



מכאב לכוּחַ Strength from Pain

■ “Aharon was Silent”

Parashat Sh’mini tells the story of the sudden death of two of Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu. Their slight deviation from the precise instructions that G-d had commanded Moshe at the dedication of the Tabernacle brought about a terrible tragedy to Aharon and his family.

It happened when they saw the miraculous fire appearing from the heavens to consume the *olah* dedication sacrifice. The Torah describes Bnei Yisrael’s holy excitement and enthusiasm at witnessing this wondrous sight:

... וַיֵּרָא כָּל הָעָם וַיִּרְנוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם.

*The entire nation saw, and raised their voices in praise,
and threw themselves on their faces.* (Vayikra 9,24)

Nadav and Avihu, Aharon’s older sons, were also gripped by the exhilaration, and they ran into the Tabernacle to offer up incense for the occasion. But their offering was a “*strange [unwelcome] fire that G-d had not commanded them*” (10,1). Once again, therefore, a fire appeared from before G-d, but this time, it consumed Nadav and Avihu. Their deaths, the result of a small departure from G-d’s specific directives, were a sanctification of G-d’s Name. As Moshe consoled his brother:

... הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' לֵאמֹר, בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד ...

*This is what G-d said,
“I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me,
and I will be glorified before the nation.”* (10,3)

For “minor” mistakes in the Holy of Holies, G-d exacts the highest prices, and from those who are closest to Him. Thus is magnified the nation’s awe of G-d and desire to adhere to His commands.

How are mortals supposed to deal with such heavy tragedies of this nature? The sharp pain and anguish at the loss of life, the sense of emptiness and torment from all angles – how are the bereaved to contain this?

Generally, one's imagination is the first to respond. It attempts to create a picture that is the opposite of reality, as if the tragedy never happened; this is the stage of repression and denial. This is followed by attempts to distract oneself by engaging in other things. Finally, crying and despair burst forth.

How did Aharon the High Priest react to the abrupt loss of his two sons? The Torah tells us in two words:

וַיֵּדֶם אֶהָרֹן.

Aharon was silent. (10,3)

What is the meaning of this silence? Aharon, who spent his life bringing peace between men - what was going on deep inside him at this time?

■ Prophetic Power

Moshe immediately instructs Aharon and his remaining sons, Elazar and Itamar, not to do anything that expresses sorrow:

רְאֵיכֶם אֶל תִּפְרְעוּ וּבִגְדֵיכֶם לֹא תִפְרְמוּ... וּמִפֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תֵצְאוּ...
כִּי שְׁמֹן מִשְׁחַת ה' עֲלֵיכֶם...

Do not allow your hair to grow, and do not tear your garments... and do not leave the entrance of the Tent of Meeting... for the anointing oil of G-d is upon you. (10,6-7)

We see that in the most sacred Holy of Holies, at the most inspiring occasion, during the most exalted service – sorrow and mourning are not permitted. The nation will do the mourning instead (verse 6). And in verse 8 we see the results:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל אֶהָרֹן לֵאמֹר:

G-d spoke to Aharon, saying:

Aharon receives a unique Divine message, given to him alone and not to Moshe – one of only two times in the entire Torah that this happens. Given Aharon's emotional state, the significance herein is even greater than it appears, for we know that one of the basic prerequisites for prophecy is joy. The prophet must be in a state of happiness and raised spirits in order to receive the Divine message. The Gemara (Shabbat 30b) teaches as follows:

The Divine Presence does not appear amidst sadness, or laziness, or wanton laughter, or light-headedness, or idle talk – but rather amidst the joy of being engaged in a mitzvah.

Our Sages derived this important fundamental from Elisha the Prophet. When King Yehoram of Israel came to request his help for the impending and seemingly-hopeless war with Moav, Elisha did not even want to look at him; he was full of sorrow and bitterness at the path of idol-worship that the King of Israel had chosen. In such a state of mind, he knew, there could be no prophecy. Elisha therefore asked, in the merit of King Yehoshafat of Yehuda (an ally of Yehoram in the war), that a musician be brought before him to raise his spirits, so that he could receive the Divine word. And so it happened:

וְעַתָּה קְחוּ לִי מִנְּגֵן, וְהָיָה כְּנִגֹּן הַמִּנְּגֵן, וְתָהִי עָלָיו יָד ה'.

