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Special Issue Honoring Dr. David Pelcovitz Upon His Retirement

From Affliction To Freedom

The Pesach Paradigm for Mental Wellbeing

Dedicated in memory of Cantor Jerome and Deborah Simons

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Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary

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Dedicated in memory of our beloved
Mr. Willy Apfel a"h
לעילוי נשמת רב זאב בן עזריאל ז"ל
Sheila and Ronny Apfel and family

Rabbi Josh Flug
General Editor, Benjamin & Rose Berger Torah To-Go® Series

Dear Friends,

One often overlooked section of the Haggadah is *Arami Oved Avi*, where our rabbis found deep insights into the Pesach story from a few pesukim (Devarim 26:5-8) that are recited when someone brings *bikkurim* to the Beis HaMikdash. The *derashos* (rabbinic interpretations) show us what each phrase refers to, often citing a reference from Sefer Shemos, thus providing insight into both the text from Sefer Shemos and the text from Sefer Devarim Let's examine one particularly challenging *derasha*:

ואת לחצנו זה הדחק כמה שנאמר וגם ראיתי את הלחץ אשר מצרים לחצים אתם.
"And our oppression," this refers to pressure, as it is said: "And I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress you."

There is an obvious question: The Haggadah is trying to define the word *lachatz* (oppression) as *dechak* (pressure) and to prove this, it quotes a verse (Shemos 3:9). We would expect that the prooftext would have the word *dechak* in it. Instead, the prooftext has the word *lachatz*. How do we see that *lachatz* means *dechak* from the verse in Shemos?

Rav Yaakov of Lissa (commonly known as the Nesivos HaMishpat), in his commentary on the Haggadah titled *Ma'aseh Nissim*, explains that we are looking at the wrong word in the prooftext. It is not the word *lachatz* alone that proves that *lachatz* is *dechak*, but rather *v'gam* (and also). Two pesukim earlier, HaShem told Moshe "*ra'oh ra'isi es oni ami,*" I have seen the affliction of My nation. Given that the affliction was already part of this conversation, "*v'gam ra'isi es halachatz,*" I have also seen the oppression, must be referring to something even more extreme. This is what led the rabbis to conclude that *lachatz* means *dechak*, pressure — a predicament much worse than affliction.

Similarly, Rav Yitzchak Abarbanel in *Zevach Pesach* suggests that *lachatz* encompasses psychological torment beyond physical labor. After hearing accounts from hostages released from Gaza, we better understand this dimension of the Haggadah.

Thus, Pesach celebrates not just physical and spiritual freedom, but also liberation from psychological oppression—a freedom of mental well-being.

For nearly two decades, Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go has addressed relevant community issues, and nearly all of them have mental health components. This issue, which honors Dr. David Pelcovitz, is wholly dedicated to the topics that Dr. Pelcovitz is fond of discussing.

Dr. Pelcovitz's work has mainstreamed mental health discussions in communities where such topics were once stigmatized. He has bridged Torah values and psychological insights, showing how they complement rather than contradict each other. His framework allows us to address mental wellbeing through a Torah lens, demonstrating that tending to psychological needs expresses the Torah's concern for human flourishing.

Just as the Haggadah teaches that redemption involved liberation from multiple forms of bondage, Dr. Pelcovitz reminds us that true wholeness requires attention to emotional and mental wellbeing alongside spiritual growth.

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman,
President and Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshiva University and RIETS

Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz
Abraham Arbesfeld Torah Dean, RIETS

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Kalinsky
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Yeshiva University,
500 West 185 St. New York, NY 10033
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Introduction

The Way We **Tell Our Story** Is The Way **We Live It**

Pesach is not just a commemoration; it is an act of storytelling that shapes how we see ourselves and our world. The Seder invites us to revisit our past, present, and future, guiding us in how we frame our personal and collective journeys. The way we tell our story—both individually and communally—affects how we process setbacks and struggles, resilience, and redemption.

