



## SHEMOT

Ki Tissa  
Strength in Suffering  
March 3, 2018

## FINDING STRENGTH AMID DEATH AND SUFFERING

### ABSTRACT

Every tragic death reminds us (or should remind us) of all other senseless losses – and unbearable pain – known or unbeknown to us. How many broken hearts are crying around the world at this very moment?

In difficult times like these, the timeless question resurfaces: Why? Why do terrible things happen to good people?

For answers and reassurance, we have nowhere to turn but to the eternal strengths we glean from those that faced these issues before us – first and foremost our ancestors, whose challenges and victories are recorded in the Torah.

In this week's Torah reading, Moses shows us the way to finding reassurance by connecting with G-d.

There has never been a greater need for a Higher Power in our lives – for connecting with G-d and gaining strength and confidence. The continuing quest to touch G-d, and understand His plan for creation has never been more acutely felt than when our infrastructures, institutions and global equilibrium are shaken to the core – and especially now as the upheaval in the Middle East creates instability in the entire region and the world.

In a deeply moving and fascinating dialogue, Moses probes the inner workings of G-d. “Show me Your face,” Moses implores, implying in so many words: “Show me how You work, show me that You are with us in our darkest moments, show me that we can prevail over all challenges.” But G-d answers, “No man can see Me and live.”

Discover the lessons G-d's answer contains for us in our struggles and challenges, and how we can learn to come close to G-d and allow Him to give us courage and fortitude in the midst of a trembling universe.

### 1. Bad Luck (Joke)

Old Shlomo was on his death bed and his loyal wife of 60 years was by his side. In and out of consciousness, Shlomo began to reminisce:

“Do you remember Sadie when we first got married back in Russia. We were so young and strong then ... And the Cossacks came and destroyed our village, and we had to flee? You were by my side then...”

“Of course, Shlomo, where else would I be?”

“And do you remember Sadie when we resettled in Poland, the Nazis came and started rounding up the Jews, and we had to flee again? You were by my side then...”

“Of course, Shlomo, where else would I be?”

“And do you remember Sadie when we came to America and some anti-Semities burned down our store? You were by my side then...”

“Of course, Shlomo, where else would I be?”

“And now Sadie that I am dying from cancer, here you are again ... as always by my side ...

“Of course, Shlomo ...”

“Sadie! Did you ever stop to think that you are bad luck?”

## 2. Why Bad Things Happen to Good People

Every tragic death reminds us (or should remind us) of all other senseless losses – and unbearable pain – known or unbeknown to us. How many broken hearts are crying around the world at this very moment?

In difficult times like these, the timeless question resurfaces: Why? Why do terrible things happen to good people?

There has never been a greater need for an answer. The need for understanding G-d's a plan for creation has never been more acutely felt than when our infrastructures, institutions and global equilibrium are shaken to the core – and especially now as the upheaval in the Middle East creates instability in the entire region and the world.

For answers and reassurance we have nowhere to turn but to the eternal strengths we glean from those that faced these issues before us – first and foremost our ancestors, whose challenges and victories are recorded in the Torah.

And, in this week's Torah reading, Moses shows us the way to finding reassurance by connecting with G-d.

## 3. An Intimate Dialogue

In perhaps the most dramatic episode in its pages, the Torah recounts the intimate dialogue between Moses and G-d, as Moses implores the Almighty to forgive the Jewish people for their terrible sin of building the Golden Calf.

As Moses attempts to elicit divine compassion, he asks G-d “I beg you, please show me Your face.”

But G-d rejects this request with the memorable words: “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live.”<sup>1</sup>

A strange Talmudic passage explains that G-d rejected Moses’ request because of an earlier event:

When G-d appeared to Moses at the burning bush, Moses refused to look, as it says, “And Moses hid his face, for he feared to look upon G-d.”<sup>2</sup> So this time G-d said, “Now that you want to see My Face, I am not willing to show it to you. When I wanted you didn’t want; now when you want, I don’t want.”<sup>3</sup>

The Midrash further elaborates on this:

Moses erred by hiding his face. Had he not hidden his face G-d would have revealed to him what is above and what is below, what was and what will be in the future. Finally, when Moses did request to see the divine face, G-d informed him that “No man can see Me and live.” [In other words,] “When I wanted, you didn’t want, and now that you want, I don’t want.”<sup>4</sup>

What is the meaning behind G-d’s bizarre tit-for-tat reaction? Somehow, it doesn’t seem G-d-like. After all, either Moses deserved to see the divine face or he didn’t.

