

Jewish Responses of Resilience to Crisis and Suffering

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Understanding Our Suffering

Job's Friend Eliphaz: You probably deserve your suffering

Think now, what innocent man ever perished? Where have the upright been destroyed? As I have seen, those who plow evil And sow mischief reap them. (Job 4:4-7)

Yaakov Weiland

When we feel pain in our bodies, it is a sign something is not right and needs to be addressed. Similarly, when we experience the pain of suffering, it can be a message from our Father in Heaven that something is not right and needs to be addressed. Perhaps, in an area of our lives, we are acting unbecoming of one of His children, or our priorities need realignment and we are not fulfilling our potential. Sin soils the soul. In addition to alerting us to make changes in our lives, suffering can also be used to cleanse the soul from unrepentant sin. To avoid this, we can cleanse ourselves through the purifying power of repentance.

Job: My suffering is unfair

If I have sinned, what have I done to You, Watcher of men? Why make of me Your target, And a burden to myself?...Though I were in the right, I could not speak out, But I would plead for mercy with my judge. If I summoned Him and He responded, I do not believe He would lend me His ear. Though I were innocent, My mouth would condemn me; Though I were blameless, He would prove me crooked. I am blameless—I am distraught; I am sick of life. It is all one; therefore I say, “He destroys the blameless and the guilty.” (Job 8,9)

Rabbi Harold Kushner

We could bear any burden if we thought there was a meaning to what we were doing. Have I made it harder for people to accept their illnesses, their misfortunes, their family tragedies by telling them that they are not sent by God as part of some master plan of His? Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them. The question we should be asking is not, “Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?” That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be “Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?”

God to Job: You can't understand why you suffer

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understanding.
Do you know who fixed its dimensions Or who measured it with a line?
Onto what were its bases sunk? Who set its cornerstone. (Job 38:4-6)

Rabbi Abraham Twerski

It is only natural for people to be curious why things happen. Curiosity is one thing. Obstinacy in insisting that every question must have an answer that we can understand is something else. Perhaps we feel that not being able to find an answer is an insult to our competence. There is nothing wrong with realizing our human limitations. There are many things that are unknown, and even if we see the unknown as a challenge and try to investigate it, we should realize that we may not be able to know everything.

Job's Friend Bilhad: Learn from your suffering

But if you seek God And supplicate the Almighty, If you are blameless and upright, He will protect you, And grant well-being to your righteous home. Though your beginning be small, In the end you will grow very great. Ask the generation past, Study what their fathers have searched out— For we are of yesterday and know nothing; Our days on earth are a shadow— Surely they will teach you and tell you, Speaking out of their understanding. (Job 8:5-10)

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson:

I remember the first time I went into a hospital room to counsel someone who was dying of a terminal illness. I was accompanied by a wise chaplain with many years of experience. We stood by the patient's bedside and I expected that we would commiserate with his plight. We would explain that this illness wasn't a punishment from God, but that these tragedies are random. With the inexperience of youth, I believed that nothing good can ever come from pain, that suffering is but an enemy to be vanquished, never a teacher to be heeded. Imagine my horror, then, when the chaplain turned to the patient and asked, "What has your cancer taught you?" And imagine my surprise when the patient responded by offering many valuable lessons that he derived from his illness: renewed love of life, better priorities, deeper love for his family. This man knew exactly what the chaplain was addressing, and he was able to share the precious insights that he had gained at a very high price.

Tools of Spiritual Resilience in Facing Suffering

Support: Psalm 121: A Song of Ascents.

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from Adonai,
who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 Adonai is your keeper;
Adonai is your shade at your right hand.
- 6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- 7 Adonai will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

Hope: Isaiah 40:1-11

- 1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
- 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from Adonai's hand
double for all her sins.
- 3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of Adonai,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- 4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain...
- 9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

Ha'Tikvah:

As long as within our hearts

The Jewish soul sings,
As long as forward to the East
To Zion, looks the eye –
Our hope is not yet lost,
It is two thousand years old,
To be a free people in our land
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

“With The Song of Songs in Our Hearts,” Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

In Genesis, God issued Abraham a call: Go forth (*lech lecha*) from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Gen 12:1). Now, in the Song of Songs, the lover exhorts the woman: *Lechi lach*, “Go forth!” Why should she venture forth? The buds have appeared, ready to bloom, and the chirping of birds is heard everywhere. But this is not merely an invitation to see and enjoy nature. One lover tells the other: “It is not enough to see the buds bloom and hear the birds sing. It is time to see you and hear your voice. It is *your* time to blossom, like nature in springtime.” In the Song, we follow young lovers who court and cavort in the springtime of their lives. The Song depicts love as a dialogue between two equals who awaken one another to the world and to their own possibilities.

Growing up in Israel, I was introduced to pieces of the Song of Songs in folk music and dances. Like my friends, I knew passages such as “*Dodi li ve’ani lo*” – “My beloved is mine and I am his,” or “*libabhtini akhoti kalah*,” – “you ravished my heart, my sister, bride.” (Song 2:16 and 4:9) None of us knew that these songs came from the Bible. Yet, we came to internalize these phrases and many others from the Song. Unbeknownst to me, the embodiment of these lyrics during my formative years made them a prism, a lens through which my adult self, decades later, related to the Song.

Spring has come again many times now since the winter that took Bill away from me. The ground above his casket is green, nurtured by the body below. Years later, my soul, my *nefesh*, keeps speaking with Bill. He continues to be the voice I hear when I close my eyes or look at the world around me. The beds of spices remain as the stubble on his face that still rubs my cheeks when I place my face against the freshly mowed grass on his grave. Now what? The seasons return. It is spring again as I write. The voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land, and now is my turn to sing these words to loved ones – family, friends, students: “Arise up my friend, my beautiful one, and go forth. It is time to hear your voice and it is time for you to blossom.”