

# SEEING THE BLESSING

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

Just as the loss of a close relative can teach us something about mourning, it can also teach us something about being comforted as well.

We tell a mourner, each time upon leaving his presence during Shivah:

HaMakom—God—should comfort you amongst the rest of the mourners of Tzion and Yerushalayim. In other words, we tell a mourner after a personal loss that just as sure as God will one day comfort the mourners of Tzion and Jerusalem, likewise should He certainly comfort you as well, something a mourner wants to hear, since, during his time of grief, he can't imagine ever being consoled.

However, there is more to this that helps us to understand the key to this period of time, and these are the "Seven Weeks of Comfort," alluded to by the Talmud here:

Rabban Gamliel, Rebi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rebi Yehoshua, and Rebi Akiva were walking. They heard the clamor of Rome from 120 miles away. [The other] Chachamim cried, but Reb Akiva laughed.

"Why are you laughing?!" they asked him

"Why are you crying?" he asked back.

"They bow and bring incense to idols, yet they are serene. The footstool of God was burned. How can we not cry?!" they told him.

Rebi Akiva explained: "That is why I laugh. If God gives such reward to those who transgress His will, how much greater will be the reward of those who do His will!"

On another occasion, they went up to Yerushalayim. When they reached Har HaTzofim, they tore their garments. When they reached Har HaBayis, they saw a fox emerge from the Kodesh HaKodoshim. The Chachamim cried, but Rebi Akiva laughed.

"Why are you laughing?!" they asked him.

"Why are you crying?" he asked back.

"Regarding the Mikdosh it says 'if a stranger approaches he is to be killed' (Bamidbar 18:7), and now foxes go there. How can we not cry?!" they explained.

"That is why I laugh," he told them. It says, 'I will take to Me two faithful witnesses, Uriah HaKohen and Zechariah' (Yeshayahu 8:2); even though Uriah lived during the First Temple, and Zechariah lived

during the Second Temple, the verse puts them together. Why? To connect their prophecies, for Uriah said, 'Tzion, for your sake, shall be plowed as a field' (Michah 3:12), but Zechariah said, 'There shall yet be old men and old women sitting in the broad places of Yerushalayim' (Zechariah 8:4).

Hence, Uriah's prophecy must be fulfilled before Zechariah's, and now that I see the fulfillment of Uriah's prophecy, I know that Zechariah's can be fulfilled at any moment!"

"You comforted us!" they told him. (Makkos 24b)

It's a nice way to end a mesechta. However, the question is, is the story as simple as it seems, or is there a deeper message? Why was Rebi Akiva able to find a path to comfort that his colleagues had not, and how did they know that he was right?

It's all a matter of perspective, of what you know and have experienced. We can try hard to put ourselves into someone else's shoes, but until we have actually put them on, there is no way to actually know what it means to walk in them.

Rebi Akiva was the son of a convert who had descended from the evil Sisera. He had started as shepherd, and knew little Torah. In fact, the Talmud says, he had been such a simpleton at one point that he admitted that had he seen a Torah scholar in his early days, he would have bitten him like a donkey. He showed so few signs at that time of becoming anything more than he was that when the daughter of Kalba Savua married him, her father cut her off and left her to live in poverty.

Yet, a few short decades later, look what he had become. He gone from being Akiva ben Yosef the shepherd boy and simpleton to the great Rebi Akiva, Torah leader of the generation. The turnaround was nothing short of awe-inspiring and miraculous, and no one appreciated that more than Rebi Akiva himself. He was a rags to riches story, both spiritually and physically.

Had he just been lucky? We don't believe in luck. However, we do believe in mazel, which means that Rebi Akiva had been destined for greatness even while his evil ancestor was trying to eradicate the very people his descendant would eventually lead. But, who could have known that at the time, or that descendants of Haman would become rabbis generations after Mordechai thwarted his plans of genocide for the Jewish people?

The Chachamim, on the other hand, had come from Jewish blood the whole way through. They may have struggled to become great, but not as much as their colleague had struggled. They had grown up with a Temple already in place, had witnessed its destruction, and now saw its desolation. For them, it was just too much of a let down, and it depressed them. They couldn't imagine the situation getting better again.