The Haggadah begins our story with hardship and concludes with praise—"*matchil b'gnut u'mesayem b'shevach*." This structure is more than just a format for retelling yetziat Mitzrayim; it reflects a fundamental approach to life. Challenges and struggles are not the end of the story—they are the beginning of a greater trajectory.

Someone who sees life as a series of struggles may find it hard to hope, while someone who views setbacks as part of a larger upward trajectory will find strength in adversity. The Haggadah provides a model for seeing ourselves as part of a broader narrative, one that moves forward even if not always in a straight line.

The Exodus itself was not an instantaneous redemption but an iterative process. Even after leaving Egypt, Bnei Yisrael carried remnants of Mitzrayim with them. Likewise, healing and resilience are not singular moments but ongoing journeys. Each year, as we retell the story, we revisit our own personal "Mitzrayim," confronting the challenges we carry and reinterpreting them within the arc of redemption.

At the heart of the Seder is the act of reframing. We take the bitterness of maror and contextualize it within the sweetness of redemption. We transform slavery into triumph. We tell our story not as victims nor as isolated individuals, but as drivers of history who collectively come together in a divine narrative of purpose and growth.

This Pesach, as we sit around the Seder table, let us embrace the power of storytelling—not just to recount the past but to shape our future. Let us recognize that the Jewish story, with all

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

President and Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshiva University and RIETS

its difficulties and tragedies—which at times, especially after October 7th, can seem unbearable—is fundamentally one of connection and redemption. We stand together in love and responsibility for each other and for generations yet born. By transforming the past from a burden into a source of nourishment, we find in the Exodus not just a historical event, but a timeless lesson in resilience and hope.

Foreword

Mental Health & the Jewish Community: Lessons from Pesach

Rabbi Menachem Penner

Director of Strategic Initiatives and Dean Emeritus, RIETS
Executive Vice President, Rabbinical Council of America

Pesach is a time of personal and communal reflection, centering on themes of faith, family, resilience, and empathy. These same themes are essential to fostering mental health and well-being in the Jewish community. In honor of Dr. David Pelcovitz's invaluable contributions to our understanding of mental health through a Torah lens, we will explore how Pesach's symbols—pesach, matzah, maror and the Seder evening—offer insights into strengthening relationships, building resilience, cultivating empathy, and educating the next generation of Jews.

Pesach: Community Support

In *Festival of Freedom,* R. Soloveitchik casts the inaugural *korban Pesach* as the birth of a chesed community:

> *God did not need the Pascal Lamb; He had no interest in the sacrifice. He simply wanted the people—slaves who had just come out of the House of bondage—to emerge from their isolation and inane self-centeredness into the chesed community—where the little that man has is too much for himself, where whatever he possesses transcends his ability to enjoy.*

The sacrifice needed to be eaten *be-chavurah*—with a group, necessitating sharing and communication:

> *The slave suddenly realized that the little he has saved up for himself, a single lamb, is too much for him. The slave spontaneously does something which he would never have believed that he was capable of doing, namely, he knocks on the door of his neighbor whom he had never noticed, inviting him to share the lamb with him and eat together.*

Through Dr. Pelcovitz's work, he has shown that true community growth happens when we move beyond our own concerns to recognize the needs of others. He has championed initiatives that build bridges between different parts of our community, creating spaces where vulnerability can be shared and support freely given. This begins by breaking barriers—bringing people around the table to hear each other's perspectives, engendering empathy, and fostering meaningful connections.

The Pesach story is not one of individual survival but of collective redemption. Dr. Pelcovitz stresses the importance of social connections in navigating adversity, highlighting the role of Jewish communities in fostering strength through shared values and support systems.

Resilience: The Symbolism of Matzah

Matzah, the "bread of affliction," paradoxically also represents redemption. It embodies the tension between hardship and liberation, teaching us that struggle is an inherent part of growth. The rapid transition from dough to matzah—in the shadow of chametz—mirrors life's unpredictable nature, reminding us that moments of difficulty and danger can suddenly shift toward redemption. The very act of eating matzah—acknowledging past suffering while simultaneously celebrating freedom—reinforces this perspective. It encourages us to embrace hardship as part of our narrative without allowing it to define our future.

