

Lev V'Nefesh

HEART & SOUL

When tragedy hits, it leaves us wrestling with new realities. One of the most frustrating aspects of any type of trauma or loss is: what do you say or do to help when it seems that nothing can be accomplished?

One unique approach has been posited by the psychiatrist Dr. Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor who authored the ground-breaking book, *Man's Search For Meaning*. He stressed that "free will" often does not grant us the ability to change bleak circumstances; but rather, the key to freedom lies in retaining the choice of how to think, feel and react in the wake of trauma and tragedy.

Lev V'Nefesh ~ Heart & Soul epitomizes the philosophy of *S.S.T.A.R.T: School & Synagogue Trauma and Resilience Training*. Relatives, friends and neighbors; teachers, clergy and medical or mental health professionals - ALL need to have the heart and soul necessary to help in tragic situations. What are they trying to connect with in those impacted by tragedy? *Their* hearts and souls, those pieces of humanity that may have been most severely affected.

The lessons in these vignettes talk to *our* hearts and souls; they talk about empathy, listening, crying, praying, caring - responses that simply cannot be examined under a microscope. Enjoy them, learn from them, and most importantly, practice them whenever needed.

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CRY WITH ME, NOT FOR ME

A young girl was leaving for school, and her mother reminded her to come straight home when her last class ended. Thirty minutes late, she finally walked through the front door. Her mother scolded her. "Where have you been?" she asked. "I've been worried sick."

With a concerned face, the daughter sweetly replied, "I walked home with my friend, Sally, and she dropped her doll and it broke all to pieces. It was just awful!"

"So you were late because you stayed to help her pick up the doll and put it back together again?" her mother asked.

"Oh no, Mommy," she explained. "I didn't know how to fix the doll. I just stayed to help her cry!"

Puppies For Sale, and Other Inspirational Tales, Dan Clark, Health Communications, Inc., 1997

EMPATHY, NOT ANSWERS

While paying a condolence call to a friend, I witnessed a visitor launch into a detailed exposition on religious approaches to suffering. My friend, in the midst of lamenting his profound loss, had no interest in hearing a philosophy lecture. I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat, looking for an opportunity to change the topic. My friend nodded politely as the discourse continued, but I knew that the words cut like daggers.

The consummate question of “Why me, God?” can sometimes serve as a philosophical inquiry, but is often a cry of suffering and angst. The former is a request for clarity which warrants a complex and intellectual response. But if the question is ultimately a reflection of deep emotional pain, then rational explanation is not only irrelevant, it’s downright insensitive. An expression of anguish should elicit empathy, not answers; supportive silence, not unwieldy words.

Adapted from Rabbi Nehemia Coopersmith’s article, *Wrestling with Suffering*.

LEARNING TO LISTEN, LISTENING TO LEARN

Let me share with you a Russian story I read as a child. It is close to 100 years old and made a lifelong impression on me. This tale is about a poor wagon driver whose young son had tragically died of pneumonia.

The wagon driver was broken-hearted at his son's death, but his desperate financial plight forced him to return to work immediately after the funeral. He was hired to take a group of rich businessmen from Moscow to another city. As the trip progressed, he began mumbling incoherently to himself, "Peter was a good boy... he was a good boy... it was only a little cough... he was such a good boy..."

The passengers, who were passing the time by laughing and joking among themselves, became annoyed with the wagon driver's moans and groans. One of them shouted at him, "You old fool! Just drive and stop making so much noise!" The wagon driver mumbled something under his breath and became silent as he drove on through the night. An hour later he began muttering to himself, "Peter was a good boy... he was a good boy... it was only a little cough... he was such a good boy..."

Again this evoked a gruff reprimand from his passengers, only a bit harsher this time. This went on until the wagon stopped at a roadside inn. The businessmen ran into the tavern to get something to eat and drink while the wagon driver repeated the whole story of his son's illness and death. The horse listened patiently, nodding its head from time to time as it munched its meal. The man had finally found a sympathetic ear to which he could relate his tale of woe — his horse!

This tragic story has its modern-day counterparts. In a world where everything seems just a phone call away, countless people continue to feel isolated and lonely. Practice the art of listening - you may end up helping people more than you'll ever know.

Story told by Rabbi Abraham Pam.

HOW TO LIVE YOUR DASH

by Linda Ellis

I read of a man who stood up to speak at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end.

He noted that first came her date of birth and spoke the following date with tears.
But said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time that she had spent alive on the earth.
And now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not how much we own, the cars, the house, the cash --
What matters most is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.

So think about it long and hard . . . are there things you'd like to change?
For you never know how much time is left that can still be rearranged.

If we could just slow down enough to consider what is true and real,
And try to understand the way other people feel.

Be less quick to anger and show appreciation more,
And love the people in our lives like we've never loved them before.

Treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile,
Remembering this special dash might only last a while.

So when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions to rehash,
Would you be proud of the things they say, about how you spent your dash?

THE CANVAS OF LIFE: OUR LIMITED PERSPECTIVE

After God forgives the Children of Israel for creating the golden calf, Moses entreats, "Please reveal Your glory to me." God responds, "You may glimpse My 'Back,' but My 'Face' you cannot see." (Exodus 33) As part of this world, one cannot fully fathom events which are intellectually perplexing and emotionally troubling. Only after this world and its history have been completed can God's will be fully comprehended. One can only see the "footprints" of Providence *after* God has passed.

This lesson can be better understood in light of the following personal incident: I was once invited to the home of an art connoisseur, who proudly showed me his collection of paintings. As I approached one of them to get a closer look, my host explained, "Rabbi, you can't appreciate the painting unless you're at a distance of five feet." If the work of a human artist cannot be appreciated unless it is viewed from a distance, how much more so the master creation of the "Cosmic Artist." Only *after* God has completed the canvas of history can the meanings fully emerge.

From an article by Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik.

THE HEAVENLY FLASK OF ETERNAL TEARS

May it be Your will, You Who hears the sound of weeping,
that You place our tears in Your flask permanently,
and that You rescue us from all cruel decrees,
for on You Alone are our eyes fixed.

יהי רצון מלפניך שומע קול בכינות
שתשים דמעוהנינו בצנאך להיות
ותצילנו מכל גזרות אבזריות
כי לך לבד עינינו תלויות

Yom Kippur Prayer

*SSTART, School & Synagogue Trauma And Resilience Training, is a not-for-profit organization dealing with crisis and trauma within the Jewish community. Since trauma's "ripple effects" can make an impact regardless of age, gender or belief, SSTART provides resilience and life-skills programs to help people prepare **before** challenges arise. In the wake of actual tragedies, crisis interventions are available to help the healing process by reconnecting victims to their inner strengths and coping skills, as well as to family and community supports.*

SSTART programs have been developed over decades of experience counseling and training children and schools, families and synagogues, healthcare facilities and hospices, from across the broad spectrum of Jewish communities. They have been carefully designed to provide an innovative blend of classic Jewish sources and cutting-edge resilience and coping techniques.

For further information or materials, or to schedule a presentation, training or intervention, please contact SSTART's Director, Moshe Borowski, LMSW, ACSW, at either HealTheHurt@gmail.com or (646) 673-5909.

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Preparing for life's expected, and unexpected, challenges.