Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Ki Savo 5780 }

Perceived Torment

The Worst Suffering

One of the *pesukim* of the *tochacha* in this week's Parsha describes the anguish of always wishing to go back in time. "*In the morning you will say 'I wish it were still last evening' and in the evening you will say 'I wish it were still the previous morning' because of the fear in your heart*".

This *passuk* is reminiscent of a similar idea mentioned in the *tochacha* in Sefer Vayikra. "*...You will run away but nobody will chase you.*"

Neither of these *pesukim* speak of an actual calamity that will take place. Rather, they speak of much greater torment - the fear in *our* heart. Whom will we escape? Nobody. There won't even be anyone pursuing us.

The worst suffering is when a person *thinks* there is something wrong but fails to realize that it's all in his head.

Real Pain

It's important to understand that pain in reaction to any suffering, is real pain. This is even when the problem that is supposedly causing all that pain is imagined. As Mark Twain famously said, "I'm an old man and have known a great many troubles, some of which actually happened."

When a child is afraid to sleep in a dark room because he thinks there's a monster under the bed, any mature child or adult will agree that the monster is not real. But the *fear* is very real to the child. Therefore, just like we should not dismiss the child's fear, we must validate the pain of someone going through a hard time, even if we know that his troubles are only imaginary.

Dark and Light

However, when you are the one feeling pain - even if someone else should be validating and understanding, it's important to understand things a bit deeper.

Two people may experience the same exact event differently. Even something as clear as the weather can be perceived differently by two people. A photographer might appreciate a cloudy day for an outdoor photoshoot, while someone who was planning a trip to the beach would be quite disappointed on the same day.

Kalmen and Zalmen are standing next to each other on the same exact spot and they are both seeing a completely different scene. Kalmen is

seeing everything in muted, dark colors while Zalmen is seeing everything in bright, sharp colors. You might think that one of them is imagining things. But their vision is 100% accurate and correct! How is that possible? Simple. Kalmen is wearing sunglasses while Zalmen isn't.

A similar scenario happened when Shmerel went to the doctor one day and complained that his entire body hurts. He feels sharp pain anywhere he touches. After a thorough examination, the doctor was surprised to find Shmerel in perfect health. It wasn't until he took a better look at Shmerel's finger that he noticed it was fractured!

Sometimes you find everything dark and dreary or you feel like everything hurts. But if you would remove those sunglasses or splint that finger, all your troubles will disappear. You just need to realize that it's your own subjective perception that is causing you to see things the way you do.

Frustration and Disbelief

When you go through something difficult and people respond dubiously, it's not that they are questioning the legitimacy of your anguish. It's likely that they are only wondering whether you are actually facing a problem or if it's only your perception that is leading you to believe you have a problem.

People sometimes get frustrated when their tales of woe are challenged as figments of their imagination. "You don't understand me!", they complain. However, if more than one person who hears you out tries to explain to you that you might be creating your own problems, perhaps it's a sign for you to consider whether what they're saying has merit (Midrash Rabbah Lech, Lecha 45:7).

It's always wise to talk to an objective third party – a family member, a friend, or a Rav – who will be able to hear your story without feeling your emotions and determine whether your troubles are real. Of course it's up to you to trust an objective perspective, when it doesn't resonate with your own.

Where to Run?

This section of the *tochacha* is particularly sharp. Even if your troubles are only in your own head, they cause real and tangible anguish, and you can't run away from yourself!

Someone once said that he won't be helped by going on a vacation, because then he will have to take himself along. Those who constantly find fault with the people or circumstances around them are in a constant state of torment, and nothing they do or change helps them – until they realize that they are the ones causing their own problem.

Fact and Fiction

When you are emotionally entangled in a situation, it is extremely difficult to take a step back and objectively assess what is going on. I sometimes hear people repeating stories to me with such conviction; they don't doubt for even a moment that what they experienced was real and true. They state it as a proven fact.

When I notice this problem in a client who comes to talk to me, I find it very helpful to ask them, "What would you tell a friend who comes to complain to you about this very problem?" Often, viewing the challenge as if it's happening to someone else can assist you in coming up with a viable solution on your own.

