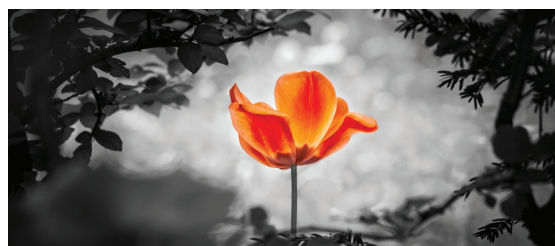




This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Suffering: God's Refining Fire

According to Jewish tradition, when the Jews were exiled from Israel in the year 582 B.C.E. and sent by the shipload to Babylon, the Babylonians would count each one of the Jewish captives both when they left Israel and again when they reached the shores of Babylon. However, no matter how many people were counted on the boat before it set sail, there was always exactly one more than the original number when the ship reached its destination.

The Babylonians were baffled and asked the Jews how this was possible. They answered: "As soon as we went into exile, our God joined us. He is found on each and every boat together with His children."

One of the most difficult and universal question that Christians and Jews grapple with is why God allows suffering to happen. This issue has challenged many people of faith who have gone through tragedies or witnessed them. If we believe that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, then why would He possibly let His people suffer? Is there a point? Is there a reason?

There are so many questions surrounding this issue — and not as many answers. In Exodus 33, Moses asked God: "*Now show me your glory*" (v.18). Moses wanted to understand God's ways. But God said, "*You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live*" (v.20). We are not meant to understand God's calculations and decisions while we are living.

In the book of Job, the Bible's most complete examination of why the righteous suffer, we find one of Job's companions reminding him, "*Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?*" (Job 11:7). In the Christian Bible, Paul wrote: "*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*" (Romans 11:33).

Yet, for all we don't know — and can't know — there is one thing that we do know with certainty: God is always with us, as we read in Psalm 91:15: "*I will be with him in trouble . . .*" God is with us in our troubles. He knows about our suffering. He feels our pain.

In Exodus 24:9, we read about Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai just before receiving the Ten Commandments. Together with Aaron, Aaron's sons, and 70 elders of Israel, Moses beheld a vision of God. Notably, they saw "*Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli*" (24:10).

The Jewish sages explain that the pavement was in the form of a brick — a brick that God kept before Him at all times while the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt. The brick was a symbol of the suffering of the Israelites, who had been forced to build Egyptian cities through hard labor, work that became even more intolerable when they had to make the bricks under impossible circumstances. By keeping a brick in His presence, the pain and suffering of God's people was always on His mind.

Now, of course, God did not need a brick to remind Him of the suffering of His people. But the story is a vivid reminder that God knows and feels our suffering. As we explore the topic of suffering in this month's *Limmud*, and attempt to make sense of one of the greatest difficulties in faith, let us remember that while we cannot always understand God's ways, we can always know that He is with us in all circumstances — and that knowledge can help us persevere through all trials.

As King David wrote in the beloved psalm that has brought comfort to God's faithful through the centuries: "*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me*" (Psalm 23:4).

*Even though
I walk
through the
darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are
with me;
your rod and
your staff,
they comfort
me.*

— Psalm 23:4

Rabbi Eckstein



A Question with No Answer

“You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.”

— Job 42:3

There are many different reactions to suffering and tragedy, but one response is universal — asking the question “Why?”

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do righteous people suffer? Or, perhaps even harder for us to understand, as King David expressed it: *“How long, LORD . . . will the wicked be jubilant?”* (Psalm 94:3). Why do the wicked experience so much good? In Judaism, much ink has been spilled in trying to make sense of this conundrum known in Hebrew as *tzaddik v’ra lo* — צדיק ורע לו — a righteous man to whom bad things happen, and *rasha v’tov lo* — רשע וטוב לו — a wicked person to whom good things happen.

Job, the biblical figure synonymous with suffering, also tried to understand God’s ways. While Job’s friends insisted that Job must have sinned and so deserved such suffering, Job knew — and we know from the Bible — that Job did not sin. Most of the book is dedicated to Job and his friends wrestling with this timeless question for which an answer has never been found.

Finally, God Himself appeared to Job and answered his question with another question: *“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand”* (Job 38:4). God is saying, in essence, “Why in the world would you expect to understand My ways? You are finite, I am infinite! I am the creator, you are the creation. I am eternal, you are mortal. Can a painting understand the artist who painted it?”

Finally, in the end, Job acknowledged his limited knowledge and said, *“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know”* (Job 42:3). And with these words, Job found comfort at last.