"Been there. Done that," Rebi Akiva was, in effect, telling them. Just as good gives way to bad sometimes, eventually bad has to give way to good, and often the good is beyond comprehension. Nothing gives a man a sense of self more than being a "self-made" man, and Rebi Akiva had been just that. For the person who has accomplished the near impossible the impossible always seems

possible from that point onward.

And they knew he was right, because when he allowed them to see the world through his eyes, and to experience history as he had, his conclusions not only became possible, they became likely. After all, as the Talmud states, before God inflicts the Jewish people he first creates the cure (Megillah 13b). Hence, for the prophecy of Uriah to come true, the prophecy of Zechariah had to already exist.

This is part of the idea of what the Talmud means when it states that, in the place that ba'alei teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous can't stand there (Brochos 34b). Some non-ba'alei teshuvah like to joke that it means that ba'alei teshuvah take so long to finish their Shemonah Esrai that even righteous people finish first and can't step back from their Shemonah Esrai because there is a ba'al teshuvah there blocking their way.

But what it really means is that ba'alei teshuvah, because of their journeys to Torah, have gained first-hand knowledge about life that people who have been religious all of their lives can't possibly know, and that's valuable, especially for seeing history in terms of the big picture. This is what the Torah means in this week's parshah when it says:

Those who have adhered to God are all alive today. (Devarim 4:4)

By adhering to God, that is, by looking at the world through His perspective, you will always be able to turn death into life in some way or another. You will always find a path to survival, intellectually and physically.

This is one of the reasons why, when referring to God in the verse of consolation, we use the Name of HaMakom, which literally means "The Place." As the Nefesh HaChaim explains, this Name of God is a reminder that all of Creation exists within God, not the other way around. It is the Name that reminds us that God is the big picture. We are saying that "The Big Picture should comfort you . . ." because, as we learn from Rebi Akiva, only with the big picture can a person truly find comfort. This is what reveals the blessing through the curse.

This is true not only on a national level, but on a personal level as well. Personal loss, especially when unexpected, draws a person into a limited world of perspective and feeling until all someone can do is mourn. This is why, the Talmud explains, God made it so that we forget our losses somewhat after 12 months; if we didn't we might mourn forever and never get on with life.

I can now speak from personal experience, having just finished the Shloshim for my father, a"h. I have had some pretty intense sad moments over the last month, because I was quite close with my father. If I allow myself to dwell on the loss, it does not take much for me to come to feel the great loss in my life. However, if I don't sit and think about it, I seem to go about my business as usual, which, at first, seemed out of place. Then I realized why. Even though my father died unexpectedly, it was only unexpected inasmuch as we thought that the operation would be a success.

However, his cancer was spreading, which had actually caused the need for the operation, and his health was rapidly declining. This made him increasingly more dependent upon others to accomplish even basic human tasks, and though he adapted well to each level of change, it was hard to watch a self-made man lose his independence. It was just a question of time before he would lose his dignity as well.

Who can place a value on even a moment of life? Who can tell if some of the best moments of a relationship are still yet to come, no matter how difficult life becomes for one or both people? This is why Judaism is against euthanasia, for the most part; quality of life is for God to decide, and therefore, so are a person's last moments in this world.

Nevertheless, once a person is no longer here, the survivors are forced to look for the blessing in the curse. In my father's case, it was easy, since he went peacefully, thank God, and without having to deal with rehabilitation as the rest of his bodily functions began to fail. He never got to that point, b"H, nor did he have to become depressed about his dependency on others. As a result, all of us were left with a positive memory of my father.

That, plus my focus on doing whatever I can to elevate his soul, has distracted me away from the negative side. I have felt, on occasion, the potential to become depressed because of such a loss, and I could certainly see why many do. However, the blessing side of my father's passing seems to override the negative side, making it easier to focus on the mercy that was done for my father, than my own personal loss.

That's what we tell mourners: May you be blessed with a view of the big picture with respect to your loss, and though you mourn and you should mourn, there should come a time when you can see the blessing as well as the curse, and to see how, sometimes, the former only comes because of the latter, and be comforted as a result, together with the rest of the mourners of Tzion and Yerushalayim.

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