

# To Feel or Not To Feel?

## Approaching Distress Through the Lens of Torah and Psychology

The period between the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz and the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av is considered the saddest time of the Jewish calendar, culminating in a day that the Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 18b) refers to as a day in which “*huchpelu bo tzaros* — tragedies were repeated.” The ninth of Av is a day on which throughout our history, tragedy after tragedy occurred. To name a few: the sin of the *meraglim*, the destruction of both *Batei Mikdash*, the fall of Betar, and the ploughing over of the city of Jerusalem all occurred on this very difficult day. The Mishna in *Taanis* (4:6) states that in response to the calamities that have historically befallen the Jewish people during this time, we are to limit our happiness once the month of Av starts. This period of grieving peaks on the Ninth of Av, on which we refrain from eating and drinking, bathing and washing, wearing leather shoes, anointing ourselves, and engaging in marital relations.

Given the grim nature of this time period and our observance of customs limiting our happiness during these weeks, this remains a time of year in which we sense an undertone of distress. As such, it is an opportune time to consider more than just the historic realities of what transpired — more conceptually, what is the Torah’s approach to our experience of grief and sadness? How does



Eric Pollak, PsyD

Coordinator of Alcohol and Drug Services,  
YU Counseling Center



Debra Alper, PhD

Psychologist and Outreach Coordinator,  
YU Counseling Center

the Torah guide us through other distressing emotions, such as fear, anger, and anxiety? Using the lens of both Torah wisdom and empirically supported theories in psychology, we will address several strategies for managing the different stages of difficult emotions.

When considering the experience of distress in the Torah-observant Jew’s life, the process of *shiva* immediately comes to mind. In the depth of loss and sadness, *shiva* can be seen as the Torah’s practical instruction on how to wade through negative emotions and distressing life events. Simply by way of their very existence, the laws of *shiva* express the notion that suffering and distress are a normal and expected part of life, and are not to be denied. In *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Rabbi Maurice Lamm writes, “Judaism is a faith that embraces all of life, and death is a part of life. As this faith leads us through

moments of joy, so does it guide us through the terrible moments of grief.”

Further, Jewish tradition has formulated “clear guidelines . . . to lead mourners through the complex maze of uncertainties and ambivalence that attend the tragic moment. The ache of the heart will not suddenly disappear. There will be no miraculous consolation. But Judaism does teach the aching heart how to express its pain in love and respect, and how to achieve the eventual consolation, which will restore us to humanity and keep us from vindictiveness and self-pity.” (M. Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, pp. 2-3)

The primary purpose of the *shiva* tradition is to create an environment of comfort and community for the individual who has experienced loss. *Shiva* guides the mourner, along with his community, through his loss and distress. Throughout the

period of *shiva*, family and friends gather in the mourner's home to allow him to grieve, all the while sharing condolences and offering support. From a practical standpoint, the process provides structure to a suffering individual when he likely feels himself in emotional disarray.

The Torah tradition of *shiva* is very much in concert with psychology's prescription for an individual who is suffering distress or loss. When an onslaught of negative emotions leads one to feel utter dysregulation, evidence-based psychology offers specific advice. First, the sufferer is encouraged to fully encounter his emotional experience, and to not deny or reject what he is going through. In the midst of his distress, the sufferer is further encouraged to reach out for emotional support from people in his life who are equipped to provide it. Research shows unequivocally that provision of support from able friends and family is a powerful buffer against the deleterious consequences of prolonged distress. Finally, psychologists advise that behavioral action precedes one's emotional state. As such, behaviorally returning to one's routine and healthy habits can hasten emotional healing.

Throughout the remainder of this article, we will discuss these three elements of the journey through negative emotions, as seen through

the lens of both Torah and evidence-based psychology: acceptance, social support, and cognitive behavioral techniques.