Resilience, the ability to withstand and grow from challenges, is a core principle in both Jewish thought and psychological well-being. Dr. Pelcovitz has explored the interplay between trauma and resilience, emphasizing that resilience is not the absence of suffering but rather the ability to grow through it. His research on trauma and abuse prevention has provided critical guidance to the Orthodox Jewish community, advocating for child safety, abuse prevention, and education on resilience.

The Maharal (*Gevurot Hashem* 51) explains that matzah is called *lechem oni*—the bread of affliction—not just because it was eaten in slavery, but because it represents a state of simplicity and self-sufficiency. Just as a poor person has nothing beyond his basic existence, matzah consists solely of flour and water, without additional ingredients that enrich or alter it. The Maharal further argues that true freedom is achieved when one is independent and unencumbered by external attachments.

Resilience is found not just in the absence of hardship, but in maintaining one's core identity and purpose despite external challenges. The lesson of matzah, then, is that resilience comes not from luxury or avoiding struggle, but from standing firm in one's essential values.

Dr. Pelcovitz emphasizes the importance of doubling down on one's core principles—as individuals and as a family. Each family, he suggests, has a "bumper-sticker" set of values that shine through to their children and to the community. He encourages us to define those values clearly so that they can be held onto through thick and thin. When facing life's challenges, these foundational principles serve as anchors, providing stability and direction. Even when everything else is stripped away, these core values can guide us toward redemption, much like how the simple matzah led our ancestors from slavery to freedom.

In addition, the Gemara (*Pesachim* 115b) discusses the dual nature of matzah as both "*lechem oni*" and "*lechem she'onim alav devarim harbeh*" (bread over which many things are recited), suggesting that our challenges can become platforms for growth and discussion. Post-traumatic growth, which Dr. Pelcovitz often references in his work, is facilitated in part by working through our tragedies in thoughtful, directed conversation.

Empathy: The Bitterness of Maror

As unpleasant as the experience might be, we must be sure to taste maror's bitterness. Chazal rule, "*Bala maror lo yatza*—One who simply swallows the maror whole has not fulfilled the mitzvah" (*Pesachim* 115b). The mitzvah of eating maror reminds us of the bitterness of slavery, encouraging us to feel the pain of our ancestors and, by extension, the suffering of others.

We have a religious and moral obligation personally to taste, to share in the bitterness others endure, and to evoke the suffering which our People has experienced at so many junctures in our history. Some may find the maror distasteful, but our duty to achieve empathy, compassion, and moral clarity demands no less.

In the same spirit, we do not recline while eating the maror: when there is suffering in the world, it is no time to be preoccupied with our own comfort. *We must sit up and take notice.*

Empathy is foundational to a healthy and supportive community. The Torah frequently reminds us to be sensitive to the plight of the vulnerable, as in "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Shemot 23:9). Personal experience with suffering should deepen our sensitivity to others' struggles.

Maror teaches us another important lesson. The Biblical fulfillment of maror is limited to an instance when the maror is eaten along with the *korban Pesach*. Recalling painful losses is critical and ensuring that victims do not become invisible as time passes is a priority, but the history of Jewish suffering must never supplant the joyful celebration of our faith and freedom.

Family and Relationships: The Pesach Seder

The Seder is a masterclass in parenting and differentiated learning, with the night uniquely centered around the family. We are commanded to pass

down the story of *yetziat Mitzrayim* to our children, solidifying intergenerational connection and preserving our mesorah.

Many aspects of the Seder, designed millennia ago by our Sages, display tremendous insight into effective education.

Making the past come alive is essential. The Haggadah states, “In each generation, a person must see himself as if he left Egypt.” The Seder employs tangible aids that engage the senses through sight, touch, and taste. The Torah shows us that meaningful education provides a “hands-on” experience, inspiring diverse customs across Jewish communities worldwide.

