

Dealing with Painful Emotions & Anger at G-d – Part 3 – JewishClarity.com

Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik very beautifully addressed many of the complex emotional issues associated with the death of a loved one in his essay *Aninut and Aveilut* taken from *Out of the Whirlwind*, a collection of his teachings on the topic of *yissurim* — difficulties and challenges in life.

There are two distinct phases in the process of mourning, and the *halachah* has meticulously insisted upon their strict separation. The first phase begins with the death of the relative...and ends with the burial. The second commences with burial and lasts seven, or...thirty days. The first we call *aninut*, the second *aveilut*.

Aninut represents the spontaneous human reaction to death. It is an outcry, a shout, or a howl... In spite of the fact that the *halachah* has indomitable faith in eternal life, in immortality, and in a continued transcendental existence for all human beings, it did understand...man's fright and confusion when confronted with death... It permitted the mourner to have his way for a while and has ruled that the latter be relieved of all *mitzvot*... [*Mitzvot* are] applicable to man who is preoccupied with life and not to one who has encountered death... How can the mourner pronounce a benediction or say "Amen" if he is "speechless"? He is still capable of producing sounds, but a benediction consists of spiritual words and not just of physical sounds.

Aveilut — At this point, the...*halachah*...makes an about-face. The *halachah* is firmly convinced that man is free and that he is master not only of his deeds but of his emotions as well. The *halachah* holds the view that man's mastery of his emotional life is unqualified and that he is capable of changing thought patterns, emotional structures and experimental motifs within an infinitesimal period of time... Man, the *halachah* maintains, does not have to wait patiently for one mood to pass and for another to emerge gradually. He disengages himself, quickly and actively... Hence, the *halachah*, which showed so much tolerance for the mourner during the stage of *aninut*, and let him float with the tide of black despair, now — forcefully and with a shift of emphasis — commands him that, with interment, the first phase of grief comes abruptly to a close and a second phase — that of *aveilut* — begins.

With the commencement of *aveilut*, the *halachah* commands the mourner to undertake a heroic task — to start picking up the debris of his own shattered personality and to reestablish himself as man, restoring lost glory, dignity and uniqueness... Yes, the *halachah* tells man, death is indeed something ugly and frightening, something grisly and monstrous; yes, death is trailing behind every man, trying to defeat him, his ambitions and aspirations; all that is true. Nevertheless, the *halachah* adds, death must not confuse man; the latter must not plunge into total darkness because of death. On the contrary, the *halachah* asserts, death gives man the opportunity to display greatness and to act heroically, to build even though he knows that he will not live to enjoy the sight of the...construction..., to plant even though he does not expect to eat the fruit, to explore, to develop, to enrich — not himself, but coming generations... The ceremonial turning point at which *aninut* is transformed into *aveilut*, despair into intelligent sadness, and self-negation into self-affirmation, is to be found in the recital of *Kaddish* at the grave... When the mourner recites — "Glorified and sanctified be the Great Name...", he declares — No matter how powerful death is..., however terrifying the grave is, however nonsensical and absurd everything appears, no matter how black one's despair is...we declare and profess publicly and solemnly that we are not giving up, that we are not surrendering, that we will carry on the work of our ancestors...that we will not be satisfied with less than the full realization of the ultimate goal — establishment of G-d's kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life for man.

Another essay from Rav Soloveitchik — *Aveilut Yeshanah and Aveilut Chadashah* — *Old Mourning and New Mourning* (also taken from *Out of the Whirlwind*) — deals with this dichotomy.

Man, Judaism maintains and insists, is capable of determining the kind of emotional life he wants to

live. Man has both actions and emotions at his disposal. Man must never be overwhelmed by his emotions. He can invite emotions as well as reject them, opening the door and inviting feelings and sentiments if they are worthy, and slamming the door on those which are degrading and unworthy of attention. In the same manner in which man has the freedom to abstain from engaging in an act to which his conscience objects on moral grounds, he can also disown emotions which the same conscience assesses as unworthy of being integrated into his personality. Likewise, he can assimilate such emotions which bear the stamp of moral approval — constructive noble feelings.

Bachya ibn Pakuda wrote a famous book called *Chovot haLevavot* (*Duties of the Heart*), in which he discriminates between *chovot ha'evavim*, the duties of our limbs, and *chovot ha'levavot*, the duties of the heart. But how can one speak about *chovot ha'levavot* if the heart succumbs hysterically to emotions, such as love for a person, object, goal, or idea which is in reality unworthy of one's love and appreciation?

