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GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT NASO

All Alone

Have you ever felt sometimes that no one seems to understand you? Ever gone through a rough patch (or multiple) and had the sense that no one else gets it? Certain experiences in life have a person entering the darkest mental spaces and caving to an overwhelming notion. He or she may be surrounded by people - perhaps even with family or friends - yet conclude with complete certainty three of the most painful words: "I'm all alone."

I'd like to offer a perspective that may help reinforce the real truth. We know that every word and even every letter in the Hebrew language carries mystic secrets and profound meaning behind the reality of creation, as it was with the Holy Language that G-d created the universe itself. For instance, the word "נשבר," which means shattered and broken, shares the same Hebrew root as "משבר," which is a birthing stool used as the newborn baby is delivered. This link is neither irrelevant nor coincidental; it is the Creator's way of communicating that just when everything seems broken and falling apart, it's actually the rebirth of something new and beautiful [1].

In a similar vein, there is much to glean from the Hebrew word for "alone": לבד. The root for the word is "בודד" yet the natural form of the word, לבד, comes with a prefacing letter "ל/lamed," which generally connotes "to" as a prefix. If you think about it, the very fact that לבד reads as "ל-בד" ("to a state of loneliness") indicates that it is naturally a foreign concept. It's almost to say that to really be completely alone, you have to actually leave your inherent position and metaphorically GO somewhere else. But in reality, one is never actually alone. The Almighty Himself is constantly beside each individual - guiding, loving, and holding your hand.

The Kotzker Rebbe once quipped, "There's nothing as whole as a broken heart." Maybe it's in the aspect of humility. Maybe it's in the sense that at that breaking point, when a person's entire world is upside down and he feels completely abandoned and alone, he actually has the biggest opportunity to feel G-d's presence so strongly right beside him.

[1] Heard from R' YV Jacobson

"Empathy is not the capacity to feel what another person feels, but the capacity to sit with another and feel something that is not about you."

Testing the Waters

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: "Any man whose wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him..." (Num. 5:12)

The Torah proceeds to describe the unique and painful process known as the Sotah ritual. When a husband suspects his wife of infidelity, and she has been warned - before two witnesses - not to seclude herself with a particular man, yet chooses to do so again, the couple must go to the Kohen. There, the woman undergoes the Sotah procedure, which includes drinking the "bitter waters." But before that happens, the Torah requires she be repeatedly encouraged to confess if she has indeed sinned, so that the Name of Hashem, which is written on the parchment and then erased into the water, is not needlessly defiled - as taught in the Gemara (Sotah).

If she is guilty, she suffers a painful and immediate death. However, if she is innocent, the Torah promises: "If the woman has not defiled herself and she is pure, she shall be exempt and bear children" (5:28). The Gemara (Sotah 26a) explains that if she was previously barren, she will now merit children. If she already had children, they will be improved - more beautiful and more worthy.

A striking teaching appears in Berachot (31b), where the Gemara tells us about Chana, the mother of the prophet Shmuel. Chana was barren for many years. In her desperate prayer to Hashem, she pleaded: "Master of the Universe! If You don't give me children, I will go and seclude myself with another man, and my husband Elkana will warn me, and I'll be brought to the Kohen to undergo the Sotah process. But since I will be innocent, I will drink the waters and merit children - just as the Torah promises."

This statement by Chana raises a serious question: How could she suggest doing something so improper? Secluding oneself with another man under such suspicion is a serious transgression, akin to violating Shabbat. Is this how one makes a request from Hashem?

The Chida, in Petach Einayim, provides a deep answer. The public humiliation and suffering of the Sotah process serves as an atonement for the act of seclusion - even if no actual sin occurred. If the woman is indeed innocent, that suffering earns her the merit of children. Chana, in her profound pain, was expressing a willingness to go through personal disgrace and emotional torment just to gain the merit needed to bear a child. She saw the suffering itself as a path to holiness and blessing.

From this, Rav Efraim Kachalon draws a powerful insight: Although no one seeks suffering, if Hashem does decree it, and a person accepts it with love and trust, the reward is immense. Pain accepted with faith not only cleanses the soul from past wrongdoings but can also serve as a vessel for future blessings.

May we be blessed to live lives free of hardship. But if, Heaven forbid, we are faced with suffering, may we find the strength to accept it with love and faith in Hashem - and through that, merit redemption and blessing.

*Written by (my dear brother) Yehoshua Sionov
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