

BAAL SHEM TOV INSIGHTS

Issue 31: Vayechi

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson • Exclusive for Members

AMBASSADORS OF SUFFERING SOULS The Inner Meaning of Distress

SUMMARY

Some of us who suffer have the resources and strengths to endure our challenges, and perhaps even find hope and resolution. Some have their prayers answered. But what of those who do not have this endurance? Who do not have resources? Whose prayers remain unanswered?

What of those that cry out: “I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had hidden and was gone; my soul went out when he spoke; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he did not answer me”?

When you are in distress or in pain, your first instinct is to do whatever it takes to relieve the pain. There’s nothing wrong with that. But at best, this may alleviate your pain and nothing more.

Did you ever consider that your sensitivity and suffering experiences allow

you to have empathy so that you can help others in need?

In the opening of this week’s portion we read that Jacob lived - truly lived - the last and best years of his life in Egypt. How could Jacob have lived his best years in the depraved land of Egypt?

In this week’s insight, the Baal Shem Tov, learning from Jacob in the opening verse of this week’s Torah portion, reveals for us a powerful and moving message about pain and suffering, and our responsibility to serve as messengers to help others in pain. Discover a new approach to dealing with distress: Don’t ignore the pain, but direct your efforts to the root of the pain, not its symptoms. And then the source of the distress can become a source of great redemption - to you and to everyone around you.

The Suffering Soul

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Jacob’s Best Years

At the opening of this week’s Torah portion, Vayechi, we read:

“Vayechi Yaakov b’eretz Mitzrayim sheva esreh shono,” And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years (Vayechi 47:28).

Every word in the Torah - Toras Emes, the Torah of truth - is precise and filled with layers of meaning. And every word is true in the fullest sense of the word. When the Torah uses the word “lived” it means that he lived to the fullest extent of the word living. Jacob “lived” in the land of Egypt not just physically and biologically, but he lived a full and rich life.

Indeed, the Baal HaTurim commentary on this verse says that the seventeen years Jacob lived there were the “best years” of his life.¹ Hence seventeen, which is the gematria (the numerical equivalent) of the word “tov” (good) - tes (9), vav (6), beis (2).

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How can we say that Jacob lived his best years in the depraved land of Egypt?! The question is only amplified by the fact that Jacob had lived earlier in Israel, the land of his fathers. And still, where were his best years? - not in the Holy and Promised Land, but of all places, in... Egypt?! Egypt was called *ervas ha’aretz*² and Mitzrayim comes from the word “*maitzirim*,” inflicting suffering (*tzar*) and “*meitzarim*,” boundaries and constraints, referring to all forms of spiritual suffering, constrictions and limitations. How could such a lowly place be the land where “Jacob lived” his “best years”?!

How Distress Brings Salvation

Teaches us the Baal Shem Tov a profound and moving insight:³

“Vayechi Yaakov b’eretz Mitzrayim” is like the verse (in Psalms⁴) “be’tzar horchavto li,” “in my distress You have expanded me.” Tzaddikim are emissaries of the *matrunita* (matron, i.e. the *shechina*, *malchus*) to pray for the lack (and need) of the *shechina*.⁵ And you become aware of this lack through your own lack.

This is the meaning of “Vayechi Yaakov b’eretz Mitzrayim:” Through Jacob’s own suffering and constraints (*mitzrayim/maitzirim/meitzarim*) he knew how to pray for the lack of the *shechina*, which is also called Yaakov.⁶ And thus “Yaakov lived,” because he bound the *shechina* to the “life (source) of all life,” (and this was made possible) through the “constraints (“*meitzarim*),” and (this is the meaning of) “be’tzar horchavto li,” “in my distress (*tzar*, *mitzaryim*) You have expanded⁷ me” (you allowed me to know the pain of the *shechina* and pray for it and in turn connect it to the life of all life).

Let us translate this into simple English with a bit of explanation (from other places where the Baal Shem Tov discusses this issue):

The soul’s thirst for love and spiritual nourishment does not allow it to rest, and we feel the urge within the transcendental yearnings to reach the beyond...