## 1. Acceptance

Emotions are a natural part of life and crucial for human survival. Normal human experience encompasses emotions ranging from happiness to sadness, anticipation to fear, and everything in between. It is normal and healthy to experience a host of emotions, often even simultaneously. Most people are open to experiencing emotions that are pleasant, but tend to avoid those feelings that make them less comfortable. Sadness, anger, fear, and anxiety are suppressed or denied, often because the sufferer feels ill-equipped to deal with them. However, research indicates that avoidance of emotions actually intensifies them, and can exponentially complicate matters (Hayes et al., 1999).

Avoidance of difficult emotions is discouraged for a few reasons. First, avoidance is a short-term solution. By avoiding his feelings, one is not addressing whatever issue is triggering them, but is instead burying his feelings until they inevitably resurface. Consequently, while one might feel better for a short period of time, he is unprepared to manage his negative feelings when they return. Additionally, when avoidance

becomes one's only way of dealing with distress, the individual becomes unsustainably vigilant about avoiding anyone or anything that might trigger what he deems an unacceptable feeling.

Unlike avoidance, acceptance is a powerful and effective way to manage distressing emotions. Defined as "the active and aware embrace of private experiences without unnecessary attempts to change their frequency or form" (Hayes et al., 2012), acceptance is the antidote to avoidance. When we accept our own negative emotional experiences, we change the way we pay attention to our distress. We experience a powerful dialectic, wherein we acknowledge our own pain without immediately trying to diminish it.

In fact, our emotions are informational, providing a kind of a personal State of the Union address on how we are doing at any given time. As such, acknowledging even painful emotions can be key to our success and survival. Noting our own fear and anxiety can alert us to danger so that we may react appropriately. Anger can prevent us from being taken advantage of, and sadness upon loss highlights the people, events, and things we value. Acceptance is powerful, because when we can see our emotions as non-threatening, their negative power is diminished. Negative emotions are not to be feared, but are to be attended to and learned from.

Moreover, part of acceptance is recognizing that our emotions are not permanent, but are in fact ephemeral. This idea is echoed by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who describes halakha as differentiating between objective and subjective mitzvot. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that

Judaism is a faith that embraces all of life, and death is a part of life. As this faith leads us through moments of joy, so does it guide us through the terrible moments of grief.

- Rabbi Maurice Lamm zt"l

*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*

subjective mitzvot, those that are performed through our own personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, are still grounded in concrete actions. This is due to the idea that halakha is “very distrustful of the genuineness and depth of our inner life, because of its vagueness, transience, and volatility” (Soloveitchik, 2002, p. 88). Our emotions can be compared to a wave, in that they come at us in a constant ebb and flow. While we have all experienced happiness, that feeling did not last forever. The same is true of sadness and all other emotions. The natural progression of emotions is for them to rise and fall in intensity, never maintaining their heightened state indefinitely. In order to progress to the calm, we must allow ourselves to experience the emotional storms. In his seminal work, *Alei Shur*, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe similarly notes that one is expected to have good and bad days.

אולם, ידיעה זו לבדה, כי התחלפות ימי האהבה וימי השנאה דבר טבעי הוא – בכוחה להפיג הרבה מן היאוש והעצבות.  
*The very knowledge of the fact that it is natural to have good days and bad days has the power to assuage a lot of despair and sadness.*

**Alei Shur, Vol. I pg. 35**

Rabbi Wolbe maintains that if one understands and accepts that these emotional highs and lows are an expected part of life, it will help reduce one’s distress.

There is a time for everything, and every emotion has its place. There are times to celebrate, but there are also times when it is appropriate to mourn and grieve. Upon entering a home of mourners, visitors are instructed to remain silent at first, allowing the mourner to direct the tone of conversation. This is illustrative of

the purpose of the *shiva* visit. That is, not to distract the mourner from his suffering, but to accept him and accompany him in whatever emotional state he is in. So too, this practice can be seen as instructive to all of us, on how to approach our own emotional condition beyond the *shiva* setting. Rather than deny ourselves the experience of our own genuine distress, let us accept our emotions where they are, and sit with them patiently until we are ready to move forward.

