

# Readers' Compendium:

# Coping with Tragedy

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by Yvette Alt Miller

## Talking to your kids about the Connecticut school shooting.

“Did you tell your kids?”

That was the question on the lips of every parent I met in the days after the Newtown shooting. Some had shielded their kids at first and then explained what had happened when their children saw a headline or watched the news. Others had told their kids about the horrific murders before their kids heard about it from someone else. In some families, the kids themselves had brought up the topic, after hearing the news from friends.

My husband and I opted not to mention anything about the shooting to our young children. We didn’t turn on the news, and when the newspaper came I quickly whisked away the front page so my kids wouldn’t encounter it. Many of my friends thought we were being overly-protective, but I think our reluctance to mention the tragedy sprang from two very different – and very Jewish – values.

On one hand, I want my children to grow up with a sense that the world is a good place. It was hard enough for me to cope with the news, and I didn’t think my children would be able to hear the news without it making them suspicious and fearful. One day I want my children to know about it, but I was willing to delay that.

This debate made me realize that the way I look at my home is subtly different from the way some of my friends and neighbors do. During the two thousand years since our holy Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, each individual Jewish home is a little “mini” Temple, a mikdash me’at. This concept has made me act consciously as a gate-keeper; I no longer necessarily allow every conversation that’s taking place in the public arena to enter our home.

Moreover, when they do learn about the shooting, I want to be ready, not shocked and teary as I was when I first heard about it. While we cannot control world events, we can decide how we respond to them. When the time comes to discuss Newtown, I hope to be able to channel my kids’ emotions into positive, constructive avenues such as donating charity, learning Torah, and praying in memory of the victims.

Dr. Samantha Bender, a Maryland-based child psychologist who has a experience working with at-risk children, agrees that young children are best shielded from extremely disturbing news. Increasing children’s stress levels can be painful, and if we’re going to do so, we should ask ourselves why and what we hope to accomplish. “Parents should ask themselves: does my desire to talk about this come from my own anxiety?”

If young children do find out about this or other catastrophes, Bender says, “It’s best to give them a sanitized version.” Keep descriptions very simple, and stress the positives in the situation. In the case of the Newtown shooting, this might be the heroism of the teachers, and the fact that the school officials’ actions saved the lives of over 600 children who were unhurt in this tragedy. And if we choose to tell our children, we also have to help them learn to put the news into perspective. “Point out that the media focuses on the worst case” when it’s in the news, Dr. Bender notes. Stress the fact that other schools around the country had a normal day.

One exception to this advice of being circumspect about the details of tragedies, Bender notes, is when events might impact children personally. In the case of Newtown, the shooter apparently suffered from Asperger's Syndrome, and families of children with Asperger's thus face a unique challenge. They need to prepare their kids for the fact that some people might judge them negatively after this tragedy. (For some families, too, this tragedy might serve as a reminder to ensure that kids with Asperger's are not isolated socially, and that they're getting help with social skills.)

If children do find out about tragedies, the American Academy of Pediatrics echoes this advice: keep discussions short, and stress the positive even in bad situations. They also recommend channeling kids' emotions towards something positive too, such as giving charity or working to help victims. This helps to manage their anxiety, and gives them hope that the world still contains goodness.

It also echoes the Jewish view that one way to respond to difficulties is by challenging ourselves to find ways we can help. For children especially, who have a simplistic view of the world, responding to evil by doing good things helps preserve their belief in fairness. When the tragedy is far away, we can still help by doing good deeds in honor of the victims. We can also channel our impulse to help others closer to home, by finding people in our own communities who can use our support.

This article can also be read at:  
<http://www.aish.com/f/p/Should-We-Tell-the-Children.html>

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by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

## If God is good, why is the world so bad?

Much of what troubles us about God's ways should really be ascribed to the actions of man. But what about the times when the evil stems directly from God?

What if a doctor informs you that your child has incurable cancer? Nobody has hurt your child. This evil seems to be coming from the One who supposedly does only good. If an evil person had hurt your child, you may not be able to forgive him, but you would at least know where to place the blame – on human wickedness. But if God has hurt your child, that is simply too much to bear.

Yet little, innocent children suffer every day. And invariably we are led to ask: How can a good God be so utterly cruel?

What troubles us also troubled the greatest Jewish leader, Moses. He dared to ask this question to The One Who Knows the Answer. And that eternal wisdom is shared with us in the book of Exodus. It is here, the Talmud tells us, that the Bible first takes up the problem of why the righteous suffer.

At first glance the passage may appear cryptic:

Moses then said [to God]: "Please grant me a vision of Your Glory." He [God] said, "I will cause all My goodness to pass before you and will proclaim the name of the Lord

in your presence. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate." And He said, "You cannot see My Presence and live." And the Lord said, "Behold there is a place alongside Me, and you shall set yourself on the rock. When My Glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My Hand until I pass by. Then I will remove My Hand and you will see My Back, but My Face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33: 18-23)

Most people who are reading this literally assume that Moses is asking to know what God looks like, and, in answer, God won't show His face, but lets Moses take a peek at His mighty shoulder blades.

That is, of course, absurd.

The Talmud (Brachot 7a) tells us that Moses was not asking to "see" God. Moses knew better. Moses knew that God has no body or any form for that matter and therefore cannot be seen with human eyes. Rather, Moses was asking to "see" God's "glory," so that he could understand God's plan. In effect, Moses is saying to God, "God, I love, honor and respect You in every way. But there are things about You that I do not understand. When I see a child with infantile paralysis, when I see a baby with leukemia, when I see a little boy suffering great pain and I know he is going to die soon, I don't know what You are doing. And I would love to have a total understanding of Your ways so that I can give you the full honor You deserve."

It is very significant that this passage appears right after God's absolution of the Israelites for the terrible sin of the Golden Calf. God had led the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt; He had performed astonishing miracles before their eyes; He had spoken to them at Mount Sinai; and then, when Moses went up the mountain, the Israelites repaid all this goodness by rejecting God and building an idol. Yet when they atoned for this great sin, He had not only forgiven them, but also responded by describing His essence as being one of complete mercy and compassion.

That is when Moses chose to make his request, as if to say, "If that is true, then will You explain how Your glory is reflected in the suffering of children and in the gloating of the wicked? Can you give me the gift of seeing how that makes sense?"

In short, Moses wanted to know why bad things happen to good people.

God's answer contains what Moses, as well as all of us reading these words thousands of years later, have the right to know.

So let us look very carefully, point by point, at what God is telling us.

## THE WHOLE PICTURE

"I will cause all My goodness to pass before you and you will proclaim the name of the Lord in your presence."

The names by which God identifies Himself are extremely important. Here, He uses the unique four-letter name known as the Tetragrammaton, which we are forbidden to pronounce; it is generally translated as "Lord" (Adonai). As noted earlier, this name signifies kindness and compassion, as contrasted with the name Elohim, which refers to God as the harsh but just judge. So it is the name of the merciful Lord that He wishes to proclaim to Moses.

We are told that "all" of God's goodness will be testimony to the merciful quality of the Almighty. And, by implication, that we will change our perception of pain and suffering once we have seen it "all." Seeing only half the story leads us to think God is cruel, but a fuller perspective will let us grasp why every strict judgment was really a necessary act of love.

Once we are able to understand the whole picture, we will see suffering as a manifestation of the compassionate side of God.

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate."

Is God saying, "I will do whatever I want regardless of what is just"? No, He is not saying that. But He is saying, "I will be gracious to the one I will be gracious to, and not to the one you think I should be gracious to. I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate, and not to the one you think I should be compassionate to."

The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) teaches that in the World to Come everything will be turned upside down. Those who are on the bottom here will be on top there and vice versa. The point it makes is that very often our judgments about who is a saint and who is a sinner are far off the mark. The way the world offers honor is literally topsy-turvy. Only in the afterlife can we see who are the truly deserving.

