

“Vayyidom Aharon”: Rav Aharon Lichtenstein זצ"ל on Responding to Suffering and Crisis

On Occasion of his fifth Yahrtzeit

ל' ניסן, ר"ח אייר ה'תש"פ

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Theme 1: Silence and Intellectual Humility

Halakhic Categories Guide, but Only to a Point

1. RAL, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 118-119

I wish to consider the question put to me: how can and should the classic *hovot ha-levavot*, or duties of the heart (repentance, prayer, fasting, etc.), affect our response to suffering, evil, and disaster?... The formulation evidently rests upon the implicit assumption that *hovot ha-levavot* – presumably, qua *hovot* can and should have an impact upon our response to calamity. What remains to be analyzed is the modality.

I must confess, however, that I find this proposition far from self-evident. That a Jewish response to suffering can and ought to include elements like prayer and fasting goes without saying. But to what extent, if any, is their inclusion grounded upon their normative aspect? Most Rishonim held that as an obligation, the *mizvah* of *tefillah* (prayer) only has *d'rabbanan* status, probably even in times of distress... By contrast, *teshuvah* (repentance) is patently mandated *mi'd'oraita*. Should our responses to the question confronting us with regard to these specific *mizvot* be significantly different? Further, none of these *mizvot* is mandatory for a non-Jew. Would we consequently formulate for a Muslim or a Christian inquirer an answer very much at variance with what we develop for ourselves.

2. RAL, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 121

The impact of *hovot ha-levavot* upon our relation to suffering is not confined to those that fundamentally are conceived as addressing themselves to it... the extent to which we have discharged our task conscientiously and creatively will significantly affect how suffering will be received, if and when it comes. Enthralled by *ahavat Hashem* (love of God), awed by *yirat Hashem* (fear of God), charged by faith (*Emunah*), and suffused with trust (*bittahon*), an individual, steeled and illuminated, faces calamity quite differently from a vacuous colleague.

The Pretense of Reading God's Mind

3. RAL, “After the Tsunami,” *VBM*

We must distance ourselves completely from such shallow and false answers. Those are questions for *Chazal* – who spoke in terms of some kind of general correlation, rather than with reference to a directly retributive causal nexus - to deal with, not people like us. The message that arises in the wake of the events of the twentieth century is that we have no business poking our noses into the "why;" in the context of such questions, what is required of us is absolute humility. We have no business explaining, or pretending to explain, things that cannot be explained. We must remember *Chazal's* teaching concerning Bilam, who thought that he understood God's supreme wisdom. The Gemara derides him: "This person, who claimed to know God's mind – could he not understand his donkey's mind?" This pretentiousness – moral, philosophical and religious pretentiousness – we totally reject.



4. RAL, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 118

We are inclined to acknowledge the justice of the Rav’s generalization that Judaism has not confronted suffering primarily as a speculative matter. Rather, it has related to it as an existential and experiential reality, to be dealt with pragmatically and normatively. Response, not explanation, is focal. Its message, in sum, is: “Don’t waste your passional experiences; utilize them; exploit them; let every passional experience become a point of departure for a higher and nobler life.”

5. RAL, “Is Anything New under the Sun?: Reflections on the First Anniversary of the Attack on the Twin Towers,” *VBM*

God’s goodness and grace are pillars of our faith. How, then, can we account for evil? It is certainly true that “the impulse of man’s heart is evil from his youth”; our Sages have told us that man’s evil impulse renews itself every day (*Kiddushin* 30b). God has endowed man with free will, which sometimes goes unbridled and has catastrophic results. I have been strongly influenced by the teachings of my revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z”l, who refrained, categorically, from providing answers as to why given events took place. I do not know the extent to which this was specifically because of the Holocaust; I presume that on principle he would have advocated standing humbly before the Almighty in any case. This attitude was deeply ingrained in the Rav’s personality and thinking. This humility dictates the conclusion that we are incapable of understanding Divine providence. But, at the same time, we are capable of responding to catastrophe – and thus also obligated to do so.

Religious Crisis as Challenging Ideological Certainty

6. RAL, “Is Anything New under the Sun?,” *VBM*

For theological and moral liberals, the events of September 11th surely came as a terrible shock. These groups had internalized the ethos, so prevalent in America in the last two centuries, that life is characterized by pleasantness, success and prosperity. Those who overlooked the tragic aspect of human life surely suffered a shocking blow – both conceptual and emotional – that threatened to undermine their worldview.