Now bring a musician before me.

And when the musician played,

the hand of G-d was upon Elisha. (Kings II 3,15)

Similarly, Yaakov Avinu was bereft when told that he had lost his beloved son Yosef. For 22 years, Yaakov was unable to rise above his sadness and enter a state of prophecy-enabling joy – and in fact G-d did not speak to him throughout this period. Only the joyful news that Yosef was in fact alive restored his level of prophecy:

וַיִּגְדּוּ לוֹ לֵאמֹר, עוֹד יוֹסֵף חַי ... וְתָחִי רוּחַ יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם...

They told him, Yosef still lives! ...

Yaakov's spirit was revived... (B'reshit 45,26-27)

And then, just a few verses later:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַרְאֵת הַלַּיְלָה...

G-d said to Yisrael [Yaakov] in a night-vision... (46,2)

Based on this, we now realize that Aharon the Priest must have succeeded in reaching this high level of inner joy, even in the midst of his heavy mourning for his two sons. For if not, he would not have been able to receive G-d's word. How did he do this? What was it that enabled him to rise above his pain?

The answer is that he turned the pain into a source of energy and strength.

We know that when one draws a bow or a spring, or cocks a gun, he is actually storing up elastic energy that is ready to be released in an even

stronger measure. It can be compared to bending one's knees before jumping. In a similar fashion, the pain of mourning is also a form of "retreat," a drawing of oneself backwards, which can then be turned into a source of tremendous strength for the purpose of jumping ahead. The "jump ahead" comes in the form of positive action. As in Aharon's case, this can be not only a memorial for loved ones who have passed away, but also turns the pain into a jumping stone for something greater, something that will raise the nation to a much higher level.

G-d tells Aharon in this prophecy that with their deaths, Nadav and Avihu have raised up the value of "pure awe of G-d." With this new understanding of the sanctity of Hashem's Name, Israel can now *"differentiate between the holy and the profane, between the impure and the pure"* (Vayikra 10,10). For without this quality of *yirat shamayim*, fear of G-d, what significance is there to the concepts of purity, impurity and holiness?

We can compare this to one who wishes to eternalize and memorialize the soul of a beloved son or wife by establishing synagogues. The result is that the death itself becomes the source for hundreds and thousands of people coming close to G-d – a mission that the deceased could never have accomplished in his lifetime.

■ Jeremiah's Challenge

The Prophet Jeremiah underwent difficult times with Israel. His prophecies of rebuke and Divine wrath did not endear them to him, and they tried more than once to harm him. He stands and pours out his pain and frustration before G-d:

לָמָּה הִיָּה כְּאִבִּי נֹצֵחַ וּמַכְתִּי אֲנוּשָׁה, מֵאַנָּה הָרְפָא...

*Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?* (Jeremiah 15,18)

לֹא יִשְׁבְּתִי בְּסוּד מְשַׁחֲקִים וְאֶעֱלֶז, מִפְּנֵי יָדְךָ בָּדָד יִשְׁבְּתִי כִּי זַעַם מְלֹאֲתָנִי.

*I never sat amidst merry-makers and rejoiced;
I sat alone because of Your hand,
You have filled me with anger.* (verse 17)

On the other hand, Jeremiah emphasizes, in the same passage, that he is still able to ascend to the heights of joy, thus enabling him to continue to receive prophecy:

נִמְצְאוּ דְבָרֶיךָ וְאֶכְלָם וַיְהִי דְבָרְךָ לִי לְשִׁשׁוֹן וּלְשִׁמְחַת לִבִּי,
כִּי נִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עָלַי ה' אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת.