Certainly, it is natural and human to want to understand the world around us. But there are many times when we just can’t make sense of it all. In our generation, one of the hardest things to come to terms with is the ruthless murder of 11 million innocent people during the Holocaust — six million of those victims being Jewish. Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel and a Holocaust survivor, wrote in his memoir:

“I am a believer — and I will remain so until my dying day . . . The question for which I have not found an answer remains the question of why. Why did it have to happen? Why was my brother Milek, may God avenge his

death, torn from our mother to go to his death, while I was separated from her and lived? I will never know, but this will not diminish my faith . . .”

Rabbi Lau explained that when King Solomon declared *“The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud”* (1 Kings 8:12), he was saying that sometimes the Divine Presence rests within a place that is hidden, concealed behind a screen of mystery. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, *“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. . .”* (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Jewish tradition teaches that Moses sought to understand the unknowable when he said to God, *“Show me your glory”* (Exodus 33:18). Moses was asking God to explain the way that He runs the world. He wanted to understand how a world that looks so unfair could possibly be just.

Here is the answer that Moses received: *“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live”* (Exodus 33: 19-20).

God’s words to Moses could also mean: “I will have mercy on the people who I see deserving of mercy.” God’s first point is that we do not know who is truly good and who is truly bad. **But God does.**

Secondly, God said, “I will have compassion — what I know to be true compassion — on those who are deserving.” God’s second point is that we don’t know which circumstances are truly good and which are ultimately bad for each and every individual. **But God does.**

Lastly, God said, “You cannot see my face and live.” God’s final point is that while we are living we simply don’t have the tools and knowledge necessary to understand how life is just. **But God does.**

Sometimes we can’t understand. But that’s ok, because we don’t have to. Just because we don’t understand God, doesn’t mean that we can’t have faith in Him. We can trust that the Creator knows what He is doing. The masterpiece is being painted even if we can’t fully appreciate its beauty.

Remember this, friends: Comfort is not found in knowing all the answers. It is found in knowing that we don’t have to know all the answers. As the psalmist wrote, *“My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life”* (Psalm 119:50).



The Purpose of Pain

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

— Jeremiah 29:11

As we have already established, there are no easy answers that explain why God allows pain, suffering, and evil to exist in His world. We cannot expect an answer to our question “why?” However, there is a question that we can ask; one that we must ask. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchick, a 20th-century renowned American *Torah* scholar who lived in the shadow of the Holocaust, taught: “We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but rather about the path wherein man shall take when suffering strikes . . .”

In other words, we do not ask why; we ask what: What can we do to emerge from our suffering as a better person? What can we learn from our difficult experiences? What good can come from a bad situation?

Asking these questions reflects our faith that everything God does is for the best even if we cannot understand how. There is a purpose for our pain. When God said to Israel, “For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,” it was at a time when the Israelites were going into exile. It was a terrible time. The children of Israel had just witnessed the destruction of their Holy Temple and of their beloved city, Jerusalem. Yet God promised that He had a plan and that it would all turn out well.

In the Jewish tradition, we are taught to bless both the bad and the good that occurs in our lives. This is because ultimately everything is only for the good and comes directly from God — **even those circumstances that seem bad**. As we read in Lamentations 3:38, “*Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?*”

The Jewish sages taught that if a person reaches into his pocket intending to take out three coins and yet only takes out two coins, it is suffering. Whether on a large scale or a small inconvenience, when seemingly bad things happen to us, we have the opportunity to transform the experience into an overflowing fountain of blessings. We can use the situation to cleanse ourselves, to attain forgiveness, to reflect, to learn life lessons, to change our behavior, or to grow into a better version of ourself.

Paul echoed the Jewish view of the transformative aspect of suffering when he wrote to the church in Rome, “*but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope*” (Romans 5:3-4). And James taught

that believers should consider the trials in their lives as “*pure joy*” because such testing will result in a mature faith. (See James 1:2-4.)

In Ezekiel 22:22, God told His children: “*As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the LORD have poured out my wrath on you.*” In Judaism there is a term used to describe the experience of the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt called *kur habarzel* — כור הברזל — the iron crucible.

This is a reference to the silversmith’s tool for refining silver. Just as a crucible purifies silver, the suffering in Egypt served to purify the children of Israel. This metaphor is used throughout Scripture to relate to all kinds of suffering. (See Psalm 66:10; Isaiah 1:25; Isaiah 48:10; Jeremiah 9:7; and 1 Peter 1:7.)