A similar shock presumably befell another group beholden to an entirely different perspective: those people of faith who thought they understood fully the ways of Providence. If they had managed to forget what happened in Europe in the previous century, the events of 9/11 presented a renewed challenge to their outlook.

Chazal’s Pluralism in Explaining Suffering

7. RAL, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 132

Hazal took it as a matter of course that one should regard personal suffering in the context of one’s relation to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. But as to conjecture concerning its substantive significance, they acknowledged considerable latitude. On one level, they encouraged responses that would question whether suffering was truly disastrous. They counseled raising the issue even with respect to the temporal pragmatic plane... As even the most righteous may be liable for the slightest peccadillo, exacting punishment from them here redounds to their advantage, as they then have a clean slate, having paid their penance with mundane currency.

On the other hand, it is conceivable that affliction is undiluted punishment or that it is, however this elusive term is understood, *yissurim shel ahavah*. Perhaps that is precisely the point: the range of perception and interpretation. One can rule out neither the chastising rod nor the stroking palm, and hence none of the correlative emotions. Various possibilities are to be entertained and examined, with no assurance that the uncertainty will be resolved. The key, however, remains acceptance. *Ante facto*, the central tradition of Yahadut gives every license to fight off impending disaster. *Post facto*, it urges acknowledgement, as an expression of the divine will, of the very affliction to which the most heroic resistance previously had been sanctioned.

Limits on Justifying God in Others' Crises

8. RAL, "After the Tsunami," VBM

I know that in extremely difficult times we are meant to acknowledge Divine justice (*tzidduk ha-din*), the first stage of which consists of declaring, "God gave and God has taken away; may God's Name be blessed." Recall, however, that while Iyov offered this acknowledgment of Divine justice after his own personal world collapsed, it is not a simple matter for people to perform *tzidduk ha-din* on someone else's tragedy, as we learn from Iyov's friends. To the extent that the personal distance between the speaker and the person who is suffering increases, so does the moral difficulty of justifying his fate and acknowledging Divine justice. The bottom line, then, is that such acknowledgment has its place, but it clearly is not a simple matter – neither philosophically nor emotionally. We are left, then, with shock and silence. We accept God's judgment, despite our incomprehension. One question, then – beyond the matter of presenting our words so as to make them as acceptable as possible – is whether to say anything at all.

9. RAL, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," *Leaves of Faith II*, *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 146

The need for balancing humility and sensitivity against the impetus to *teshuvah* obtains. If one genuinely counts himself among the guilty, *u-mippenei hatta'enu* ("because of our sins we were exiled") can be a most positive response. However, at the point at which it begins to shade off into *u-mippenei hatta'ekha* ("your sins"), let us beware...

Challenges to Traditional Theologies of Suffering in the Modern World

10. RAL, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 148

I return to the sinking feeling that much of what has been said here may fall upon deaf ears. In a scientific age, any linkage of suffering to sin, even as an instrument of repentance, may seem both hollow and naïve; any attempt to cry up the purgative nature of suffering may be viewed, especially after the Holocaust, as trite, platitudinous, and – what is worst – callous... I can understand this reaction, and indeed, up to a point, share it. But only up to a point...

Theme 2: Integration and Relation

Existential and Religious Categories Trump Halakhic Categories

11. RAL, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 126-127

The *hovot ha-levavot* we have surveyed affect our relation to suffering in several ways... On a primary level, they may condition how suffering is initially experienced; on a second, how it is understood and interpreted; on yet a third, what ensues in its wake.

With regard to the first... the most critical *mizvot* are the more general ones: *ahavat Hashem*, *devekut*, *yirat Hashem*. Broadly speaking, these *mizvot* mold a person's fundamental experiential relation to the *Robbono shel Olam*, and their influence upon response to suffering is itself multiplanar... transforms the individual... [and] affect the perception proper. Religious and secular experiences of the same calamity may vary, not because the sufferers are different, but because the respective blows ultimately are not truly identical... the scope of suffering is circumscribed and its significance diminished... because living, in Milton's phrase, "as ever in my great Taskmaster's eye," perspectives and values are reoriented... The importance attached to a temporal value, and hence the dismay engendered by its loss, is patently a function of one's total spiritual context... This point obviously needs to be examined in the broader context of the question of otherworldliness, a subject that lies well beyond the scope of this paper.

