Suffering and Love



This essay was originally published in Hebrew in The Enigma of Suffering, ed. Dr. Baruch Kahana, Dr. Chayuta Deutsch, Ronny Redman (Tel Aviv: Miskal – Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books, 2012), 287-296. Rabbanit Rachelle Fraenkel read a passage from it in her 18Forty conversation, so we brought it to you today. It is translated for the first time by Shulamis Hes.

Rotem was diagnosed with cancer when she was three and a half years old. She died on the 8th of Sivan, 5768. She was seven years old.

"You must accept suffering with love," people would say. Their words stung.

How easily they pull the trigger. "Accept suffering with love."

This sentence would resonate in my head, and I, my entire being, would shout and protest deep within. If a person wants to accept his suffering with love, let him accept them, but how can a person accept another individual's sufferings with love? How can a mother accept her daughter's sufferings with love? The very willingness, so to speak, to accept the sufferings of another with love contains within it callousness and cruelty. How can I watch the sufferings of my little daughter and accept them with love? If **I** were suffering, I could conceivably accept it, but **her** sufferings?

This statement, in its various versions, would overwhelm me at times with anger, and at other times with sadness, but always with a lack of understanding and an unwillingness to respond to it.

Until one day, when our agonies intensified, the meaning of the phrase became clear to me—like when a blind person suddenly can see. It became clear to me that until now I had not understood our sages' directive at all. I suddenly understood that what they meant was that when sufferings inflict a person and those close to her, one must be tough and strengthen one's love. The only thing that we could give (and receive) without limit was love. The more Rotem's sufferings increased, the more helpless we ourselves became in all that pertained to her treatment, the more we realized that nothing remained for us with which to save her—the more we armed ourselves with love. The only thing we could do in the face of the sufferings was to love. To accept the sufferings by giving more love to Rotem.

Once our sages' dictum became clear to me, I could not understand how I had not seen it before. How could I have considered another way in my heart?

As the means of help we could provide dwindled, as her bodily sufferings multiplied, so did the love between us intensify. And she was able to withstand the sufferings, through the love. And it, the love, overcame them. It overcame them, in the face of the waves of pain and the waves of sorrow. In the face of the waves of fear and the waves of weakness—against all of these stood in her favor a great love. And it overcame them.

If we could put all the pain on one side of a scale and love on the other, the love would outweigh the pain.

I acknowledge and confess, I know very well that this saying of the sages was meant in the context of loving God. But I can interpret it only as loving Man. I say nothing about loving God. I do not praise or speak against it. I am a person who believes in and fears God, so I engaged in those years as well in a faith dialogue with my Maker, be it through prayer or questioning.

"Whether as children or as servants."[1] I wish to leave my stance in my inner space, as a believing person in the presence of the King of the World. I do not share it with people. "The Lord is for me, what will Man do to me?"[2]

When it comes to God and His conduct of the world, there are many more things that I do not understand than I do understand.

It is best that I leave this central issue in the realm of something that "needs further study," as a life-long question for me. However, about the areas I do know I am not willing to be silent. I do not know the nature of Providence. I do not know how to answer the question of "why the righteous Man suffers." I do not know much about *Heavenly Jerusalem*. It is enough for me to know what I need to do here, in Jerusalem on Earth where my little daughter lies in pain. I better leave alone these philosophical questions about good and evil in the world and about love of God. I am content to know how to answer material questions. It is better that I accept my daughter's sufferings by extending great love to her.

To me, accepting my daughter's sufferings by love of God meant saying "yes" in response to a great shout of "no" that reverberated from one end of the world to the other. There is nothing that leaves a person more alone in his loneliness than saying "yes" to his pain. The only thing I could do was be with my daughter. To caress her hand, look into her eyes, and love her with boundless motherly love. To shed a secret tear in the face of bodily pain and in the face of the unthinkable possibility that death would end all her grace and beauty. To be honest, I felt that God, as it were, shed a tear with me, like the sorrow of the *Shekhinah* in exile.

