



Temple Rodef Shalom

Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein
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The Significance of Suffering

“Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation?...Why in the world did He ever create pain?”

“Pain?” Lieutenant Scheisskopf’s wife pounced upon the word victoriously. “Pain is a useful symptom. Pain is a warning to us of bodily dangers.”

“And who created the dangers?” Yossarian demanded. He laughed caustically. “Oh, He was really being charitable to us when He gave us pain! Why couldn’t He have used a doorbell instead to notify us, or one of his celestial choirs? Or a system of blue-and-red neon tubes right in the middle of each person’s forehead. Any jukebox manufacturer worth his salt could have done that. Why couldn’t He?”¹

This passage from Joseph Heller’s novel “Catch 22” goes to the heart of a question human beings have been asking for more years than we can count: How can a just and loving God allow suffering?

This sermon is not going to address that question.

This sermon is going to suggest, as Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his classic book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,”

“Laws of nature treat everyone alike. They do not make exceptions for good people or for useful people....laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people....God does not reach down to interrupt the workings of laws of nature to protect the righteous from harm.”²

If this is the case, how can we understand pain and suffering? What do we do with the disappointments and losses and discouraging times that face every one of us as human beings?

“A strong case can be made that modern society does a poor job of preparing 21st-century humans for the inevitable ebb and flow of discontent.”³ David Von Drehele wrote these words in the wake of the suicides, last summer, of the designer Kate Spade and the writer and television personality Anthony Bourdain.

Von Drehele highlights the work of James Davies, a British psychotherapist and philosopher, who believes “that we have created a culture that assumes happiness to be the normal, healthy human condition. Deviations from the blissful path — sadness, anxiety, disappointment — are thus treated as illnesses in search of a cure. This ‘harmful cultural belief that much of our everyday suffering is a

¹ “Catch 22,” by Joseph Heller, chapter 18.

² “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, p. 58.

³https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/our-culture-assumes-happiness-is-the-normal-human-condition-why/2018/06/08/8722d03e-6b4c-11e8-bf8c-f9ed2e672adf_story.html?utm_term=.398c0fb2ec18

damaging encumbrance best swiftly removed' gets in the way of a more robust response, he writes: namely, approaching unpleasant emotions as 'potentially productive experiences to be engaged with and learnt from.'"⁴

Davies believes that our experiences of suffering are "expressions of what it means to be fully human, and also, more controversially, as experiences which can potentially present opportunities for self-understanding and emotional development if understood, managed and responded to correctly."⁵ He urges us to use our suffering in ways that are productive, can help us grow, and that can help us move from a bad to a better place.

Davies traces our 21st century attitude towards suffering to the Enlightenment. This 18th century intellectual and philosophical movement promoted the laws of reason and the scientific method as tools that could be used to improve human life. The thinkers of the Enlightenment saw human misery everywhere. They directed considerable effort toward using emerging scientific knowledge to alleviate suffering.

For the philosophers of the Enlightenment, suffering was "not an inevitable feature of the natural order nor did it provide a route to God, but it was rather the outcome of human error or folly; a purposeless affliction to be eradicated by the exercise of reason."⁶ Any growth that humans might derive from suffering was minimized. Emotional suffering became equated with the suffering from physical ailments, and therefore a collection of symptoms that medicine could reduce or eliminate. "Emotional discontent," notes Davies, "Was increasingly stripped of its spiritual and moral meaning; gradually being understood as a regrettable consequence of genetic or biological misfortune."⁷

We are grateful for the innovations in the treatment of debilitating anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses that make it possible for millions of people to lead more productive lives and, in many cases, to save lives. As a psychotherapist for over twenty years, I saw the benefits of these treatments for my patients. I found that those patients who saw their emotional suffering as an opportunity for self-reflection and renewal ultimately achieved a more complete and lasting healing.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, a psychiatrist and a rabbi, notes that "While we wish that it would come via a more pleasant route, suffering is often a wake-up call. We are often so frenetically engaged in the activities of life that we may give little thought to the purpose of life. It is when we suffer that our focus may change. Suffering may change our perspective and we may assign different values to things."⁸

I certainly saw this with my patients. Although many presented with longstanding symptoms of depression and anxiety, it was often a crisis that propelled them to seek treatment. Whether it was the loss of a loved one, a career disappointment, a major illness, or a transition from one phase of life to the next—those who came for treatment knew that they could not go on with their lives as they had before. My role was to accompany them on their journey to emotional healing, a journey that helped them to derive meaning from their suffering.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "The Importance of Suffering: the Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent," by James Davies. Routledge, 2012, p. 6.

⁶ Ibid., p. 59

⁷ Ibid., p. 61

⁸ http://www.jewishworldreview.com/twerski/twerski_tazria.php3#.W3nMbLgnY2w

If, as Rabbi Kushner writes, “Pain is the price we pay for being alive,” we should not ask: “why do I have to feel this pain?” Instead we should ask: “How can we turn all the painful experiences of our lives into birth pangs or into growing pains?”⁹

What happens on the other side of these painful experiences? How are we changed if we allow our birth pangs to lead to growing pains?

A woman who was successfully treated for depression wrote that

“My suffering has changed in certain ways how I see things. One of the most important is that I am more sensitive to the suffering of others.”¹⁰

Our pain can help us to be more compassionate towards others who are suffering. The words “compassion” and “suffering” share a connection: the word “compassion” comes from the Latin *com* (with) + *pati* (suffer)—literally to suffer with someone.

Those who come through suffering often discover courage that they did not know they had. Because they have survived the depths, and the world is a less scary place.