12. RAL, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," Leaves of Faith II, p. 148

Response to suffering cannot be divorced from the totality of religious experience, and the ability to integrate religious solutions is a function of the totality of faith and commitment. But that is precisely the Achilles' heel of modern man and of many a contemporary Jew, to the extent to which he has hitched his wagon to modernity, to a world in which, as Matthew Arnold lamented, "the sea of faith" no longer... [is] full... In such a context, the key to confronting suffering in a Jewish way lies beyond formulae related to the realm of suffering. It entails reaffirmation of one's fundamental *Yahadut*.

Accompanying All Stages of Suffering

13. RAL, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," Leaves of Faith II, p. 120-121

I would like to open the analysis by deviating from the formulation in yet another respect. We should, I believe, address ourselves not just to the response to suffering, but, more extensively, to the relation to it... Response comes, logically – and, by and large, psychologically and temporally as well – *post facto*. It constitutes, virtually by definition, an aftermath. The impact of inner religious sensibility upon the experience of suffering, however, also precedes and coincides with that suffering. It might significantly condition not only *how* the sufferer feels but *what* he feels.

Teshuvah as Returning to a Relationship

14. RAL, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," Leaves of Faith II, pp. 134-135

From another perspective, however, *teshuvah*, as a phenomenon rather than qua *mizvah*, has a wholly different effect. It bears two primary aspects, recoil *from* and return *to*: "return from your evil ways" (Yehezkel 33:11), as opposed to "return, Israel, unto your God" (Hoshea 14:2). The first constitutes the "moral" element, broadly defined: the recognition of sin and its retrospective and prospective renunciation. The second is its "religious" component: the rehabilitation and restoration of one's relation to God. The latter entails not only repentance but redemption... The whole range of *hovot ha-levavot* – *ahavat Hashem*, *yirah*, *devekut*, and others – that mold our relationship to Him, influence our reaction to suffering at the primary level.

Relating to the Suffering Other

15. RAL, "After the Tsunami," VBM

I am not certain that the problems I raised have an easy solution – or any solution at all – but we must try to point out certain general directions. The question is not only what we should say, but what we should do. On this level, our responses subdivide into actions with practical effects and actions with emotional effects.

The practical response refers to the simplest, most elementary level of *chesed*, performing acts of kindness and charity. Yet in addition to direct aid, there is another type of action that is necessary for its attitudinal significance. At the beginning of the Intifada, I was in the U.S. and people asked me what they could do to help Israelis in their difficult situation – could they give *tzeddaka* or help otherwise. I told them that the first step is simple. The Gemara (*Ta'anit* 11b) teaches,

"At a time when the Jews are in trouble, and one of them separates himself from the community, two angels arrive and place their hands on his head and declare, 'So-and-so, who separated himself from the community, shall not participate in the community's consolation.'"

Chazal regard such a situation, where a person does not participate in communal distress, as a most severe manifestation of egotism. The Gemara presents Moshe Rabbeinu as a foil to those who dissociate themselves from the community's distress. When the Israelites fought Amalek in the desert, Moshe sat on a rock, instead of on a chair or cushion:

"Moshe said, 'Since Israel is suffering, I too am with them in suffering.' And whoever makes himself suffer with the community, will merit to experience the community's consolation."

Whether Moshe sits on a rock or on a sofa makes no difference at all to those who are waging the war against Amalek; nevertheless, Moshe would never think of not identifying with the nation in its time of trouble, in the midst of war.

16. RAL, “Is Anything New under the Sun?,” VBM

Exposure to both the suffering and the bravery of 9/11 cannot but increase the human sensitivity of anyone with an open heart. This exposure must intensify our commitment and deepen our determination pursue the good. We must do our best to remember those who were killed; to support those whom they left behind; to build a better world, one that is more trusting and more humane. Especially during these days of reckoning, we cling to the realization of our shared destiny: “a world built by kindness” (*Tehillim* 89:3).

17. RAL, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” *Leaves of Faith II*, p. 144

We are also engaged emotionally, commiserating – be it as outsiders – with the pain of others. Among the *hovot ha-levavot*, this empathy relates to the very least to *tefillah*... The primary impact of *hovot ha-levavot* upon our relation to the suffering of others is felt, however, insofar as the suffering becomes, in some sense and on some level, our own. From a purely moral standpoint, this degree of empathy is desirable in itself, as a reflection of the ability to transcend egocentrism and weave an element of fellowship, community, or universality into the fabric of personal identity... This sense bears directly upon response to a fellow Jew’s suffering, and all the more so to response to a calamity that strikes *Knesset Yisrael*, collectively.

