

Rabbi Moshe Eisemann is a faculty member at Ner Israel Rabbinical College, Baltimore, Maryland

LOOKING THROUGH THE FROSTED WINDOW: WHEN THINGS ARE HARD TO SEE AND UNDERSTAND—SOME REFLECTIONS UPON CHRONIC PAIN

Thank God I do not write from experience.

This will certainly tend to attenuate my message. A great thinker once said that no theologian should be allowed to put pen to paper until he has spent six months in the cancer ward of a children's hospital. With equal justification we can say that anybody who has not gone through the purgatory of chronic pain cannot really have much of significance to say on the subject.

True—but not completely true. And this for two reasons. First, the wider sweep of vision which distance makes possible can provide a sense of context and perspective which cannot be attained by the sharper, more focused picture which is painted in such vivid colors by the brush of experience. Second—and more important—it seems to me that the soil in which the seeds of understanding, comfort and coping can germinate, must be tilled long before crisis sets in. Each of us must learn to think and feel like an *ehrlikker yid*. After that, there are simply those who are tested and those who are not.

And God tests those who can grow through the testing. They are the strong ones who have earned God's trust. They get to find out what the rest of us will never truly know. How theoretical were the theories upon which they built their lives? How did their poetry translate into prose? How *erhlikh* is their *ehrilkhkeit*?

Let us start then, undeterred by our sense of inadequacy—which in the right place and at the right time can have its uses—to try to discover the components of a thought-world which could lend us strength in our time of weakness, hope when our minds tell us to despair, and love when we find it hard to love—or even care.

AN *EVED* DOES NOT SET HIS OWN AGENDA

Many of life's frustrations come about when the goals which we have set elude us. We have worked out a strict learning schedule which will enable us to finish a given *masekhta* in a reasonable time—and a *mesbulakh* knocks at the door. We have set aside an evening for quality time with our children—and some communal responsibility which will brook no excuses intrudes.

We become angry, guilt-ridden and ultimately diminished.

It need not be so; indeed it ought not to be so.

An *eved* does not set his own agenda.

We are here to do not what we perceive to be important, but what God, through the workings of *hashgakha*, reveals to us to be our task.

A *mashal* of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter [cited in *Ma'asei laMelekh, Hafets Hayyim al haTorah, Ki Tissa*] comes to mind: a king sent an ambassador to another country to perform a given task, adjuring him that under no circumstances was he to make a wager with anyone. When the ambassador was ready to go home, he went to say goodbye to the regional king, who thanked him for his good offices. However, he had one question: why was he subjected to the insult of having a hunchback assigned as ambassador to his court? The diplomat was aghast at the accusation and vehemently denied that he was a hunchback. The king insisted and declared his willingness to bet a million dollars that the ambassador was indeed malformed. The latter removed his shirt, showing that his build was perfectly normal, pocketed the million dollars and returned home fully expecting to be rewarded for having enriched the royal treasury by such a large amount of money.

The king who had sent him was furious. He had made a ten million dollar wager with his neighbor that the ambassador would never remove his shirt.

The *nimshal* is clear enough.

Obviously, such an attitude to life does not absolve us from making decisions. Our paths are not always clear and often an array of choices leaves us thoroughly confused about what God really wants from us. But sometimes there are simply no alternatives. Then we are, so to speak, off the hook. We know exactly what it is we have to do, and can focus our minds to do it right. There is no room for frustration; there is every need for concentration.

There is a correct way of serving God through bearing pain. It may prevent us from following courses which we had carefully plotted, from fulfilling plans which had been thoughtfully and lovingly laid.

But it turns out that these were our plans, not God's. He had something else in mind for us. Resolutely, keeping our shirts on, we must change direction.

We may not know where the new road leads. But that need not really matter. We do what we are called upon to do. Obedience to a fate which we cannot alter—and ought not to want to (*Bava Kama* 38a¹)—may be its own reward.

LOSING BATTLES AND WINNING WARS

It is hard to be submissive, doubly hard when we are racked by agonies which we don't really—can't really—believe we deserve.

Acute suffering can sometimes generate corrosive morbidity, or equally injurious, misplaced and ultimately destructive belligerence. Both are essentially healthy reactions taken to unacceptable extremes. The two may also combine and cause disintegration of the sufferer's resources at the very moment at which he most needs them.

The sequence goes something like this: I am suffering. Suffering is the wages of sin. So I must have sinned. But I know my friends and neighbors and I don't seem to be much worse—and am perhaps much better—than they are. Therefore I must be wrong. I am somehow evil. And though I don't *seem* to be worse than anyone else, there *must* be some dreadful malignancy lurking within my most innocent acts of omission or commission. God must hate me. Why should I go on living?