1. Job – The Hidden Question

Years ago, when we did not yet understand Job's sorrow apart from study and reflection on the book, I prepared a review lesson for my women students. For a few months we had studied the chapters of the book together: We were with Job in his struggle with God and in his cry to God, in his request to understand the ways of God's conduct of the world. And then, as I am flipping through the chapters of the book we had just finished studying and thinking about how to conclude the learning that dealt with basic spiritual, theological, and existential questions, at the same time, I found myself bewildered—how did I not notice?

When I asked my students what the book was about, they replied that the book was about God's conduct of the world; it raises the question of sufferings, the question of "the righteous who suffers" and so on. All their answers were true. Indeed, the entire book asks and answers questions about [God's] conduct of the world, reward, and Providence. However, the book does not open with this question! The book does not open at all with a question about God, but with a completely different question about Man:

> The Lord said to the Adversary, "Have you noticed My servant, Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright Man who fears God and shuns evil!"
>
> The Adversary answered the Lord, "Does Job not have good reason to fear God?
>
> Why, it is You who have fenced him round, him and his household and all that he has. You have blessed his efforts so that his possessions spread out in the land.
>
> But lay Your hand upon all that he has, and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face."[3]

"Is there a believer in the world?" the book asks, "and if so, what is his nature?"

And behold, the “test” concerning the nature of Man is determined by Job. Job pivots the question from the realm of Man as the subject to the realm of God’s conduct of the world. “Are you interrogating me?” asks Job, so to speak. “Well, I interrogate You!” God asks about Man and his faith, and Job turns the matter toward Heaven: He questions God’s justice and conduct of the world.

The book follows Job’s lead, and a theological debate unfolds in it; one answer pursues the next. One Divine answer leads to the one that follows. Finally, the book ends, most likely with Job understanding that there are things he will never know, even if it appears that he will never cease to ask.

But at the beginning of the book, another question was asked! And what about it?!

What do we know about Man at the end of the Book of Job? Did we receive an answer? After all, it is not possible for the book to ask such a powerful question and not answer it.

And the book does answer it, but it requires another look to discover the answer.

> Comments like “All is for the best,” “Hashem loves you,” and the like pained me and struck me like poison darts.

I started studying the book of Job from the beginning. Together with my students, I gathered everything that the book teaches us about Man. After weeks and months of a theological dialogue which centered on God, we suddenly found ourselves discussing Man:

About the fact that a Man of faith exists, despite everything.

That one can use words of faith, yet they can be devoid of content and of fulfillment of God’s will.

About the great loneliness of Man and his search for connection.

About the great pain that a man can inflict on his fellow man.

And that in theological discourse it is possible to forget the suffering person.

In my humble opinion, the book’s deception is intentional. We, too, followed the various debates and treated the book as a scholarly symposium presenting varied theological and philosophical approaches. But we are not dealing here with a symposium or a philosophical dialogue between thinkers. It is a person wallowing in his agony who is revealed here.

Eventually the bad stuff reached us. Thoughts and prayers between me and my God I will leave as a private dialogue with God. My insights, my questions, my searching, my beliefs—all of these are open and known to the *One Who examines the thoughts and the heart*.[4] And *who is a wise person who understands any of this?[5]*

However, every time I would hear sayings that demanded something of me in the sphere of faith, or which wanted to organize or seek a "good" meaning for Rotem's illness, I would rebel within. Certain thoughts a person has should not be expressed to another. I do not say this only so that a person will not harm another, but also because it is true. The direction from which these words come, whether internal or directed to another, is essential in determining the veracity of their content. And do we even know all there is to know concerning Man that we can comment on God and His Providence in the world?! We are not dealing here with a lecture or an ethics lesson in a yeshiva. We are talking about a little girl who is precious, who is beloved, and about her family who observes her agony and embraces her in her sufferings.

"Sufferings must be accepted with love." Yes, with great love. For another. For the individual.

This is the best, most beautiful, and most compassionate advice I have ever received.