Sympathy and Unity with Non-Jews in Suffering

18. RAL, “After the Tsunami” VBM

During the past week, we have heard constantly changing estimates as to the nature and scope of the disaster that has befallen several countries in Asia. Our natural response has been to recite chapters of *Tehillim* after *mincha* in yeshiva, and this response is certainly appropriate. If we pray for a single individual who is caught in a stormy sea, even on Shabbat, then how much more appropriate this is for such a great number of people. Our prayers are not only for the Jews harmed by this disaster, but for the victims of all nations.

In the *sicha* I gave on the day following the disaster, I emphasized that we are the descendants of Avraham, who saw fit to pray for a society that even he himself knew to be corrupt to the core – “exceedingly evil and sinful towards God.” The Chafetz Chaim explains that Avraham’s reference to finding a number of “righteous people” in Sodom did not mean people of elevated spiritual stature; he simply meant people who were not wicked and deserving of death at the hands of Heaven. He entertained no hope of finding more than fifty such people who were not deserving of death. This is the city on behalf of which he argued and negotiated with God, until he pled on behalf of only ten – and even that number did not exist. If for the sake of this city Avraham offered not supplication but insistent argumentation, shall we not pray on behalf of such a large and peaceful community? We are reminded of Yona’s prayer concerning the “great city of Ninveh;” how can we not pray for entire countries?

19. RAL, “Is Anything New under the Sun?,” VBM

Our confrontation with this worldview should lead us to examine ourselves and take care that our own fervor not overpower our conscience and our faith. We must redouble our efforts to draw people closer together. As Jews, we proclaim a universal vision, while simultaneously preserving our uniqueness. We pray for and await the day when “the Lord will be one and His name one.” During this season we turn to God in supplication:

Reign over the whole universe in Your glory; be exalted over all the earth in Your grandeur; shine forth in Your splendid majesty over all the inhabitants of Your world. May every being know that You have made it; may every creature realize that You have created it.

These are very universal terms, but the next sentence moves from the universal to the particular: “May every breathing thing proclaim” not only theological unity, but also that “the Lord *God of Israel* is king, and His kingdom rules over all.”

This formulation, established by the Sages, draws from the visions of Isaiah and Micah. It embraces the universal, eschatological aspiration, while directed through a uniquely Jewish channel – which, at that time, will become the shared vision of all of humanity.

And many people shall go and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (*Yeshayahu 2:3*).

I know not how Divine providence will direct the paths of humanity, Jewish and general, to arrive at the realization of that vision, to close the gap between history and truth. Such a resolution has not yet appeared on the horizon. We lack the tools – practical and perhaps even conceptual – to bridge the abyss that lies between these worlds. However, as individuals and as a community, as believers and as educators, it is within our hands to try and influence the emphases and the direction. While preserving our uniqueness and our faith, we must try to narrow our differences with the broader world.

Fundamentally Inseparable from Religious Life Writ Large

20. RAL, “Is Anything New under the Sun?,” VBM

On the human level, the pain is terrible. Identifying with it is not only a duty imposed by the conscience, but also a visceral, instinctive reaction. That being said, I would nevertheless resist the notion that the evil committed on that bitter day marks a revolutionary change in our world from either a religious or a moral perspective. In keeping with this theme, I have titled this address, “Is anything new under the sun?”

Theme 3: Faithful Trust, Loving Trust, and Our Historical Moment

21. RAL, *Bittachon*: Trust in God, VBM

TWO APPROACHES TO *BITTACHON*

Our approach to humanity’s role in shaping history thus combines two factors: bold and responsible action accompanied by a deep and daring *bittachon*. What, however, is the nature of this *bittachon*? It seems to me that we must distinguish between two fundamental approaches.

According to the first approach, trust is expressed by the certainty that God stands at your side and will assist you. This is a variation of the words of the *mishna* (*Rosh Ha-shana* 3:8, 29a): “As long as the Jewish people looked Heavenwards and humbled their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed [in their war against Amalek].” This approach is fundamentally optimistic, saturated with faith and with hopeful expectation for the future...

