

PART 7: SUFFERING

by Rabbi Dr. Azriel Rosenfeld

Suffering stays away from a person who studies Torah, as it says "The sons of RESHEF fly (UF) upward" (Job 5:7): UF refers to Torah, as it says "If you close (TA'IF) your eyes to it, it is no more" (Prov.23:5); and RESHEF refers to suffering, as it says "Hunger and RESHEF" (Deut.32:24). Even schoolchildren know this, for it says "If you hear G-d's voice and listen to His commandments... the ills that were inflicted on Egypt will not be inflicted on you" (Ex.15:26). Rather, if a person can study Torah and doesn't, G-d brings suffering on him to stir him up, as it says "I kept silent from the good thing (Torah, the good acquisition: Prov.4:2) and my pain was stirred up" (Psalms 39:3). G-d's ways differ from the ways of flesh and blood; when a person sells something, the seller is sad and the buyer is happy, but G-d gave the Torah to Israel and is happy, as it says "I gave you a good acquisition; do not forsake My Torah" (Prov.4:2).

If a person sees that suffering has come upon him, he should examine his deeds, as it says "Let us investigate our ways" (Lam.3:40). If he finds something, he should repent, as it says "and return to G-d" (ibid.). If he finds nothing, he should attribute the suffering to neglect of Torah, as it says "Happy is the man whom You afflict and teach him Your Torah" (Psalms 94:12). If there was no neglect, it must be suffering given out of love*, as it says "G-d rebukes those He loves" (Prov.3:12). If he accepts it with love, his reward is that "He will see descendants and live long" (Isaiah 53:10), and his Torah will remain with him, as it says "G-d's desire will succeed in his hands" (ibid.).

Suffering of love does not lead to neglect of Torah (as it says "Happy is the man whom You afflict and teach him Your Torah": Psalms 94:12) or of prayer (as it says "Blessed be G-d that my prayer and His grace did not depart from me": Psalms 66:20). "Teach him Your Torah" also tells us that we can learn this from the Torah: If a slave goes free when he loses a tooth or an eye (Ex.21:26-7), all the more so does suffering, which cleanses the entire body, free a person from his sins. A covenant is associated with salt (as it says "The salt of your G-d's covenant": Lev.2:12) and with suffering (as it says "These are the terms of the covenant": Deut.28:69); just as salt flavors meat, so suffering cleanses sin.

Through suffering, G-d gave Israel three precious gifts: Torah, as it says "Happy is the man whom You afflict and teach him Your Torah" (Psalms 94:12); the land, as it says "G-d chastises you as a man chastises his son... for G-d is bringing you to a good land" (Deut.6:5,7); and the world to come, as it says "Rebuke and chastisement are the way of Life" (Prov.6:23).

If a person occupies himself with Torah and charity all his sins are forgiven, as it says "Mercy and truth atone for sin" (Prov.16:16); "Mercy" is charity, as it says "Pursuing charity and mercy" (Prov. 21:22), and "Truth" is Torah, as it says "Buy truth" (Prov.21:23).

Having children and losing them is a suffering given out of love; R.Yochanan used to carry a small bone (or a tooth) of his tenth dead son. When R.Yochanan was once sick, R.Chanina visited him and asked "Do you enjoy suffering?" He replied "Neither it nor its reward!", so R. Chanina took his hand and raised him up. R.Yochanan raised up R. Chiya b.Abba when he was sick, but he couldn't raise himself up, because a prisoner cannot free himself.

When R.Eleazar was once sick, R.Yochanan visited him, saw that he was crying, and asked him why: If it is because you have not studied enough Torah, we know that even one who does only a little is rewarded if his intentions are good; if it is because you lack food, not everyone merits two tables (in both this world and the next); and if it is because you have lost children, this is a bone of my tenth dead son. He answered "I am crying because of the beauty that will decay in the dust!" He responded "Then you do have a reason to cry!", and they both cried. He asked "Do you enjoy suffering?", and he replied "Neither it nor its reward!", so he took his hand and raised him up.

Four hundred jars of R.Huna's wine once turned into vinegar, and the Rabbis suggested that he should examine his deeds. He asked "Do you mistrust me?", and they replied "Do we suspect G-d of punishing unjustly?" He said "Anyone who has heard anything about me should speak up!", and they told him that they had heard that he had not given the tenant who tended his vineyard a share of the vine twigs. He protested that the tenant was stealing from him, but they answered by quoting the saying "One who takes from a thief has a taste of the theft". He promised to give the tenant a share; the vinegar then turned back into wine, or (some say) vinegar became as expensive as wine.

** that is, G-d's love for the person moves Him to cause suffering so that the person grows*

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