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18-century founder of the Hassidic movement, explained what that means through this wonderful story:

In a certain house, there dwelt two Jews and their families. One was a learned scholar, the other a poor laborer. Each day the scholar would rise from his sleep at the break of dawn and go to the synagogue where first he would study a page of Talmud. Then as the pious men of old were wont to do, he would wait a short time, direct his heart to heaven and say the morning prayers quietly and slowly, drawing out his worship until almost midday.

His neighbor, the poor laborer, also rose early and went to work – backbreaking work that strained the body and soul at once – until midday, there being no time to go to the synagogue to pray with the congregation at the proper hour.

When noon arrived, the scholar left the synagogue to return home, filled with the sense of self-satisfaction. He had busied himself with Torah and prayer and had scrupulously performed the will of his Creator. On his way from the synagogue, he would meet his neighbor, the poor laborer, hurrying to the house of worship, where he would recite the morning prayers in great haste, in anguish and regret for his tardiness. They would pass each other.

When the poor laborer passed his neighbor on the street, he would utter a mournful groan, upset that the other had already finished his study and prayer in leisure before he had even begun: "Oh my, here I am just going to Shul. He had already finished. I didn't do it right. Ay ay ay!" Meanwhile the lips of the scholar would curl mockingly, and in his heart he would think, Master of the World, see the difference between this creature and me. We both rise early in the morning. I rise for Torah and prayer, but he...

So the days, weeks, months and years passed. Each of the two men's lives were spent in a different fashion, one in the freedom of Torah and prayer, the other in the slavery of earning a livelihood. When from time to time their paths would cross, the scholar would smirk, and the laborer would groan.

As it must to all men, death came at last to the scholar and, shortly afterward, to his neighbor, the laborer. The scholar was called before the heavenly tribunal to give an accounting of his deeds. "What have you done with the days of your years?" the voice from on high called out.

"I am thankful," replied the scholar with a firm voice, in which could be detected more than a little pride, "all my days, I served my Creator, studying much Torah and praying with a pure heart."

"But," commented the heavenly accuser, "he always mocked his neighbor, the poor worker, when they would meet near the synagogue." The voice from on high was heard, "Bring the scales."

On one side, they put all the Torah he had learned and all the prayers he had prayed, while on the other side, they put the faint smirk that hovered over his lips each day when he met his neighbor. Behold, the weight of the smirk turned the scale to guilty.

After the case of the scholar had been completed, they brought before the heavenly tribunal the poor laborer. "What have you done with your life?" asked the voice from on high.

"All my life, I have had to work hard in order to provide for my wife and children. I did not have time to pray with the congregation at the proper time, nor did I have the leisure to study much Torah for there were hungry mouths to feed," answered the laborer in shame and grief.

"But," commented the heavenly advocate, "each day, when he met his neighbor, the scholar, there issued from the depth of his soul a groan. He felt that he had not fulfilled his duties to the Lord."

Again, the scales were brought and the weight of the groan of the poor worker turned the scale to innocent.

The same point was made by the famed 12th-century Talmudist and philosopher, Moses Maimonides, in the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Repentance, 3:2). In his legal magnum opus he concludes that in God's eyes a person's good deeds and shortcomings are judged qualitatively, not quantitatively. One terrible sin may outweigh a lifetime of good deeds, or one special good deed may wipe out many sins. Only God truly knows what is in each person's heart as well as the real value of our actions.

So when God tells Moses, "I will be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate," He is saying, "I know better than you who is righteous and who is wicked, who is deserving and who is not. Don't presume to improve upon my judgment."

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"And He [God] said, 'You cannot see My Presence and live.'"

What in the world does that mean?

Moses wants to "see" God, to understand God's ways. But God tells Moses, "As long as you are alive, you will never fully 'see.'" The entire picture is not visible from our limited perspective in this world.

Imagine yourself standing with your nose pressed to an impressionistic painting. In one place you see splotches of the most breathtaking royal blue, in another there is a big splotch of black, in another a splotch of white. It is not until you step a good dozen feet away that you see what the painting depicts – it's Van Gogh's "Iris." "

This is just as true when it comes to understanding God's plan. At times we see the colorful parts, at times the dark parts, but we can never step back far enough to see the whole picture. To step back far enough is to step into the next world.

Our existence here on Earth, and our comprehension of the real meaning of our lives, is very limited. This is God's message to Moses, the same message He gives Job when that long-suffering man asked for understanding. God says, "The facts at your disposal in the arena of life are insufficient for the kind of knowledge that you seek to possess."

## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD

"And the Lord said, 'Behold there is a place alongside Me, and you shall set yourself on the rock.'"

To help Moses grasp the reasons for the presence of evil on Earth, God tells him to stand "alongside Me." This phrase echoes a similar idea from Genesis when man is

first created in the image of God. Man is given a role to play in completing God's work, commensurate with his greatness. He is told that he stands as a partner alongside God up above; he is not a passive observer down below.

Why was Moses told to set himself upon a rock? Because the Hebrew word for rock, *tzur*, comes from a root that means to form, fashion or shape. The rock alludes to man's purpose on Earth. Just as God is a creator, so too is man. Indeed, man is a co-creator with God, a partner in the completion and perfection of the world.

To give man a chance to exercise this function, God has purposely left the world unfinished. It was created incomplete. That is the meaning of God resting at the end of the sixth day. God was surely not tired. "God rested" means that He stopped in mid-work. Why? So that man has the opportunity to have a hand in perfecting the world. God allows for sickness so man can play a role in inventing cures. God allows for famines so that man can have a part in inventing new methods of agriculture. God allows for droughts so that man can participate in bringing the world closer to its ideal state by inventing new irrigation methods and by building dams and desalinization plants.

So the evil in the world only points up the work we still have to do. Evil is a manifestation of a world that is still incomplete, waiting for man to do his part and finish the job.

"When My Glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My Hand until I pass by. Then I will remove My Hand and you will see My Back, but My Face shall not be seen."

It is here that the most important part of the answer is given. By telling Moses that he will not be able to see His face, but only His back, God is saying that it will be impossible for Moses to understand the events as they are happening. But later, in retrospect, it might be possible to make sense of what has occurred.

While you are confronting a crisis, while you are in the eye of the storm, you will not be able to understand God's purpose or logic. But once the crisis has passed, then, looking backwards in time, it will be possible to begin to understand God's ways.

We can all name events in our lives that appeared terrible when we experienced them, but when seen from a later perspective turned out to be good. A man is hurrying on the way to the airport. He gets a flat tire, and he panics – he knows he is going to miss the plane. He is angry at fate. At that moment, it is a terrible thing. He fixes the flat, drives like mad to the airport, but to no avail – the plan has taken off without him. An hour later, he finds out that the plane went down and crashed. So the flat tire, which he cursed a few hours ago, turned out to have been a blessing.

There is a memorable story told in the Talmud (Brachot 60b) that teaches the principle of "this, too, is for good":

The renowned first-century scholar, Rabbi Akiva, while traveling by donkey through a small village, could not find lodging at any inn. He took this in stride, assuming there was a divine purpose for his difficulties. He camped out in the woods outside of town, happy at least that he had his lantern to read by and his rooster to wake him in the morning. But in short order he is visited by more calamities – his donkey runs off, his rooster dies, and his lantern blows out. But being Rabbi Akiva, he patiently accepts his fate.

The next morning, when he goes back into town, he finds that a gang of marauders had massacred the entire population. Suddenly, he understands each and every difficulty he had faced: "Had I gotten lodging, I would have been killed. Had the lamp been on, they would have seen me. The rooster would have crowed, the donkey would have brayed. Everything that happened to me I now realize was all for the good."

## THE ILLUSION OF GOOD AND BAD

When we ask the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" we are often making erroneous assumptions. What we perceive as "bad things" might, in fact, be the best things that could happen to them.

I know a multimillionaire who lost his first job as a mail clerk. Unable to find employment, he was forced to start an enterprise of his own. He now says, "It is only because I got fired that I made it."