The Seder encourages questions, recognizing that children learn best when engaged and curious. The night unfolds in a question-and-answer format, emphasizing active participation rather than passive reception. From a psychological perspective, these family connections nurture mental well-being.

Through the framework of the four sons, the Haggadah demonstrates the importance of tailoring our approach to each individual. Each archetype reveals something about emotional development and personalized learning. The wise child exhibits intellectual curiosity; the wicked child expresses authentic questioning; the simple child demonstrates straightforward communication; and the child who doesn’t know how to ask reminds us to create supportive spaces for everyone.

While the Seder happens just once a year, it serves as a powerful model for effective parenting throughout the year, teaching us to meet each child *basher heim sham*—exactly where they are.

For decades, Dr. Pelcovitz has shared his talents across multiple institutions within Yeshiva University’s ecosystem. In his distinguished role at the Azrieli Graduate School of Education and Administration, Dr. Pelcovitz holds the Gwendolyn and Joseph Straus Chair in Psychology and Jewish Education. There, he has developed pioneering courses that bridge psychological research with Jewish educational practice, mentored countless graduate students, and conducted groundbreaking research on resilience, trauma, and family dynamics within Jewish contexts. His dual expertise in clinical psychology and Jewish education has made him uniquely positioned to address the complex intersection of mental health, child development, and religious identity formation.

Dr. Pelcovitz’s Legacy of Integration

Dr. Pelcovitz’s enduring contribution to our community lies in his seamless integration of psychological wisdom with Torah values. Through his decades of teaching at both RIETS and Azrieli, he has cultivated this integrated approach in generations of rabbis, educators, and mental health professionals. The lessons of Pesach provide us with a roadmap for building both individual and communal well-being. As we celebrate Pesach and Dr. Pelcovitz’s extraordinary contributions, we renew our commitment to the values Dr. Pelcovitz has championed.

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Divrei Pesicha

Questioning Relationships

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger
Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS
Mara D'asra, Congregation Beth Abraham, Bergenfield, NJ

One of the very many words of guidance that Dr. Pelcovitz generously shares with *rabbonim, mechanchim* and parents of all stripes—who regularly seek his insights—is memorably summarized in his book *Balanced Parenting* (p.87), "Rules without relationships result in rebellion." This wisdom empowered many to wisely set limits while feeling comfortable being both a demanding and loving parent. While the fear of rebellion can make this lesson both pressing and personal, its corollary is a foundational teaching for successfully transmitting our mesora—a heritage of privileged discipline and demanding requirements. Our people, who pray for and treasure the blessing of refined and sincere progeny, embracers of Hashem's will, are thus counseled that these blessings are most likely nurtured within warm, loving family relationships.

A parental dynamic defined solely by regulations and requirements creates distance, replacing the natural flow of love and nurturing with rigidity and detachment. The family becomes a place of instruction rather than connection, and our tradition loses its charisma, passion and transformative power. In contrast, reasonable, necessary limits and mesora—when modeled and taught within the context of trusting and profoundly caring relationships—have a far greater chance of being accepted, and hopefully embraced. Yet, as we all too well know. there are no guarantees.

In our tradition, this truth first appears in the conversation between Yaakov and seemingly indifferent shepherds, relaxing together instead of tending to their thirsty flocks. He greets them (Vayetzei 29:4), "My brothers, where are you from?" Many commentaries, unwilling to accept that the saintly patriarch would high-five the shepherds with a "Hey bros," explain that Yaakov Avinu was strategically setting the stage to critique their inaction, which may have been causing substantial financial loss to their owners. In Dr. Pelcovitz's terms, he was developing a relationship—showing interest and concern in them and their work to create an opening for positive influence.

The Seder night builds on this theme as well. The Talmud explains that we eat the karpas so that "children will ask." In fact, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik is said to have introduced personal, idiosyncratic practices specifically to simply spark curiosity and invite questions. There are opinions that say that the custom of wearing a *kitel* at the Seder was also adopted for this very purpose—to encourage inquiry.