**2. Social Support**

Another important component of *shiva* is the support that mourners may garner through the ability to talk about their loss to family and friends. Mourners may be comforted by being given the opportunity to reflect on their loved one and by having others provide for their physical and emotional needs through interpersonal interactions and acts of kindness. A verse in Mishlei (12:25) alludes to the notion that talking to someone can be an effective way to cope. The verse states:

דָּאָגָה בְּלִב־אִישׁ יִשְׁחָנָה וְדָבָר טוֹב יִשְׂמַחֶנָּה.  
*Anxiety in the heart of man weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.*

The Gemara in *Yoma* (75a) elaborates on this verse and presents a dispute between Rav Ammi and Rav Assi:

דאגה בלב איש ישחנה רבי אמי ורבי אסי,  
 חד אמר: ישחנה מדעתו, וחד אמר: ישחנה  
 לאחרים.

*One says that you should rid it from your mind, while the other one says that you should discuss it with others.*

In his commentary on Sefer Mishlei, the *Sfas Emes* remarks that the two distinct opinions are really an explanation of each other, as it is

possible that by talking to someone else, one will rid his mind of his worries.

Furthermore, after the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe successfully intercedes on behalf of Bnai Yisroel and Hashem agrees to not destroy them. The Torah states:

וַיִּנְחָם ה' עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ.  
*Hashem reconsidered the evil that He said He would do to his people.*

**Shemot 32:14**

What is noteworthy is the use of the word “*vayinachem*” to describe how Hashem reconsidered. The root *nachem* means to comfort. Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, more famously known as the Chasam Sofer, in his *Toras Moshe*, Shemos 32:14, quotes the *Shnei Luchos haBris* who explains that Hashem was comforted by His ability to speak (*kaviyachol*), just like a person who through his own speech can reduce his anger. Consequently, He did not eradicate *Bnai Yisroel*.

Social support can be defined as the “existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us” (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983, p. 127). This system of support can include immediate and extended family members, neighbors, friends, rabbis, community members, and school peers and teachers.

It has been demonstrated that emotional support can serve a vital role in helping individuals manage distressing emotions. According to the APA’s 2015 Stress in America survey,<sup>1</sup> the average stress level for those who identified themselves as having emotional support was 5.0 out of 10 (where ‘10’ signifies a great deal of stress and ‘1’ means little or no stress), while those that did not

feel emotionally supported reported an average score of 6.3. There are a number of studies that have linked poor social support to numerous physical and mental health problems. Conversely, positive social support is correlated with greater academic success, problem-solving abilities, social achievement, and greater life satisfaction (Southwick et al., 2005, Uchino, 2009).

### 3. Cognitive Behavioral Approach

Cognitive behavior therapy, also known as CBT, is based on the premise that our feelings result from our thoughts and our behaviors. As such, if one wishes to change the way he is feeling, a cognitive behavioral therapist will guide him to identify, understand, and eventually change his thoughts and behavioral responses to his circumstances. Put very simply, a guiding principle of CBT is that in order to affect emotional change, one must act the way he wants to feel (Deacon and Abramowitz, 2004).

This principle is consistent with so

many Torah instructives, wherein the Torah enjoins us to shape our emotions by first altering our behaviors. In mitzvah 16, the *Sefer HaChinuch*, articulates the way that outward actions have the power to shape one's inner character. He states:

כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו, ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עוסק בהם, אם טוב ואם רע, ואפילו רשע גמור בלבבו וכל יצר מחשבות לבו רק רע כל היום, אם יערה רוחו וישים השתדלותו ועסקו בהתמדה בתורה ובמצוות, ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב. ובכח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות. ואפילו אם יהיה אדם צדיק גמור ולבבו ישר ותמים, חפץ בתורה ובמצוות, אם אולי יעסק תמיד בדברים של דופי... ישוב לזמן מן הזמנים מצדקת לבו להיות רשע גמור, כי ידוע הדבר ואמת שכל אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו.