Or: I am suffering. Suffering is the wages of sin. I have sinned and deserve to be punished. But this seems to be out of all proportion. Look at so and so. He too has sinned and seems to be doing just fine. Why me? God must hate me for no good reason. So I will repay hatred with. . . .

Thus the two in their separate manifestations.

The combination is easy enough to figure out: I must be wicked but something tells me that I am not. So I feel rebellious. But then I really am wicked. So now I am a rebel and God hates me. But this is not fair. He made me a rebel so how can He blame me? But isn't questioning God's justice the very culmination of wickedness? I have sunk too low. I have failed. But have I. . . ?

The truth is that both guilt and questioning have their legitimate place. If we understand this, we will be able to use both these reactions positively and will not distort them into the caricatures delineated above.

First guilt.

Suffering must lead to introspection. When we fall victim to misfortune, we are to examine our actions closely. The likelihood is that we will not come up empty-handed. If we do, we are to assume that our commitment to Torah learning was not what it should have been (*Berakhot* 5a²).

So, as a first step, we are to trace our problems to our shortcomings. It cannot be otherwise in God's world. But it is the possibility of *not* coming up with an answer that is significant. *Hazal* seem to accept that even honest self-analysis may not yield an explanation which satisfies. Even the ultimate and unfailing explanation offered by the Sages—our less than perfect commitment to Torah learning—may not, after all, mark our conscience.

Can it be that occasionally we will lack the wherewithal to recognize the justice of our fate? Yes.

We cannot, in the end, be what we are not. And if our sense of fairness is not developed enough to plumb the exquisite calibrations of God's justice, then we will simply have to remain with a question.

If the concept of suffering = sin resonates within us, if we can discover our transgressions and have our agonies guide us towards a pure contrition, so much the better. If not, that too is part of living. We do not have to understand everything.

And now, the confusion. The nagging and merciless, "Why?" And the "Why me?", the "Why anybody?" And the large and brooding question mark which hangs suspended over so much of human experience. All the hunger, all the sores, the broken limbs and the broken spirits, the screams and the taunts, the lashes and the screw, the myriad poor and writhing, the disenfranchised and the disheartened—all, all refracted, magnified and focused through the prism of my own intolerable pain.

Is it alright to question? Yes.

That is the short answer which the long and complex saga of Iyyov teaches us. Iyyov struggled and fought and challenged and asked, and asked, and asked. In the end God said that he spoke well—better than the hapless friends who thought they had all the answers [*Iyyov* 42:7]. So it is alright to ask.

But can this be true? Can unadulterated faith and dogged challenge coexist? What of the uncomplaining acceptance of God's decrees? What of *tsidduk hadin*? What of *Hatsur tamim pa'alo*? Was Aaron not silent in the face of unbearable loss?

We have said that it alright to question—not that it is the only way. There is Aaron, who kept silent, and Iyyov who did not. There is Nahum ish Gamzu, who reveled in the sheer horror of his destitution

(*Taanit* 21a³), and there is Habakkuk, who demanded an explanation for the chaos which he observed and for which he could find no excuses (*Habakkuk* 1:2–3).

It is alright to question, alright even to challenge, when question and challenge are rooted in *emuna*. “You, O God, Who are the ground of my being, the focus of my longing, the life that quickens me, the warmth that suffuses me, my father, my king, my only reality, why are You so incomprehensible? How can I serve an enigma, how can I love a contradiction? How can I find You when upon every approach which I attempt You seem to recede further and further into inscrutable essence which brooks no familiarity? I so desperately want to fear You, want to love You. Can You not make fear and love more possible?”

It is never alright to rebel.

We can sometimes lose a battle but win a war.

We might wish, when we are plagued with questions, that our faith were stronger, more pure, less subject to the roiling which leave us no peace. The Aaron mode might suite us better than that which Iyyov legitimized.

But Iyyov, in the end, met God and found vindication.

No small matter—that.

A SINGLE WISH

Most of us must have wondered at one time or another what our choice might be if some genie would pop out of a bottle and grant us a single wish.

What would we like more than anything else in the world?

I know what I would choose.

I would like to learn the art of concentration, to have the ability to focus upon some subject which is of significance to me. Not to be as helpless as I am in the face of the myriad, banal and inconsequential stimuli which bombard my earnestly erected and pathetically ineffective defenses. What could I not accomplish if I could just learn discipline?