Chazal's reluctance to explain the purpose of karpas, coupled with the speculative nature of later interpretations, certainly indicate that, in this instance, the question was far more important than the answer. Very possibly this is because the question initiates or deepens a relationship, fostering trust and respect even while paving the way for a newfound appreciation. It positions the father to relate and relay the messages of the Seder in a way that is uniquely his own. And if the prompt "*v'kan haben sho'el*"—now the child asks—feels too scripted to open the child to his father's words, then perhaps the natural curiosity sparked by the karpas will do just that.

To a great extent, the A-mighty reinforces this truth many a time. It is the story of our choseness at yetzias Mitzrayim—rather than the omnipotence of the Creator—that serves as the foundation for our observance, from the Asseres Hadibros through the parsha of tzitzis and beyond.. Chosenness invites and accepts, embraces and attaches, promises and perpetuates. Expectations, in turn, add substance and purpose, transforming our commitment into something meaningful and lasting.

I am privileged to empower women through advanced Torah learning as both a proud YU alumnus and educator.

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Dr. Nechama Price
Director, Graduate Program in Advanced Talmud Studies

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Family Relationships and Dynamics

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH REBELLIOUSNESS

Dr. David Pelcovitz

The Gwendolyn and Joseph Straus Chair in Psychology and Jewish Education, Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration

Every year, as we read the passage about the Four Sons, we often find it accompanied with a dvar Torah or a conversation about dealing with rebellious children. For many, this conversation is theoretical — but for some it is very real. In recent years, there has been an unfortunate increase in the number of adolescents from observant Jewish families who have become seriously disruptive, rebellious and defiant. This essay will help us appreciate the challenges involved and provide a summary of recommended interventions.

When dealing with a child who is already overtly rebellious, it is important for parents and educators to keep in mind that since the key dynamic underlying such behavior is feeling alienated and set apart from the mainstream, parents and teachers can play a pivotal role in helping a child or adolescent feel connected. Perhaps the most potent antidote to feeling angry and alienated is feeling appreciated and understood. When parents and teachers make harsh or belittling remarks or treat a child in a manner that the child perceives as unfair, the child's downward spiral may accelerate. Conversely, a combination of time, support and understanding can go a long way toward bringing a rebellious adolescent back on the path of more productive and meaningful behavior. The following recommendations can be considered:

Limit Setting

A rebellious child does best with a balance between love and limits. Research (Barkley, 1998) indicates that the following consequences work best with disruptive children and adolescents: First, punishments are consistent and not overly harsh, and are administered briefly, unemotionally and clearly. Second, they stem logically from the misbehavior and make sense to the child. Third, they are viewed as being delivered in the context of a child feeling liked and appreciated, in spite of the punishment.

The verse in Mishlei states:

יַסֵּר בִּנְךָ כִּי יֵשׁ תִּקְוָה וְאֶל הֲמִיתוֹ אַל תִּשָּׂא נַפְשֶׁךָ.

Discipline your son while there is still hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction.
Mishlei 19:10

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Dr. Erica Brown
’88 Stern College for Women
Vice Provost
Director, Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership

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The midrash deduces from this verse:

כל המייסר את בנו מוסיף הבן אהבה על אביו והוא מכבדו.

If one disciplines his son, the son will have greater love and respect for his father.
Shemos Rabbah no. 1

When a parent or teacher shows that he or she doesn't take the child's misbehavior personally and disapproves of the behavior and not the child, consequences tend to be far more effective. A parent once told me that he always wondered why his child bristled at the slightest criticism from either parent, but was able to take even the toughest and most demanding direction from his basketball coach. I explained that when children know that everybody is "on the same team" they will accept even the most demanding set of rules willingly. They are most likely to rebel when they feel that their parent or teacher isn't with them on the same team.