I know of one young man who as a student was so distraught over a breakup with a girl that he became suicidal. He clearly thought that this was the worst trauma of his young life. I spent a whole night with him, talking sense to him, comforting him.

Twenty years later, I ran into this young man again. "Remember me?" he grinned.

"Sure do. You owe me a night's sleep," I said.

"I came back to tell you the end of the story," he responded. And he shared with me what had happened to him since that time. His life had been filled with blessings. He had a beautiful wife and children and was very happy. Meanwhile, the girl he considered ending his life over had become an alcoholic, and by last count had been married and divorced three times.

So ultimately, with hindsight, he realized that because of his "tragic" breakup he turned out to be much better off. Of course when he was suicidal and I tried to tell him that everything would turn out for the best, he could not listen, much less understand why it was better this way.

The Zohar, the chief work of the Kabbalah, the body of Jewish mysticism, comments that when God created the world He pronounced it *to v me'od*, "very good." But when we look at the world, when we study history, when we

watch World News or CNN, we find it very hard to agree with this divine judgment.

So the Zohar points out that God gives us a clue in the name he chooses for the first man – Adam. In Hebrew, Adam is spelled using the same letters as the word *me'od* – mem, aleph, daled – but in different sequence: aleph, daled, mem. Furthermore, the Zohar says, Adam is an acronym standing for the three milestones of human history. Aleph, as the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, represents the very beginning of the story of mankind with Adam. Daled, for David, represents the high point of Jewish history. Mem stands for Moshiach (Messiah), who will bring the world to its longed-for state of fulfillment.

When we finally reach that stage of history alluded to by the mem, the days of Messiah, we will be able to look at everything that ever happened before throughout the course of all time, from the aleph of Adam through the daled of David, and together with God, we too will be able to proclaim that the world is not only good, but indeed very good – *to v me'od*.

As Søren Kierkegaard so powerfully put it, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward."

## IN SUMMARY

The Biblical exchange between God and Moses teaches us to beware of assumptions that are incomplete and erroneous, assumptions that lead us to question the goodness of God.

Moses says to God, in effect, "God, I want to honor you totally, but my lack of understanding of Your ways interferes. How can I honor you completely when I see good people who have it bad and bad people who have it good?"

God says, "Hold off, I question two of your premises."

"Which premises?"

"Number one, don't be so quick when you call some people good and others bad, because you don't know for sure. Number two, when you say they have it bad or they have it good, are you sure of your definitions? Are you sure you know what you are talking about? You are not positive. And you can't be positive because you can't see My face. You will only be able to see it in retrospect. In retrospect a terrible thing could be the best thing. Sometimes it will take you years to see. Sometimes you will never see, not in your days on Earth anyway."

What troubles so many people, however, are the many times when even the gift of retrospect seems to give us no greater clarity. Looking backwards at one's life can be illuminating, but it can often still leave us with many unresolved questions. What can we do then? Does it mean that we will end our lives on Earth with problems never to be resolved, injuries never to be healed, cruelties never to be explained, injustices never to be set right?

It is easy to say, "Okay, he lost his job. He will find one that he likes much better – it's not so bad." But when we are watching someone slowly dying from cancer, suffering with every breath, it is not so easy – in fact, next to impossible – to say, "This, too, is for good."

A wife says to me, "My husband got sick, he remained sick for the rest of his days, and then he died. Where is the good in that? Don't tell me to wait for the end of the story. I have seen the end of the story. He died."

Yet God tells us, "Man cannot see Me and live." We don't have the entire picture even at the time of death. Death is the gateway to the great beyond – and that very description reminds us that there is more after our earthly passage. What is still not clear during our finite existence, God seems to be saying, will be possible to comprehend once we are blessed with the divine perspective of eternity.

Mourners for their loved ones may have a difficult time viewing death in any positive light; for them it represents an excruciating loss. But for the deceased, death is not a problem, but rather a solution to the problem. For the person involved, death is the beginning of all the answers.



by Rabbi Dovid Hochberg

## How do we educate our children to feel the pain of the Jewish People without overwhelming them?

Terror works by cloaking insignificant everyday actions and events in a shroud of suspicion. Will I be able to buy tomatoes today at the store without being blown apart? Will my flight land uneventfully? Is that girl walking next to me really a terrorist? The terrorist takes our imaginations, those private and creative domains of our own minds, and twists them into weapons against us, surrounding us with fear.

The mind and imagination of a child is even more fragile. Children want to feel that the world is safe. They want to think that the people they love will always be around, and that everyone in the world is good and kind. They want to trust others and feel secure when they go out. Terror shatters every one of these thoughts.

The terror in Israel is tragic, and it is our responsibility to feel the pain of our fellow Jews, wherever they are.

The question is: do we share this pain with our children? Should we tell our children about terror in Israel and other tragedies that strike our collective Jewish family? And if yes, how do we tell our children? How do we educate our children to feel the pain of Klal Yisrael, the Jewish People, while not scaring and overwhelming them so they can't sleep at night or function in school? On the other side of the coin, how do we teach our children to feel a connectedness to the suffering of Klal Yisrael when we ourselves don't feel connected?

"Kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh" – Jews are guarantors for one another; what affects one of us, affects all of us. It is our responsibility to feel the joy and sadness of our Jewish brothers and sisters. And yes, we do have a responsibility to imbue our children with this same closeness and feeling for Klal Yisrael. This is a very important lesson that needs to be taught. However, there are three factors to keep in mind when instilling this lesson within our children.

The first important factor to understand is that it is not our responsibility to raise children who lightly gloss over tragedies or put on happy faces during horribly difficult events. It is our responsibility to give our children the emotional strength, tools, and bitachon (trust in God) to face whatever comes their way in life. Children have an enormous capacity for strength; it is our role to help shape and channel that capacity into productive life lessons.

The second factor is to be aware of our own response. In order to effectively educate our children to empathize with the pain and suffering of Klal Yisrael, we must pay close attention to our own reactions to tragedy. Does the news affect us deeply, or do we just shake our heads, say "nebach," (shame) and move on?

Generally, people respond to the news of a tragedy in one of three ways:

They "turn it off" and try not to really think about it.

They become completely overwhelmed and paralyzed by the news.

They are truly affected by what happened and respond in a normal, non-disabling way.

Our children learn from watching. We can't expect them to run out and say Psalms for Klal Yisrael when we don't say Psalms for Klal Yisrael. It would be unrealistic to expect our children to deeply feel the pain of shattered lives when we turn the page without as much as a sigh.

On the other hand, if we become paralyzed by the news, we risk overwhelming and traumatizing our children. The psyche of children is more fragile than the psyche of adults, and we must proceed with caution when talking to them, even if we feel like falling apart. The fact that we are so upset is more disturbing to them than the actual tragic event, and any lesson we wish to provide will be lost.

Pay close attention to the way you respond to tragedy. You can expect your children to react the same way.

The third factor is to closely gauge how your children will react. As parents, although we may not be perfectly accurate in our assessment, we usually have a pretty good idea of how each of our children will respond to tragedy. One child may be able to understand and react to the news in a healthy way, while another child may be incapable of understanding what happened or may become overwhelmed if we share too much.

Sharing too much can overwhelm our children, and sharing a small amount with a fearful and anxious child can be just as damaging. Constantly gauge the reactions of your children as you are sharing the news. Are they getting anxious? Are they ignoring what you are saying? Do they keep telling you they want to go play? There are many ways children let us know that they are being overwhelmed, and it is only through paying close attention that we can be sure we are not doing more harm than good.

Here are some general guidelines to follow when discussing a traumatic event with your children:

(A) It is not helpful to tell children what to feel or not to feel. We may be tempted to say, "Don't worry," "Just think about other things," or "Don't be scared," but such reassurances don't work. They are worried, they are thinking about what happened, and they are scared. It is much more helpful to listen with a caring ear and a warm hug. You can say, "That was such a scary thing!" or "That makes me feel sad, too." Acknowledge what they are feeling instead of trying to push their feelings aside.

