

Emunah in Difficult Times

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WE ALL RESPOND DIFFERENTLY TO CRISIS

על אלה אני בוכיה עיני עיני ירדה מים כי רחק
ממני מנחם משיב נפשי...

*For these things I weep; my eye, my eye
sheds tears, for the comforter to restore
my soul is removed from me...*

Eicha 1:16

In Judaism, on the one hand, we are given control over our feelings. On the other hand, we are responsible for our emotions. For example, on Tisha B'av we are required to feel sad even if we won the lottery the day before. Purim is a day of happiness, even if we failed the bar exam the previous day. On Shabbos, we are expected to feel a peaceful, tranquil day of rest regardless of the trials and tribulations of the week just passed.

In Sherri Mandel's words in her book *The Road to Resilience*:

One has to prepare oneself with study and actions to be able to transform one's feelings, so they correspond with the spiritual atmosphere of the day. Judaism is a religion that teaches us emotional maturity and control.

On Tisha B'av, we have instructions and expectations that correspond to the "spiritual atmosphere of the day," emotional regulations that demonstrate our belief in our God and our desire to follow His laws. However, what of the days when we do not feel "emotional maturity" and in control of our feelings? What of the days when sadness and despair overcome and overwhelm us but do

not correspond with national days of mourning? Do those moments then represent a lack of faith? Do we have permission to exhibit and express these feelings freely, or not?

For answers to these challenging questions, we turn to Our Creator and His Torah. First and foremost we must remember that Hashem is the One who created us. It is He who instilled in us the capacity to feel all emotions — not only happiness and joy but also sadness, anxiety, confusion, fear, anger, guilt and so on. It is up to us to learn how to express and channel our many emotions and how to best utilize them to serve Hakadosh Baruch Hu, but He certainly understands each person's unique capacity and

proclivity to express these emotions.

While in the midst of a crisis, trauma or tragedy — or any difficult, challenging or sad time — there is no right or wrong way, no prescribed manner that we are required to feel, think, cope or react. Viktor Frankl, a famous psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, coined the phrase, “an abnormal response to an abnormal situation is totally normal.”

The Torah validated this very point. After Yosef was thrown into the pit, Tragedy 101, when his father and family thought he was killed by wild beasts, five different members of his family reacted in five different ways.

Yaakov Avinu, Yosef’s father, lost Ruach Hakodesh and was steeped in grief for 22 years, until he learned that his beloved son was alive (Bereishis 37:34-35 and Rashi). His brother Reuvain tore *kriah* as an outward sign of mourning (Bereishis 37:29). Yehuda held all his emotions inside until they burst at the next major event in his life (Bereishis ch. 38). Binyamin lived in the past, and named each of his ten sons according to an attribute of Yosef, as Rashi explains in Parshas Miketz (43:30). Yosef himself used his challenges, of which there were so many, to propel himself forward until he was ultimately second to Pharaoh. Five different reactions to the same tragedy. Yet the Torah does not specify that one was right and one was wrong. This is the Torah’s way of teaching us, validating for us, granting us each permission to feel, think, cope and react according to our individual personalities, emotional make ups, resiliency levels, coping skills and connection to the tragedy.

All of the emotions and feelings that we experience in response to crisis, trauma, tragedy and any challenge

— whether it is a designated day for mourning or not — are exhibited by our role models in the Torah. One example, which I refer to often in my work, is the story of Sorah Imeinu’s death after Akeidas Yitzchok. Rav Ephraim Wachsmann notes the midrash (Bereishis Rabbah, Chayei Sorah no. 1) that teaches that the verse in Tehillim 37:18, which states, *yodei’a Hashem yemei temimim* — Hashem knows the days of those who are complete — refers to Sorah. Rashi in Chayei Sorah says about the days of Sorah: *kulam shavim l’tovah* — all of them were equally good. Everything in Sorah’s eyes was as if it was *tamim* — complete, or in Rashi’s words, *l’tovah*, for the good. Sorah Imeinu saw everything as if it was good. However, we can therefore surely ponder, how then is it feasible that Sorah died upon learning of the news of the Akeida? If she thought it was good why did her *neshoma* leave her?

A number of commentaries validate and normalize several emotions, common reactions to difficulties.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, *Sichos Mussar, Chayei Sorah 5733*, suggests that Sorah died from shock upon hearing that her beloved son was offered as a sacrifice. Shock is surely a common reaction when we hear of news that is unexpected, and is often a large component of a tragedy.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz also suggests that Sorah died upon hearing the news of the Akeida because she was alone, and it was too much for her to bear all alone. Avrohom, Eliezer and Yitzchok were together as they walked toward the Akeida. However Sorah was by herself when the angels arrived to deliver the message.