However, even when following these discipline guidelines, children tend to engage in negative persistence. They won't accept the logic and keep nagging about the consequences. An effective way of dealing with negative persistence is illustrated in a d'var Torah by R. Henoch Leibowitz, *Chiddushei Halev*, Bereishis pg. 103. He quotes the midrash that when Avraham Avinu was on his way to the Akeidah, the Satan approached him and tried to convince Avraham that Hashem didn't really command Avraham to slaughter his son. First, the Satan said, "How could it be that you waited 100 years for this son and now you are going to slaughter him?" Then he said "How could it be that Hashem commanded to you commit murder?" Each time, Avraham responded "*al menas ken*" — I am doing so despite what you just said. Avraham's response is somewhat puzzling. Why didn't he just respond to the Satan, "You are lying. Hashem did command me to slaughter my son"? R. Leibowitz answers that there is no point in debating the Satan. Avraham didn't want to get sucked into an argument that would give credence to the other side. The same could be said about negative persistence. When a child is given a consequence, the logic should be explained at the outset. If the child then persists, he or she should be told "we are no longer discussing the reasons for the consequence," and after the third time the child nags, the conversation should be ended completely.

Methods of Discipline

Greene (2000) at Harvard Medical School has developed a set of strategies to guide parents and teachers in dealing with disruptive children in the classroom. These include:

- Try to see the child's behavior as coming more from the child's wiring rather than from willful misconduct. Most of these children's behavioral difficulties are either fueled by neurological factors (i.e. frontal deficits) or stressors at home that make it difficult for them to regulate their affect. While this does not mean that limits and consequences are not necessary, it does mean that the parent or teacher can respond calmly as he or she would to any misbehavior that is coming more from a child who "can't" rather than "won't" behave properly.

- Respond to child before he or she is at their worst.

- Anticipate and modify situations that will likely trigger defiance by cueing in to specific factors that fuel explosiveness.

- Use of distraction, logic, empathy may work if employed before meltdown.

- Choose only worthy battlegrounds.

- Address recurring patterns by identifying specific situations that routinely cause significant frustration.

How do we choose worthy battlegrounds? How do we know which acts of rebellion require consequences and which can be ignored? The *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vayechi* no. 6, provides numerous examples of how the Avos handled conflict. They didn't respond at the beginning of the conflict, but instead waited for the right moment to respond — *nasnu makom l'sha'ah* — they gave space for the moment and walked away from the conflict until there was a moment that they could respond in a way that would be effective. When dealing with rebelliousness, there are situations that are dangerous and we can't just ignore what is going on. However, there are situations where we can give space and make a strategic withdrawal. When the relationship is not only about dealing with negative behavior, we can form a positive relationship.

Addressing the Spiritual

Whenever possible, address the spiritual. Rebellious adolescents often describe feeling alienated from spirituality, yet at the same time, being thirsty for greater spiritual understanding and connection. An at-risk child who returned from a summer program that emphasized spirituality with growth through musar explained the reason for his dramatic improvement after the summer. "Until now," he explained, "I never knew who God was. God was always about what I couldn't do. Don't watch TV on Shabbos, don't go to inappropriate

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movies. Nobody ever told me who God was until this summer. Now that I understand what God is about, Judaism makes more sense to me, and for the first time, I'm interested in what Judaism has to offer."

Parents and children alike should be aware that there are multiple pathways to spiritual connection. Some children are in a setting that favors one type of spiritual connection and they may thrive in a setting that favors another.

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz once said to his teacher, the rabbi of Lublin: "Show me one general way to the service of God." The zaddik replied: "It is impossible to tell people what way they should take. For one, the way to serve God is through learning, another through prayer, another through fasting and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him to, and then choose his way with all his strength."
Tales of Hasidim (Buber, 1961) pg. 313

The Parent-School Partnership

Promoting effective parent-school partnerships are an essential part of any program for addressing the needs of the at-risk child. Research has consistently shown that at-risk children do better when they perceive their parents as being actively involved in their education (Henggeler et al, 1998). Parents overtly supporting teachers, monitoring homework assignments and grades and supporting extracurricular school activities have all been found to help children develop the kind of prosocial behavior that is an antidote to the influence of acting-out peers. Educators can help promote this type of partnership by providing parents with regular feedback regarding their child's academic and behavioral progress, and scheduling parent-teacher conferences in a manner that is flexible enough to accommodate parents' work schedules.

