Finding Meaning In Suffering

Another important issue that we will need to address is that of yissurim, suffering. The world is full of suffering and many of our students have unfortunately experienced it often. A ma'amin might think, "If I believe that everything comes from Hashem, then this pain, too, comes from Hashem. How can that be?"

Inculcating Emunah From A Young Age

It is important to preempt this train of thought by teaching our children all about the goodness of Hashem, how He watches over us with Hashgachah Pratis, and is constantly looking out for us and doing chessed for us. If we inculcate this belief in our children when they are still young (though of course it is never too late), then this will be their baseline, and when yissurim do occur, they will know that there is an explanation for them. Even if they cannot understand the reason, they will already have a solid, deeply-rooted belief in Hashem and His chesed, as well as a relationship with Him, making it much easier to accept the difficulties. As we know, when someone is sitting shivah, that is not a good time to start teaching them that Hashem is good and everything is for the best. However, if this concept is part of our children's chinuch, then even if they are not on the level of saying, like Dovid HaMelech, "Chessed umishpat ashira," meaning "al chessed v'al mishpat ashira"—I will sing when Hashem bestows upon me kindness and when He deals with me with His middah of judgement; at least they will be able to say and believe, "Baruch Dayan Ha'Emes—blessed is the True Judge.

Taking Care Of Each Individual

Regarding the mitzvah of "V'ahavta eis Hashem Elokecha—And you shall love Hashem, your G-d," Rashi says that Ahavas Hashem is learning Torah. However, the Rambam says differently: He states that ahavah is "misbonen b'peulosav"—noticing and thinking about His actions, looking at the magnificence of creation, gazing up at the heavens and thinking about Who created everything in this complex and beautiful world. And yet He has time to take care of each of us individually, to provide us with all our needs. There is a beautiful mashal told to illustrate this point: There was an almanah who used to support her family by making bagels and selling them in the market every day. One day, she stood in the shuk the whole day, but she could not sell even one bagel. It was getting dark; it was time to go home to her kids, yet she had no money. On the way home, somebody stopped her and asked, "What do you have in the basket?" When she answered that she had bagels, he asked her how many she had, and told her that he needed to buy them all. As she continued walking home, she said, "Ribbono Shel Olam, bist dach azoi farnumen mit dein gantze velt—You are so busy with Your whole world. Where do You find the time to look and see what is going on in this little almanah's basket?"

Reconciling The Views On Ahavas Hashem

"Ki ereh shamecha ma'aseh etzbe'osecha...mah enosh ki sizkirenu?"—I see Your skies, the work of Your Fingers...who is man that You remember him? This is, according to the Rambam, the "pesach le'ehov es Hashem"—the opening through which one can love Hashem. Therefore, in order to reconcile Rashi's and the Rambam's views on what ahavas Hashem is, we can say that the mitzvah of ahavas Hashem is in fact limmud HaTorah, because "mitoch kach atah makir"—through that you recognize — the limmud Torah brings us to recognize Hashem and is therefore an expression of an inspiration for love of Hashem.

However, how can we inspire someone to come to want to learn Torah? Through looking at creation and recognizing the Hashgachah Pratis in our lives, noticing how Hashem runs the world with all its complexities, yet finds the time to look into our little baskets and provide us with all our seemingly insignificant needs at all times.

Through the constant recognition of the Hashgacha Pratis in our lives, we can become emotionally prepared to see the good even in the seemingly bad situations that we find ourselves in.

Coping With Suffering

When a child has suffered a lot in his life, we can look to Sefer Iyov for guidance on how to approach him. Iyov was a tzaddik, a giant of giants. He lost everything he had — his ten children, his vast wealth, his health and he was a broken man. His friends came to be menachem avel, but they sat in silence for seven days, for Iyov was speechless, and they could not address him before he addressed them. Afterwards, they discussed everything that happened for thirty-eight Perakim, analyzing and trying to understand.

In the 38th Perek Hashem said to Iyov, "Eifo hayisa b'yasdi aretz"—Where were you when I created the world? Do you know what this world is about? Do you know which neshamos had to come back, and to whom? This world is like a

needlepoint, where if all you see is the back, it looks like a lot of messy strings, but the front is a beautiful picture. Why did Hashem wait until this point to tell this to Iyov? I think we can learn from here that when someone is experiencing pain, it is permissible for him to try to understand the meaning of what is going on, to try to make some sense out of it. It is only when he has tried to understand but he is frustrated because he cannot, that he is ready to hear and accept "eifo hayisa b'yasdi aretz," that there are some things he cannot understand. Telling him upfront, before he goes through this process, can be too harsh and may not be accepted.

There Is Always A Reason

It is important that our children know that even when we do not understand, there is a reason. A menahel once invited a rav to speak to a group of girls in Los Angeles at a melaveh malkah. He told a story about a couple that did not have children for many years. They went to a Rebbe, who gave them a brachah, and they had a child. Five years later, the child died. They returned to the Rebbe heartbroken, and asked him for an explanation. The Rebbe explained that the child was a neshamah of a ger tzedek who was born a prince and lived in a palace. At five years of age he became enamored with his Jewish tutor, and ran away from the palace to join the Jewish people. He lived a life of tzidkus. When he got to shamayim, he was told that though he was a tzaddik and certainly deserved to go to a very high place in Gan Eden, he first needed to go back to this world to rectify the five years that he had lived as a non-Jew. This was the child that the couple bore.

Two weeks later that Menahel was on a plane with his wife, on the way to Eretz Yisrael to bury their son. All of a sudden, he turned to his wife and said, "He was talking to us." Though of course no one can know exactly the reason for their son's death, this was a big nechamah for them and really gave them chizuk.

Hashem's chesbonos might be otherworldly and beyond our limited understanding. They may be global or communal. The Mishnah says, "Ein b'yadeinu lo mishalvas haresha'im v'lo miyesurei hatzadikim"—It is not in our hands [to understand], neither the serenity of the resha'im nor the suffering of tzaddikim. Sometimes there is a need to try to make some sense out of something, but ultimately gam zu l'tovah—this too is for the good, it is already good—it is part of the salvation.

This mehalech can help us cope with the concept of the Holocaust as well. The Holocaust is about suffering and pain, but it is also about Hashgachah Pratis.

Many, many people were saved in amazing ways. The story of the Holocaust is also full of instances of mesirus nefesh of the many, many individuals who gave up food, energy, and their very lives for others and in order to keep mitzvos. Obviously, this cannot be told to someone who went through the Holocaust without deeply sympathizing with the pain that they went through, but it is true nonetheless.

In general, trying to understand the meaning behind yissurim is an emotional process, not an intellectual one. If the questions were logical, it would be like asking Albert Einstein a question on the theory of relativity when you have no idea what the theory is all about. Therefore, the answers to these types of questions have to address the emotions as well.

Rashi says, "Vayarek es chanichav, techilas kenissas adam... she'asid la'amod bo"—chinuch is a process, it is the beginning of the entry of a person into something he is going to maintain in the long term. Chinuch takes time; it takes patience. But that is our job, and of course Hashem helps.

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