says with admirable realism — Of course every event, good or bad, is planned by the Almighty. So too is death. Man can do little to change the course of events; he rather must surrender to G-d's inscrutable will. Yet submission to a higher will must not prevent man from experiencing those emotions.

Judaism does not want man to rationalize evil or to theologize it away. It challenges him to defy evil and, in case of defeat, to give vent to his distress. Both rationalizing and theologizing harden the human heart and make it insensitive to disaster. Man, Judaism says, must act like a human being. He must cry, weep, despair, grieve, and mourn as if he could change the cosmic laws by exhibiting those emotions. In times of distress and sorrow, these emotions are noble even though they express the human protest against iniquity in nature and also pose an unanswerable question concerning justice in the world.

I want the sufferer to act as a human being, G-d says. Let him not suppress his humanity in order to please Me. Let him tear his clothes in frustrating anger and [temporarily] stop observing *mitzvot* because his whole personality is enveloped by dark despair and finds itself in a trance of the senses and of the faculties. Let him cry and shout, for he must act like a human being.

The *mishnah* relieved the mourner who has not buried his dead “from...all the (positive) *mitzvot* laid down in the Torah” (*Brachot* 3:1 and 17b). Rashi says the reason is that a person who is engaged in performing one *mitzvah* is exempt at that time from other *mitzvot*. But *Tosafot*... disagree, saying that the reason... the mourner is relieved of his obligation in *mitzvot* [is] because he is incapable of performing them... He is like a *chereish*, *shoteh v'katan*, the deaf mute, imbecile and minor who are all exempt from *mitzvot*. This is what *Tosafot* and all the *Rishonim* mean when they say that it is completely forbidden to perform a *mitzvah* during this first stage of mourning — the *onen* [one that has not yet buried his relative] is incapable of performing *mitzvot*. Judaism understands that bitterness, grief and confusion are noble emotions which should be assimilated and accepted by man, not rejected at the time of distress. Of course, emotions, like the tide, reach a high mark, make an about face, and begin to recede. The Torah has therefore recommended to man not only to submit himself to the emotional onslaught, but gradually and slowly to redeem himself from its impact.

Therefore, the *halachah* divided mourning into various stages:
First, *meito mutal lefanav* — when his dead lies before him. This is the period of *aninut*, extending from the time of death until the time of burial.
Then, commencing with burial, *aveilut shivah* — the week-long period, which extends into *sheloshim* — the thirty-day period.
Finally, for one's parents, *yud bet chodesh* — the twelve month mourning period. We have during these stages an imperceptible transition from a depressed, desolate, bitter consciousness of catastrophe to a redeemed higher consciousness.

Rav Soloveitchik spoke further about these issues in an essay entitled — *A Theory of Emotions*, also taken from *Out of the Whirlwind*.

Judaism has insisted upon the integrity and wholeness of the table of emotions, leading like a spectrum from joy, sympathy, and humility...to anger, sadness, and anguish... It does not reject any human feelings as unworthy and destructive...

As a rule, Judaism has always tried to maintain a balance between conflicting emotions and to accept the totality of the human emotional experience. We must not say that love is an absolutely noble feeling, while anger is always a base emotion. Their worth and ethical connotations depend upon...[their] circumstances. Sometimes a profound hatred is as noble an experience as a great love.

Similarly, the *halachah* distinguishes between *aninut* and *aveilut*. *Aninut* signifies the **immediate** reaction to the death of a loved one, the unrestricted gloom and unsounded depths of excruciating grief which render the mourner speechless and confounded... Man becomes aware of the worthlessness and absurdity of life, and his distress knows no limits. The *halachah* does not attempt to check this feeling of bereavement — it lets man sink in the abyss of despair at the first encounter with death. It relieves him of all halachic duties since, because of the painful experience, he is not free to act. *Aveilut* [the period that follows the burial] denotes the critical stage of mourning, the grief awareness, and at this level, we will notice at once that *aveilut* contains its own proper negation — solace and hope. *Aveilut* in the *halacha* is interwoven with *nechama*, consolation. They are inseparable. The latter is not a frame of mind which **displaces** grief; there is rather an **interpretation** of grief and solace...of mourning and faith. Immediately upon closing the grave, the line [of the consolers] is formed and comfort is offered to the mourner. What is the *kaddish* pronounced at the grave if not [a]...negation of despair?

