

Chanukah, and When Life Grows Dark

A LETTER TO KIDS WHO HAVE LOST A MOM OR DAD

Sometimes other kids have things we wish we had, like bigger homes or nicer cars. Some have richer parents or parents who are more “cool.”

But lots of kids are very lucky without even knowing it. These are kids with both parents. Their lives were never turned upside down or their world torn apart.

Ours was.

Unfortunately, my six children had plenty of opportunity to wish their lives were the same as their friends’. Most of their friends, after all, had two parents.

Our home was a happy one. We were a really happy family. We didn’t have much money but we were able to help lots of people. We laughed a lot.

My youngest child was only five when her mother became ill. She was ten when life grew dark and I became her only parent. Her sister was 14, and her brothers ranged from 19 to 24. It was tough for all of them. No, that’s not a strong enough word. It was dreadful. It was terrible. Our home was no longer a happy and bright place.

The usual question people ask at times like this is, Why me? Why us?

I’ll give you the answer straight away: No one knows. I don’t know, nor do you. No one does.

When events affect the entire Jewish people and life grows dark for all of us, our *gedolim* can point out what we need to improve as a people. When an individual suffers, only a prophet can tell you why. But we don’t have prophets anymore.

Whenever I am invited to speak at a Shabbaton or seminar, there is always one lecture I insist on giving. It is called, “Why Do Very Bad Things Happen to Very Good People?”

That may sound strange, since I just wrote that I don’t know the answer to that question. But I do know how to react, having learned from others whose challenges were documented. The truth is that although I thought the stories were interesting, I did not realize when I read them that the challenges were actually mine, and that their experiences could be applied to my own situation.

The obstacles those Jews faced were huge. One had a father who had him thrown into jail for ten years. Another was nearly killed by his father. One had a brother who tried to kill him several times, and a father-in-law who did the same. This man’s daughter was kidnapped and violated. He faced the threat of his entire family being killed in a pogrom, and he lost a son and became blind. Many of their wives faced periods of childlessness and the pain that brings, while sharing their husband’s struggles. They all experienced great pain through one or all of their children.

And yet, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah all overcame their “why me?” times.

When I first read the book that tells their stories, I thought it was a narrative of people long ago. It was, however, a tale about me and the here and now, and a tale about you, your life and your pain.

I once gave my usual lecture in San Diego. After I finished, a man came over to me who had been in Auschwitz. Scheduled to speak right after me he said, “You’ve

taken away everything I wanted to say!”

Not quite. He related the following:

“One day, a bunch of us were standing in a corner of the barracks within sight of the chimneys of the crematoria. One of the boys suddenly announced, ‘I’m glad I’m in Auschwitz!’ We looked at him and asked him what he had said, and he repeated it. We asked him if he was crazy or sick. He replied, ‘No, I’m not *meshuga*. And if I wasn’t happy, I’d still be in Auschwitz anyway.’”

The speaker then turned to the audience and said, “If you haven’t suffered, you haven’t lived. If you haven’t suffered, you’re nothing! How else are you going to help other people when they are suffering?”

You either become better or bitter. The difference between the two is only an “I.”

Don’t misunderstand me. I am not trying to minimize anyone’s pain or even my own. After all, we pray every morning, “*Lo al yedei nisayon*—don’t give me any tests.” They come anyway, but you shouldn’t volunteer for them!

One of my books is all about this subject. It’s called *The Little Book for Big Worries: Dealing with Serious Illness*. Would I have vol-



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unteered for the experience of losing a wife and watching my children lose their mother so I would be qualified to write this book? Certainly not! But because I will never know the reason “why me” or “why us,” I can at least listen to that Auschwitz survivor. “If you haven’t suffered, you haven’t lived. How else are you going to help other people when they are suffering?”

I can choose between bitter or better. I can do nothing, or I can try to help other people with their pain. I can also remember the lives of those Jews in that book I mentioned, and how they overcame “bitter” for “better.” I can think about how they moved on from pain and tragedy to greatness and success, and created the Jewish people.

Of course, all the words in the world won’t help if you are in so much pain that you just want to scream, “Why me? It’s so unfair!”

I hope you’ll read a bit further because I can tell you something that is actually very helpful.

At the moment, I live in New York City. New Yorkers talk about “the mountains,” by which they mean the Catskills. I am from Scotland, I know real mountains. Trust me, the Catskills are pimples! Whatever you are wearing on your feet as you read this is probably fine for climbing them.

If you want to climb a Scottish mountain, you will need proper hiking boots. If you want to climb the Swiss Alps, you will need far more serious gear. And if you want to climb the world’s highest peak, Mount Everest, you will require a whole team of people to help get you to the top. They will carry all the equipment including oxygen tanks,

without which the climb is impossible.

The higher the mountain you have to climb, the more help you need to conquer it. And in order to get you to the top, they obviously have to have been there before. In

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truth, the best help is available from those who have been in your particular situation and know how to conquer your particular mountain.

Leaning on them to deal with the pain of losing a parent, your family slowly starts to heal, bit by bit. We began to put our home back together. A calm settled, and some smiles and laughter appeared too. Our world returned to the way it was—apart from the fact that the person we loved more than anyone else was no longer with us. So much happened that we had so little control over yet we started to recover, even if tears bubbled just below the surface.

Time goes on, and a wounded family starts to grow stronger. The tears are still there, but the scab grow thicker. Of course, nothing is the same, and nothing will ever be quite the same.

Then into the calm something else may be injected. It can happen soon or even decades later. It usually feels like another storm that is even more challenging than the first one.

But it might not be a storm at all. We wait to see which way the wind blows and whether it will be a breeze or a gale.

After everything that’s happened, your only parent tells you that he is thinking of marrying again. Your world is badly shaken all over again. Do you welcome this new development, or are you betraying your late Mom or Dad if you do? Will you give the new stepparent and his or her kids a chance, or do you turn the pain you feel outward, with plenty to go around for everyone else? Will the “better” you achieved flip over to become “bitter?”

If this happens, and it seems to be the biggest mountain yet, then remember Mount Everest. The higher the mountain you have to climb, the more help you need to conquer it. And that help has to have been there before.

Don’t try climbing the highest heights on your own. You are guaranteed that there is always help to be derived from *Klal Yisrael*. It will come from someone who has suffered in exactly the same way as you, turned the bitter into better, and realized, “How else are you going to help other people when they are suffering?”

If your life grew dark not too long ago, the twinkling and sparkling lights of the *menorah*, dancing and leaping upward, contain a message: Even when life becomes very dark, there are those who can light the way for you and help you begin to pick yourself up.

Find out who has already gotten to the top of your particular mountain, and helps others climb it as well. And ask them to help you do it too. ●

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