

# Tragedy – A Source of Strength

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**W**e are a nation experienced in tragedy. Our people have suffered the severest pain and persecution on both the personal and communal level, yet miraculously, our people have endured, persevered and even flourished, despite these brutal conditions. Should not the reaction of a constantly suffering people have been one of demoralization, of rejection, of shattered faith? The answer to this question captures the very essence of Klal Yisroel with its unique understanding of the meaning and purpose of life and its special relationship with the Almighty.

King Solomon in the Song of Songs (Chapter 5) describes the saga of the rejected lover seeking to reunite with his beloved. “Open the door, my beloved.” He pleads to be allowed entrance but is rejected. “I have removed my garment, must I get up and get dressed? I have washed my feet, must I get up and dirty them?” Despite the most ardent pleas, the woman remains cold, aloof and unmoved. Yet, suddenly, she observes his hand through a crack in the door and immediately her emotions stir. She rises from her bed and hastens to let him in.

We know that the entire Song of Songs is analogous to the relationship between Klal Yisroel and the Almighty. The Ramban interprets the previous episode in the following manner:

The prophets come to Klal Yisroel and plead with them to repent their evil ways. Despite all their exhortations, the people turn a deaf ear and show no response. However, when Hashem causes Klal Yisroel to suffer, there is a definite reaction and a return to righteous ways. It would seem at first glance that the analogy in Song of Songs is a bit strained. How can the appearance of the man’s hand through a crack in the door be compared to an act of punishment meted out by G-d to His children?

If we analyze the following sentence of the Psalms of King David, the analogy becomes clear. “Your staff and your cane, they will comfort me.” A stray lamb, separated from its flock, alone and bewildered, suddenly feels the stinging staff of its master upon its back. At that very moment, despite the piercing pain, the lamb feels the greatest comfort. My master is here! I am not alone! Despite the pain and suffering inflicted upon us by Hashem, it is that very same pain that strengthens our knowledge of His presence. We recognize His need to reprimand us for our wrongdoings, and, therefore, we realize that the punishment is a revelation of His existence and manifestation of His concern. It is for this reason that we respond. Not out of fear, but rather, out of love.

This approach is what has sustained us through centuries of bloodshed and torture. However, it still remains to be explained how we, as a people, have been able to reach this astounding level of perception. How, as a nation, have we been able to see through the clouds of agonizing pain and focus on the reality of our suffering?

Man lives in an imaginary world. He believes that the pleasures in which he indulges himself will last forever. The pursuit of gratification is his overwhelming concern, leaving little or no room for an honest examination of the reality of his existence. The truth is, of course, that life is just a fleeting moment in eternity and even that short period of existence is filled with difficulty and pain. The reality is that the soul is immortal, that a future does exist, that this life is no more than a corridor to the World to Come. It is man's lack of control, his inability to curb and harness his passions, that distorts his grasp of reality and leads him to a life of false fulfillment and mistaken values.

The people of Israel are different. As the nation that embraced the Torah, as those who adhere to its precepts and ideals, we do not live under the haze of illusion. The Torah outlines for us a life, which calls for the subjugation of desires. With the Torah we avoid being enslaved by our passions, and, therefore, we can free our minds to objectively pursue a life of significance and meaning. The Torah is the heartbeat and soul of our people. Its message as to the purpose of life is aflame within us. It is for this reason that when tragedy strikes we are not defeated. The pain and suffering

help us focus on the reality of life and intensify the fires of faith with a reevaluation of our actions and a reassessment of our life's purpose, followed by a renewed commitment to the Torah and Mitzvos.

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Our Rabbis tell us (Smachos, Chapter 8) that Rabbi Akiva lost his beloved son, Rabbi Shimon. When Rabbi Akiva rose to deliver the eulogy and beheld the great assembly of people, he was overwhelmed with emotion and proclaimed, "Do not think it is easy to bury a child. But now that I see so many people gathered to perform "honoring the deceased" because of my son, I am assured that he is guaranteed a place in the World to Come, and I have been consoled." The Talmud related that this same Rabbi Akiva was once traveling and stopped to spend a night at an inn. He was told that there was no room for him at the inn. At that moment, he proclaimed, "All that the All-Merciful does is for the best," and proceeded to sleep out in the field. While in the field he lit a candle, but a wind came and blew it out. Again he repeated, "All that the All-Merciful does is for the best." Rabbi Akiva again repeated the same phrase when his rooster was killed, and again, when the same happened to his donkey. The next day, Rabbi Akiva discovered that the inn was attacked by thieves and all the lodgers were killed. Had he spent the night at the inn, he certainly would have been killed. Had his candle been lit, had his rooster crowed, had his donkey brayed, he would have been discovered. Had nothing happened to the inhabitants of the inn, Rabbi Akiva still would not have registered any complaint. That Hashem does everything for the best was expressed with complete sincere will before he knew how his misfortunes were really preserving and protecting him.

Yet this same Rabbi Akiva did not find comfort for the loss of his child with, "All that the All-Merciful does is for the best." To intellectually accept and adjust to such a loss is feasible. To find

emotional comfort seems an impossible task. This is what Rabbi Akiva meant when he said, “Do not think it is easy to bury a child.”

Did Rabbi Akiva have to inform us of the difficulty of burying one’s own child? Rabbi Akiva knew that, logically, no one could comprehend his consolation other than with the assumption that his loss was not that profound. Rabbi Akiva explained that his loss was extremely profound, but the knowledge that his son was guaranteed a place in the World to Come, and the deep understanding that this was all that mattered, gave him solace and comfort.

Rabbi Akiva did not have a distorted picture of the meaning of life. His comprehension that our life in this world is temporary and transient was complete. When he was assured that his son was guaranteed a place in the World to Come, he knew that there had been no end. The momentary pain can only be soothed by the knowledge that eternal pleasure has been guaranteed.