

Chesed, Comfort, and Care: Rabbinic Responses to Suffering

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ספרי דברים שי"א:א'

(א) בהנחל עליון גוים - עד שלא בא אבינו אברהם כבר היה המקום דן את העולם כאכזרי. חטאו אנשי דור המבול - הציפם בזיקים על פני המים. חטאו אנשי מגדל - פזרם מסוף העולם ועד סופו. חטאו סדומים - שטפם באש וגפרית. אבל משבא אברהם אבינו לעולם זכה לקבל יסורים ממשמש ובאים, כענין שנאמר ויהי רעב בארץ וירד אברם מצרימה. וא"ת מפני מה יסורים באים? מפני חבתן של ישראל:

Sifrei Devarim 311:1

(1) (Devarim 32:8): "When the Most High caused nations to inherit": Before the advent of our father Abraham, the L-rd judged the world with severity: The men of the flood sinned — He flooded them like sparks on the face of the waters. The men of the tower of Bavel sinned — He scattered them from one end of the world to the other. The men of Sodom sinned — He swept them away with fire and brimstone. But when our father Abraham came to the world, afflictions materialized (*in place* of destruction), viz. (Bereshith 12:9) "And there was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt." And if you would ask "Why are there afflictions?" (the answer is) Because of His love for Israel (i.e., to avoid destroying them!)

ברכות ה' ב:י"ט"ז

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש. על לגביה רבי יוחנן אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שְׁכָרָן. אמר ליה: הב לי יָדָךְ. יהב ליה יָדֵיהּ, ואוקמיה. רבי יוחנן חלש. על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שְׁכָרָן. אמר ליה: הב לי יָדָךְ. יהב ליה יָדֵיהּ, ואוקמיה. אמאי, לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה? אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים. רבי אלעזר חלש. על לגביה רבי יוחנן. חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל. גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא. חזייה דהוה קא בכי רבי אלעזר. אמר ליה: אמאי קא בכית? אי משום תורה דלא אפשׂת — שנינו:

אָחַד הַמַּרְבֵּה וְאָחַד הַמַּמְעִיט, וּבְלִבְד שְׂיִכּוּיִן לְבוֹ לְשָׁמַיִם. וְאִי מְשׁוּם מְזוּנִי — לֹא כָּל אָדָם זֹכֶה לְשֵׁתִי שְׁלֵחַנוֹת. וְאִי מְשׁוּם בְּנִי — דִּין גְּרָמָא דְעֵשִׂירָאָה בִּיר. אָמַר לִיה: לְהֵאֵי שׁוּפְרָא דְבְּלִי בְּעַפְרָא קָא בְּכִינָא. אָמַר לִיה: עַל דָּא וְדָאֵי קָא בְּכִית, וּבְכוּ תְרוּיָהּ. אֲדַהֲכִי וְהֲכִי אָמַר לִיה: חֲבִיבִין עֲלֵיךְ יְסוּרִין? אָמַר לִיה: לֹא הֵן וְלֹא שְׂכָרָן. אָמַר לִיה: הֵב לִי יָדְךָ, יְהֵב לִי יָדִיהָ, וְאוֹקְמִיהָ.

Berakhot 5b:10-16

The Gemara continues to address the issue of suffering and affliction: Rabbi Yoḥanan's student, **Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, fell ill**. Rabbi Yoḥanan **entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you?** Do you desire to be ill and afflicted? Rabbi Ḥiyya **said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward**, as one who welcomes this suffering with love is rewarded. Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to him: Give me your hand**. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba **gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yoḥanan stood him up** and restored him to health. Similarly, **Rabbi Yoḥanan fell ill. Rabbi Ḥanina entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you?** Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward**. Rabbi Ḥanina **said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Ḥanina stood him up** and restored him to health. The Gemara asks: **Why** did Rabbi Yoḥanan wait for Rabbi Ḥanina to restore him to health? If he was able to heal his student, **let Rabbi Yoḥanan stand himself up**. The Gemara answers, **they say: A prisoner cannot generally free himself from prison**, but depends on others to release him from his shackles. The Gemara relates that **Rabbi Elazar**, another of Rabbi Yoḥanan's students, **fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan entered to visit him, and saw that he was lying in a dark room**. Rabbi Yoḥanan **exposed his arm, and light radiated from his flesh, filling the house**. He **saw that Rabbi Elazar was crying**, and **said to him: Why are you crying?** Thinking that his crying was over the suffering that he endured throughout his life, Rabbi Yoḥanan attempted to comfort him: **If you are weeping because you did not study as much Torah as you would have liked, we learned: One who brings a substantial sacrifice and one who brings a meager sacrifice have equal merit, as long as he directs his heart toward Heaven**. **If you are weeping because you lack sustenance** and are unable to earn a livelihood, as Rabbi Elazar was, indeed, quite poor, **not every person merits to eat off of two tables**, one of wealth and one of Torah, so you need not bemoan the fact that you are not wealthy. **If you are crying over children who have died, this is**