(B) Give your children the actual facts about what happened and try to make things as simple as possible. Sheltering your children does not work. Kids hear about events in carpool, on the news, or at school, and what they hear may be far from accurate. Their fears and anxieties may also make up part of their perception of what happened. Communicate the basic facts to your children in a loving, caring way and encourage them to ask as many questions as they would like. You can also ask them questions, such as "I thought ... when I heard about what happened. What went through your mind when you heard?" or "Do you think they were scared when...?" or "What do you think they felt when...?" Don't overexpose them to the news.

(C) The most effective way to reduce your children's anxieties is to reduce your own. Your children will take their cues on how to handle challenging situations from the way you respond. You should be honest about your emotions but convey the message that God gives each person the strength they need to handle what He gives them. (After a tragedy, children relate more to this message than to a message that God loves us. That usually prompts the question of "If God loves us, why did He let those people get killed?")

(D) It is especially important to reassure small children, since their primary (and perhaps only concern) is whether

or not they themselves, their parents, and their immediate surroundings are going to be okay. Tell them that they will be safe and reassure them as often as needed.

(E) Your children may talk repeatedly – that is, more than you feel is necessary – about the tragedy, and you should let them talk. Psychologically, talking about an event gives people a sense of control. As adults we do this all the time. Whenever we hear about a bus bombing or that someone passed away, we immediately need to know details. Did he have an illness? For how long? Where did the bombing occur? In what area? Asking questions and learning as much as we can about uncontrollable events give us a sense of control. Children are the same way.

(F) Your children may feel a need to fantasize about what happened. For example, upon hearing that a terrorist murdered a child in a school, your child might say, "If that terrorist came near me, I would jump in the air and give him 10 karate kicks," or "I would dodge the bullets!" Let your children be as expressive and graphic as possible in their fantasy; it is their way of maintaining a sense of control. You will find that even though they may acknowledge that they are describing a fantasy, it is still helpful and calming to them. They may also recreate the event in their play. Allow them to play, reflect back what they are saying, and let them to share their feelings, even if they make shocking statements.

Despite your best efforts not to overwhelm your children, they may be traumatized by the tragic event. Here are some signs that your children may require professional help:

1. Your children suddenly are unable to concentrate or refuse to go to school after a tragic event. They may complain more frequently about an upset stomach or other physical ailment and refuse to leave the house.
2. They show signs of regression. For example, they may begin to use "baby talk" or wet their beds. They may

ask for the light to be left on in their rooms or want to snuggle more frequently.

3. There are changes in your child's sleeping or eating patterns. They may experience restlessness or become more irritable. Some children become more aggressive and begin to act out now for the first time.
4. Your children experience nightmares or other anxious behavior. They may cling to you when you leave the house or try to stop you from leaving.

Although many symptoms that follow a traumatic event are likely to pass, things may not proceed smoothly. In today's day and age, there are excellent treatments that can quickly and dramatically reduce the anxiety and tensions associated with a tragedy or trauma. You know your children better than anyone else, so be alert for any unusual changes.

In conclusion, children have the incredible inner strength and capacity to handle horrific events. Provide them with simple, factual information, and reassure them that they are safe and that all is in the hands of God. Pay attention to signs that your children may be psychologically overwhelmed through signs like regression, increased hostility and other anxious behaviors, as well as changes in sleeping patterns. Seek professional help if you are concerned. Encourage your children to share their feelings and creatively express their fantasies and thoughts about the event.

If we take the time to teach our children the life lessons that can be found everywhere we look, they will develop the emotional strength, tools, and trust in God to face whatever comes their way.



## LIFE IS GOOD, NOT FAIR

by Rabbi David Baum

### A Jewish perspective on one of life's toughest questions.

On the afternoon of Monday, May 5, 1975, I sat down to do a homework assignment for my eighth-grade English class. I was sitting at the desk in our den, next to the kitchen. I was 13 years old.

My father was 45 at the time and had been, until his first heart attack eight months earlier, a heavy smoker. After his heart attack, which occurred one week after my Bar Mitzvah, he had given up smoking. But his heart had sustained damage, and his doctors had told him that he could not engage in any strenuous activity. He had always loved working on our lawn but now he was prohibited from mowing it; from then on, it was to be my job.

But on this spring afternoon, my father decided to mow the lawn. I offered to do it, but he told me that the first mowing of the season was tough. He would do it and I would take over the rest of the year. He was trying to help me but never anticipated what was about to occur.

As I began my assignment, my father had just finished dinner and was still sitting at the kitchen with a cold drink. He looked very tired. After I'd written a few lines, for no apparent reason, I looked up into the kitchen just in time to see him fall off his chair and crash onto the kitchen floor. His body was convulsing.

I ran upstairs and called to him, but he was unconscious. I screamed to my mother, who came running to the kitchen, grabbed the phone and called 911. Then, we waited. Within a minute or two, police cars with sirens wailing came tearing into the cul-de-sac where we lived and screeched to a halt in front of our house. The policemen ran in and instructed us to get a pillow, which one of them put under my father's head, and a blanket,

which he laid over him. Seconds became minutes and then more minutes and then more minutes. The police were getting very agitated that no ambulance was coming.

My father stopped convulsing. One policeman started to scream into his walkie-talkie about an ambulance. I distinctly remember him saying, "This isn't a joke, this is serious." Finally, the ambulance arrived and my father was taken out on a stretcher. By this time, the entire neighborhood was in front of my house, and someone instructed me to go find my little sister, who was out riding her bicycle with friends.

The ambulance took my father to the nearest hospital half a mile away, but it was a futile effort. He was dead on arrival.

Before long, a police car pulled up in front of our house again. My sister and I were waiting outside on our driveway along with the rest of the neighborhood. My mother got out of the police car and motioned for us to come over, her expression confirming what I had already known when the ambulance had pulled away. I bolted the other way and in a mix of tears and rage, started walking laps around the house. I guess I wanted to get out of there, but I had no place to go.

At the ripe old age of 13, I had stood by helplessly and watched my father die. My sister was 12; my mother was a widow at 39. I sat shiva for my father for a week, and my friends came over and we talked about everything except the fact that my father had just died. For many years, I was the only person I knew with one parent; this was the 1970s, and most people had two. I only knew two girls whose parents were divorced.

After that, I became the go-to guy when it came to death. When a friend lost her brother in high school, I went to pay a shiva call. She jumped up, literally grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into another room. "I've been waiting for you. You're the only person I can talk to about

this who will understand," she told me. It was a dubious honor and one I would have gladly passed up.

Why do such tragedies happen? What did I do to "deserve" watching my father die? What did my mother do to "deserve" becoming a young widow? Or my little sister, burying her father before she could celebrate her Bat Mitzvah with him?

The short answer is that I didn't do anything to deserve such a tragedy, and neither did my mother or sister because the word "deserve" doesn't even belong in the equation. As I will explain, many things happen to people in their lifetimes that have nothing to do with deserving or not deserving.

But first, a few other points.

## THE QUESTION SAYS A LOT

If the question of suffering bothers us, our discomfort reveals a great deal about how we envision God. Either consciously or subconsciously, we recognize that:

- A. God is kind and just.
- B. He runs the world.
- C. Everything He does has meaning.
- D. We were created for pleasure.

A) God is kind and just. Why should suffering be an issue in the first place? Perhaps there is suffering in the world because God is angry or has a bad disposition? Or has not been properly appeased? The only reason why we are bothered by suffering is because we believe in a kind and just God. If we didn't, we would have no expectations and there would be no question about suffering. Asking "why?" reveals that we are questioning the justice in it and that we cannot accept injustice. In a Jew's universe, there cannot be a God who is mean or cruel.

B) God runs the world. The question of suffering reveals that you acknowledge that God is actively running the

world. If we didn't believe in God, we wouldn't ask the question; there would be no one to whom to pose the question. And if we believed in a God who created the world and then left it or has limited abilities, we also wouldn't ask the question because either God is not involved or He can't do anything about it. In either case, questioning God about suffering would be akin to holding a weatherman personally responsible for the weather. If we question the existence of suffering, it is only because we understand that there is a God to whom we can direct the question – one who is ultimately responsible for what occurs.