Indeed, another passage in the Talmud and Midrash *lands* Moses for averting his eyes at the burning bush, and interprets his behavior as a gesture of respect.

And we must not forget that the Torah *de facto* states: “No man can see the divine face and live.” This suggests that had Moses looked at the burning bush, he would have died.

And finally, why indeed did Moses not want to look at G-d’s face in the burning bush, but now he suddenly developed a burning desire to do so?

Clearly, all this requires deeper examination.

## 4. A Closer Look

Let’s read the burning bush story closely:

G-d’s angel appeared to [Moses] in the heart of a fire, in the middle of a thorn-bush. As he looked, [Mo-

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 33:18-20.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 3:6.0

<sup>3</sup> Talmud, *Berachot* 7a.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash, *Shemot Rabba* 3:1, 45:5.

ses] realized that the bush was burning, but was not being consumed. Moses said to himself, “I must go over there and investigate this great phenomenon. Why doesn’t the bush burn?”

When G-d saw that [Moses] was going to investigate, He called to him from the middle of the bush. “Moses, Moses!” And Moses replied, “Here I am.” G-d said, “Do not come any closer. And take off the shoes from your feet. The place upon which you are standing is holy ground.”

... Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at the Divine. And G-d said, “I have indeed seen the suffering of My people in Egypt. I have heard how they cry out because of their slave-drivers, and I am aware of their pain. I have come down to rescue them from Egypt’s power. I will bring them out of that land, to a good, spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”<sup>5</sup>

G-d’s words from within the burning bush – “I have indeed seen the suffering of My people ... I have heard how they cry out” – explains why G-d appeared, of all places, in a burning thorn-bush. Had G-d appeared in, say, a flowering fruit tree, Moses might have challenged G-d and asked: “It’s very nice that you appear in beauty, but do you also feel our human pain?! You want me to confront the depraved Pharaoh and insist that he stop the genocide and release the enslaved Jews. But everyone will ask ‘Where was G-d in all our suffering? Does G-d exist only in good times but not in bad ones?’”

To pre-empt these fundamental questions, G-d appeared in the lowly thorn-bush in order to demonstrate that there is no place devoid of the Divine and to emphasize that He was with the Jewish people in their pain and suffering.”<sup>6</sup>

But Moses did not want to see G-d’s face in the holocaust. He did not want to understand G-d’s “reasoning” for allowing the death of so many innocent children. He wasn’t willing to face the ultimate paradox and know divine explanations for human suffering. “He feared to look upon G-d” when he remembered that at that very moment lives were being consumed, even as the bush itself was not. Moses “hid his face” and just wanted to cry.

## 5. Times Passed, Things Changed

But then time passed and things changed. G-d lived up to His promise and delivered the Jews from the clutches of their Egyptian tormentors. G-d demonstrated that He indeed was together with the people in their suffering, and finally redeemed them through His chosen leader, Moses.

Things seemed to be going very well.

Following the Exodus, Moses led the Nation of Israel to Mount Sinai, where they experienced the greatest

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:2-8.

<sup>6</sup> See Rashi on the verse. From Tanchuma 14, Mechilta, Shemot Rabba 1:9. Also Torat Shlomo on the verse.

revelation in history – the giving of the divine mandate to the human race. But then the tide turned again. While Moses was communing with the Divine atop the mountain, the people below built the Golden Calf. This time the catastrophe did not come at the hands of the Egyptians – it was caused by the Jews themselves.

Moses was aghast to discover their betrayal. He shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments and waged war against the idolaters in the camp. But then He had to mend the broken relationship with G-d.

Ascending the mountain to beg G-d's forgiveness, Moses realized how difficult his mission was. How could he elicit G-d's compassion in the face of such a grave crime? How could he offer the flawed human race hope after a great fall?

High stakes indeed.

Moses knew that now he needed to return to the “burning bush,” the place where joy and suffering converge – the place where the Divine can be found in the darkest corners of existence. He understood that only this mysterious place contained the answer to this paradox.

Since his original encounter at the burning bush, Moses had matured in his relationship with G-d. He was now ready to see G-d's face. He now appreciated the need to enter into the divine mystery of human suffering. He now *wanted* to “see” the face of the Divine.