Do not stray after your hearts and after your eyes—so that you might remember. There it is. We won’t remember until we learn the art of single-minded intensity. Our minds, our best intentions and—sadly—our potential for achieving greatness, lie, like so many dried and dead leaves, along the meandering paths gouged out indiscriminately by our distracted thinking.

Pain focuses the mind.

Would-be comforters are not allowed to begin speaking to the mourner until he opens the conversation [*Mo'ed Katan* 28b]. His mind is consumed by his sorrow. He cannot think of anything—may not wish to if he could. It is his prerogative to decide whether he wishes to be distracted or, indeed, relieved.

The source of this halakhic ruling is the story of Iyyov. When the friends came to see if they could help him in his dreadful travail they sat by him for seven days without uttering a word. For seven days—seven days!—they must have watched him, single-mindedly engrossed in the contemplation of the sheer enormity of his suffering.

Seven days.

When life gets serious, the useless, the frivolous, even the merely dispensable, lose their attraction. They can no longer deflect our thinking. The big issues, the significant and the elevating, loom large and occupy center stage.

It does not take much to change.

Elazar ben Durdaya had frittered away an entire life. The filth in which he had wallowed, the morass of lust in which every last spark of his humanity must have become submerged, defy the imagination—and certainly the vocabulary—of normalcy. And one single focused thought, one flash of insight that something might yet be salvageable, created Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya, the paradigmatic *ba'al teshuva* who taught that it takes just one second to build an entire world (*Avoda Zara* 17a⁴).

Chronic pain must be a dreadful burden to bear. But viewed as challenge and opportunity, it may just be the genie in the bottle. *Happy is the man whom God chastises* (Psalms 94:12).

LIVING LIFE SERIOUSLY

The *tanna*, R. Eliezer, was a fighter of epic proportions. He fought his father that he might learn Torah. He fought the dreadful pangs of starvation as, unnoticed and uncared for, he sat among the thousands of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's students (*Pirkei R. Eliezer haGadol* 1). He fought his colleagues for what he perceived to be the truth in the stupendous struggle surrounding the *tannur shel aknai* (*Bava Metzia* 59b⁵), and he fought the dreadful loneliness and bitterness of the years of ostracism which he suffered as a result (*Sanhedrin* 68a).

In the end, he fought the debilitation of his final illness. Four of his students visited R. Eliezer as he lay in pain on his death-bed. Among them was R. Akiva. What does one say at such a time?

The other three vied with one another to express their sense of impending loss: "You have meant so much to us. More than the rain drops . . . more than the sun . . . more than our very parents."

R. Akiva would have none of this. Instead of joining the litany of praises which they had begun, he was short and to the point. "Suffering is precious!"

R. Eliezer asked his attendants to sit him up so he could concentrate on R. Akiva's thought.

"What authority," he wanted to know, "can you adduce for your contention?"

Rabbi Akiva picked his way through a series of complex scriptural passages. His point, he demonstrated, was solidly grounded in the sources, based upon the cleansing and atoning properties of pain (*Sanhedrin* 100a).

There is an almost surreal atmosphere to this scene. We can picture the rabbi on his death-bed, attendants and perhaps family hovering over him, waiting with dread for the inevitable end. He ignores them all, ignores death itself, and enters upon a discussion which might as well have taken place on a quiet afternoon in the *bet haMidrash*. R. Akiva has made an interesting observation. R. Eliezer is intrigued and would like to know its provenance. R. Akiva has all the time in the world to elaborate.

No crisis of looming death and bereavement. And—most remarkably—the other friends have become invisible to R. Eliezer as he focuses on R. Akiva. For their sake, we are hurt. Would common thoughtfulness not demand that their distress somehow register with R. Eliezer? For that matter, should R. Akiva have rejected their thinking so bluntly?

We wonder what was going on in R. Eliezer's mind while his former students were singing—and sighing—his praises. What would have been his reaction if R. Akiva too had simply added another description of just how much he had meant to them all?

Perhaps for those few moments he too thought that the expression of these sentiments constituted an appropriate farewell. One can do worse than end a productive life with a fond review of significant achievements, of important and meaningful relationships.

R. Akiva's unadorned aphorism may have shocked him too, as it surely shocked those others whose praises he had refused to join.

Suddenly, a new dimension is introduced. There is not much time left. If suffering is precious then I need to know, and to know well and clearly, how to mine it to the fullest. Why is it precious? How can it serve me? How can these last moments that are left to me on earth be

made to yield their bounty to the fullest?