The Chasam Sofer, *Toras Moshe to Chayei Sorah* (pg. 76), states that

Sorah’s *neshoma* experienced a state of euphoria. She was so incredibly happy, because she was extremely connected to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Sorah recognized that *ratzon Hashem* — the will of God — was being fulfilled through the Akeida. Sorah’s *neshoma* was so overcome with this joy and *dveikus baHashem* — clinging to God — that her body, her physical being could no longer contain her lofty *neshoma*, it therefore left her and she died.

Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 32, proposes that Sorah was deeply sad. She was mourning and actually cried out in grief in reaction to the news of the Akeida. Sorah’s six shouts of anguish and pain are correlated to the six shouts of the shofar that we are required by the Torah to hear.

The ability to experience conflicting emotions, the heart’s capacity to expand and hold both happy and sad, is a struggle many grapple with following a crisis. This idea is also validated by the commentators. Sorah experienced tremendous anguish, pain and grief, yet at the same moment she also experienced a genuine joy, fulfillment and connection to Hashem. In Avrohom Avinu’s eulogy for his beloved wife Sorah, which is Mishlei ch. 31 (*Midrash Tanchuma, Chayei Sorah* no. 4) — commonly known as *Eishes Chayil* (Mishlei ch. 31) sung by many on Friday nights — he says *vatischak l’yom acharon* — she laughed until her last day. We again learn from here that even in her last day, during her most difficult moments, hearing that her son Yitzchok was brought to the Akeida which made her understandably so, so sad, she was still so, so happy. Both Sorah’s extremes were correct, valid, and understood by Hashem.

In fact this very story is read on Rosh Hashana, a day in which our faith in Hashem and our reaffirmation of His kingship are stressed, while we are reminded of our vulnerabilities as well.

The story of Sorah's death after the Akeida is but one example of many that allow us to express emotions without the concern that they deny our faith. The spectrum of emotions and feelings that we are capable of are found and validated in the Torah: loneliness, confusion, anger, guilt, fear, sadness etc. It is essential and should potentially be a source of comfort and strength to internalize the notion that perhaps one reason Hashem incorporated these stories is so that we do feel validation, permission to process our feelings, thoughts, and reactions following challenging times. Yes, Hashem expects us to channel those feelings back toward Him but He knows they are not due to a lack of faith or belief in Him.

In that same vein, it is incumbent upon us to grant permission, to create a comfortable, safe place for expression of emotions not only for ourselves, but for others as well. Too many youngsters, as well as adults,

stray away from religious observance when they are chastised for asking questions or expressing emotions following a trauma or tragedy.

Creating appropriate avenues of expression is not only halachically permissible but is following in Hashem's ways. The very same Rambam who codified the rules of mourning also penned an emotionally laden and mournful letter following the death of his brother.

As religious Jews, prayer is our conduit to Hashem during good times and in sad and difficult times. However, even then, Hashem understands that approaching Him, praying to Him may be challenging. Hashem's message to us during those moments is: I am here for you and with you — just approach me, I don't care how, just come, even amidst your pain, even if it's not a delegated national day of mourning. Each one in your own way, choose your own pathway.

Rav Shimshon Pincus's sefer *She'arim B'tefillah*, Pathways to Prayer, based on statements of Chazal, delineates ten different avenues in which we can approach Hashem when feeling despondent. Each pathway is not only valid, but is a unique way we can

channel our emotions and feelings toward a closer connection with Hashem. Each is a manifestation of faith, not a lack thereof.

The ten pathways to prayer are: *bitzur* — calling out in distress; *sha'ava* — hysterical outcry; *tze'akah* — wordless scream; *ne'akah* — groaning; *rina* — joy, song or praise; *pegiah* — relentless entreating; *keriah* — calling out; *nipul* — throwing oneself down; *pilul* — prayer; *tachanunim* — begging for grace.

בכו תבכה בלילה ודמעתה על לחיה אין לה
מנחם מכל אהביה כל רעיה בגדו בה היו לה
לאיבים.

*She weeps, yea she weeps in the night,
and her tears are on her cheek; she had
no comforter among all her lovers, all
her friends have betrayed her, they have
become her enemies.*

Eicha 1:2

On Tisha B'av we cry and all cry together with us. When our tears flow on other occasions, knowing that Hashem understands and validates all of our emotions and will ultimately wipe all our tears, is the greatest *nechoma* of all. *Umacha Hashem dimach me'al kol panim*, may Hashem wipe the tears from all our faces, speedily in our day.