Ethicizing Emotion — Only when the critical awareness shifts the emotion into the total life experience and directs the glance of the person toward the outside, do the emotions become ethicized, endowed with meaningfulness, not confined to oneself. The other, the thou, is drawn into our inner emotional world and we permit him to share our attention. There, something

wonderful happens — the wall separating individuals is torn down and free communication of feeling is made possible... One should interpret his own feelings and place them within the all-embracing life experience. Then the barriers which he erected around his emotional self are done away with, and the other is invited to join him...

The same is true of the feeling of despair. It should open up the closed-in individual existence and make it accessible to others. Grief must not enhance one's self-regard and self-care and render him completely oblivious to the suffering of others. The grieving person must also be disturbed by the pain sustained by his fellow man. He should share the other's burden, even though he seems completely preoccupied with his agonizing private burden. What Judaism requires is the communization of the individual existence. This is achieved by directing the self-centered emotional life toward the outside, or, if we wish to state it differently, by letting others from the outside enter our inner life...there are other existences...that are [as] important and meaningful as he is, and whose experiences are similar to his... This discovery of the thou takes place in the emotional world.

Summary

While anger seems to be an issue which no human being is entirely removed from, it is still problematic, particularly when expressed in destructive actions.

When it comes to dealing with **intensely painful** situations, we are required to work at seeing the righteousness and justice in how G-d is dealing with us.

How should one deal with the pain of bereavement? On the one hand, it is wrong for one to specifically **choose** to magnify and maximize the pain of bereavement — **far beyond** what is normal. But on the other hand, for one to not mourn properly is considered to be cruelty. The bottom line is that we have a great deal of choice when it comes to our emotions, and we are expected to exercise this choice properly.

Based on the story of Iyov (Job), however, the *Gemara* (*Baba Batra* 16a) declares that a person is **not** held accountable even for blasphemous words, if they are spoken as a result of one's unavoidable reaction to extreme pain or anguish.

One may even speak harshly to G-d — many great Jews have done so all throughout Jewish history — **if it is a part of an ongoing relationship** with Him. Having this relationship is not only important, it is tremendously therapeutic.

The ultimate *yissurim* is actually distance from G-d, and that is the primary pain which is expressed by David *HaMelech* and others all throughout *Tehilim*.

Final Conclusions

At the end of this process of trying to understand and incorporate the Torah view of dealing with painful emotions and anger at G-d into our lives, what have we accomplished? Have we achieved the type of closure that we are all looking for?

We may all still have many unresolved questions, as well as much pain. And they may both end up continuing until the final stage of history when all questions will be answered, and all issues will be resolved. At the same time, however, we need not feel angry with Hashem. Being confused and unclear is very different, in fact almost the exact opposite, from the moral certainty and judgment which is the essence of anger. As difficult as our pain and questions may be, the awareness that will probably help us the most to deal with them will be the surety that both pain

and questions are limited to this temporal world that we are all presently living in. In the world past this one, however, all of this pain and uncertainty will finally be resolved. And even now, at the very moment that we may remain immersed in our own pain, we can be comforted by our certainty that our loved ones who have passed away are long past any pain of their own. At the very same time that we continue to grapple with our own many questions, we can know that our loved ones have no more questions at all.

Hashem should grant all of us the *siyata d'Shimaya* (Heavenly assistance) to be able to understand all that we are capable of understanding, to have the strength to be able to deal with and to live with the pain and the losses that are such an unfortunate reality of this world, and to hasten the time when all confusion and all pain will ultimately be resolved.

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