C) Everything He does has meaning. When we ask "why?" it implies that we are looking for an answer that provides an underlying reason. When we suffer personally, this aspect of the question takes on even greater significance. Asking "Why me?" confirms that a person believes that there must be a reason for what they are enduring. They understand that what is happening is not random but rather directed.

D) We were created for pleasure. When we question suffering, we are clearly stating, "This shouldn't be." The question confirms that we understand that life is good and that God created us to give us pleasure, and suffering seems to run contrary to that understanding. We rarely ask "Why me?" when things are going well. It's almost as if we expect life to be good.

So the question of suffering reveals that we believe in a kind and just God who runs the world, that we believe what happens to us has meaning and life is meant to be good and pleasurable. With this awareness, bad things happening seem like a contradiction and we ask, "How could a loving God let this happen?"

Related Article: [Life After Death](#)

## GROUND RULES

There are four essential points that we must understand in order to grasp any meaning behind suffering. Without these four, it can never make sense. They are:

1. Everything is a gift.
2. There is no such thing as "fair."
3. If life has meaning, then the pain also has meaning.
4. There is an afterlife.

1) Everything is a gift.

If we look at our lives and the myriad gifts we possess, we quickly see that we don't deserve any of them. Why does a person deserve the gift of sight or hearing? Why does any person deserve the gift of a properly functioning digestive, nervous or reproductive system, or legs or teeth or children or food or brains or a house to live in or any number of the literally thousands of things that we take for granted?

We know deep down that we have not earned any of the gifts we possess; everything we have is a gift.

Nevertheless, we go through life expecting everything to work out the way we want it to or, at least, not badly. And when there are setbacks or tragedies, suddenly we want to know, "Why me?"

But once we understand that we do not deserve anything and realize that we are constantly receiving gifts of love, we can view suffering in a different context.

Unfortunately I have a real life example that sheds light on this. My cousin Ann once had three healthy children. One day, 30 years ago, her 2-year-old was in the backyard, playing with her siblings and some other children, when she wandered off. Nobody noticed how long she was missing and when they eventually found her, she was face down in a neighbor's in-ground birdbath which was full of water. Her brain had been deprived of oxygen long enough to leave her severely retarded. She eventually died at the age of 22, still wearing diapers.

Years later, a relative of mine approached me about this. "Tell me what Ann did to deserve that!" she demanded. "Ann is such a good person."

I answered, "If you can tell me what Ann did to deserve two healthy children, I will tell you what she did to deserve this."

This answer did not mean that I wasn't brokenhearted about what had happened. Of course I was. But I wanted to show my relative that there is no answer because there is no question. We don't deserve the good and we don't "deserve" the bad. Everything is a gift – our eyes, our ears, our children, our food but also illnesses, deaths, disasters and tragedies.

But we still need to understand how.

## 2. Life is not fair.

How often have we heard the expression "life is not fair" or "there is no justice in this world"? This is 100 percent true. Life is completely unfair. Where is the fairness in some being born rich and some being born poor, some beautiful and some plain, some seeing and some blind, some hearing and some deaf, some healthy and some sickly, some fertile and some barren, some intelligent and some simple, some mentally fit and some mentally ill, some charismatic and some painfully shy?

In fact the concept of "fair" is so foreign to Jewish thought that in the Hebrew language, there is no word for "fair." Modern Hebrew has adopted the word directly from English. If you want to complain in Hebrew you say, "Zeh lo fair."

To quote a cliché, life is a journey; there is no objective finish line to which we are all racing. We all die at different times and in different ways but it's not the end that matters, it's what we do while we are here, with what we are given. Just walk through a cemetery: Everyone there has the same net worth, is in the same state of

health, owns the same amount of real estate and is as good-looking as the next.

We are each created with our own unique path in life. God desires the same end result for all of us, but our itineraries are personalized, each person's being different from the other. Therefore, God has equipped each of us with the custom-designed tools that we will need for our own individual journeys. It doesn't matter what your neighbor has because what he has is good for him but not for you, and vice versa.

Everything you need, you have. Everything you will need, you will receive. Knowing that God has created each of us with our personal path to tread and with all the tools and skills that we need eliminates any basis to complain about the inequities of life.

Knowing this also obviates the need to be concerned with keeping up with the Joneses. People often create their own unhappiness by focusing on what they don't have. A person who appreciates what he has will not become unhappy when his neighbor pulls up in a new Mercedes.

## 3) If life has meaning, then the pain also has meaning.

If life itself has God-given meaning, then so must every aspect of it, including the pain and the setbacks. Therefore, the pain of life is a part of the gift of life. A person whose life is focused on personal growth and eternal existence will understand that pain is part of the package and this knowledge enables a person to bear it. On the other hand, believing that there is no purpose to pain can be more painful than the pain itself. Meaning allows a person to endure suffering and become stronger. Meaninglessness prevents a person from even enjoying comforts.

How often has something seemed tragic while it was happening but later on, in hindsight, was actually a blessing? How often do we read about tragedies that have produced amazing results or about people accomplishing

wonderful things after their outlooks on life are completely changed?

4) There is an afterlife.

Many Jews think the concept of an afterlife, Heaven and Hell, are purely Christian concepts. This is a mistake. Although the Jewish understanding of Heaven and Hell is fundamentally different than the Christian or Muslim view, belief in the afterlife is in fact one of the unequivocal foundations of Judaism.

The existence of an afterlife gives this life meaning. Since this world is full of inequities and injustice, we are left with two choices: Either there is another place where true justice is meted out, where both the righteous and the evil receive their just rewards, or the world in which we live is just cruel and arbitrary, and people are either winners or losers.

Believing the latter would mean that murder victims just had bad luck (wrong place, wrong time) and tyrants really do get away with mass murder. The little old lady who gets swindled out of her life's saving is just a poor sucker and her swindler will never face true justice if he's never caught.

Only an afterlife, where a final accounting is made, gives the trials and travails of this lifetime any ultimate purpose.

## WHY SUFFERING?

The Talmud gives us the guidelines for evaluating our suffering. If we find ourselves in an uncomfortable situation, regardless of the degree, we are to go through three steps:

1. First, we must scrutinize our actions. Perhaps we are being chastised, for our own good, to improve ourselves or abandon negative traits or behaviors. Again, this is not punishment but rather the prodding of our loving coach who wants us to win.

2. Second, if we do a self-evaluation and it does not seem to us that this is the cause, we are to evaluate our time to see if we are wasting it instead of applying it to Torah study. This is the most sincere way to have a relationship with God and He desires us to study Torah above all else.

3. And lastly, if that too is not the cause, then the Talmud attributes the situation to suffering which is good for us – even though we cannot understand it in this lifetime.

After all is said and done, there are many times when the underlying reason for our suffering remains unknowable.

God has a real relationship with us, whether or not we acknowledge or reciprocate it, and He is always readjusting our world in response to our freewill decisions. His goal is always the same – only the manner and the methods change. He reacts to our every choice and decision and constantly reshuffles the deck in order to deal us the best cards, given our choices.

He does this to guide and help us. Everything is done with an eye on our eventual best.

Sometimes God is active and will intervene and frustrate our plans. Other times He will be passive and allow our decisions to run their course. This applies to both good and evil plans.

Sometimes the only reason for suffering is to draw us closer to Him. Sometimes our suffering is designed to act like an alarm clock by focusing us on what is truly important and preventing us from wasting our lives in a dull fog. It can be a wake-up call for an individual, a nation or the world as a whole.

Sometimes our suffering can be intended to remove negative traits. Sometimes it is intended to prevent a greater evil or bring a greater good. Sometimes its only purpose is to bring out our potential. Sometimes the whole situation has to do with the Next World and not this

one. In these cases, when we can't see the big picture, the suffering will seem unjust.