Too late now to allow those others to bask one last time in the love of his attention. That would surely have been the instinct of the great Rabbi, who had longed for so many lonely years that just these students would return to him (*Sanhedrin* 68a⁶). Too late now for anything other than to live in the time left to him—and to live seriously. If R. Akiva could provide a source for his contention—and if that source would guide him on his final road, then R. Eliezer needed desperately to know of it.

R. Akiva explained that suffering can atone. Suffering can galvanize change. Understood correctly and utilized appropriately, it can rebuild shattered lives.

The *gemara* does not report R. Eliezer's reaction, but we may surmise that it lent him fortitude to win another, perhaps the last of his great battles. For a man who had built his life around the dictum that one's friend's dignity should matter as much as one's own (*Avot* 2:9⁷), it must have come hard to ignore his three other visitors as he did. But it had to be done. There simply was no time. That, too, in the throes of dying, became for him one of life's struggles.

Suffering is precious. Too precious to waste.

IN THE THICK OF THE FRAY

What do we do about life's challenges?

David's prayer that God probe the mettle of his loyalty by exposing him to temptation (Psalms 26:2) is frowned upon by the Sages (*Sanhedrin* 107a⁸). Indeed, in our daily morning service we ask God not to put us to the test, *ve-al tevi'enu li-ydei nissayon*. But, as the late Rav Hutner observed, David's ill-advised prayer was not expunged from Psalms. Apparently, then, the longing to flex one's muscles in the service of God is legitimate. But our *tefilla* tells us otherwise.

Let us see what happens. I take out my *Tehillim* before *shaharit* and, with feeling and fervor, join David in his prayer: *behaneni haShem ve-nasseni*, challenge me O God, and put me to the test. Then I open my *siddur* and pray—just as earnestly—*ve-al tevi'enu li-ydei nissayon*, do not expose us to a test. Which do I mean?

Both, says Rav Hutner. Each sentiment, taken alone, is *treif*. As they interplay with one another, a balance emerges which helps us cope with life's exigencies.

Of course, one who loves God would want to demonstrate his loy-

alty by plunging into the fray. But that urge must be tempered by a sober awareness of what failure would mean. Of course, one who fears God trembles at the thought of being seduced by sin. What if he proves too weak and uninspired? On its own, such cold and restrained calculation would drain religious life of much of its music. There must be room to ignite passion, to nourish hope that perhaps temptation will come his way—and that he prove to be equal to its blandishment.

Thus, the symbiosis of the two attitudes which affects practice not at all. We do not seek to expose ourselves to battle since we are afraid of failure; but we will not shrink from it when we are called. We crave the heady sense of service loyally performed.

When we are called, when *hashgaha* has placed us in the front lines, then the timid *ve-al tevi'enu li-ydei nissayon* becomes inoperative, and the robust, exhilarating *behaneni haShem ve-nasseni* is engaged unimpeded.

Each dull, debilitating, draining throb of pain becomes a prod, urging us on to greatness. Each momentary sense of helplessness and hopelessness becomes a depressed spring, gathering the energy to propel us onwards and upwards.

Hovot haLevavot (*Ahavat Hashem* 1) tells of a *hassid* who used to get up in the night and say:

My God, You have starved me and left me naked, have made me dwell in the night's worst darkness, making me experience both Your might and Your greatness. Were You to burn me in fire, it would only increase my love for You and the joy that I feel in You."

NOTES

1. A daughter of R. Shmuel bar Yehuda died. Some students suggested to Ulla that they should go together to comfort him. He refused: "Why would I want to get involved with comforting the Babylonians? It becomes an exercise in blasphemy. For they say, 'What can we do!'" The implication is that if they could change what God had willed, they would do so.
2. "One who sees that suffering has come upon him should search carefully through his actions. . . . If he searched but could not find any wrongdoing, he should assume that [the suffering results] from an insufficient commitment to Torah study. If he cannot find even this imperfection, let him be aware that his suffering belongs to the category of *yissurim shel ahava*."
3. It is told of Nahum ish Gamzu that he was blind in both eyes, and had lost both his arms and his legs. His entire body was covered by leprosy.

He lay in a shaky bed, the legs of which were placed in bowls of water so that the ants might not climb all over him.

Once, the house in which he lay was unsafe, so his students wanted to move him first so that his safety would be assured, and only then to take out his furniture. But he said: "Children! Take out the furniture and only then move me. Once you take me out, the house might come down and the furniture will be destroyed. But I am convinced that as long as I am in the house it will not collapse."

