



CONSIDER THIS...

RABBI GERSHON SCHUSTERMAN
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Dear Rabbi:

I, alongside my wife, have been working in Jewish outreach for twelve years with significant success and we have built up quite a following. We also have four children, *B"H*. Four months ago we had a child, a beautiful baby girl, who died quite suddenly and unexpectedly. Ever since then I have been quite miserable; my wife, I dare say, even more so. I'm mature enough to understand that this is to be expected and 'this too shall pass.' My question for you, dear Rabbi, is that my relationship with Hashem has been damaged. I feel totally cold towards Him. I feel that He let me down and I feel abandoned by Him. This is a time when I need Him the most but I can't access Him. It affects my work as well. I used to be able to talk to those seeking *Yiddishkeit* with joyous enthusiasm, but today I can't. If I were free to articulate what is really in my heart I would drive people away. Rabbi, what do I do?

Hurt and Perplexed Dad

Dear Hurt:

Let me ask you, quite personally, do you need an answer or a hug?

I want to tell you a story...

I recently visited with my grown son who, like me, is a rabbi. We went out one evening, just to talk, and he spoke to me passionately about his cousin, my nephew, who had been diagnosed with an incurable brain tumor. My son told me about how good his cousin is, how he has a young and growing family, how difficult this is for everyone and how unfair this is. I listened patiently as he poured his heart out.

As he was speaking, I began formulating my rabbinic response; after all, I've done this before. Then I realized, my son is a rabbi, too. He has been confronted with these very same issues and has much to offer as a response. So I said to myself, "What purpose is there in telling him that which he already knows?"

When I had an opportunity to respond, I looked into his eyes and said, "My dear son, do you want an answer or do you want a hug?" I caught him off guard and he took a few moments to respond.

His eyes filled with tears, and finally he said, "I want a hug."

When a person is in pain, what he really wants is for the pain to go away, and sometimes a hug accomplishes that much better than an explanation. Grown men may not know how to ask for a hug and they often camouflage their needs under the guise of wanting an answer.

Avos (3:18) says: "Do not comfort your friend while his deceased lies before him." While this is stated quite graphically, it is also meant figuratively. This is why we have a custom not to visit the home of the bereaved to comfort them before the third day. Our sages understood that more time may be needed before the mourners are ready to hear the traditional phrase of consolation, "*Hamakom y'nachem es'chem...*"

But does one size fit all? Are three days, or even seven days, experienced the same way by everyone? Can one compare one loss to another? Hashem's holy language, *lashon hakodesh*, has a different word for one who loses a parent (*yasom[ah]*), a spouse (*alman[ah]*) or a child (*shachul[ah]*) to indicate that each loss is distinct and different. Coming to terms with a tragic loss is highly individualized and may take three months for some, for others, perhaps three years... or longer.

Surely you know the *Gemara* (*B"V* 16b) that says *ein adam nitfas b'shaas tzaaro*; a person is not culpable for [even blasphemy] uttered in a time of pain [bereavement]. Such is Hashem's understanding and empathy for one experiencing the pain of the loss of a loved one.

Whoever has raised children has experienced this scenario: A child, frustrated with his parent for having denied him the thing he wants and "needs" right now, has a crying fit and screams, "I hate you, Mommy!" Fast forward 60 seconds... the child is hugging the very same Mommy, his little head on her shoulder, finding comfort in her embrace.

We are Hashem's children, He is our loving parent, even as we don't understand His ways, and are pained beyond our

capacity to bear pain.

Crying out from great pain and suffering, and having true faith in Hashem and His *hashgachah pratis*, are not incompatible. The *tzaddik* Harav Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson, known as the Frierdiker [Lubavitcher] Rebbe, recounted his thoughts in 1927 when he was arrested for promulgating Yiddishkeit in the Soviet Union. Imagining the feelings of his mother, wife, daughters, son-in-law and *chassidim*, he burst into tears.

Then the Rebbe states (in his diary), "Suddenly, as a lightning bolt, a thought hit me: Who did this? Who caused this to occur? It isn't from anyone but Hashem! I did that which was my responsibility, and Hashem does as He sees fit. And at that moment I was elevated from my lowly situation and I ascended heavenward in thoughts higher than those who dwell in the physical world, with pure faith and complete confidence in the living G-d..."

When the Rebbe cried, it wasn't for lack of faith, *chas v'shalom*. Even a *tzaddik* and a Rebbe can feel pain that is so real and intense that he can burst into tears. Then the painful challenge propels him to greater heights of *emunah* and *bitachon*. ("Suddenly... I was elevated...")

People, especially when they are very agitated, sometimes need help to properly frame their feelings. This is often true even for adults.

My daughter and her family, including a bright and articulate three-year-old son, spent their winter vacation with us. Being quite upset about something one day, he proclaimed, "I'm angry," and proceeded to throw things.

My wife, ever the educator, calmly told him that we don't do that in our home. When he calmed down enough to listen, she asked him, "Are you sad that things didn't go the way you wanted them to?" She paused. "So you feel disappointed? Do you know what disappointed means? It means you're not pleased that things are not going the way you would like them to go. So, instead of saying 'I'm angry,' you can say 'I'm disappointed.'" Sometimes things don't work out exactly the way you want them to. Later perhaps things will work out better."

