

Sparks

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SOUL-UTIONS TO PAIN

The archetypical story about pain is recorded in the book of Job, who experiences horrible tribulations. Job's friends try to give him answers to explain his pain, but Job is not satisfied with any of their answers. In the end, G-d Himself speaks to Job and gives him resolve.

Job's friends tell him that there is no such thing as pain without justice. This means that when a person goes through pain it is simply the fulfillment of justice. Pain is not haphazard or accidental. In some way-even if we cannot possibly fathom why-we have deserved our pain. But Job does not accept this answer.

Maimonides, the great Torah sage known as the Rambam, says that this answer is actually the true position of Jewish tradition. In fact, when the Rambam discusses the meaning of "pain" or "suffering," he quotes the verse in the book of Job recording the answer of Job's friend who said that there is no pain without justice. How could the Rambam teach that the reason for pain is justice, and yet Job did not accept this approach? And when G-d finally appears to Job to reveal the meaning of his pain, He gives him a completely different answer. Are we to understand from this contradiction that G-d has a different answer regarding pain than the Torah does?

I recently heard a brilliant answer to this problem. According to Jewish tradition there are two approaches to pain: One is a philosophical approach, and one is an experiential approach, both of which are valid depending on the circumstance.

There are times when we are simply exploring the philosophical meaning of pain. And then there are times when we are personally in pain are struggling to understand why. When we are merely discussing pain then we can find a philosophical understanding of pain. But when we are in pain, we must accept the there really are no satisfactory answers.

I recently attended a lecture by a rabbi, who has a PhD in philosophy, speaking about responses to the Holocaust. At the end of the class a man with a thick Yiddish accent said, "Rabbi, I cannot accept anything that you have said. I was in Auschwitz!"

The rabbi responded, "Listen, I am a philosopher, I am talking about pain from a philosophical point of view. I am in no way proposing that what I have to say could comfort you in your pain."

If you are in pain, no philosopher can give you an answer.

If you are in pain there are no answers, but there is a soul-ution.

To understand the difference, let's imagine what would have happened if Job accepted his friend's answer. Would G-d have appeared to Job? No. Would Job have had a revelation, a personal, experiential encounter with G-d? No.

In light of this, it is a good thing that Job didn't accept his friends answer. If he had accepted the answer, he would have never met G-d.

When we are in pain, not only will the philosophical approach not give us an answer, we really don't want answers.

I understand this point well. When I am in pain, I never want answers. Have you ever had that experience, when you were in pain and you spoke to a friend who gave you reasons for your pain or advice how to overcome it? "Maybe this is why it is happening. Maybe you should do this.. Maybe this is how you could solve it. ." And you get annoyed and perhaps even a bit angry.

Well, what do we want from them? We share our problems and our pain with them, and they simply try to help by giving us answers. The truth is, when we are in pain we are rarely interested in philosophical answers or psychological guidance. What we first want and need is comfort and empathy; warmth and compassion.

When my son scrapes his knee, and runs home crying, I have two ways to respond. I could say, "It's okay, we'll just put a bandage on it. It's really a small little thing. It will go away." But the more logical I am, the more my son will cry, "You don't understand!" Kids in pain don't want logic; and neither do we. When my son scrapes his knee, he wants me to say, "Oye, oye, oye ." When he gets empathy and compassion he quickly responds with, "It's not so bad, Daddy, it's not so bad." He is looking for love not answers. When we are in pain then it is the personal connection that solves the pain, not logical answers.

If Job would have given up and said to his friend, "You're right. That answer makes sense," he would have forfeited the opportunity to find G-d in his pain and experience G-d's comforting presence.

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