The righteous might suffer in this world because their mitzvot are the most fundamental aspects of their beings. They are spiritually oriented and it would be a waste to reward them in this temporal world, which doesn't mean that much to them. They are not interested in fame or expensive cars or big homes.

On the other hand, evil people who do some good and therefore must be paid, might get rewarded here in this world because their good deeds are the superficial part of their lives and not of great importance to them. Therefore, they get paid in this world in ways that matter to them. They would not be able to appreciate a spiritual reward.

God's decisions will always include the variable of how His actions will affect everything else in the cosmic equation. God has plans for humanity as well as individuals, and this is factored into every decision. But for reasons that remain hidden, we are not entitled to know why we suffer even as we go through the pain. Perhaps knowing why a child is born with Down's syndrome, or why a husband dies as a young man leaving a widow and orphans, or why a person develops multiple sclerosis will negatively affect our free will.

We can understand the rules, but we cannot begin to fathom all the calculations that go into God's interactions with us, balancing our eternal needs, the needs of our society and the needs of mankind. Since there is an infinite array of factors that are beyond our limited understanding, suffering may often seem arbitrary and unfair. Yet it is neither.

We have to accept that everything is done for our good and that one day, we will understand the reasons for what happened to us in our lives on Earth.

**COMING FULL CIRCLE**

Our lives are like a tapestry. If one views the back – an incomprehensible, ugly mess of threads of different lengths, colors and thicknesses, seemingly thrown together haphazardly and arbitrarily – it is hard to make any sense of it all, and it is impossible to form any kind of picture. Turn the tapestry around and all of a sudden everything becomes clear. The messy back makes total sense in light of the front.

After we depart from this world and enter the World of Truth, we will all come before God with our questions. And we will finally get answers. We will clearly see the reasons for every one of life's occurrences, from the most trivial to the most sublime. Not only will we have no further questions, but we will be grateful for what happened to us. And, regardless of how unpleasant our lives were while we passed through this world, it is still better for us to have gone through it than not to have been created at all. This is because, regardless of our suffering, we have a pleasurable eternity ahead of us.

This future encounter can be illustrated by the following story which I cannot personally verify, but nevertheless worth retelling. It happened in the men's room in London's Heathrow Airport on December 21, 1988. A man scheduled to fly on Pan Am 103 to New York got locked in a toilet stall and missed his flight. This was the plane that was blown up in midair over Lockerbie, Scotland, by agents of the Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi.

I can imagine him becoming increasingly unhinged as he came to realize that he might miss the flight. As time continued to tick away, I can see him screaming "Help!" at the top of his lungs. And as he sat waiting for a maintenance man knowing that his flight was boarding, I can see him kicking the door with all his might while cursing the British "who can't even make a stupid door that works." Imagine how pleasant he must have been when he was finally freed—only to learn that the flight was closed and he would have to wait for the next one to New York. Imagine his sense of frustration while he sat

for hours, waiting for the next flight, wondering the whole time about the fate of his luggage that was checked on that flight. How would he even explain this to others?

Imagine how his mood must have changed when the TV in the waiting area broadcast a news bulletin about the terrorist bombing of the flight, killing every person onboard. Suddenly his ordeal in the men's room takes on a totally different meaning. Not only is he no longer angry, he is actually grateful that he got stuck there. He might even have said, "Thank you, God, for jamming the door." The same series of events is now seen entirely differently than it had been only a few moments before.

His experience did not change — only his understanding of it. The same experience seen through a different lens now produces a much different reaction and in hindsight, what seemed like a bad thing turned out to actually be a good thing.

When we eventually stand before God and see our lives replayed, this will be our reaction to everything that has happened to us, both good and bad. We will see all things for what they truly are: Acts of love that were done on our behalf. And we will be thankful for everything — everything — that we endured during our short stay here in this world.

Excerpted from *The Non-Orthodox Jew's Guide to Orthodox Jews*, published by Veracity Press, 2010, a book that offers an all-encompassing view of Orthodox Jews' beliefs and actions and explains the issues that non-Orthodox Jews often find puzzling or exasperating. Readers will encounter surprisingly refreshing discussions of topics such as happiness, good and evil, personal integrity, suffering, heaven and hell, prayer, charity, economics, love and sexuality, marriage, evolution, morality, assimilation, intermarriage and Zionism.



## I NEED HELP

by Rebbetzin Feige Twerski

**When dealing with pain, there's no time to wait: addressing problems at their inception averts much heartache.**

Some years ago, I took my father of blessed memory, to a physician in Milwaukee for a consultation. After the examination, the doctor shared his conclusions with us, and we prepared to leave. Just as my father was about to walk out of the office, he turned to the doctor and said "Doctor, you're the first medical professional who didn't hassle me about my weight. How come?" The doctor's wise response was memorable and I have quoted it often since. He said, "Rabbi, it's not what you eat, it's what eats you that really matters."

I thought about that this morning when a young woman came to see me to discuss her troubled marriage. She unloaded 15 years' worth of pain, anguish and emotional deprivation. My heart sank as the picture grew darker and more hopeless. When I could bear it no longer, I erupted, "Why did you wait so long to get help? What have you been doing for the last 15 years, while all of this was eating away at you?"

### PRIDEFUL RELUCTANCE

Indeed, one of the greatest frustrations I have experienced in more than 30 years of pastoral counseling is the prideful reluctance of individuals and/or couples to seek intervention when a problem first arises, or at the very least, when it becomes clear that the problem is not going away.

Invariably, by the time the situation comes to our door there is so much accumulated anger, bitterness and resentment that a veritable wall, impenetrable to remedy, has been thrown up; by then an almost superhuman effort is needed to break through.

Negativity of this magnitude ravages not only its object, but its bearer as well. Resentment, someone explained, is like drinking poison and hoping that the other person will die. The fact is that, as my father's doctor observed, "it eats away at us." We become the victims.

## APPROPRIATE ASSISTANCE

King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs (12:25) exhorts us that if there is worry or concern in one's heart, one should speak about it to those who can be of assistance:

If there is anxiety in a man's mind let him quash it, and turn it into joy with a good word – a righteous man gives his friend direction ...

In modern day we have many choices available to us – rabbis, therapists, counselors and other professionals that a particular situation might call for.

Articulating one's problems and issues in the presence of an objective party, gives one access, at the very least, to greater clarity and insight. Dealing with a problem at its inception can avert much heartache and many tragedies – - divorce, alienation, destroyed relationships, etc.

Many hesitate to get help, because they see it as a sign of weakness. Others believe that they deserve to suffer. Still others mistakenly think time will cure everything. All are misguided rationalizations.

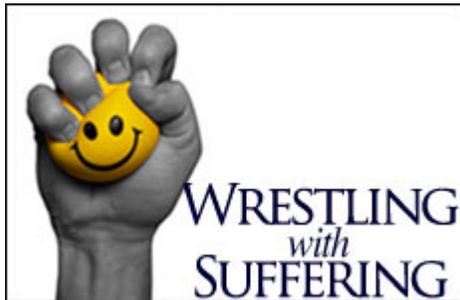
A woman at a seminar once asked me how we can teach our children to deal effectively with the stresses and challenges of life. I responded that our children watch us very carefully. Our behavior is the example we set for them to follow. Our message to them needs to be that when life gets tough, we don't crumble or run away, we don't give up the ship. We don't avoid facing our issues such that we become frustrated, bitter, angry and resentful.

## ALL ONE'S STRENGTH

The story is told about a little boy who, while playing in the backyard, tries to move a big rock from its place. He pushes and pushes but to no avail. The rock doesn't budge. Frustrated, he turns to his father who, instead of being sympathetic, admonishes his son, "You are not using all your strength." The boy turns once again to address the stone, huffing and puffing, pushing and pulling, but once again with no success. Much to his surprise, he hears his father, chiding him, "But son you are still not using all your strength." Spent and fatigued, the young lad cries to his father, "How can you say that? I have tried my best!" "No you haven't," responded his father, "you didn't ask me to help you."