The Chazon Ish, in his book *Ha-emuna Ve-ha-bittachon*, categorically rejects this approach...

Unlike the Chazon Ish, I would not go so far as to consider this view as being beyond the pale. It seems to me that many *Rishonim* adopted an approach akin to the one which the Chazon Ish rejects....

There is, however, a second approach to *bittachon*. The *Kad Ha-kemach* continues,

Also included in the matter of trust is that a person must surrender his soul to God, and should constantly occupy his thoughts with this matter: If brigands should come to kill him or to force him to abrogate the Torah, he should prefer to give up his life rather than go against the Torah. Concerning this, David said, “To You, God, I shall offer up my soul” (*Tehillim* 25:1), and it further states, “My God, in You I have trusted, let me not be disgraced” (*ibid.* 2). One who gives up his life under such circumstances has performed an act of *bittachon*.

Obviously, this approach has a completely different meaning. It does not attempt to scatter the clouds of misfortune, try to raise expectations, or strive to whitewash a dark future. It does not claim that “It will all work out for the best,” either individually or nationally. On the contrary, it expresses a steadfast commitment— even if the outcome will be bad, we will remain reliant on and connected to God. We will remain faithful until the end and shall not exchange our trust in God for dependence on man. This approach does not claim that God will remain at our side; rather, it asks us to remain at His side.

Naturally, this approach is much less popular than its counterpart. A demand is always less marketable than a promise. For one who makes an honest assessment, though, this approach also functions as a source of solace and strength. In truth, this approach presents not just a demand but also a message. Being disconnected from God constitutes the greatest tragedy that can befall a person. When the Torah states, “To Him you shall cleave” (*Devarim* 13:5), it simultaneously expresses a demand as well as an opportunity. Similarly, the psalmist’s call, “Israel, trust in God” (*Tehillim* 115:9), constitutes both a demand as well as an opportunity...

FAITH AND LOVE

These two approaches stem from different halakhic obligations. The first is, practically speaking, an aspect of the mitzva of *emuna* (faith). This mitzva has a purely cognitive aspect, which asks of a Jew to recognize certain metaphysical or historical facts...

Concerning the second type of trust... The proclamation, “Though He may slay me, still I will trust in *Him*,” expresses a trust in God Himself, not as a function of what I can *receive from* Him, but rather as trust *in* Him. This trust is unconnected with what one may get out of the relationship, but simply describes a connection to God...

THE DUALITY OF BITTACHON IN TEHILLIM

The dual nature of trust in God receives strong expression in the *Shir Ha-ma'alot* chapters in *Tehillim*. On the one hand, we have *mizmor* 121:

A song of Ascents. I will lift up my eyes to the mountains, from whence shall my help come? My help is from God, Maker of heaven and earth...

This *mizmor* provides a classic illustration of hopeful, faithful trust, one that is certain of a positive outcome. *Mizmor* 131, on the other hand, portrays a completely different mood:

A Song of Ascents, for David. O Lord, my heart has not been proud, nor have my eyes been haughty. I did not tread in areas too great or wondrous for me. Did I not wait and did my soul not silently hope, like a suckling infant longs for his mother? Like a suckling, so too my soul. Israel will trust in God from now and forever.

What does the suckling infant think while in his mother’s embrace? Does he regard her as the one who will save him from crisis? Perhaps instinctually, this indeed may be the case, but practical expectations are in fact not the main thing on the infant’s mind. First of all, he turns to his mother because he wants to be close to her. At that moment, he is not preoccupied with future plans, nor is he anticipating the fulfillment of visions or promises. He knows only one thing: the world is a cold, frightening place, but here with his mother there is warmth and security! The mother, in turn, caresses him and comforts him. Over and above any response on her part, simply being in her presence gives him life and strength. Therefore, the suckling cleaves to her under all circumstances. This is not out of readiness to sacrifice himself for her, but rather because nothing in the world can separate him from her. Wherever she turns, he is at her side, tightly clutching her skirt with his small fingers...

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE TWO TYPES OF BITTACHON

Just as these two chapters of *Tehillim* are paradigmatic of the two approaches to trust, one can also trace the historical development of these two approaches over time. Of course, the Jewish people have adopted both approaches from their earliest beginnings, with our forefather Avraham being a classic example of both. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest that the destruction of the First Temple and the consequent exile brought about a fundamental shift in attitude. Although historians have often exaggerated the effects of this turning point, it is nevertheless a fact that our own Sages also viewed this era as pivotal.

