SUFFERINGS FROM LOVE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe and Aharon, "When a person has a blotch, a discoloration, or spot on his skin like the curse of leprosy, then he should be brought to Aharon the priest, or to one of his descendants." (Vayikra 13:1-2)

Yesurim shel ahavah—sufferings from love—seem like an oxymoron. In general, we don't cause suffering to people we love. Just the opposite; we tend to do our best to protect them from suffering, and to end it for them if they already are in pain.

Nevertheless, the Talmud speaks of it as if it is a level to be achieved, not avoided, or save from:

Rabbah, and some say, Rav Chisda, says: If a man suffers, let him examine his conduct, for it says, "Let us search and try our ways, and return to God" (Eichah 3:40). If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah, since it says, "Happy is the man whom You chastise, God, and teach out of Your law" (Tehillim 94:12). If he did attribute it [to this], and still did not find [this to be the cause], then it is suffering from love, as it says, "For whom God loves He corrects" (Tehillim 3:12). (Brochos 5a)

Why, one may ask, would such a righteous person be made to suffer? He's done everything right, and has grown above reproach. Furthermore, wouldn't making such a person suffer profane the Name of God, making it seem as if there is no justice in the history, and cast aspersions on the suffering righteous person?

As to the value of such suffering, Rashi explains that this is God's way of cleansing the righteous person of all sin in this world, so that He can in2 crease his reward in the World-to-Come, beyond what he might have otherwise merited by the end of his life. Such a righteous person is perfect enough that his suffering in the world can free him from the fires of Gihenom, which less righteous people will need in any case, and for whom yesurim shel ahavah may be irrelevant.

What is interesting, as well, is the way that the Talmud used three different verses to refer to three different types of people, and therefore kinds of suffering, when we might have thought that each verse actually applies to everyone equally. We all must search our ways when we suffer, and should be grateful that God cares enough about us to show us our mistakes, which obviously He does because He loves us.

Thus, we learn an insight. The Talmud is telling you that someone whose actions are reprehensible,

or at least reproachable, is not someone who is able to appreciate the value of yesurim. He will certainly not consider himself to be a fortunate person while he suffers, because the whole reason why his action are less than what they ought to be on his level is because he assumed he could have his cake and eat it too. Who would be happy to find out otherwise?

However, someone who is careful about how he acts, but not as careful about his opportunities to learn Torah, is someone who can at least appreciate the value of yesurim. He is trying to be as righteous as he can, at least by doing the mitzvos he must and by avoiding the sins he can, so he is in touch with Heaven, and knows Divine Providence when he experiences it. Such a person can lovingly grow from such yesurim.

But, someone whose actions are perfect and whose Torah learning is maximized is someone who not only is pleased that God interferes in his life to make him better, but he is someone who can sense God's love, even through the suffering, and loves God back even more because of it. He is a believer in the World-to-Come, not just in theory, but in action as well, exhibited by the way that he uses every moment of this world for the sake of the next world.

Don't get the wrong idea. He is not a masochist. Unlike other religions from the past, such a tzaddik does not go looking for pain, as the Talmud later shows. Rather, if yesurim comes to him, in spite of his near-perfect life, he makes a point of using it to his spiritual advantage, just as he has been doing with every other aspect of his life.

A connection can be made between these three types of people and their approaches to life, and the three degrees of tzara'as in this week's parshah: the person's house, his clothing, and finally, his body. The question is, how does it ever get to level three? Surely tzara'as on the house, and all that is involved in removing it, should be enough to invoke teshuvah and a fear of even more direct forms of Divine punishment. Why is it not? Everyone makes mistakes, even righteous people, as Shlomo HaMelech reminds us:

"For there is not a righteous man on earth who does only good and never sins. (Koheles 7:20) And, as the Talmud points out, the difference between a tzaddik and an evil person is not always based upon mitzvos, but how each responds to spiritual failure. For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, but the wicked stumble in time of calamity." (Mishlei 24:16)

No, as we have already said, the righteous person is not a glutton for punishment, just someone who learns from his mistakes, and more importantly, from his Divine Providence. Should he happen to err, and speak loshon hara, or commit any of the other sins that result in tzara'as to his home, you can be sure that it will be enough for him to mend his ways, after which he will lovingly thank God for having pointed out his error.

Not so the beinoni—the average person. Not as much a lover of criticism as the righteous person, he may not respond to the tzara'as on his walls as quickly and as adequately as the tzaddik, and as a result, slip up again. However, you can be sure that by the time the tzara'as shows up on his clothing,

he will jump into action and do the proper teshuvah that he should have done earlier. Well, better late than never. However, someone on an even lesser level, even though he knows the halachah, will not be fazed enough even after the tzara'as moves to his clothing. It might be embarrassing to some extent, but being distant from his actual person, he can cope with it, perhaps even rationalize it away. Deep inside he might know differently, but on the surface of things, he acts as if he has done nothing wrong, or at least that wrong. Not careful about the way he performs mitzvos, he is careless about his sins as well.

Such a person needs a far more dramatic spiritual wake-up call, and tzara'as on the body, and what it necessitates to be cured, is it. Imagine being locked up and having to await the kohen's decision about whether the sore on your skin is pure or impure? Think about what it must have been like to have to walk around with clothing pulled over the head down to the lip, calling out "Impure! Impure!" everywhere you went! The humiliation! And, there was not hiding it, either. Perhaps in one's house, and maybe on one's clothes, but not on the body. Tzara'as on the body was too difficult to keep to one's self, and faking another illness did not work or help the situation. If a person wanted to return to normal health, he had to face the music and the facts of spiritual illness and make amends. When Divine Providence knocks, you don't dare pretend that you are not home. Similarly in life today, even though we do not have tzara'as today, lacking the Temple and the purification process, general yesurim works in the same way. When a person has small problems, he tends to ignore them and sweep them under the carpet, assuming that either they will go away on their own over time, or that he can cope with them.

However, as smaller problems become bigger ones, they become harder to ignore, and sometimes, impossible to ignore to the point that they can "lock" a person into their own private world, as they take refuge from public embarrassment and the like. Such problems force the hand of the sufferer, and make them ask, "Why me? Why now?" to which Heaven can finally answer, "We're glad you asked. Now we can discuss it."

In this world, there are a lot of attackers, and even more victims. As victims, it is only natural to be defensive, and to blame, especially when there is something to blame and someone to blame it on. And, the law itself acknowledges that there are guilty parties and innocent parties in this world, and they have to be dealt with accordingly. Justice must prevail—even at the cost of life when necessary—as much as is humanly possible, and when it does, the Shechinah resides amongst man.

On the other hand, everything is a function of Divine Providence, and all that happens to a person is for the sake of tikun—personal rectification. There is no such thing, really, as an accident, from a Torah perspective. Justice between men is a function of the human courts; all that happens to us is a function of the Heavenly Court, to the most minutest of details. Place the blame for your suffering on others, if you must, and when necessary, but at the end of day, know and accept that whatever happens to you, in whatever form, no matter how severe, was not a mistake, but part of our own personal tikun. The sooner we realize it, and acknowledge it, and work to rectify ourselves, the faster

we rid ourselves of our suffering, and the more we protect ourselves against more severe forms of personal difficulty.

Text

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