He learned more than a new word. He learned a new way of looking at and framing his life experiences as they were happening. In the next few days, when he felt upset, he said somewhat more calmly, "I'm very disappointed." That is progress!

Inside each of us remains a child, and that child is tantrum-prone when he is hurt and disappointed, even as an adult. "We had such a beautiful dream for our life together as a couple, and now you died and I am left alone, bereft, and without a spouse." Or, "My child was so good, so sweet and so special. She had a wonderful life ahead of her, and now all those possibilities are buried with her." One can feel hurt. One can feel sad, very sad, and cry one's heart out. Later on, one can be very disappointed, and have a need to talk things through.

Or, one can focus on feeling abandoned and having no one to turn to; one can become quite angry, often at the same ones who could have been a source of solace and a pillar to lean on. A person can roll up into a ball and lock everyone out and

become more and more angry and despondent.

Yidden in pain pour their hearts out to Hashem out by saying *Tehillim*. It is not necessarily because the person expects to find a resolution to their problem in the words they are saying. In fact, many chapters of *Tehillim* are open-ended outpourings of the heart, channeling the words of the Psalmist, in which he finds consolation in simply expressing his pain and grief to Hashem and in feeling that He is listening and providing His embrace.

When driving a car, if one loses control and goes into a skid, instinctively one wants to direct the car in the direction *away* from the skid. Driving instructors will tell you that this will exacerbate the loss of control and therefore one should do the exact opposite. One should steer into the direction of the skid ever so gently and thus regain control.

Likewise with life, when things happen that are out of our control and we go into a skid, the best way to regain equilibrium is to recognize the source of the crisis, realize that the Master of the world is the One behind the scene, and to submit to Him.

In addition to your personal struggle you seem to be frustrated with how to continue your mission to educate and inspire others. You now feel inadequate to this task because:

...your relationship with Hashem has been damaged; you feel totally cold to Him; you cannot in good conscience talk about Yiddishkeit with joyous enthusiasm; in fact, if you were free to articulate what is really on your heart, you might drive people away.

Not to make light of something so serious, let me say that one should never let a good crisis go to waste (see *Mishlei* 14:23). Here is an opportunity to create a new, deeper, and more mature and meaningful relationship with Hashem. If you achieve this, you may be better equipped to continue your most vital mission.

Consider taking a sabbatical—brief or extended—as you work this through. You deserve it and need it.

Who can talk more sincerely about finding Hashem in the depths of despair, a young *yeshivah bachur* who became a suburban rabbi, or a Holocaust survivor who remained faithful to G-d as he started life again? Those forged by fire are stronger and their relationship with G-d deeper, having had their *emunah* tested and come through intact, sometimes with flying colors.

Think of the souls of those giants of spirit who went to the crematoria singing *Ani Maamin*. Think of the bereaved and

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maimed in the terror attacks in Eretz Yisroel, who, while experiencing their agony, express sincere *emunah*, *bitachon* and *ahavas Hashem* even as they ask Hashem to bring a resolution to their travail. You have it in you to do the same, if you dig deeply enough.

Even sincere outreach workers can fall into a rut in their relationship with Hashem. When things are going well, we may take Hashem for granted and relegate Him to a passive, supervisory role. Paradoxically, we can teach Hashem's Torah enthusiastically while neglecting our own personal relationship with Him; familiarity can breed content. Life is good, so we become complacent and even smug, thus blocking Hashem from having an active role in our lives.

A crisis changes that. A crisis shatters our smugness; it challenges our relationship with Hashem and forces us to reacquire ourselves

with our real selves more honestly. We may find ourselves wanting. The process is a difficult one, for it forces us to soul-search as never before. But when this process is undertaken with commitment, we often find that our bond with Hashem is (or needs to be) much deeper than it was up to now, and we feel the need to renew the bond in a profoundly different manner.

The realizations achieved by this experience can catapult us to a deeper relationship, substituting the need for answers with the sense of certainty that one's suffering is purposeful in Hashem's plan, even as it may remain unfathomable to the person. A child who falls and hurts himself will run to his mother for comfort, and after being held for a few moments he becomes calmer. The bruise hasn't gone away, but the child's sense of security is reestablished in his mother's embrace. So it is with us, in dealing with our lives' bruises, and *chas v'shalom* worse. We need, at all times, to maintain a close relationship with Hashem so that when we need Him, we can sense His embrace.

Sincerely yours,

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Rabbi Gershon Schusterman is originally from Brooklyn and was a Chabad Shliach in Southern California for 20 years. He is now in private enterprise and continues to give shiurim and lectures, and writes on Jewish topics. He is married to Chana Rachel Schusterman, a teacher and lecturer in her own right, and is the father of eleven children. This article is reprinted with permission from Our Tapestry, a non-profit organization that provides tools, empathy and solace to families who have suffered the loss of a child. Our Tapestry publishes seasonal magazines to hundreds of bereaved families worldwide and organizes local gatherings. For more information, visit www.OurTapestry.org.