Sometimes, even though my client will be able to solve the problem for an imaginary friend, he will still insist that his problem is unique and

unsolvable. Why? Because his pain is so real to him, his anguish so deep, that he can't imagine it all going away with such a simple fix – a fix he himself came up with! That is why it is so important to separate fact from fiction and to honestly determine what is real and what is exacerbated or entirely fabricated by your emotions.

Challenge Your Own Assumptions

Efraim, a client of mine, declared that his wife doesn't care about a word he says. How did he know that? Because every time he asked her something, she responded coolly and indifferently.

I challenged him, "How does that prove that she doesn't care? Maybe you already made up your mind that this was the truth, and the fact that she didn't answer once or twice only served to further your assumption. Maybe she is so intimidated and afraid of you that she simply doesn't know what to answer? Maybe she just didn't hear you!" There are so many ways to look at things.

Often when a couple is in conflict, and one buys a gift for the other there will be such assumption. People tell me, "The gift she gave me last week was totally manipulative." Or "That gift is worthless! He just bought it to spite me." Are you sure that this is so? It's hard to believe that your spouse went out and spent their money on something they thought you would enjoy out of malice. It might occur on a rare occasion, but is it true in your case?

Once you're in a negative place, nothing you see will be good. Think about it. Are you constantly seeing things in a bad light? That might be your indication that the problem is only your perception.

Nobody can prove your assumptions wrong. If they try, you will claim that they don't understand you. There are people who go from therapist to therapist, hoping at least one of them will not tell them that they are the problem. But if you don't have an open mind and you are not ready to hear that you might be causing your own troubles, then you will forever be running away from an invisible, inescapable enemy: your own mind.

Can It Be True?

When you come home from a long day of shopping and notice a large stain on the wall just outside your door, it might cause some aggravation. The stain is there and very visible, but does that indicate that your entire house is dirty? Does it mean that it never was and never will be clean again? It all depends on how you see it. If you choose to focus only on that stain, while completely ignoring the rest of your remarkably clean home, you will be making your own life miserable.

It could be that your spouse has a flaw. It could even be that it is a gigantic flaw. But others don't see it that way. Well-meaning friends and family might even go so far as to tell you how lucky you are to have such a spouse. Even if that probably won't make you very happy right now, consider that maybe they're trying to tell you something?

Perhaps if you remove Kalmen's dark colored glasses and quit focusing on that one stain on the wall, you will be able to start noticing the things that they see. Ask yourself: Is he really a cruel husband? Don't people really like her? Although people who are excellent parents and terrible spouses, or devoted friends and horrible neighbors exist, it is not the norm. If your spouse is generally a good person and only you find them problematic, consider if there might be something that you can change to alter your perception.

Don't Skip the Preface!

Even if you preface your complaints against others with "I know I'm not perfect either" or "Maybe I should not have said that", it doesn't absolve you of fault. In fact, your imperfection or the thing you said might place you squarely at fault for the entire incident! At the very least, you may be equally accountable.

Maybe, if you do some honest introspection and change the way you look at things, you will cease to live a tormented existence of your own making, and come to realize that your spouse is actually quite perfect, even if they never change a thing.

Chinuch: In Your Own Head

Children sometimes do or say things without realizing that they're being disrespectful or crossing red lines. Most of the time, they are not trying to hurt us. We need to remember not to take what they say personally and realize that we might be looking at them based on our own preconceived notions. It's also possible that they are triggering certain emotions that would never be stirred had it been someone else's kid saying the very same thing.

Sometimes you find your child totally impossible, but surprisingly, your spouse gets along with that kid swimmingly. This usually means that there is something wrong in your perception of the child and his actions, rather than with the child himself.

As difficult as it might be, when dealing with our families we need to be vigilant to keep our sunglasses firmly inside our pockets, so that our vision doesn't get clouded and our mood unnecessarily soured.



Q&A

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org



Question:

My son, who doesn't live with me, will be spending some time in my house. I want to know how to use this opportunity to convince him that the things he has heard about me aren't true and that I am really a good person.

Answer:

Show, don't tell. If you want to benefit your child, say nothing. First, by talking about it you are legitimizing the accusations wagered against you and you might inadvertently admit to some of them. And second, by showing him what a great parent you are just by making him comfortable and giving him a genuinely good time, you will make a much deeper impression on him. His opinion might not change overnight. It might take a long time. Slowly but surely, however, your efforts will bear fruit and he will come to see the truth for himself.

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