Emissaries of the Matron

The Zohar (cited by the Baal Shem Tov), which is interestingly on this week’s Parsha, states as follows:

“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? That I am lovesick.”⁸ [Asks the Zohar:] Is there anyone then closer to the King [the beloved one] than Knesset Yisroel [Malchut, Matrunisa, the matron] that she has to ask them “if you find my beloved, what will you tell him”?

[And the Zohar answers:] The daughters of Jerusalem are the souls of tzaddikim, who are always close to the King, and they report to the King daily on the welfare of the matron.

We learned the following: When a soul comes down to the world, Knesset Yisroel [malchut] approaches the soul and adjures her to tell the King and let Him know how much she loves Him, in order to appeal to Him.

The Pining Soul

How does this esoteric Zohar translate in practical terms for us down on Earth?

Each one of us has a soul that was sent down from heaven to fulfill its specific mission. However, as the soul enters this material world it becomes “separated” (in our perception at least) from its Divine source. On this material plane spir-

ityuality is concealed and it takes great effort for a soul to connect to its G-dly roots. Most of our lives we are busy with our material needs and our struggle to survive on earth, to the point that we get totally consumed, and have little or no time and energy to feed our souls.

And yet. Despite our immersion in material life, the soul beckons. The soul's thirst for love and spiritual nourishment does not allow it to rest, and we feel the urge within the transcendental yearnings to reach the beyond, something that is above the din and monotony of our daily routines and struggles. Each one of our souls pines and seeks.

I Adjure You: Find My Beloved

What does the soul do to quench its thirst and reconnect to its Divine source? It turns to the "daughters of Jerusalem," the souls of the tzaddikim on earth, and beseeches them to represent them and intervene on their behalf: *"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem..."* "Please, promise me," the soul implores, "promise me that you will *"find my beloved,"* and *"tell him that I am lovesick!"*

You Tzaddik, who has constant access to the Divine King, you who give Him a daily report on His matron down below

- each one of us thirsty souls - please, we beg of you: Tell the King that His matron is lovesick and misses Him terribly.

Tell Him that the time has come for us to reunite. It's high time that we fuse heaven and earth, and that we reconnect - the King and His matron as one - with the Divine presence completely revealed in the "garden" on Earth.⁹

He or she endures pain and distress, and uses this to become aware of others' pain, so that he can serve as their messenger to pray for them and help them reconnect to the source of all life, and thereby achieve redemption!

The Tzaddik has the power to make this connection because he is both close to the King as well as close to us. He lives among us and experiences suffering as we do, as the Baal Shem Tov explains. He therefore can empathize with us - the "matron" - and thus serve as our ambassador to appeal to G-d on our behalf.

The Tzaddik

Using this Zohar, the Baal Shem Tov explains the opening verse in our chapter, "Vayechi Yaakov b'ereetz Mitzrayim:"

Jacob's distressful life in Egypt (*mitzrayim* with all its implications), taught Jacob to empathize with the suffering of people in his time and in all generations. He was therefore intimately aware of what to pray for on behalf of the wanting "matron" and helpless soul. And this caused Jacob to truly live - "Vayechi Yaakov (and Jacob lived):" through his suffering, Jacob was

able to reconnect the “matron” - each one of our souls - with the “life of all life.” “Be’tzar horchavto li,” from the dire straits of the abyss “You have expanded me” to live and experience the “best years.”

This gives us a whole new take on a Tzaddik - and on anyone of us who behaves like one: He or she endures pain and distress, and uses this to become aware of others’ pain, so that he can serve as their messenger to pray for them and help them reconnect to the source of all life, and thereby achieve redemption!

The Relevant Lesson to Us

We live in a world where there are many troubles and difficulties. People are hurting everywhere. But there is hurt and there is hurt. There is pain and there is pain.

Many people in distress cry out but there is no one there to answer. In the words of Shir Hashirim (preceding the call to the “daughters of Jerusalem”): “I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had hidden and was gone; my soul went out when he spoke; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he did not answer me.”¹⁰

Often children and others who have no one to care for them are left unprotected and defenseless to the pain of the

world, and don’t know where to turn for help. Their cries remain unanswered.