Meeting the challenges of life effectively belongs to those who have the foresight and the courage to seek out, in a timely fashion, those who can enable them to use all their strength.





by Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith

## Jewish philosophical approaches to one of life's fundamental questions.

While paying a shiva call to a friend who lost her mother to leukemia, I witnessed a young student launch into a detailed explanation of Judaism's philosophical approach to suffering. My friend, in the midst of experiencing profound loss, had no interest in hearing a philosophy lecture. I sat there squirming in my seat, looking for a break to change the topic. My friend nodded politely, but I knew that the student's words cut like daggers.

"Why me, God?" can be either a philosophical question or a cry of anguish. The former is a request for clarity and warrants an intellectual reply. But if the words are an expression of emotional pain, any rational explanation is not only irrelevant, it's downright insensitive. An expression of pain requires empathy, not answers; silence, not words.

This article takes a decidedly intellectual approach to the question of suffering. The following approaches are not meant to be tidy answers to one of life's most profound issues. They require the ongoing dedication to wrestle with them, striving to assimilate them into the fabric of our lives.

The question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is built upon the following three axioms about God.

God must be:

1. all good
2. all knowing
3. all powerful

If you remove any one of these attributes, the question disappears.

If God isn't all good, He can do evil and even enjoy inflicting pain. Is there any wonder why bad things happen to good people?

If God isn't omniscient, bad things occur because He doesn't know everything that's going on in the world. If He knew about it; He would certainly put a stop to it.

If God isn't omnipotent, bad things happen because there are forces in the world beyond God's control. Diseases and natural disasters are too mighty for God. We can only call God to task for events that are in His hands.

If one believes in an omnipotent Being who is all good and all knowing, then the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" poses a real challenge.

### A MINOR DISCOMFORT

Just how much pain must occur to legitimately raise the question? The Talmud gives the example of a person who reaches into his pocket with the intention of getting a certain coin and instead pulls out a smaller coin. Forced to reach into his pocket a second time, he experiences minor discomfort. The Talmud declares that this added exertion is reason enough to necessitate asking, "Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong to deserve this?" (Brachot, 5a)

Any amount of pain or discomfort poses the same theological question, even the stubbing of a toe. Philosophically, the dull aches in life demand as much an

explanation as the major crises. After all, if God is all good, all powerful and all knowing, why should my daughter get a paper cut? Furthermore, minor examples of discomfort are perhaps more conducive to delving into the issue of suffering, since they diffuse the emotional tension, making it easier to focus on acquiring intellectual clarity.

## ASPECTS OF LOVE

Our first approach to wrestling with suffering requires us to take a look at a fourth aspect of God's nature: Love.

We usually think of love as tender moments of warmth and nurturing, a sense of reaching beyond ourselves through giving and sharing. This is one aspect of love called Chesed, loving-kindness.

But there is another, equally essential side to love, without which no love can be complete: discipline. Imagine a mother getting a call from the local supermarket telling her to come get her teenaged son who has been caught shoplifting. The mother believes in parenting through positive reinforcement alone – only expressions of warmth and love are acceptable, no criticisms allowed. During the drive home, the son silently waits for his mother's reaction. She gives him a big smile and says, "You had such a busy day, you must be starving! What do you want for dinner?" The shoplifting incident is never mentioned.

Two days later the mother gets a call from the police to come down to the station. Her son has been caught mugging an elderly woman. She posts bail and gives her son a big hug. "My poor darling! This is no place for you. You must have been so frightened!" What do you think the son is going to do tomorrow? What he really yearns for is some real attention. He desperately wants his mother to draw the line somewhere, to set some boundaries and say, "No! This is wrong. You're going too far."

Acceptance and warmth without the balance of discipline are a distortion of love. The mother's unceasing smile becomes a statement that nothing he does is worthy of reaction. Discipline and judgment, the other face of love, tells a child that his actions truly matter.

The aim of discipline in good parenting is to educate, not punish. The goal is to show the child where he is making a mistake and to direct him on the proper path.

Jewish literature refers to God as "Our Father in Heaven," Avinu shebashamayim. He is a father, not a grandfather with a long white beard. There is a significant difference between a parent and a grandparent. The grandparent's relationship is built primarily on the Chesed, giving side of love – bringing presents, spending time playing with the grandchildren, getting nachas. When discipline is called for, the parents step in. God relates to us like a parent; His love is complete, expressed through both giving and discipline. Therefore, when something bad happens, the first step should be to try to understand what our Father is teaching us.

As the Talmud states, "When misfortune comes upon a person, he should examine his actions."

We are being taught a lesson, not getting punished. Adversity can be a wake-up call from God, encouraging us to explore our actions and to see where we're going off course.

## CONTEXT AFFECTS EVERYTHING

The emotional context of the relationship shapes how we interpret the actions of others. For example, Rachel has been working on completing her Masters degree over the last four years. Tonight is the graduation. She tells her husband, "Meet me there at 8:00 pm and please – don't be late."

"Don't worry. I'll be there on time," he says.

"You promise?"

"Promise."

Eight o'clock rolls around and he's not there. Rachel starts getting agitated. It's ten after eight and still no show – now she's mad. At 8:30 she can't believe he let her down again. She feels hurt and dejected.

Let's take a look at another couple, Susan and David. They have been married for ten years and fully appreciate the love they have for each other. Susan tells David to be there at eight and to try not to be late.

"Are you kidding?" he says, "This is such an important evening; I wouldn't want to miss a minute of it!"

Eight o'clock rolls around and he's not there. What does Susan think? "Maybe he got stuck in traffic." Ten after eight...she starts to worry. "Maybe something happened." At 8:30, she leaves to call the hospitals, in a state of panic.

Same situation with two very different reactions. When the relationship is one of resentment and mistrust, the action is interpreted through that negative lens. When the relationship is one of love and trust, that same action is viewed in an altogether different light.

When we are unaware of God's unwavering love, we will necessarily misinterpret God's message. The initial challenge is to ensure that our relationship with Him is rooted in trust and love.

God is not a dysfunctional parent. He does not lash out in anger, inflicting pain because of His own frustration and lack of impulse control. Everything that happens stems from His unwavering love, which is infinite and boundless, greater than all the love in the world.

"As a parent chastises his son, so God chastises us" (Deut. 8:5).

Like a loving father, God is trying to teach us something.

So how do we start building a loving relationship with God?

## RECLAIMING THE HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The cornerstone of any loving relationship is trust, the confidence that the other truly cares and is there for you. A sapling of trust is cultivated through actions of giving, which deepen its roots, nurturing it to grow stronger. Eventually the trust becomes firmly embedded, forging a relationship permeated with love.

However, there is another indispensable ingredient: gratitude. If an act of love is not acknowledged, it cannot strengthen the bond in any way. For all intents and purposes it's as if that act was never done. When expressions of kindness are taken for granted, as expected as the daily newspaper at the door, they lack all power to nurture closeness and trust. Without gratitude, the "emotional bank account" of trust never accumulates. It's as if the history of the relationship is being written on a child's etch-a-sketch.

We need to appreciate the countless demonstrations of God's care in our lives, so that we can build our sense of trust. By recognizing His unceasing involvement in our lives, past and present, we can build a loving connection with God.

This is God's essential message to the Jewish people, when He introduces Himself for the first time at Mount Sinai. "...I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:2)

God could have said, "I am the Lord your God who created the heavens and the earth." What could be more impressive than that?

But He isn't interested in showing off His power, recounting erstwhile feats of strength to which people have no direct connection. He wants to show this fledgling nation that He is with them, committed, loving and caring. "Yes it's Me, your God, who overturned nature to liberate each and every one of you. The One who saved you and freed you from slavery."

Appreciating God's active role in our personal lives will give us that same reassurance. All too often we take for granted the innumerable blessings God has already given us, and overlook the special relationship we have with Him. We tend to forget that we are the recipients of a myriad of precious gifts, that there is a Being who granted us the gift of life, the ability to see, and the faculty to hear, that every instant of our existence is a brand new gift of life.

