

Joy Resulting From (Not Despite) Pain

Judah Kerbel ~ Queens Jewish Center ~ Parashat Vayeitzei 5783

*In a room that feels empty
Sitting all alone
Where just two candles glow
The silent hopes and whispered prayers
Echoing painfully
The dream in their hearts
Yet to grow
Imagined it so many times
Their dream Vzakeini
A family of their own
Offered every tear they have
Done all there is to do
But they know they're not in this alone*

*I know that it's hard to keep waiting
So I'll be here with you, holding your hand
And together our cries Vzakeini
Our tears will be carried right up to Hashem
So let's keep on waiting together
Hoping together for just one more day
Hold on tight for just a bit longer
Our cries, our tefilos, he won't turn away*

-["Hold on Tight"](#) by Chayala Neuhaus, sung by Baruch Levine and Benny Friedman

One of the major themes running through the lives of the Imahot (matriarchs) is the issue of infertility. Sarah has difficulty having children; Rivka suffers similarly; and Rachel feels tremendous agony. She considers herself to be dead without children, without purpose, living aimlessly. When Yosef is born, she gives him that name both because Hashem has removed that disgrace and also because it is only in that moment that she can have extra hope that Hashem will give her another baby – *yosef Hashem li ben acher*. Although Leah has many children quickly, it seems that Hashem enables this intentionally due to a particular circumstance. *Vayar Hashem ki senuah Leah va-yiftach et rachmah*. Hashem actively opens her womb because Leah was despised by Yaakov.

It is very hard to understand why people suffer. While we have a concept of reward and punishment in Judaism, we also know that Hashem's calculations are not entirely

straightforward. Part of the human and Jewish condition is the inability to fully grasp Hashem's actions, even if we hold *ha-Tzur tamim po'olo*, Hashem's actions are perfect. We might wonder what the Imahot, the righteous matriarchs of the Jewish people, would all endure the emotional affliction of infertility, assuming that they are deserving of reward?

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev shares a very powerful idea in the *Kedushas Levi*. When Yitzchak was born to Avraham and Sarah, Sarah says *צָהַק עֵשָׂה לִי אֲלֵקִים*. When Sarah initially hears that she will have a child, she laughs in an almost cynical way, a laugh of disbelief. This laugh, however, is a laugh of joy. The *Kedushas Levi* says:

הנה שכוונת השם יתברך במה שפקדם לעת זקנותם ולא כדרך כל הארץ בשני נעורים כדי שתצטער על זה ואחר כך כשיפקוד אותה יהיה שמחה גדולה, כי הדבר שבא בנקל בלי שום צער אין בה שמחה.

The intention of Hashem, blessed be His name, in taking note of them and enabling them to conceive in their later years, and not in the more natural way of conceiving in one's youth, is order that they will experience suffering over this, and then when Hashem takes note and enables them to conceive, it will result in great joy, **because anything that comes easily without any pain does not yield [true] joy.**

While having a child is a *simcha* for any family, the more naturally it comes, the more it is simply part of the way of life. Yes, there is joy, but it is also normal and natural. But when Sarah has a child in such a miraculous fashion, it is a colossal *simcha*! There is tremendous jubilation! Precisely because of how lowly the mother felt and how much she suffered, her happiness and excitement was the inverse. However much one celebrates the birth of a child, which is usually a great celebration, that sense of joy is that much more amplified when one experiences severe challenges in reaching that point and knows what it means to lack that joy. The transformation of hopelessness to achievement is quite radical (see Rav Baruch Simon, *Imrei Baruch on Bereishis, Vayeira, Ma'amar 4*).

This perhaps lends insight into the tefillot of Chanah. On the one hand, she was *marat nefesh* – bitter, depressed about her infertility. She goes to the Mishkan and cries and pleads with Hashem to give her a son. On the other hand, when she does give birth a year later, she says another tefillah, except this one begins *alatz libi Bashem* – my heart rejoices in God. What is it brought her joy? It is *mekim me'afar dal, me-ashpot yarim evyon*. It is the fact that Hashem elevates the downtrodden. Many people have reasons to be happy with Hashem, but why was Chanah the one who wrote this effusive *shirah* (song) praising God? It is because only someone who went through the difficulty that she endured can know that level of *simchah gedolah*, colossal joy.