We read in Malachi 3:3, “*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.*” God Himself is the silversmith and though we may be put through the fire, we are still in His hands. When we are called to walk through the fire, we must remember that God is our purifier. He never leaves our side, and when He is done, if we so choose, we will be refined, repaired, and a beautiful reflection of God.

think about it

1. Think of the trials and difficulties that you have experienced. How have those experiences contributed to shaping you into the person that you are today?
2. Think about your own family, neighborhood, community, church. Where are people suffering right now? What can you do today to help relieve that suffering?
3. How have the trials and difficulties you’ve experienced equipped you to help comfort others? What is one thing you can do today to comfort someone suffering?
4. Think of a time when you have experienced something that seemed bad that later turned out to be a blessing in your life. How does this knowledge encourage you in your current situation?
5. If you could go back to a time when you experienced suffering, as a child or as an adult, what advice would you give yourself? What advice would you give to someone who is suffering currently? Which Bible verses or teachings would you share?



Comfort My People

*Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.*

— Isaiah 40:1

When we suffer, we are called to have faith. However, when other people suffer, we are called to act in faith.

We must act to comfort the suffering, to soothe the pain of those hurting, and to do what we can to alleviate the suffering of God's people. *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,"* and comfort them we must. In the Christian Bible, in his well-known Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"* (Matthew 5:4).

Just before the Israelites left Egypt, darkness, the ninth plague, struck the land. We read: *"No one could see anyone else or move about for three days"* (Exodus 10:23). The Bible relates that the darkness wasn't merely the absence of light. It had a physical presence of its own. It was tangible and so thick that it kept people stuck in their places.

In Jewish teachings, this darkness is described as being "as thick as a golden dinar." This was the worst kind of darkness in the world because *"No one could see anyone else."* It's the kind of darkness that blinds us to the suffering of the people around us.

A dinar is a type of coin. If you take two coins and hold them out in front of you, you could see the coins along with everything else around you. If a person was there, you could see that person. If the sun was rising, you could see the beautiful sunrise. But if you hold the coins right in front of each eye, you see nothing else at all. You can't see the sun rising or the people around you. You are blinded and in darkness "as thick as a golden dinar."

There are times in our lives when we are in such a darkness. Sometimes, in our pursuit of material possessions or when we are simply caught up in the routine of our demanding lives, we lose sight of the people around us. In our quest for wealth, we are blinded to the poverty around us. In our striving for a promotion at work, we don't see the loneliness of our spouse or children at home. In trying to get everything done on our to-do list, we fail to do some of the most important things of all.

If we don't see the suffering of others, we cannot comfort them.

Just after Cain killed his brother Abel, God confronted him asking: *"Where is your brother Abel?"* Cain replied, *"I don't know . . . Am I my brother's keeper?"* (Genesis 4:9). Of course God knew where Abel was. What He was really asking was, "What have you done to your brother?" And Cain shrugged off the question, refusing to take responsibility for the fate of his brother.

Now, although our personal life situation doesn't

mirror Cain's actions, God asks us essentially the same question every day: "Where are your brothers? Are you aware that people are starving in one country and dying of preventable disease in another? Are you aware that there are hungry children in your town or that there are elderly who are cold because they can't afford heat? Do you see their suffering? What have you done for your brothers?"

What do we answer? Do we turn a blind eye and say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Or do we declare: "I am my brother's keeper! And my sister's keeper! And I will help them in every way that I can!"

We may not be able to answer the question of why there is suffering in the world, but we can answer the question of what we are doing about it. We can be part of the solution. We are called to comfort those in need. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, God comforts us *"in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God"* (2 Corinthians 1:4).

It need not be difficult. Sometimes simply being present with someone who is suffering, like Job's friends did, and letting them know you care is the most powerful comfort of all.

We may not be able to stop all the pain in the world, but we can do *something* to alleviate suffering – starting with our own families and reaching around the globe.

apply it...

1. REFRAFRAME YOUR REALITY. In Psalm 112:6-7 we read:

"Surely the righteous will never be shaken . . . They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD" (112:6-7). We don't need to fear "bad" news because our trust is in God, who has good things planned for us. (Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28)

2. SPEAK YOUR FAITH. Even just saying "I believe" will give us strength to keep going in faith. (Psalm 71:15; Luke 1:45)

3. SEE THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS. Take time to become aware of those in need in your own community and around the world. (Isaiah 58:6-7; Luke 10:30-33)

4. LET GO. Sometimes our suffering is compounded by holding on to the need to understand why challenges and tragedies have occurred. Learn to trust God's plan no matter how hard it is to understand. (Psalm 37:5-6; James 1:12)

5. CHOOSE TO GROW. When we go through challenges, we can let them hold us back or we can use them as a catalyst for meaningful change and personal growth. (Isaiah 40:29-31; James 1:2-4)

6. COMFORT GOD'S PEOPLE. Use the experiences and trials that you have gone through to comfort others. (Isaiah 51:12; 2 Corinthians 1:4)