the bone of my tenth son, and suffering of that kind afflicts great people, and they are afflictions of love. Rabbi Elazar **said to** Rabbi Yoḥanan: **I am not crying** over my misfortune, but rather, **over this beauty** of yours **that will decompose in the earth**, as Rabbi Yoḥanan's beauty caused him to consider human mortality. **Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Over this, it is certainly appropriate to weep. Both cried** over the fleeting nature of beauty in the world and death that eventually overcomes all. **Meanwhile**, Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to him: Is your suffering dear to you?** Rabbi Elazar **said to him: I welcome neither** this suffering **nor its reward**. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to him: Give me your hand**. Rabbi Elazar **gave him his hand, and** Rabbi Yoḥanan **stood him up** and restored him to health.

סנהדרין ק"א א-ק"א ב

רבה בר בר חנה כשחלה ר' אליעזר נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו אמר להן חמה עזה יש בעולם התחילו הן בוכין ורבי עקיבא משחק אמרו לו למה אתה משחק אמר להן וכי מפני מה אתם בוכים אמרו לו אפשר ספר תורה שרוי בצער ולא נבכה אמר להן לכך אני משחק כל זמן שאני רואה רבי שאין יינו מחמיץ ואין פשתנו לוקה ואין שמנו מבאיש ואין דובשנו מדביש אמרתי שמא חס ושלום קיבל רבי עולמו ועכשיו שאני רואה רבי בצער אני שמח אמר לו עקיבא כלום חיסרתי מן התורה כולה אמר לו לימדתנו רבינו (קהלת ז, כ) כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא ת"ר כשחלה ר' אליעזר נכנסו ארבעה זקנים לבקרו ר' טרפון ור' יהושע ור' אלעזר בן עזריה ור' עקיבא נענה ר' טרפון ואמר טוב אתה לישראל מטיפה של גשמים שטיפה של גשמים בעולם הזה ורבי בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא נענה ר' יהושע ואמר טוב אתה לישראל יותר מגלגל חמה שגלגל חמה בעולם הזה ורבי בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא נענה רבי אלעזר בן עזריה ואמר טוב אתה לישראל יותר מאב ואם שאב ואם בעולם הזה ורבי בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא נענה רבי עקיבא ואמר חביבין יסורין אמר להם סמכוני ואשמעה דברי עקיבא תלמידי שאמר חביבין יסורין אמר לו עקיבא זו מנין לך אמר מקרא אני דורש (מלכים ב כא, א) בן שתים עשרה שנה מנשה במלכו וחמשים וחמש שנה מלך בירושלים [וגו'] ויעש הרע בעיני ה' וכתוב (משלי כה, א) גם אלה

משלי שלמה אשר העתיקו אנשי חזקיה מלך יהודה וכי חזקיה מלך יהודה לכל
 העולם כולו לימד תורה ולמנשה בנו לא לימד תורה אלא מכל טורח שטרח בו ומכל
 עמל שעמל בו לא העלהו למוטב אלא יסורין שנאמר (דברי הימים ב לג, י) וידבר ה'
 אל מנשה ואל עמו ולא הקשיבו ויבא ה' עליהם את שרי הצבא אשר למלך אשור
 וילכדו את מנשה בחוחים ויאסרוהו בנחשתים ויוליכהו בבלה וכתוב (דברי הימים ב
 לג, יב) ובהיצר לו חילה את פני ה' אלהיו ויכנע מאד מלפני (ה') אלהי אבותיו
 ויתפלל אליו ויעתר לו וישמע תחינתו וישיבהו ירושלים למלכותו וידע מנשה כי ה'
 הוא האלהים הא למדת שחביבין יסורין

