

PERCEPTIONS: VAYISHLACH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Bad things happen to good people. This is nothing new. History is full of examples of this, and even Moshe Rabbeinu questioned God about the issue (Brochos 7a). The only question most people have is why God allows it to happen.

Most people do not get the opportunity to talk to God about it, at least not while still alive. Iyov was one of the few people who did, and the answer he received leaves us with just a little less confusion:

"Were you there when I laid the foundations of the world?" (Iyov 38:4)

Essentially God told Iyov that the answer was that his question was not a valid question. It assumed too much, as if Iyov had enough of the "big picture" to know what should or should not be. It was if he was telling God, "I know all about Creation and history, and the suffering you have inflicted upon me does not make sense."

A couple of weeks ago, after the terrible attack in Har Nof, Jerusalem, a wife of one of the victims was quoted as saying, "We accept the decree with love." She wasn't saying that she understood why her husband was taken from her that day, and in such a horrible way. They had merits that could have justified him living a long and happy life. There are other people, seemingly, with less merits who have.

It would seem, rather, that she understood that in spite of her terrible pain of loss and what it meant to the future of her family, that God is always just, and always acting for the good. History, however, is much bigger than the individuals that make it up, bigger than the entire communities of which they are a part, and bigger than the entire generation to which they belong. Things were set in motion thousands of years ago that are only now being revealed, something only God knows.

The Talmud tells us that loshon hara, derogatory speech about another person, is worse than the three cardinal sins of idol worship, murder, and adultery (Arachin 15b). Tell that to the editor of your local newspaper who has absolutely no problem printing loshon hara but would never commit, well, at least murder (the other two sins, apparently, are much easier to rationalize).

It is certainly counter-intuitive to treat loshon hara so severely. Did the rabbis really mean it or did they simply exaggerate the seriousness of the sin to scare people into avoiding what is obviously a very simple sin to commit? Given the extent to which loshon hara is still spoken it would seem that many people believe that this is the case.

However, if we consider what *loshon hara* is in essence it becomes easier to appreciate why the rabbis took it so seriously. This is especially so when recalling that there are times when saying something negative about a person is not only permissible, it is a *mitzvah*. For example, it may be permissible to say such things in a Jewish court of law when the innocence or guilt of an accused person needs to be determined.

Even in such a situation, it is the nature of the act that is judged, not the person. *Bais Din* has been charged, by God, with an obligation to judge the actions of people and when necessary, respond with a Torah-prescribed punishment. They can decide an act to be evil, but they have to leave it for God to decide whether the person who perpetrated the act is evil as well.

Who else but God can make such a decision? Only God can take into account the full story of a person and determine what he himself is responsible for and what he could not help. This is especially true when one considers that the story includes more than family, school, and peer influence. It also includes the nature of a person's soul and his previous reincarnations.

Who else but God can know the reason for events? Only God knows the complete master plan for Creation and what is necessary to fulfill it. It could be that its fulfillment requires that a person live a perfectly happy life for 25 years and then meet personal disaster head on at the age of 26, or just the opposite. There are times we might know why, but probably more times that we won't, leaving a generous amount of room in life for *emunah*, or faith in God.

One of the things of which we are guilty as human beings is this seemingly innate ability to assume that what we know enough about a situation before we really do. We will pass judgment on people or events based upon what we currently know, often without first checking to see if we have all the facts.

To make matters worse, not only do we make decisions about people or things without all the details, but we even let personal emotions contribute to the decision process. Often how we feel about a person or situation has more to say than what there is to know about either. This prevents us from being able to judge them to the side of merit, to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Not coincidentally the one area in which we do not act this way is with respect to our money. Before we make a decision about where or how to invest or spend our money, we'll do research. Even after doing the research we may still even ask important questions like, "Do I have all the pertinent facts to make a good decision?" or, "Am I being logical about this, or are my emotions blinding me to the truth?" Our appreciation of money and fear of losing it makes us super cautious when it comes to giving it up.

The legal system acknowledges this shortcoming of humans to jump to conclusions, and often wrong ones. Therefore, a court of law employs a system of deliberation, primarily a jury that will listen to all of the information and then take the necessary time to come to a "good" conclusion about it. As the *mishnah* says:

Be deliberate in judgment. (Pirkei Avos 1:1)

Sometimes it may only be a matter of not immediately reacting, of taking the time to take in what has occurred and mulling it over. Such a moment of silence may feel like an eternity, but it certainly results in one:

Then Moshe said to Aharon, "This is what God said, [when He said], 'I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified.' " And Aharon was silent. (Vayikra 10:3)

And Aharon was silent: [and did not complain. Consequently,] he was rewarded for his silence . . . (Rashi)

Without question the sudden and tragic loss of his two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, came as a shock for Aharon HaKohen. That, however, was not the reason for his silence, evident by the fact that he is rewarded for keeping his peace at a time that most people would have fallen apart.