Rav said: The Jewish people offered a clinching argument in response to the words of the prophet. The prophet had said: “Return to God, for your ancestors who transgressed are no more!” The people responded: “And the prophets who did not transgress, where are they?”—as the verse states (*Zekharia* 1:5), “Where are your fathers? And will the prophets live forever?” . . .

Shemuel explained [that the people had a different retort]: Ten people came before the prophet and sat before him. He said to them, “Return to God.” They said to him, “A slave who has been sold by his master or a woman who has been divorced by her husband, can there be any claim between them?” [In other words, by destroying our Temple and exiling us, has God not in effect divorced us or released us from His service?] Said God to the prophet, “Go and tell them (*Yeshayahu* 50:1): ‘Where then is the bill of divorce

of your mother whom you say I sent away, and to which of my creditors have I sold you? You have been sold on account of your transgressions, and your mother was sent away because of your misdeeds.’ ”
(*Sanhedrin* 105a)

During the period of the Temple, when the people of Israel dwelt in their own land, it was possible for them to draw strength from *bittachon* born of faith. Of course, even at that time there were crises and difficult moments, but as long as the national and religious frameworks remained in place, it was possible to rely on the fundamental relationship between God and His people. The darkness of night was bearable because one could believe that the dawn would follow. With the Destruction, however, the foundations of that trust crumbled... in the aftermath of the Destruction, when Mount Zion was desolate and foxes prowled its ruins, when the Jewish people was shamed and humiliated, how was it possible to trust in God that things would work out for the best? This was neither possible nor necessary, for “a servant whose master has sold him and a woman whose husband has divorced her” bear no responsibility towards their former relationship.

Concerning this, there was a dual response. God offered the awesome and striking rejoinder that we have not been absolved and that the initial obligation remains in place:

That which you are thinking shall never be, that you say, “We shall be like the other nations who serve gods of wood and stone.” As I live, says the Lord God, I shall rule over you with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm and with awesome wrath! (*Yechezkel* 20:32-33)

The Jewish people, for their part, discovered a treasure-trove of trust that was new to them, but ancient in origin. They remembered that they were not simply heirs to the *Berit Bein Habetarim* (Covenant between the Pieces, *Bereishit* 15) but also the “descendants of My beloved Avraham” (*Yeshayahu* 41:8). They came to the realization that it is possible to say “the Great, Mighty and Awesome God” even as the enemy forces destroyed His sanctuary and enslaved His people (*Yoma* 69b). It was possible to have a deep and abiding faith even “by the rivers of Babylon.”

The Jewish people emerged from the state of exile strengthened and fortified, with a faith that was more profound than before. They learned to appreciate that their connection to God, their reliance on Him and trust in Him, were independent of external, objective factors. This is the meaning of *Chazal* ’s statement that the people re-accepted the Torah in the days of Achashverosh...

BITTACHON TODAY

While we should generally try to maintain a balance between the optimistic *bittachon* of faith and the steadfast *bittachon* of love, there are historical periods when it seems that the latter type of *bittachon* is on the verge of disappearing completely, and therefore needs special reinforcement. Although it may sound paradoxical, I think that our own period, which has witnessed the rebirth of the State of Israel, is one of those times. All of the religious and national hopes and aspirations that arose with the dawn of the state tended to draw us completely towards “faithful trust,” while the second approach of “loving trust” was pushed aside.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that under favorable conditions, it is more difficult to demand religious self-sacrifice. As the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson pointed out, it is much easier to dismiss this world and to adopt an otherworldly stance when there is not much to lose in this life. In contrast, for a person burdened with many possessions, disdain for the material realm is much more difficult. It is also possible that our almost exclusive embrace of the first aspect of trust is engendered by our continuous accomplishments, which raise expectations even further. Perhaps the popularity of the teachings of Rav Kook, suffused as they are with national and cosmic optimism, is also partially responsible.

Whatever the cause, the phenomenon is clear: the equilibrium between the two aspects of trust has been lost by the Religious Zionist community in Israel. This fact was and is reflected in our educational system. We inculcated the ideas of faithful trust, redemption, hope and expectation very well, but neglected to teach the values of loving trust, of cleaving to God without hesitation under all circumstances. We did not fortify our children or ourselves concerning the possibility of crises, conveying that the song to God must be sung even on the rivers of Babylon. We did not allow ourselves to wrestle with the possibility of national setbacks...