Sanhedrin 101a-101b

Rabba bar bar Ḥana says: When Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, his students entered to visit him. Rabbi Eliezer **said to them: There is intense wrath in the world**, and it is due to that wrath of the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who is angry at His world, that I am suffering from these afflictions. His students **began to cry** due to their teacher's suffering, **and Rabbi Akiva was laughing.** They **said to him: Why are you laughing?** Rabbi Akiva **said to them: And for what reason are you crying?** They **said to him: Is it possible** that Rabbi Eliezer, who is as much an exemplar of Torah as a **Torah scroll, is afflicted with pain and we will not cry?** Rabbi Akiva **said to them: It is for that reason that I am laughing. As long as I would see for my teacher that neither does his wine ferment and spoil, nor is his flax stricken, nor does his oil spoil, nor does his honey turn rancid, I would say to myself: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, my teacher has already received his world** in reward for the mitzvot that he fulfilled, and will not receive a reward in the World-to-Come. **But now that I see my teacher overcome with suffering, I am happy.** He is receiving punishment in this world for the few transgressions that he might have committed, ensuring that he will receive a complete reward in the World-to-Come. Rabbi Eliezer **said to him: Akiva, have I failed to fulfill any portion of the entire Torah?** Rabbi Akiva **said to him, you taught us, our teacher: “For there is not a righteous man upon earth who does good and sins not”** (Ecclesiastes 7:20). **The Sages taught in a baraita: When Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, four Sages entered to visit him: Rabbi Tarfon, and Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Tarfon responded to the situation with words of encouragement and said: You are better for the Jewish people than a drop**

of rain, as a drop of rain provides benefit in this world, and my teacher provides them benefit in this world and in the World-to-Come. Rabbi Yehoshua responded and said: You are better for the Jewish people than the sphere of the sun, as the sphere of the sun provides benefit in this world, and my teacher provides benefit in this world and in the World-to-Come. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya responded and said: You are better for the Jewish people than a father and mother, as a father and mother provide benefit in this world, and my teacher provides benefit in this world and in the World-to-Come. Rabbi Akiva responded and said: Afflictions are cherished. When Rabbi Eliezer heard this he said to his attendants: Support me so I can sit and hear the statement of Akiva my student, who said: Afflictions are cherished. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Akiva, from where do you derive this? Rabbi Akiva said: I interpret a verse in order to derive it. It is written: “Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem...And he performed that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord” (II Kings 21:1–2). And it is written: “These too are the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judea, copied” (Proverbs 25:1), indicating that Hezekiah taught Torah and disseminated it to the multitudes. And is it conceivable that Hezekiah, king of Judea, taught Torah to the entire world and to Manasseh his son he did not teach Torah? Rather, Hezekiah certainly taught Manasseh much Torah; nevertheless, from all his exertion to teach him and from all his toil to teach him, it was only afflictions that elevated him to the path of good, as it is stated: “And the Lord spoke to Manasseh and to his people but they would not heed. And the Lord brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, and bound him with chains, and carried him to Babylonia” (II Chronicles 33:10–11). And it is written thereafter: “And when he was in distress, he sought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and he prayed to Him and He was entreated of him, and He heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom; then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God” (II Chronicles 33:12–13). You learned from this that afflictions are cherished.