*Your words were found and I ate them, and Your word to me
was joy and rejoicing of my heart, for Your name was called
upon me, O Lord G-d of Hosts. (verse 16)*

We see, then, that the prophet's source of joy is his close relationship with the Creator Who speaks to him – even as he simultaneously feels the intolerable pain of the people's hostility towards him and his prophetic messages. What does G-d answer him in his difficult quandary?

לָכֵן כֹּה אָמַר ה': אִם תָּשׁוּב, וְאָשִׁיבְךָ לִפְנֵי תַעֲמֹד.
וְאַם תּוֹצִיא יָקָר מִזֹּלִל כְּפִי תִהְיֶה יָשׁוּבוּ הֵמָּה אֵלַי וְאַתָּה לֹא תָשׁוּב אֵלֵיהֶם.
*Therefore thus says G-d: If you return, I will bring you back,
and you will stand before Me. And if you extricate the precious
from the vile, you shall be as My mouth: they will return to
you, and you will not return to them. (verse 19)*

Hashem's answer is this:

“It is up to you. If you are able to raise yourself up from and above the pain, and turn it into a source of strength and repentance, I will restore you to your status as prophet. If you succeed in your difficult prophetic mission to have these straying souls return and repent, then you will continue to represent Me; when your mouth speaks, it will be as if My mouth is speaking.

“If this happens, then you will be privileged to see the nation returning to you, and you will not have to lower yourself from your prophetic level to be like them, to revel in their parties and games, and to appease them with false illusions.

“Rather, take your sharp pain and turn it into a source of energy for positive action and repentance and growth – and then, perhaps, you will succeed in nullifying the harsh judgments that I have decreed upon Israel.”

■ Producing Sweet from Bitter

It was this concept that led Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi – R. Judah the Prince, the redactor of the Mishna – to invest great efforts in locating the children of righteous men who had strayed from the path of Torah and bringing them back.

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 85a) tells us, for instance, that Rebbe once visited the village of his childhood friend, R. Elazar, son of R. Shimon bar Yochai. Rebbe asked the townspeople if R. Elazar had any offspring, and was told that indeed he had a son, but that the boy had left the path of Torah. Rebbe did not give up, but rather sought out and found the youth. He then promptly granted him rabbinical ordination, despite his situation, and sent the boy to R. Shimon ben Isi to learn Torah.

The story continues: When the boy grew older, he went to learn in Rebbe's yeshiva. Rebbe heard the youth asking a question, and said, "His voice sounds familiar; he sounds like R. Elazar, son of R. Shimon bar Yochai." The scholars told him: "You are right; it is his son, whom you sought out and ordained!"

What is the special value of this unique mission that Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi took upon himself, that of restoring boys to the way of their fathers? The Gemara answers by quoting the above-quoted words that G-d told Jeremiah:

... וְאִם תּוֹצִיא יָקָר מִזּוּלָּל כְּפִי תִהְיֶה ...

*If you extricate the precious from the vile,
you shall be as My mouth...* (Jeremiah 15,19)

The Gemara elaborates: "Whoever teaches Torah to his friend's son, will be privileged to sit in the Heavenly Yeshiva on High, and whoever teaches Torah to the son of an ignoramus, merits that even if Hashem hands down a harsh decree against Israel, He will withdraw it on his behalf."

In other words: There is nothing higher than the power of turning bitter into sweet, or a bleak desert into a blossoming garden. If Hashem hands down a harsh decree, it is only so that people will take stock of their ways and return to the path of integrity and goodness – and whoever has a hand in this process, is a true emissary of G-d; he is the prophet who will merit Divine inspiration and dialogue with Hashem.

The true mission of every Prophet in Israel is to reach the "point of sanctity" within each person, and to highlight and empower it – until it becomes his capstone.

We read in Pirkei Avot (Chapters of the Fathers 1,12):

"Be like the students of Aharon: Loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people, and bringing them closer to Torah."

Aharon HaCohen was able to reach the ultimate level of extricating the good from the bad, because of his ability to find the good in everyone and to turn enemies into friends. His visionary ability to act to turn bitter into sweet helped him during his time of personal catastrophe to turn pain into a source of strength.