I fear, however, that today we are beginning to pay the price for this skewing of values, and now is the time to rectify the error. Our obligation is to redirect our focus to embrace loving trust, to acknowledge that we are ready to hold tight to God because He is our steadfast Rock, and let the chips fall where they may. We must deal with

the tragic dimension of trust, to renew the spirit of “Though He may slay me, still I will trust in Him.” This expresses the essence of Jewish trust in the face of tragic situations.

I hope that my words are not misconstrued to mean that we must abandon faithful trust. Personally, I am brimming with the belief that God will not abandon His people and that our national existence in this Holy Land is secure. I do my utmost to pass on this belief to my children and students. At the same time, I feel that I must simultaneously instill in them loving trust, not as a spiritual insurance policy in case of crisis, but rather because sacrifice and connectedness to God are essential in their own right, even under the most favorable circumstances. The ability to trust during suffering is important for a person, even when he thinks that difficulties do not lie on the horizon.

I also hope that my words are not taken to imply a devaluation of suffering or a negation of the pain of tribulation. In his essay, “Beyond Tragedy,” Reinhold Niebuhr writes, “Christianity is a religion above and beyond tragedy. Tears as well as death are swallowed up in triumph.” This is because, for Christianity, suffering is transformed by becoming the foundation for personal redemption. Let it be stated explicitly that Judaism is not “beyond tragedy,” nor does it “swallow up” suffering. Jewish tradition educates the person to accept suffering, but also to bemoan it. Grieving—not philosophical detachment, stoic fortitude or open-armed joy—is the response which Halakha mandates when a person is faced by a loved one’s death. As the Ramban writes in the introduction to his work on the laws of mourning, *Torat Ha-adam*, “Strength of heart in this matter is of the path of rebelliousness, and softness of heart is of the path of confession and repentance.” Jewish tradition teaches the person to respond to suffering and to be educated through his or her experience of it, but certainly not to downplay or negate it. Let us recognize the magnitude of pain and suffering, but let us also continue to trust in and cleave to God.

The attribute of trust is thus antinomic, i.e., it contains conflicting aspects. On the one hand, trust demands that a person be convinced that God will assist him; on the other hand, it demands that a person be prepared for a time when, God forbid, help will not be forthcoming. That it is antinomic makes it more difficult to teach, but the model nonetheless exists.

Let us recall that our tradition preserves the account of a towering and heroic figure—Rabbi Akiva. He was full of faithful trust and optimism, convinced that the Jewish people would be restored to sovereignty and spiritual greatness in their land...

Rabbi Akiva hoped; he anticipated the best and believed that it would transpire. Yet when this did not come to pass, when faced with a cruel and painful death—in this last, most bitter hour, he smiled. As he explained to Turnus Rufus, the wicked Roman governor, his smile was not an indication of “belittling of suffering,” but rather a sign of great *bittachon* (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 9:5)...

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Practically speaking, I think that we must concentrate on one point: Trust is not an independent topic, but rather is associated with both faith and love. The ability to nurture the quality of trust depends upon one’s internalization of a general fear of Heaven, which is related to the quest for closeness to God as well as to the centrality of religious values in a person’s life. The attribute of trust, especially with respect to its second aspect of love, is not independent of other qualities, and it certainly cannot simply be activated, like a proverbial faucet, during an hour of need. Rather, *bittachon* is a function of a person’s general relationship to God, and depends upon his service of the heart, practical mitzva observance, devotion to study of Torah, and sensitivity to God’s constant overarching presence, in the sense of the verse (*Tehillim* 16:8), “I have placed God before me always.”

This approach is, of course, long and arduous. It offers no shortcuts and eschews facile slogans. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is, in the final analysis, a “long path which is short;” and I am not aware of any other. This approach is not presumptuous enough to suppose that it can answer all of our questions, but it does remove some of the sting from the questions...

If we are interested in coping with questions concerning *bittachon*, then we must address the general state of our Torah life. Let us deepen our faith, increase our love, and in so doing, we will attain the necessary *bittachon*. This is a trust that will allow us to hope for the best possible outcome, but will also strengthen us for life’s most difficult moments. As “believers and children of believers,” we trust that God will do His part.