Rav Simon quotes [Ramban](#) in a similar vein about the nature of *nisyonot*, difficult tests and trials. Why does Hashem test Avraham? What does a *nisayon* accomplish for a tzaddik? It makes a person stronger. When they go through the experience of *nisyonot*, which are

stressful, trying, and emotionally challenging, they emerge as a new person. They change for the good. The process may be painful, but there is a satisfaction and genuine joy that one can gain from the very overcoming of those challenges. We all face situations in life that in those moments are new and complex to us. We may not entirely know how to navigate them. But that process of trial and error is part of the spiritual growth process. Dr. Carol Dweck coined the term “growth mindset,” which “is about believing that people can develop their abilities.” Whether it is a new professional challenge, emotional/mental challenge, health challenge, Hashem believes, and we have to believe ourselves, that we can fortify ourselves to navigate those challenges. Rav Yitzchak Hutner famously explained to a struggling student that the verse in Proverbs, *sheva yipol tzaddik v’kam*, means that a tzaddik falls seven times and gets up not despite but because of his falling. Whether the setbacks are due to mistakes we made or due to circumstances beyond our control, our *nisyonot* in life have the power to transform those setbacks into virtues. And there is no greater joy than looking back at something that once seemed impossible and seeing that we made it through that challenge and emerged a stronger person.

This is part of the story of the entire Jewish people. We begin our Pesach seders with Avadim Hayinu – we discuss our moments of slavery before we celebrate our freedom, or as the Mishnah says *matchil bigenut umseyem b’shevach*, because, as Rav Soloveitchik says, we cannot appreciate our freedom without our experience of slavery. The American Jew who was born into a prosperous, free society needs to intentionally contemplate Jewish history to appreciate the sacrifices that have been made and the hardship endured. As ideal as it is to live in such a society, it does become too easy to take that freedom for granted. It becomes too easy to take the State of Israel for granted as well when one only considers its powerful side without seeing its history of vulnerability. As much as we want to educate and inculcate the notion of *s’iz gut tsu zayn a Yid*, it is good to be a Jew, that does not entirely negate the notion *shver tsu zayn a Yid*. In fact, they go hand in hand. While we do not want Judaism to be so difficult that it is impossible to meet the challenges, we also know that the effort put into Torah and mitzvot produces the returns. In the language of the last Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, *l’pum tza’arah agr*—according to the labor/pain is the reward. As difficult as Torah study can be; as difficult as it is to rein in the *yetzer hara*, we are reminded that the toil is meant to be rewarding, and the reward can only arrive with the toil. That is how we can celebrate the trajectory of Jewish history and the privilege we have to keep Judaism alive and thriving.

As nice as it is to talk about Sarah’s ending, Chanah’s ending, Yetziat Mitzrayim, *et cetera*, sometimes the greatest challenge within the challenge is not the challenge itself but the lack of closure. If you tell someone who is struggling that they will continue to struggle, but that it will be over in six months, a year, they might take solace in knowing that it will end. What is even hardest is that sometimes we do not really know if and when we will reach that *simcha gedolah*. But part of the story is that trust and faith that we will get there. *Hazorim b’dim’a*,

b'rinah yiktzoru – we may be sowing with tears, but the story of the Jewish people, from the avot and imahot until today, is that we have faith that one day, we will reap in joy.

The song I quoted above ends like this:

*In a world that feels empty
We languish in golus
With only our faith aglow
Our silent hopes and whispered prayers
Echoing painfully
The dream in our hearts
Yet to grow
Imagined it so many times
Harachaman hu yezakeinu
For that day, a home of our own
Offered every tear we have
Done all there is to do
But we know we're not in this alone*

*I know that it's hard to keep waiting
So I'll be here with you, holding your hand
And together our cries will be stronger
Our tears will be carried right up to Hashem
So let's keep on waiting together
Hoping together for just one more day
Hold on tight for just a bit longer
Our cries, our tefilos, he won't turn away*

ואף על פי שיתמהמה
עם כל זה אחכה לו,
אחכה לו בכל יום שיבוא
בכל יום שיבוא, אני מאמין

Whether our struggle is that of the Imahot, challenges of faith that Avraham received, more personal in nature, or the story of the Jewish people, we may feel we are in golus. But one thing that cannot be taken away from us is the hope that our extraordinary anguish will turn into extraordinary joy, and that our golus will turn into geulah.

אחינו כל בית ישראל הנתונים בצרה ובשביה, העומדים בין בים ובין ביבשה – המקום ירחם עליהם ויוציאם מצרה לרוחה, מאפילה לאורה, משעבוד לגאולה, השתא בעגלא ובזמן קריב ונאמר אמן.