And this love became more and more pure, grew stronger and stronger; and as our ability to save her body became less and less likely, so our love grew more and more until ultimately it depended on nothing at all, not even on life itself.

"I loved with an eternal love."[6]

2. The Sufferer and the Utopian Picture

I am just a simple human being. I do not pretend to be more than who I am. When with my daughter, I was placed in a battle, with all my loved ones around her, I tried to operate with honesty. I had to stretch the concept of faith to limits I did not know could exist. I had to find new spheres of prayer and faith. At times I verily needed a whole new language.

The *Parashat Hashavua* pamphlets distributed in synagogues would often leave me lonely and hurting. I mention these pages precisely because of their accessibility to the general public, and because of the intolerable ease with which superficial faith is presented to all who seek it. I felt that for the purpose of perpetuating the existing religious and faith discourse and preserving the conventional framework, the writers are willing to sacrifice us. The illness and death of a small child, sufferings, and terror—all of these threaten the utopian picture. Comments like "All is for the best," "Hashem loves you," and the like pained me and struck me like poison darts.

I faced two choices: To accept the statements [in the pamphlets]; to continue to see in the world harmony and grace, without evil and without pain. ("Only due to the feebleness of our minds do we not understand why it is for the best.") Or to understand that the drawing they drew does not include me. They excluded me from their generality. That what they depicted could not possibly include such painful and sad cases as mine.

The first option did not resonate with me. Although I am not a learned person, I try to be honest. I felt this approach cancels the distinction between good and evil, ignores another's pain, and negates his very being. And principally because it numbs my heart. I had no choice but to choose the second option: to read these words and feel that I was left alone. My daughter and I interfere with the perfect description of a world full of miracles, and we have no place in it. We are spoiling the party. The pained person remains in his loneliness. And now I had this additional pain.

If I remain a believing person, it is despite all this.

Those days I would find a balm for my tormented soul in the writings of Rabbi [Joseph B.] Soloveitchik, who, despite being a man of complete faith, agreed to regard the pain, acknowledge it, and hear the cry of the sufferer whose whole being cries out. And there were intellectuals and rabbis who were willing to regard together with me the spheres of pain and sadness. Good people who surrounded us and lent a hand, and essentially opened their hearts to us. People who agreed to an encounter with us, even though at the end of the day this left them in pain, too. People, who despite coming from a clear-cut world of Torah and faith in God, or perhaps precisely because they come from there, also saw the other person and chose to extend a supportive hand and compassion. I do not know where I would be today without them.

3. Lend a Hand and Lift Him up

In Tractate Berakhot 5b, the Gemara presents a sequence of stories with a recurrent structure. I will quote the first story:

[Rabbi Yoḥanan's student,] Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan entered to visit him, and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" [Do you desire to be ill and afflicted?] Rabbi Ḥiyya said to him, "I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward," [as one who welcomes this suffering with love is rewarded.] Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him, "Give me your hand." Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yoḥanan stood him up and restored him to health.[7]

Rabbi Yoḥanan sees Rabbi Ḥiyya is sick and asks him if his suffering is dear to him. After he asks the question, he waits for Rabbi Ḥiyya's answer. Only when Rabbi Ḥiyya himself declares that he desires neither the suffering nor its reward, thus, expressing a readiness to get up from his suffering, is Rabbi Yoḥanan able to reach out and give him his hand.

In the second story in this pericope, Rabbi Yoḥanan is the one who is sick, and Rabbi Ḥaninah asks him, "Is suffering dear to you?" After Rabbi Yoḥanan answers that he welcomes neither the suffering nor the reward, Rabbi Ḥaninah extends his hand and lifts him up. The Gemara asks, "Why does Rabbi Yoḥanan need someone to give him a hand when he himself knows how to help sick patients get up from their illness?" The Gemara answers, "A prisoner cannot free himself from prison." Rabbi Yoḥanan does not have a miraculous spell that can get him up on his feet. He needs, just like his friend in the previous story, a person to face him and extend his hand to him.