Actually, many precepts in the Torah deal exclusively with human emotional attitudes and not physical actions: "Love your neighbor" (*Vayikra* 19:18), "You shall not covet" (*Shemot* 20:14, *Devarim* 5:18), "You shall rejoice on your holiday" (*Devarim* 16:14), "You shall not hate your brother" (*Vayikra* 19:17), "You shall love the stranger" (*Devarim* 10:19), etc.

Ibn Ezra raised [a famous question] vis-à-vis the command of *lo tachmod* — not to covet the property of one's neighbor. Coveting is an emotion, a feeling. How then can one be commanded to not covet, desire, or be envious? But in truth, one can be called upon to exclude an emotion in the same way one must abstain from a certain act which is considered unworthy. Ibn Ezra (in his commentary to *Shemot* 20:14) introduces a famous fable or simile. The ignorant peasant, he says, will never desire or fall in love with the daughter of the king, the princess. Ibn Ezra wants to show that emotions are guided by human reason. One desires only what is possible; whatever is impossible is not desired. Pascal spoke about the *logique de couer*, the reasons of the heart (*Pensees* #277). The freedom to adopt and accept emotions or to reject and disown them is within the jurisdiction of man.

Aveilut and the Control of Emotions — The precept of *aveilut*...rests completely upon this Jewish doctrine of human freedom from emotional coercion. However, man's task vis-à-vis *aveilut* is not always the same. At times, man is told to respond emotionally to disaster, to yield to the emotional hurricane and not master his feelings. He must not take evil as something inevitable, which warrants no emotional outburst, just because such a response would be an exercise in futility... Judaism says with admirable realism — Of course every event, good or bad, is planned by the Almighty. So too is death. Man can do little to change the course of events; he rather must surrender to G-d's inscrutable will. Yet submission to a higher will must not prevent man from experiencing those emotions.

Judaism does not want man to rationalize evil or to theologize it away. It challenges him to defy evil and, in case of defeat, to give vent to his distress. Both rationalizing and theologizing harden the human heart and make it insensitive to disaster. Man, Judaism says, must act like a human being. He must cry, weep, despair, grieve, and mourn as if he could change the cosmic laws by exhibiting those emotions. In times of distress and sorrow, these emotions are noble even though they express the human protest against iniquity in nature and also pose an unanswerable question concerning justice in the world.

I want the sufferer to act as a human being, G-d says. Let him not suppress his humanity in order to please Me. Let him tear his clothes in frustrating anger and [temporarily] stop observing *mitzvot* because his whole personality is enveloped by dark despair and finds itself in a trance of the senses and of the faculties. Let him cry and shout, for he must act like a human being.

The *mishnah* relieved the mourner who has not buried his dead "from...all the (positive) *mitzvot* laid down in the Torah" (*Brachot* 3:1 and 17b). Rashi says the reason is that a person who is engaged in performing one *mitzvah* is exempt at that time from other *mitzvot*. But *Tosafot*... disagree, saying that the reason... the mourner is relieved of his obligation in *mitzvot* [is] because he is incapable of performing them... He is like a *chereish*, *shoteh v'katan*, the deaf mute, imbecile and minor who are all exempt from *mitzvot*. This is

what *Tosafot* and all the *Rishonim* mean when they say that it is completely forbidden to perform a mitzvah during this first stage of mourning — the *onen* [one that has not yet buried his relative] is incapable of performing *mitzvot*. Judaism understands that bitterness, grief and confusion are noble emotions which should be assimilated and accepted by man, not rejected at the time of distress. Of course, emotions, like the tide, reach a high mark, make an about face, and begin to recede. The Torah has therefore recommended to man not only to submit himself to the emotional onslaught, but gradually and slowly to redeem himself from its impact.

Therefore, the *halachah* divided mourning into various stages:

First, *meito mutal lefanav* — when his dead lies before him. This is the period of *aninut*, extending from the time of death until the time of burial.

Then, commencing with burial, *aveilut shivah* — the week-long period, which extends into *sheloshim* — the thirty-day period.

Finally, for one's parents, *yud bet chodesh* — the twelve month mourning period. We have during these stages an imperceptible transition from a depressed, desolate, bitter consciousness of catastrophe to a redeemed higher consciousness.

Rav Soloveitchik spoke further about these issues in an essay entitled — *A Theory of Emotions*, also taken from *Out of the Whirlwind*.

Judaism has insisted upon the integrity and wholeness of the table of emotions, leading like a spectrum from joy, sympathy, and humility...to anger, sadness, and anguish... It does not reject any human feelings as unworthy and destructive...

As a rule, Judaism has always tried to maintain a balance between conflicting emotions and to accept the totality of the human emotional experience. We must not say that love is an absolutely noble feeling, while anger is always a base emotion. Their worth and ethical connotations depend upon...[their] circumstances. Sometimes a profound hatred is as noble an experience as a great love.