They moved out the furniture and then carried him out. Immediately, the house fell down.

After he had explained to the students why these terrible sufferings had overtaken him, they cried out: "Alas, that we have to see you thus."

He responded: "Woe to me if you had not seen me thus."

4. It was said that R. Elazar ben Durdaya had [before he became a *ba'al teshuva*] made a point of visiting every single prostitute in the world. On one occasion he had heard that there was a prostitute . . . in some far-flung place. Immediately he obtained the money needed to engage her services and crossed seven rivers in order to reach her.

When he was finally with her she derided him. His actions put him beyond the pale. He would never be able to do *teshuvah*.

Shocked at what he had heard . . . he cried bitterly until he sobbed his heart out and died.

A heavenly voice cried out: "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya will make his way into *olam ha-ba*."

5. The issue was the status of a certain oven in relation to the laws of *tum'ah* and *tahara*. R. Eliezer held that it was *tahor*, while all his colleagues ruled that it was *tame*.

In a stirring confrontation, R. Eliezer, refusing to bow to the majority opinion, put his ideas to the test. If he was right, the river flowing nearby was to move from its bed—and it moved. A nearby tree was to jump to another location—and it immediately became uprooted. And finally, the very walls of the *bet haMidrash* were to come his aid. Ominously they began to fall inwards until, in what must have been one of the most dramatic moments in the history of *halakhic* discourse and discord, R. Yehoshua called out to them to desist: they had no business to become involved in the discussion, he said. In obedience to R. Yehoshua's exhortation the walls ceased falling, but they did not straighten up in deference to R. Eliezer. Unimpressed, the Sages held fast to the validity of their position.

As a final resort, R. Eliezer called for divine intercession. Even in this, he was answered, when a heavenly voice called out: "Why do you argue with R. Eliezer whose views invariably accord with the *halakha*?"

Once more, R. Yehoshua took up the cudgels, this time, as it were, against God Himself. "The *halakha* does not reside in heaven. The *bat kol* has no *halakhic* standing. We have a Torah and it is written that the majority opinion prevails."

The *gemara* goes on to relate that R. Natan met Elijah the Prophet and asked what God was doing at that moment. How did He view R. Yehoshua's defiance?

Elijah answered that God was smiling, declaring: "My children have gotten the better of Me!"

Eventually, in view of R. Eliezer's continued intransigence, the Sages

pronounced a *herem* against him.

I have chosen to tell this story in some detail in order to show just how mightily R. Eliezer was willing to fight for the truth as he perceived it.

6. When R. Eliezer became ill, R. Akiva and his colleagues came to visit him.

. . . They sat down at a distance of four cubits [because of the *herem* which had been imposed and which made it impossible for them to come closer].

He asked, "Why have you come?"

They answered, "To learn Torah."

He asked, "And where have you been until now?"

They answered, "We were too busy."

He said, "I would be surprised if any of you die a natural death."

So R. Akiva asked, "What will be my fate?"

He answered, "Yours will be harder than any of the others'."

R. Eliezer placed his hands over his heart and moaned, "Alas! My two arms are like two Torah scrolls which have remained unopened. I have learned much Torah and I have taught much Torah. I have learned much Torah but took no more from my teachers than a dog might lap up from the sea. I have taught much Torah but my students took no more from me than a dropper might draw from a bottle."

The *gemara* continues with a description of R. Eliezer's death. The final moment came when his students asked him a question concerning the laws of *tum'a* and *tahara*.

He succumbed with the word *tahor* on his lips.

7. This is the first of three maxims which, as reported in *Avot*, R. Eliezer thought fundamental.

Significantly, in old age, R. Eliezer seems to have attenuated this very extreme demand to some extent. *Berakhot* 28b tells us that when his students came to visit him during his illness, they asked him to instruct them in the path which would lead them to *olam ha-ba*. Once more, he had three pieces of advice to proffer. And once more, the first concerned the need to be considerate of others. But this time he did not demand that another's dignity should matter as much as one's own. He asked only that we always take care to respect others.

I have discussed this apparent softening of the earlier position, as also the probable parallelism between the second and third maxims with those which he had enunciated earlier, elsewhere.

8. David had asked God why He identifies Himself as the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," but not as the "God of David." God answered that while the Patriarchs had been tested and proved, David had not. Immediately David asked that he, too, should be exposed to a situation which would probe the mettle of his loyalty.

The story of Bat Sheva, in which David fell short of the standards expected of him, came about as a result of that request.