And in their vulnerable state they can be hurt further. “The watchmen who patrol the city found me; they smote me and wounded me; the watchmen of the walls took my jewelry off me.”¹¹

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Then there are those of us who are also in distress, but for whatever reason, have the presence of mind, heart and spirit to know how to cry out and pray for salvation, and have the ability to access and find help.

The first thing we must always be aware of, as the Zohar makes abundantly clear, is that every soul - even one that cries out and gets no answer, even one who does not know how to cry - is pining with love to reconnect to its beloved! “I sleep, but my heart is awake.”¹²

Ambassadors of Suffering Souls

The second thing is that we must learn from Jacob - as the Baal Shem Tov teaches us - that we are ambassadors of all suffering souls. They implore of us (consciously or not) to help them. We must use our pain to empathize with those hurting souls whose cries remain

unanswered, and for those that are unable to cry out. We who have the strength and opportunity to protect ourselves are responsible to also cry out and take care of the more vulnerable ones among us. Indeed, we have been sworn by these pained souls - *"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem..."* "Please, promise me," the soul pleads, "promise me that you will *"find my beloved,"* and *"tell him that I am lovesick!"*

Though we are not on the level of Jacob, each of us has the spirit of "Jacob" (our forefather) within our souls. And as such, have the power to feel and empathize with the pain of others, and cry out for them. We therefore carry the responsibility - and the hope and promise - to represent all those hurting souls that are depending on us to have their prayers answered.

So the next time you are in any pain or distress, if you are anguishing over any particular issue, remember: Your very pain - and sensitivity that allows you to feel that pain - may just be a way for you to relate to another's deeper loss, someone who needs you to appeal on his or her behalf to G-d.

And to tell G-d that this person in distress is sick with love and is desperate to be reconnected with his source of life.

And by doing so, *"be'tzar herchavto li,"*

"Vayechi Yaakov b'erezt Mitzrayim" - the actual distress (*mitzrayim, be'tzar*) becomes the catalyst that inherently rejuvenates, resurrects, and brings new life - *"Vayechi Yaakov* - and connects the drained souls to the source of all life, *"life of all life"!*

We are not alone in this world. We carry the responsibility for those less fortunate than us. We are their emissaries to G-d.

We who have the strength and opportunity to protect ourselves are responsible to also cry out and take care of the more vulnerable ones among us.

Imagine the awesome blessing and gift - and responsibility - to serve as an ambassador for those who are suffering...

Will you rise to the occasion and fulfill your promise to those who have called upon you?

How many lonely children are there around you, waiting... How many suffering adults are in your sphere of influence, waiting... Waiting silently, or not so silently. Waiting for you to fulfill your promise: Find my beloved and tell him I am lovesick, and sick of waiting...

Please, save me. Reconnect me.

Sources: Ben Pores Yosef Parshas Vayechi. Keser Shem Tov sec. 61. Tza'voas Harivash sec. 73.

FOOTNOTES

¹Berachos 32a.

²Avoda Zara 7b.

³Bereishis Rabba 21:5. Just as the garments of a snail are part of itself, so the creation is not something separate from or outside of the Divine. It is part of Him, and His Presence is continually present within it.

¹ See also Hayom Yom Tevet 18. Likkutei Sichos vol. 10 pp. 160.

² Vayigash 46:28.

³ See also Ohr HaTorah Vayechi 354a. Likkutei Sichos ibid.

⁴ 4:2.

⁵ Zohar I 242a.

⁶ Zohar I 145b.

⁷ The common translation of the word “hirschavto li” is “you have relieved me.” But “hirschavto li” in Hebrew literally means “you have expanded (or enlarged) me.” “Expanded” is far more than “relieved” - and can be appreciated with the Baal Shem Tov’s insight, that precisely

because of the distress (“be’tzar) was he able to reach and connect the shechina to the expansiveness of the “life of life.” Compare to Psalms (118:5): Min ha’metzar korosi koh, ononi ba’merchev koh, “from the straits I called G-d; G-d answered me with a vast expanse.”

⁸ Shir HaShirim 5:8.

⁹ The opening of chapter 5 in Shir haShirim is: Basi L’Gani, come, return, to my garden. See Basi L’Gani 5710.

¹⁰ Shir Hashirim 5:6.

¹¹ Ibid 5:7.

¹² Ibid 5:2.