## GETTING THE MESSAGE

Wrestling with suffering requires viewing all events as meaningful. Events in our life are not mere coincidences, random accidents that have nothing to do with a purposeful Being. If God is all knowing, all powerful and all good, nothing just happens.

"One who believes in God's oneness and understands its implications must believe that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is one, single, and unique, being subject to no impediment or restraint whatsoever, He alone dominating all....there is no other beneath Him who exercises any dominion in the world...He alone supervises all of His creatures individually, and nothing transpires in his world except through His will and agency – not through chance, and not through nature, and not through constellation; but He governs all of the earth and all that is in it, decreeing all that is to be done..." Daas Tevunos, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

Living with this attitude enables us to see God's guiding hand in our daily life. I have a friend who was a workaholic, working every day from early in the morning till late at night. Her job was her sole source of meaning and satisfaction in life, and she was looking forward to a

promotion that would bring even more responsibility and more demands on her time.

One day she was thrown from a horse and broke her leg. Needless to say, she was upset with the timing of the accident, but that proved the least of her worries. The break was very complicated and after being in a series of casts for several months, it still would not heal. By this time, her absence from work caused her to lose the coveted promotion and she was asking, "Why me, God?" In the end, she had to be hooked up, 12 hours a day, to a special machine that sent electro-magnetic impulses through her leg to stimulate bone cell growth. She had to come home early from work, every day, and, once hooked up to the machine, could do nothing but read, watch television and think.

And think she did. She began to consider the stressful life she was leading and to question where it was all headed.

There is a principle in Judaism called "measure for measure," which loosely means, "the punishment must fit the crime." To be able to figure out the meaning of the message, God will often send His message through a medium directly related to the area one needs to improve. Forced to pull out of her frenetic pace, she realized that all her running was leading nowhere. After eight months of healing, she changed the course of her life and will be eternally grateful that she broke her leg.

It's not always easy to figure out the message. And there is the possibility that God intended to teach my friend a different lesson. Perhaps He wanted to show her that she isn't always in control, or not to take a functioning body for granted. By being aware that her pain was for a reason, she was able to use the episode as a means to grow and bring God's presence into her daily life.

If you were to receive registered mail from the President of the United States, would you just throw it in the garbage? When we realize that events carry divine messages, we are compelled to open them up and explore their contents. By ignoring the message and attributing events to mere chance, we rob ourselves of potential

growth and meaning, and waste the opportunity to further develop our closeness with God.

Incidentally, we don't have to wait for God to send us a personal wake-up call. A fool learns from his own mistakes, a wise man learns from others. Not only is there a particular message to the one suffering, but there is a message to everyone who hears about it, as well.

## WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHY

At times, we cannot clearly grasp why certain events happen, and we feel enshrouded in a cloak of darkness, unable to pierce through to see the light. What are we to do then?

Imagine a father engrossed in a book, who sees in the corner of his eye his two-year-old daughter walking towards an electrical socket holding a paper clip. The father shuts his book and yells, "Annie, stop!" Annie continues walking towards the socket.

"Annie! Stop right now!!"

Inches away from sticking the paper clip in, the father jumps off the couch and slaps it right out of her hand. Annie starts bawling, "Why do bad things happen to good people?!"

Because children have an immature perspective of the world, they are not able to see the whole picture. In Annie's mind, she was just playing with a harmless paper clip and got a smack for no good reason. The father, of course, was preventing his daughter from getting electrocuted. The slap was for her good. When Annie gets older, she'll be able to look back and view the episode from a more mature position and see things in an entirely different light.

Every individual has a unique mission to fulfill. The countless events that occur in one's life converge in profound synchronicity to consummate a higher destiny, integral to God's master plan. Thus, the sum total of a

person's life manifests a distinct contribution towards the perfection of the world.

"There is no deed, small or great, whose ultimate end is not universal perfection, as stated by our sages [Brachot 60b]: 'All that is done by Heaven is for the good.' For in the time to come, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will make known His ways...showing how even the chastisements and tribulations were precursors of good and actual preparation for blessing. For the Holy One, Blessed be He, desires only the perfection of His creation." – Daas Tevunos, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

Our life's events come together like the woven threads of a beautiful tapestry. God is the master weaver who unites a myriad strands into a work of art of mind-boggling complexity. Every strand is necessary, precisely entwined in the ideal position.

When half done, we could question the tapestry's jarring splotches of black and ugly strands of gray. There are times we can see only the backside of the tapestry that looks frighteningly chaotic and confusing. Only once completed can we appreciate its full beauty.

Some experiences may seem bad at that moment, only because we lack the perspective of the big picture. It's like leaving in the middle of an action movie, going home and thinking the hero is about to be killed. With some films, the very last frame can redefine our whole understanding of what happened.

In actuality, all events, the "good" and the "bad," come from the same single source – One God who is all good.

"And you shall know this day and return it to your heart that the Lord is God, in the heavens above and on the earth below – there is none else." [Deuteronomy 4:39] God Himself testifies and proclaims that the net sum of all His great workings in the world is the revelation of this absolute oneness." – Daas Tevunos, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

## FROM ONE SOURCE

The Talmud (Pesachim, 50:a) brings the quote, "...on that day God will be One and His Name will be One" (Zechariah 14:9), and asks, "Is God not One today?"

The Talmud answers that in this world we may know, intellectually, that everything God does is for the good, but we may not be able to feel and perceive how these seemingly negative events are in fact truly good. There can be confusion that makes evil seem to be in contradiction to God's trait of unceasing kindness.

But in the World to Come, the Talmud continues, when the destiny of the world has unfolded and each individual's has been completed, we will obtain a full perspective. We will be able to look back and feel how all things, even the major upheavals, were for the good. Every twist and turn, personally and globally, will have been an ultimate expression of God's perfect nature.

We will recognize evil for what it truly is – a temporary illusion destined to disappear like a puff of smoke.

"...and all evil will evaporate like smoke when You remove evil's dominion from the earth" (Machzor, Rosh Hashana Prayers).

While this approach does not eliminate the suffering, it can help us accept the pain, knowing it is ultimately for the good. When someone we love and trust does something we don't understand, we have the maturity to suspend judgment and are confident that there must be a good explanation for this behavior.

## SELF-INFLICTED SUFFERING

So much of our suffering is self-inflicted. Just read the headlines of any paper. We are masters at afflicting others and ourselves with immense pain – psychological and physical – and have no one to blame but ourselves.

Perhaps we question God for giving us the total freedom to wreak such havoc. Why grant us the option to hurt and

kill? Wouldn't the world have been a better place if evil had been curtailed, limiting the scope of our free will?

Limiting the extent of free will would have made the world a safer place, but sheltering us from the potential consequences of our choices would diminish purpose and meaning in life. It is our ability to choose that makes us different than robots. Free will gives us independence and personal responsibility for the consequences of our actions, lending meaning to all our choices. If our choices were limited, our independence would be reduced, compromising the ultimate meaning of our existence.

This would be in contradiction to God's perfect nature. Since God is perfect, His creation must be given the opportunity to attain maximum meaning and good. Anything less would be an act of glaring imperfection.

"And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis, 1:31).

"'and behold, it was good' – this refers to the Yetzer Hatov, the Good Inclination; 'and behold, it was very good' – this refers to the Yetzer HaRa, the Evil Inclination" (Breishit Raba, 9:7).

Complete freedom requires complete access to good and evil. In other words, evil enables free will to exist, thus even evil serves the ultimate cause of good.

When we strive to live with the consciousness that all events serve a higher purpose and are precisely what we need at that moment, we can slowly learn to recognize the true good that lies beneath every situation. Wrestling with suffering enables us to use every experience as a tool for elevation, seeing it as a vital, personal lesson and as an opportunity to strengthen our trust in God's unending goodness. Knowing there is a constructive purpose and meaning to the difficult times we face, may not erase the pain but it can make it easier to bear.