A man who started his own business eight months after he attempted suicide notes:

“Nothing could be as bad as what I went through, so what do I have to fear now? My experience of surviving depression has made me less afraid of life. But I am more courageous not because the world has changed, but because I have changed.”¹¹

In the wake of his depression, this man gained courage that enabled him to immerse himself in life and to find meaning. When we are under great stress, when we suffer loss or experience trauma, we are more able to cope if we believe that our lives have meaning and purpose.¹²

This search for meaning is a critical part of who we are as human beings, as important as our striving for physical survival. Dr. Clay Routledge writes that “We want lives that matter. It is when people are not able to maintain meaning that they are most psychologically vulnerable.”

Having friends, family, and community support are key to giving our lives meaning and purpose. People are more likely to feel that their lives have meaning if they feel a sense of what social scientists call “belongingness.”¹³ When we are suffering, the support of those around us is critical.

What can we do to support a friend or family member who is suffering? The first step is to acknowledge their pain, even if the person has not told us directly that something is wrong. Perhaps you have seen the public service television commercial in which two people are texting each other. One person replies

⁹ “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, p. 64.

¹⁰ “The Importance of Suffering: the Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent,” by James Davies. Routledge, 2012, p. 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/opinion/sunday/suicide-rate-existential-crisis.html>

¹³ *Ibid.*

to the question “How things are going?” with the answer that, some days, she cannot get out of bed. There is no response from the other person. The following words then appear on the screen: “How will you respond to someone who is depressed?” The message is that depression and suffering are not out of the ordinary. They are part of life. We need to be ready to respond.

We must let our friends who are suffering know that we are with them. We may not be able to fix what is wrong, yet we can accompany them. We can be alert to signs that our friends may need professional help. We should ask them directly if they have thought of harming themselves. We can support them through the healing process, assuring them that there is hope, helping them to find their strength. We can remind them that their suffering will not be a permanent state. The author William Styron, who suffered from depression, wrote to his fellow sufferers: “Everyone must keep up the struggle, for it is always likely that you will win the battle and nearly a certainty that you will win the war.”¹⁴

What can we do if we are suffering? We can acknowledge that suffering is part of life. We must reach out to friends and family for support. Our goal should not be merely to “get through” a difficult period, but to use a painful time to examine what we can learn from our suffering. Our suffering, Davies writes, “although deeply disturbing, frightening and painful, may in fact have a powerful message to teach.”¹⁵

William James, one of the founders of modern psychology, wrote that “the end of suffering can mark the beginning of something new and not a mere reversion to natural health, because the sufferer, when saved, can be ‘saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before.’”¹⁶

Our biblical matriarch, Leah, is an example of someone who suffers deeply. Her life does not unfold in the way she expected. Leah is married to Jacob, a man who does not love her.¹⁷ Worse still, Jacob makes no secret of his love for Rachel, Leah’s sister. The names Leah gives her first three sons show her hope that Jacob will come to love her as well: *Reuven* (‘now my husband will love me’), *Shimon* (‘this is because Adonai heard and gave me this one also’) and *Levi* (‘this time my husband will become attached to me because I have born him three sons.’)¹⁸

Leah’s suffering brings her to a profound change, a change that we see in the name that she chooses for her fourth son: *Yehuda* (Judah), meaning “This time I will praise Adonai.”¹⁹ Rabbi Shai Held writes that “Leah has somehow found the courage to accept that her life it not going to turn out as she had hoped.”²⁰ Leah’s ability to express gratitude does not wipe away her hurt and disappointment, nor should it.

The word Jew—*Yehudi*—derives from the name Judah. As Leah teaches us, to be a Jew is to accept that life does not always turn out the way that we planned. To be a Jew is to live with complex emotions and

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/03/opinion/sunday/depression-william-styron.html>

¹⁵ “The Importance of Suffering: the Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent,” by James Davies. Routledge, 2012, p. 172

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 161

¹⁷ “The Heart of Torah: Volume 1. Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus,” by Rabbi Shai Held, p.60

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 61

¹⁹ Genesis 29:35

²⁰ “The Heart of Torah: Volume 1. Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus,” by Rabbi Shai Held, p. 62.

realities. To be a Jew, and a human being, is to know that “everyone is our brother or sister in suffering.”²¹ We do not walk this path alone.

Abraham Lincoln suffered from depression. A friend of the young Lincoln was so concerned about his despondent state that he removed every sharp object he could find from Lincoln’s room.²² Yet, one of Lincoln’s biographers wrote that Lincoln’s depression was central to Lincoln’s success:

“With Lincoln we have a man whose depression spurred him, painfully, to examine the core of his soul; whose hard work to stay alive helped him develop crucial skills and capacities . . . and whose inimitable character took great strength from the piercing insights of depression . . . forged over decades of deep suffering and earnest longing.”²³

Why in the world did [God] He ever create pain?”

Yossarian’s question, while important, is not as important as the answer he receives from the wife of Lieutenant Scheisskopf.

“Pain is a useful symptom.”²⁴

Give us the wisdom to pay attention to the symptom of pain. Grace us with the compassion to walk by the side of those who are suffering. Strengthen us with the resolve to face the disappointments and pain in our lives. Guide us so that our suffering may lead us to life renewed.

Amein

²¹“When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, p. 112.

²² https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/our-culture-assumes-happiness-is-the-normal-human-condition-why/2018/06/08/8722d03e-6b4c-11e8-bf8c-f9ed2e672adf_story.html?utm_term=.866117701cd7

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Catch 22,” by Joseph Heller, chapter 18.