*A person is influenced by his actions, and his heart and thoughts follow the acts he does whether they are good or bad. If a completely wicked person who constantly thinks of doing bad deeds is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and mitzvot, even if it is not for the sake of Heaven, even he will turn to the good, and he will overcome his evil*

*inclination through the power of these actions, since the heart follows the actions a person does. Similarly, even if one is a completely righteous person who desires Torah and mitzvot but always involves himself in bad deeds... after a certain amount of time he will become a wicked person, for we know, and it is true, that every man is affected by his actions.*

The *Sefer HaChinuch* identifies the important role that one's behaviors play in shaping his character for the sake of heaven and diminishing his *yetzer hara*. Indeed, the power of one's actions should not be undervalued. Even when unaccompanied by genuine intentions, the *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that simply going through the motions of acting like a good person can lead one's character to become good.

One's actions can have a similar and powerful effect on his or her emotional state as well. Regarding the mitzvah of *simchat yom tov*, rejoicing on yom tov, the Rambam writes in *Hilchot Yom Tov* (ch. 6):

שבעת ימי הפסח ושמונת ימי החג עם שאר

If a completely wicked person who constantly thinks of doing bad deeds is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and mitzvot, even if it is not for the sake of Heaven, even he will turn to the good, and he will overcome his evil inclination through the power of these actions, **since the heart follows the actions a person does.**

- *Sefer Hachinuch Mitzvah 16*



ימים טובים כולם אסורים בהספד ותענית, וחייב אדם להיות בהן שמח וטוב לב הוא ובניו ואשתו ובני ביתו וכל הנלוים עליו שנאמר ושמחת בחגך וגו', אף על פי שהשמחה האמורה כאן היא קרבן שלמים כמו שאנו מבארין בהלכות חגיגה יש בכלל אותה שמחה לשמוח הוא ובניו ובני ביתו כל אחד ואחד כראוי לו. כיצד הקטנים נותן להם קליות ואגוזים ומגדנות, והנשים קונה להן בגדים ותכשיטין נאים כפי ממונן, והאנשים אוכלין בשר ושותין יין שאין שמחה אלא בבשר ואין שמחה אלא ביין.

*It is forbidden to fast or recite eulogies on the seven days of Pesach, the eight days of Succot, and the other holidays. On these days, a person is obligated to be happy and in good spirits. He, his children, his wife, the members of his house, and all those who are dependent on him, as it states (in Deuteronomy 16:14): "And you shall rejoice in your festivals." The "rejoicing" that is mentioned here refers to sacrificing peace offerings, as will be explained in Hilchot Chaggigah. Nevertheless, included in this "rejoicing" is that he, his children, and the members of his household should rejoice, each one in a way that is appropriate for him. Therefore, children should be given roasted seeds, nuts, and sweets, and one should buy the women attractive clothing and jewelry according to one's financial capability. Men should eat meat and drink wine, for there is no happiness without meat and there is no happiness without wine.*

To some, the commandment to be happy, or rejoice, on yom tov may seem intangible or difficult to implement. How can we be commanded to experience an emotional state? The Rambam explains that the way to fulfill this experiential mitzvah is via specific action. The Rambam is telling us that an individual can bring upon himself a particular emotional state by adopting the behaviors of that state. Simply put,

the way to fulfill the mitzvah of feeling happy on yom tov is to act happy on yom tov.

This wisdom serves as a guide for the sufferer as well. Again, let us return to *shiva* as a paradigm for our experience of, and evolution in, distress. Surely, there is a time to accept these feelings and allow ourselves to fully experience the distress it brings. We surround ourselves with signs that we are grieving, and behaviorally separate ourselves from the rest of the world, which is not. But then there comes a time to get up. When the seven days of *shiva* have passed, the mourner rises from his seat and walks beyond the confines of the *shiva* home. This action is both physically and symbolically meaningful, as this individual who had been mourning now moves cognitively and behaviorally into his new status. He walks not to forget, not to distract himself from his loss, but to move purposefully forward, all the while carrying the weight of what he has endured.

May we all merit knowing only minimal sorrow. In times of distress, may we have the strength to accept our experiences and learn from the lessons that those bring. May we be strengthened by the support of others, and then, may we rise again in *simcha* and *shleimut*.

## Notes

1. For full survey results and methodology, please see [stressinamerica.org](http://stressinamerica.org).

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