Rather, Aharon HaKohen remained silent at that critical moment as if to say, "What has happened here at this time is beyond my understanding and can, at this time, only be understood by God. All I can do is have faith that it is just and for the ultimate good." For that kind of response there is reward, a lot of it.

He had a teacher, though. It was Ya'akov Avinu who was first to show us how to respond in such situations of crisis. After news of Dinah's violation reached Ya'akov's camp, his sons began their plans of revenge. First they convinced Shechem to have his fellow citizens perform Bris Milah on themselves. Then, on the third day after performing Bris Milah when they were at their weakest, Shimon and Levi took their revenge on behalf of their family by wiping out all of the men of Shechem.

It was quite a violent response to the crisis and many commentators spend time justifying it. On his death, Ya'akov Avinu criticized Shimon and Levi for their angry response. Their intentions had been good but their anger had been misplaced. As Ya'akov told them, it almost cost the lives of their family.

The question is, what would Ya'akov had done Had Shimon and Levi not attacked the people of Shechem. We don't get to know the answer to this question because he never had a chance to show us. Once the men of Shechem were destroyed the situation had dramatically changed and Ya'akov Avinu continued on with his journey home.

In a lot of societies what Shimon and Levi did would have been cause for celebration. The primal response to evil is to mete it out in kind on behalf of good. When Al Qaeda brought down the World Trade Center and murdered 3,000 people in the process, the Americans went into Afghanistan to exact revenge against the perpetrators. Iraq invaded Kuwait and brought an American-led Coalition force onto itself, after which the victory was celebrated with a ticker-tape parade in New York.

It could be that the other brothers wanted to congratulate Shimon and Levi on their initiative and daring do. Ya'akov, their father, responded differently:

Ya'akov said to Shimon and to Levi, "You have troubled me, to discredit me among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and among the Perizzites, and I am few in number, and they will gather against me, and I and my household will be destroyed." They said, "Shall he make our sister like a harlot?" (Bereishis 34:30-31)

Analyzing the dialogue, it doesn't quite make sense. Ya'akov Avinu says to his sons, "By acting as you did you have endangered the entire family." They responded by saying, "Yes, but how could we allow our sister to be treated like harlot?" The next thing Ya'akov could have said was, "You don't hear what am I saying. What is the point of defending the honor of your sister if it results in the entire family being wiped away? What will you have gained? On the contrary, the loss becomes even more catastrophic!"

"Then what were we supposed to have done?" the brothers should have asked at that point.

"Wonder about why God might have allowed such an event to occur in the first place," Ya'akov would have answered, "as I did. And when you can't come up with a satisfactory answer to the question," he would have continued, "as I couldn't, then you tell yourself that God runs the world, and all that He does is for the good, even the bad. And then you move on, as I was about to do before you acted so personally and so recklessly."

It is after the incident in Shechem that Ya'akov's name is officially changed to "Yisroel," and not by an angel, but by God Himself. The angel, at the beginning of the parshah, only prophesied that it would happen without telling Ya'akov Avinu why it would happen. He told him the meaning of the name, that "he fought with an angel and men and prevailed," but Ya'akov had yet to know all the men with whom he was destined to fight.

Ma'aseh Avos siman l'banim—the actions of the Forefathers are signs for the children. What happened to Ya'akov Avinu has happened to the Jewish people throughout history continuously. It would be great to take revenge and at times we have, especially now that we have our own state.

The first thing we have to do, on a personal and national level, at least those who believe that God is behind all that happens, is to keep our peace. The first thing we are supposed to do, as hard as it is to hear it, or to believe it, and certainly to do it, is to accept the Divine decree with love. Find out why it happened? Try, but do it knowing that the answer may be something as sublime a "suffering as a result of Divine love" (Brochos 5a). The answer may still be in Heaven and yet to descend to the realm of man.

The second thing we have to do is have emunah that God is responsible and that it is for the good, the ultimate good. We have to recall that we were not there when God laid the foundations of Creation and therefore do not have the same view of the big picture that He does. As big as our lives

may to be ourselves, they are but a piece, a very small piece, in a much larger puzzle that includes all that has occurred before us, and all that will occur after us, and everything in-between.

After that, we can consider how to respond to the crisis. Maybe Steps 1 & 2 are enough of a response, maybe something more physical and dramatic is necessary. However, to respond correctly so that something positive results we have to get to that response via the first two steps. That is what it truly means to be a "Yisroel."

Text

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