Every person needs an outstretched hand. He needs a person who can reach beyond himself toward the other, a person who is ready and able to see him as he is and reach out to him to lift him up. There is no consolation here, no glorification of sufferings, no justification of God. What we have here is someone noticing his friend in his time of pain and lending him a hand: "'Give me your hand.' He gave him his hand and lifted him up." And in this encounter between the hands outstretched towards each other, this kindness occurs, pulling up a person from his weakness.

During those days I sought another reading: I searched for a faith and Torah discourse that also hears the person as he is. I was looking for a human Torah, a life-affirmative Torah. New words came to fill the void left by words so worn out as to hurt.

Can it be that holiness is present where a person reaches out to his fellow? When he manages to leave himself and his teachings and meet the other? Can it be that the caress I give my daughter with eternal love and with infinite desire to be with her, is the very essence of holiness and prayer?

I want to keep looking, talking, and loving, even if it also involves pain.

The soul's struggles with faith continued. New avenues were found in one's search for his God. But the main thing was the search for Man: how to exist fully with those my soul loved; how to bridge the endless gap between one another; how to shed all the outer shells and be there together, in great love.

With fear and trembling I write the following lines. I am torn between the inclination that says to write and that which forbids me to write. Will it not be a desecration of the Holy? If because every hand can feel these moments, does that take them away from us? I hope I will not regret it.

Such a holy conversation occurred between us on Rotem's last Friday, a few hours before she left this world, never to return. Rotem was in pain and distress, yet full of vitality, sharp, and fully present. She lay in the living room, and I sat next to her. I sang to her and stroked her aching body. I stroked her foot, her hand, her face. As I put these moments in writing, I feel them all in my body. My fingers are automatically reminded of that very caress, and the pain I feel is like the phantom pain described by people who have lost a body organ, yet it continues to hurt even in its absence. We had some consolation in our bodies' contact with each other, as if it were impossible to discern who was doing the stroking and who was being stroked. Suddenly I received a message on my cell phone, and I responded to it distractedly.

"Who was that?" Rotem asked immediately.

"Michal. She asked how you were, and I replied that you were in pain."

"I do not want you to say that I'm in pain."

I regretted how I responded to the message. I apologized and said I would not do that again.

"And how should I respond if I am asked how you are?"

There was silence between us. Rotem was an honest girl, and we were both searching for appropriate words to answer this difficult question.

"I'm going to say 'okay,'" I said. "But in effect I will have said nothing," trying to be evasive.

"But I am **not** OK," Rotem replied, honestly and sadly.

And again, there was silence as we painfully searched for the right words.

Suddenly a strong voice arose inside me, and I looked straight at Rotem and told her,

"My Rotem, my love. Your leg hurts so much. Your hand hardly moves either. Your head hurts a lot. Nothing seems to be OK anymore. But **this** is not Rotem. This is your leg, your hand; it's not you! You are your thoughts and wisdom, your sensitivity and love, your intelligence, and your smile. And you are so lovely and so full of goodness, love, beauty, and purity. You really, really are fine. Completely!"

Rotem looked at me deeply, a look that melded us into one, and a smile as deep as the sea emanated from her kind and wise eyes.

"Right," she replied, "so say I'm fine."

And our hug needed no further words.

On days that my mind returns to that conversation, I am filled with pain and longing that cuts through me. But I also find great solace in it. A person can live a lifetime without being able to say such things. I am thankful we were able to have that conversation. That there was honesty and love between us, an internal touch, and sharing. I also feel comforted that both Rotem and we knew that though the cancer could destroy the body until all that remains is a broken vessel full of pain, the one real thing it could never touch was who Rotem was–her entire soul, vitality, love, wisdom, and fullness. On all these the disease had no foothold. And Rotem remained pure and innocent, sweet, and full of life.

And between us the love remained. It cannot be taken from us.

