

Parashat Vaera 5772, 2012:

How to Respond to Evil and Suffering

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal* translates some of the key verses in our *parasha* in the following manner:

I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered My covenant. “Therefore say to the Israelites [in My name], ‘I am G-d. I will take you away from your forced labor in Egypt and free you from their slavery. I will liberate you with a demonstration of My power, and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to Myself as a nation, and I will be to you as a G-d. You will know that I am G-d your L-rd, the One who is bringing you out from under the Egyptian subjugation. I will bring you to the land regarding which I raised My hand, [swearing] that I would give it to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am G-d.’” Moses related this to the Israelites, but because of their disappointment and hard work, they would no longer listen to him. (This and all Torah translations, *The Living Torah, Sefer Shemot* 6:5-6:9)

In contrast, Onkelos (second century CE) translates the final verse as: “And Moshe spoke in this way to the Jewish people, and they did not accept this from Moshe because of their depressed spirit and the hard work that was upon them.” Our ancestors were deeply depressed because of the evil and suffering they faced on an ongoing basis. They lived as slaves in squalid and unbearable conditions. Pharaoh, the megalomaniacal and heartless leader of Egypt, had given a death sentence to all of their newborn male children. Moreover, various Midrashim teach us that crying Jewish infants were thrust into the hardening walls that their parents were forced to construct. Clearly, anguish and travail were the order of the day. It seemed that the curses in *Sefer Devarim* 28:67 had been

visited upon them: “In the morning, you will say, ‘If it were only night,’ and in the evening you will say, ‘If it were only morning.’ Such will be the internal terror that you will experience and the sights that you will see.” We are faced with an immediate question: “How can we, as 21st Century Jews, encounter these curses, especially in the light of the catastrophes that have befallen our people?” It is to this question we now turn.

The spiritual challenge of theodicy, “the vindication of the divine attributes, particularly holiness and justice, in establishing or allowing the existence of physical and moral evil,” (Dictionary.com) is concisely summarized by the classic question: “If G-d is all good, how can He allow evil to exist?” This is a problem, if not **the** problem for the thinking and spiritually sensitive religious Jew. Unfortunately, however, it is a problem without a solution. As my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known by his disciples as “the Rav,” formulated it:

The acuteness of this problem has grown for the religious person in essence and dimensions. When a minister, rabbi, or priest attempts to solve the ancient question of Job’s suffering, through a sermon or a lecture, he does not promote religious ends, but on the contrary, does them a disservice. The beauty of religion with its grandiose vistas reveals itself to men, not in solutions but in problems, not in harmony but in the constant conflict of diversified forces and trends. (“Sacred and Profane,” *Gesher*, Volume 3, No. 1, page 7)

According to the Rav, we cannot ask the question: “Why is there suffering and evil? Instead, for the religious Jew, the question becomes: “What do I do with suffering and evil when I am forced to encounter them?” In an April 15, 1965 letter to Dr. Dan Vogel, then Dean of Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University, Rabbi Soloveitchik succinctly stated this approach to The Problem of Evil:

Job was in error because he tried to grasp the nature of evil. Therefore, Judaism has recommended that the metaphysical inquiry be replaced by the halakhic ethical gesture. Man should not ask: Why evil? He should rather raise the question: What am I supposed

to do if confronted by evil; how should I behave *vis a vis* evil? The latter is a powerful challenge to man and it is the duty of man to meet this challenge boldly and courageously. (Quoted in: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, page xxxvi)

What, then, should be our approach to suffering? How do we integrate it into our overall world-view (*hashkafa*)? What constitutes a true halachic response to suffering? *Talmud Bavli, Taanit* 8a, suggests the following answer to these questions: “*Amar Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: 'Kol hasameach b'yisurin sh'bayin aluv mavi yeshuah l'olam. Shenemar: 'Bahem olam v'nivashayah.*” (“Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Levi said: ‘Anyone who rejoices in the suffering that comes upon him brings salvation to the world. As it says [*Yeshiyahu* 64:4] “We had always [relied] upon them and been saved”’) At first blush, one could not imagine a more counter-intuitive response to misery and suffering.

The great Tunisian Talmudic scholar, Rabbeinu Chananel ben Chushiel (990-1053) explained what is meant by Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Levi’s statement and his use of the *pasuk* (verse) from *Sefer Yeshiyahu*: “We admit that this affliction has come upon us because of our sins and this acknowledgement, [in and of itself] is fitting to bring salvation to the world.” In a word, *yisurin* (acts of suffering) are to be viewed as opportunities for rededicating ourselves to Hashem. They are cathartic moments, which when viewed through the lens of discernment of the Torah offer us a chance for spiritual growth and renewal. As difficult as these painful periods may be, they are precious moments that should never be squandered. *Yisurin*, therefore, are a call to *teshuvah* (repentance). As the Rav states:

Suffering, in the opinion of Judaism, must not be purposeless, wasted. Out of suffering must emerge the ethical norm, the call for repentance, for self-elevation. Judaism wants to convert the passional frustrating experience into an integrating, cleansing and redeeming factor. (Ibid.)

Each month, in anticipation of Rosh Chodesh, we pray to the Holy One Blessed be He for long lives that will be filled with goodness, blessing, peace, sustenance, physical health, awe of Heaven, and fear of sin. We beseech Him for lives that will have neither shame nor humiliation. We *daven* (pray), as well, for lives that will include honor and the love of Torah. With His Divine grace, may all of these *berachot* (blessings) be fulfilled for the entire Jewish people.

If, however, G-d forbid, there are those amongst Hashem's people upon whom He chooses to visit acts of suffering, may the recipients of these trials and tribulations respond to them with a renewed sense of purpose. May they, like Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi suggests, find the strength to use these *yisurin* as opportunities for spiritual growth and redemption, and thereby bring salvation to the world. As *Yirmiyahu*, the majestic prophet at the time of the destruction of the First *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), taught us so long ago: "*Hasheveinu Hashem alecha v'nashuvah chadeish yameinu kekedem*" ("Bring us back to You, Hashem, and we will return, renew our days as they were in the past"). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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