כתובות ס"ז ב:י"א-י"ג

ת"ר מעשה ברבן יוחנן בן זכאי שהיה רוכב על החמור והיה יוצא מירושלים והיו תלמידיו מהלכין אחריו ראה ריבה אחת שהיתה מלקטת שעורים מבין גללי בהמתן של ערביים כיון שראתה אותו נתעטפה בשערה ועמדה לפניו אמרה לו רבי פרנסני אמר לה בתי מי את אמרה לו בת נקדימון בן גוריון אני אמר לה בתי ממון של בית אביך היכן הלך אמרה לו רבי לא כדן מתלין מתלא בירושלים מלח ממון חסר ואמרי לה חסד ושל בית חמיך היכן הוא אמרה לו בא זה ואיבד את זה אמרה לו רבי זכור אתה כשחתמת על כתובתי אמר להן לתלמידיו זכור אני כשחתמתי על כתובתה של זו והייתי קורא בה אלף אלפים דינרי זהב מבית אביה חוץ משל חמיה בכה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי ואמר אשריכם ישראל בזמן שעושין רצונו של מקום אין כל אומה ולשון שולטת בהם ובזמן שאין עושין רצונו של מקום מוסרן ביד אומה שפלה ולא ביד אומה שפלה אלא ביד בהמתן של אומה שפלה

Ketubot 66b:11-13

Apropos the daughter of Nakdimon ben Guryon, the Gemara relates what later became of her: **The Sages taught:** There was an incident involving Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. **When he was riding on a donkey and leaving Jerusalem, and his students were walking after him** to learn from him, **he saw a certain young woman who was gathering barley from among the dung of the animals of Arabs.** She was so poor that she subsisted on the undigested barley within the dung. **When she saw him, she wrapped herself in her hair,** as she had nothing else with which to cover herself, and **stood before him. She said to him: My teacher, sustain me.** He did not recognize her, so **he said to her: My daughter, who are you? She said to him: I am the daughter of Nakdimon ben Guryon. He said to her: My daughter, the money of your father's household, where did it go?** How did you become so poor? **She said to him: My teacher, is it not that they say such a proverb in Jerusalem: Salt for money is lacking [haser]?** There is nothing with which to preserve it and prevent it from being lost. **And some say** the proverb asserts that **kindness [hesed]** is salt for money, i.e., using money for acts of kindness preserves it. He continued to ask her: **And the money of your father-in-law's house,** which was used properly, for benevolent acts, **where is it? She said to him: This one came and destroyed that one;** all the money was combined, and it was all lost together. **She said to him: My**

teacher, do you remember when you signed on my marriage contract? He said to his students: I remember that when I signed on the marriage contract of this woman, and I read in it, it listed a thousand thousands, i.e., one million gold dinars as a dowry from her father's house, aside from that which was promised her from her father-in-law. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai cried and said: How fortunate are you, Israel, for when Israel performs the will of the Omnipresent, no nation or tongue can rule over them; and when Israel does not perform the will of the Omnipresent, He delivers them into the hand of a lowly nation. Not only are they delivered into the hand of a lowly nation, but even into the hand of the animals of a lowly nation, as in the pitiful instance of Nakdimon's daughter.

אבות דרבי נתן ד'ה'

על גמ"ח כיצד הרי הוא אומר (הושע ו) כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח. העולם מתחלה לא נברא אלא בחסד שנאמר (תהלים פט) כי אמרתי עולם חסד יבנה שמים תכין אמונתך בהם. פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא מירושלים והיה רבי יהושע הולך אחריו וראה בית המקדש חרב [אר"י או לנו על זה שהוא חרב] מקום שמכפרים בו עונותיהם של ישראל. א"ל בני אל ירע לך יש לנו כפרה אחת שהיא כמותה ואיזה זה גמ"ח שנאמר כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח

Avot D'Rabbi Natan 4:5

On acts of kindness. How so? It says (Hosea 6:6), “For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering.” The world was created from the very beginning with kindness, as it says (Psalms 89:3), “For I have said that the world will be built on kindness, and the heavens will be established on Your faith.” Once, Rabban [our rabbi] Yohanan ben Zakkai, left Jerusalem, and Rabbi Yehoshua followed after him. And he saw the Holy Temple destroyed. [Rabbi Yehoshua said: Woe to us, for this is destroyed –] the place where all of Israel's sins are forgiven!² *I.e., via the bringing of sacrifices.* [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: My son, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement just like it. And what is it? Acts of kindness, as it says (Psalms 89:3), “For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering.”

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