4. Between Spheres of Life

In the days of Rotem's illness, I had to move between two spheres of life: to be conscious of each moment in an attempt to live the moment to the fullest, to see beauty and vitality in every day, as if there was no threat of death blowing down our necks; and simultaneously, illogically, to live in the realistic sphere of life where we know where we are headed. It was a daily burden for all of us, but we did not want to concede. We did not think it was right to close our eyes, but we did not want our cognizance of reality to prevent us from rejoicing and living fully that which remained.

After Rotem's leaving, I found myself again trying to navigate between two walks of life. I had to restore peace to my life, amidst all that was torn and separated. I saw people whose pain consumed and encompassed their whole being. I was jealous of their ability to hold on and not allow life's forces to numb them and to cause them to forget their loved ones or their pain, but it was hard for me to see their deterioration.

I have also seen people whose devotion to life has inspired me. But I had a hard time observing how their choice to walk on the side of life meant to abandon everything that was, sometimes with almost no ability to touch or look back.

And again, I did not want to concede. Rotem is dear to me, and she became a part of my self-definition. Is it not enough that reality forced us apart? I never consented that the cancer could conquer my desires as well. They cannot be touched. Through them, I want to continue to be together.

Can a way be found to accomplish both?

For the first few months the longings became so physically painful that I could enumerate through them the organs of my body. I would cry a lot, and sometimes I could hardly breathe.

I noticed that a new pain had joined the previous pain list. This was pain on account of Rotem becoming something sad, that Rotem was becoming a “problem” to be dealt with. That Rotem was becoming a hardship that had to be surmounted. My whole being shouted “no” in the face of this. After all, Rotem for me was like a treasure, like a balm for the soul, like a bright light, like life-giving water. And after all, Rotem was to me like pearls and precious stones. I was not going to allow Rotem to become a difficulty and a problem, but I was also unwilling to give up this treasure.

So, I decided there are no shortcuts. That there is but one long path, but it is the only one that I am ready to take. I am not ready to end our relationship. I am not ready to turn my head away. I want to keep looking, talking, and loving, even if it also involves pain. But I will not hold back the pain. It is not the end goal. It just happens to be on the journey. I am willing to pay the price to win what lies beyond it.

I want to continue to live and fill my life and my family’s life with joy, vitality, renewal, and curiosity, all the while remaining with Rotem as well. With Rotem, who is a part of my self-definition, who is a part of us all. Not forced, yet not fearfully either. In the right naturalness which she always had.

I did not want the pain to slowly turn into poison. I did not want it to seep in and make me bitter. I have seen people who for this reason chose not to speak about or engage at all with their sphere of pain. This is due to their desire to cling to life. However, they are also giving up an important part of their being. I realized that if I want Rotem to continue to be a living part of my life and to accompany me, this at times will involve pain. Not all the time. Most of the time Rotem is with me and fills my life with joy, love, and faith, but sometimes the price is also pain.

I try to view the pain as a hidden treasure. Every time it appears, I allow it to be there. I am hurting but also happy, and I remember the presence of all the good that was, and in fact, still is. I think that every bit of pain is indicative of so much of Rotem’s beauty and enchantment. If I had not loved so much then, it would not be so painful today. And yet, even when I know how intense the pain can be, if I had to do it again, I would take the same steps. If only it were possible.

I greet this pain with great love. I do not sanctify it, nor do I wallow in the pain alone. Rather I rejoice in it. It is part of my life’s richness.

I walk down a street full of strangers, and I think they see an ordinary person. They do not give a second look, so they do not know the precious treasures I carry within me. Pearls and precious stones, more costly than gold and much fine gold, and drippings of a honeycomb.[8]

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[1] Rosh Hashanah *Musaf Amidah*.

[2] Psalms 118:6 paraphrased.

[3] Job 1: 8-10, (*TANAKH; The New JPS Translation*), https://www.sefaria.org/Job.1.8, with minor changes.

[4] Jeremiah 11:20.

[5] Hosea 14:10.

[6] Jeremiah 31:3.

[7] Berakhot 5b (*The Koren Noé Talmud*, with commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz), https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.5b.10, with minor changes.

[8] Psalms 19:11 paraphrased.