BEHAR: Causing Emotional Pain, in the Name of Heaven

One of the most painful mistakes people make when trying to comfort someone in distress is to offer an explanation for that person's suffering.

A man is diagnosed with a serious illness. A couple struggles for years to have children. Parents lose a child. Someone experiences financial ruin or a devastating personal tragedy. And then, often with sincere intentions, a friend, a relative, or even a rabbi says:

"Perhaps this happened because you were not careful enough in this area of Jewish law."

"Maybe HaShem is punishing you for this or that."

"You should know that your sin caused this tragedy."

Such words may sound "religious." They may even be presented as "spiritual guidance." But according to Halakha, saying these things to a suffering person is not an act of faith. It is a violation of the Torah prohibition of ona'at debarim—causing emotional pain with words.

The Torah commands:

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"You shall not wrong one another." (Vayikra 25:17)

Our Chakhamim explain that this verse prohibits hurting another person through speech.

The Talmud’s Example

In Talmud Babli (Baba Metsia 58b), the Gemara presents one of the clearest illustrations of this prohibition:

“If sufferings are coming upon a person, if illness has befallen him, or if he is burying his children, one may not say to him what Iyov’s friends said to him: ‘Remember now—what innocent person ever perished?'”

Iyov (Job) was suffering immense misfortunes. His children died in an accident. He lost all of his possessions. And finally, he lost his health. Three friends of Iyov came to comfort him. In the beginning, they did the correct thing: they sat next to him, without saying a single word, for an entire period of seven days.

This is one of the main sources of the Shib’a, the seven days of mourning. But it is also the source of a very important halakha, or protocol: when visiting a mourner, the visitor may not say any word, except for “min hashamayim tenuchamu”—”may you be consoled from Heaven.” Other than this, the visitor must remain in silence until the mourner opens the conversation first. Our presence—not any kind of explanation, but our silent presence—is what a mourner truly needs.

When Comfort Turned Into Accusation

After the seven days passed, the friends of Iyov engaged him in a very long argumentation where, one after the other and in very different ways, they tried to convince him that HaShem would never punish someone for nothing. He must have sinned! Iyov, rightfully so, defended his innocence.

At the end of the story, in the very last passage of the book, the three friends of Iyov are ordered to bring a chatat—a sacrifice of atonement brought by someone who committed a transgression involuntarily.

The Sages of the Gemara bring this example with an unmistakable message: when a person is enduring pain, we are forbidden to suggest that his suffering is the result of his sins.

This ruling is codified by the Mishne Torah, the Shulchan Arukh, and the Sefer haChinukh—always citing the very same case of Iyov.

What About Personal Self-Reflection?

Many people—even knowledgeable and religious people—get confused on this point, because the Sages, in a different context but also speaking about human suffering, explain that when someone is going through hardship he or she should reflect on his actions: yefashfesh bema'asav, "let him examine his deeds."

Indeed, Judaism teaches that when a person experiences hardship, he should engage in honest introspection. He should ask himself:

"What can I improve?"

"How can I grow from this?"

"What am I doing wrong at this moment?"

This is a deeply private conversation between a person and his Creator. It is not a way of trying to discover why HaShem brought this difficulty upon him. Rather, it is the way a Jew is taught to "respond to suffering." In a sense, this exercise is palliative: it is not about finding the intention of HaShem—something which Moshe Rabbenu himself was not able to fathom and which we are never taught that we can find—but a positive response that helps the person focus on growth and rise back from despair and depression.

Now, here is where people make a terrible mistake. There is a

world of difference between what a person asks of himself—"What can I do better?"—and what another person may suggest to him—"This is why you deserved this suffering!"

This kind of unsolicited admonition brings terrible emotional pain to someone already in anguish. It causes more emotional suffering, and more depression, because now the person feels guilty on top of his sorrow. Whoever speaks this way actually transgresses an explicit prohibition of the Torah.

What may be spiritually meaningful when spoken inwardly becomes a Torah violation when spoken outwardly as an accusation.

Our True Obligation

When another Jew is suffering, our duty is to alleviate pain, not to intensify it.

We are called to offer:

Compassion and words of comfort.

Our silent presence when they are mourning.

Our heartfelt tefillot (prayers).

Our unconditional support.

HaShem does not need us to explain His decisions. What He asks of us is to care for His suffering children.

Telling a suffering person that his illness, tragedy, or loss occurred because of his sins is an explicit violation of the Torah prohibition of *ona'at debarim*—causing emotional pain through words.

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