Similarly, the *halachah* distinguishes between *aninut* and *aveilut*. *Aninut* signifies the **immediate** reaction to the death of a loved one, the unrestricted gloom and unsounded depths of excruciating grief which render the mourner speechless and confounded... Man becomes aware of the worthlessness and absurdity of life, and his distress knows no limits. The *halachah* does not attempt to check this feeling of bereavement — it lets man sink in the abyss of despair at the first encounter with death. It relieves him of all halachic duties since, because of the painful experience, he is not free to act. *Aveilut* [the period that follows the burial] denotes the critical stage of mourning, the grief awareness, and at this level, we will notice at once that *aveilut* contains its own proper negation — solace and hope. *Aveilut* in the *halacha* is interwoven with *nechama*, consolation. They are inseparable. The latter is not a frame of mind which **displaces** grief; there is rather an **interpretation** of grief and solace...of mourning and faith. Immediately upon closing the grave, the line [of the consolers] is formed and comfort is offered to the mourner. What is the *kaddish* pronounced at the grave if not [a]...negation of despair?

Ethicizing Emotion — Only when the critical awareness shifts the emotion into the total life experience and directs the glance of the person toward the outside, do the emotions become ethicized, endowed with meaningfulness, not confined to oneself. The other, the thou, is drawn into our inner emotional world and we permit him to share our attention. There, something wonderful happens — the wall separating individuals is torn down and free communication of feeling is made possible... One should interpret his own feelings and place them within the all-embracing life experience. Then the barriers which he erected around his emotional self are done away with, and the other is invited to join him... The same is true of the feeling of despair. It should open up the closed-in individual existence and make it accessible to others. Grief must not enhance one's self-regard and self-care and render him completely oblivious to the suffering of others. The grieving person must also be disturbed by the pain sustained by his fellow man. He should share the other's burden, even though he seems completely preoccupied with his agonizing private burden. What Judaism requires is the communization of the individual existence.

This is achieved by directing the self-centered emotional life toward the outside, or, if we wish to state it differently, by letting others from the outside enter our inner life...there are other existences...that are [as] important and meaningful as he is, and whose experiences are similar to his... This discovery of the thou takes place in the emotional world.

Summary

While anger seems to be an issue which no human being is entirely removed from, it is still problematic, particularly when expressed in destructive actions.

When it comes to dealing with **intensely painful** situations, we are required to work at seeing the righteousness and justice in how G-d is dealing with us.

How should one deal with the pain of bereavement? On the one hand, it is wrong for one to specifically **choose** to magnify and maximize the pain of bereavement — **far beyond** what is normal. But on the other hand, for one to not mourn properly is considered to be cruelty. The bottom line is that we have a great deal of choice when it comes to our emotions, and we are expected to exercise this choice properly.

Based on the story of Iyov (Job), however, the *Gemara (Baba Batra 16a)* declares that a person is **not** held accountable even for blasphemous words, if they are spoken as a result of one's unavoidable reaction to extreme pain or anguish.

One may even speak harshly to G-d — many great Jews have done so all throughout Jewish history — **if it is a part of an ongoing relationship** with Him. Having this relationship is not only important, it is tremendously therapeutic.

The ultimate *yissurim* is actually distance from G-d, and that is the primary pain which is expressed by David *HaMelech* and others all throughout *Tehilim*.

Final Conclusions

At the end of this process of trying to understand and incorporate the Torah view of dealing with painful emotions and anger at G-d into our lives, what have we accomplished? Have we achieved the type of closure that we are all looking for?

We may all still have many unresolved questions, as well as much pain. And they may both end up continuing until the final stage of history when all questions will be answered, and all issues will be resolved. At the same time, however, we need not feel angry with Hashem. Being confused and unclear is very different, in fact almost the exact opposite, from the moral certainty and judgment which is the essence of anger. As difficult as our pain and questions may be, the awareness that will probably help us the most to deal with them will be the surety that both pain and questions are limited to this temporal world that we are all presently living in. In the world past this one, however, all of this pain and uncertainty will finally be resolved. And even now, at the very moment that we may remain immersed in our own pain, we can be comforted by our certainty that our loved ones who have passed away are long past any pain of their own. At the very same time that we continue to grapple with our own many questions, we can know that our loved ones have no more questions at all.

Hashem should grant all of us the *siyata d'Shimaya* (Heavenly assistance) to be able to understand all that we are capable of understanding, to have the strength to be able to deal with and to live with the pain and the losses that are such an unfortunate reality of this world, and to hasten the time when all confusion and all pain will ultimately be resolved.

This should be *I'zechut ul'illuy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a"h, bat Asher Zevulun*