## 6. The Mystery of Death (Optional)

Moses' new level of awareness was made possible also by the fact that in the interim he had an encounter with G-d on Mount Sinai which empowered him with the ability to face death.

The Midrash<sup>7</sup> explains that when G-d was teaching Moses the methods of purification from all forms of defilement, Moses asked in shock: “How can anyone ever be purified from the impurity of death?”

Moses was shocked because death is the one event we constantly confront which challenges the entire premise of our significance. It is final. This is why Moses did not attempt to analyze the issue intellectually; he took it personally to heart and cried out: “What can possibly purify the impurity of death?! How can we ever heal from it, how can it not shake the very core of our beliefs?”

In response, G-d shared with Moses the mystery of cycles. Everything in existence is part of a cycle – a part of one continuum of energy. And every form of energy requires movement. Energy cannot be generated in a vacuum; it needs two opposite poles that cause tension and then resolution.

Take the life force energy within our bodies. Our heartbeat is the result of two movements – contraction and expansion. So is our breath – inhaling and exhaling. Tension and then resolution, leading to another new cycle,

<sup>7</sup> Midrash, Bamidbar Rabba 19:4.

and then another.

This mystery is captured in the balance of mixing water and ashes (the aftermath of fire) in the mitzvah of the red heifer. Fire is the tension and water the resolution. Together they are the source of life itself.

## 7. Healing from Spiritual Death

Realizing that all answers lie with G-d and recognizing the need to heal from the “spiritual death” brought upon by the Golden Calf, Moses implored G-d for understanding, for clarity: “I beg you, show me Your face.”<sup>8</sup>

And here G-d revealed to Moses one of the most profound secrets of all: “I show My face not in beauty and pleasure, but in the burning bush – in pain and suffering. I show My face not when you want to see it, but when I want you to see it.”

When G-d said this He was not “getting even” with Moses or playing tit-for-tat. He was exposing His essence and telling Moses: “I want a partner. I cannot show you My face if you do not partner with Me. Had you looked at Me when I wanted to show you My face, even though it was in pain, then you would have joined Me in the mysterious journey of grief and joy, and you would be able to see My face and gather strength. You cannot come and expect to see My face on your terms – when you want. You have to respect the moment when I want to show it to you.”

## 8. Secrets of G-d’s Personality

But the story doesn’t end here. After all is said and done, G-d did indeed reveal to Moses the secrets of His inner personality and the hidden Thirteen Attributes of Divine Compassion:

“I will make all My Glory pass before you, and I will reveal the Divine Name in your presence ... [Though] you cannot see my face, because no man can see me and live, [but] I have a special place where you can stand on the rocky mountain. When My Glory passes by, I will place you in a crevice in the mountain, placing My hand over you until I pass by. I will then remove My hand and you will see My back, but My face you will not see.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, commentaries explain that G-d finally showed Moses His face as well. Panim Yafot<sup>10</sup> reads the verse like this: “You will see My back but My face [will be revealed to you only when] you will not see.” In other

<sup>8</sup> As the Talmud, Berachot 7a explains that Moses was plagued by the timeless question why the good suffer and the evil prosper  
<sup>9</sup> Exodus 33:19-23.

<sup>10</sup> Panim Yafot: (lit. “Beautiful Faces”) is a commentary on Chumash, based on both Halachah and Kabbalah, by Rabbi Pinchas HaLevy Horowitz of Frankfurt (c. 1730-1805), a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch.

words, “You will see my face only by not looking.”

## 9. The Lesson for Us

What does it all mean to us?

I suggest that when we face unfathomable suffering, we are not expected to be better than Moses. We, too, can close our eyes and just weep.

Maybe G-d can witness so much pain and be able to take it. But we are human. We don't want to look at G-d's face in such moments. It's too terrifying.

Yet, whether we like it or not, G-d wants us to partner with Him. We may resist the partnership. From time to time, perhaps more often than not, we may cry out in our own vulnerable moments that we just want some peace and quiet. And I think G-d understands and forgives.

But as partners we have a right to ask – especially whenever we are touched by the mystery of tragedy – “How many more bushes have to be burned before the Divine Presence is finally revealed?”

We have a right to ask. And we have a right to pray. But we also have the responsibility to work to make this world a better place – a place where the Divine can call home. It is then that the Divine Presence will rest among us in all its glory, and we will, at last, understand the need for the suffering and how it brought us to good – to the best possible place, to the Final Redemption. Amen.

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