Ongoing teacher and parent training on strategies for dealing with at-risk children, supported by school administrators, can be valuable both for addressing and preventing problem behavior. Some yeshivot have implemented mandatory teacher and parent training to help deal constructively with defiant and disruptive behavior and to maximize the chances of creating a strong parent-school partnership. Such programs tend to be most effective when schools create in-service days for teachers that do not require the teachers to attend sessions on their own time. Teacher-training content should include classroom management strategies for defiant students, strategies to identify high-risk situations, when to refer, and how to talk to parents. Scheduling programs as part of parent-teacher conference nights has proven effective for maximizing parent attendance.

Expelling a Rebellious Child

Expelling a child from a school should be considered only as an extreme step when all alternatives have been exhausted. Yeshivot that are quick to expel rebellious adolescents have unwittingly exacerbated the problem for the entire community by creating a growing group of such children on the streets. This fosters the kind of "deviancy training" that can contaminate more mainstream adolescents in the community (Dishion et al, 1999). Successful alternatives to expulsion include programs that allow adolescents to work part of the day and attend school part of the day. In this way, adolescents remain part of their peer group and find success in non-academic areas where they are more likely to achieve.

Some schools have experimented with

When a child is given a consequence, the logic should be explained at the outset. If the child then persists, he or she should be told "we are no longer discussing the reasons for the consequence."

"exchange" programs where they "trade" a disruptive child in one school for a disruptive child in another school. When children are given a totally fresh start in a new school, they often experience success that isn't possible in an environment where they are perceived by teachers and peers as troubled.

Finally, although many high schools frown on early graduation, when rebellious adolescents are allowed to graduate after their junior year, they often thrive. Success can come as a result of many factors: kids get a fresh start in an environment where they aren't viewed in a preconceived way; they have the opportunity to make more appropriate friends; and they enjoy the greater academic flexibility present in post high school environments.

The Gemara makes the following comment about the ketores:

כל תענית שאין בה מפושעי ישראל אינה תענית שהרי חלבנה ריחה רע ומנאה הכתוב עם סממני קטרת.

Any fast that does not include the sinners of Israel [in its prayer services] is not a fast. Because the galbanum had a foul smell and was nevertheless included in the spices of the ketoret.
Kerisos 6b

Children actually benefit from having a little "galbanum" in their social circles. I once heard R. Moshe Meir Weiss express the following idea: When Hashem told Avraham to kick his son Yishmael out of the house, the Torah (Bereishis 21:11) records that Avraham was very distressed "*al odos b'no*" — about the welfare of his son. Which son? It would seem that he was distressed about what would happen to Yishmael. However, R. Weiss suggested that he was distressed about what would happen to Yitzchak. Yishmael was supposed to serve as an inoculating influence so that Yitzchak could better handle the dangers of the outside world. Now that he was gone, how would Yitzchak learn to deal with those challenges?

The following story is told about R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, the Chazon Ish. A student was once caught going to an inappropriate venue on Shabbos. The rosh yeshiva wanted to remove him from the yeshiva. The Chazon Ish heard about this and confronted the rosh yeshiva, saying "Now you are on the level to be a judge for *dinei nefashos* (capital punishment)?" The Chazon Ish suggested that the rosh yeshiva learn *b'chavrusa* (one-on-one) with this student. When the rosh yeshiva claimed that he couldn't learn with this student, the Chazon Ish offered to personally learn with this student. The student later became a Torah teacher. (*Ma'aseh Ish* Vol. VI pg. 52)

Concluding Remarks

The Gemara tells us that when dealing with children, we should use the following rule:

לעולם תהא שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת.

One should always use the left hand to push away and the right hand to bring closer.
Sanhedrin 107b

The left hand represents the weaker hand. When we discipline or set limits, we should do so with the proverbial "weaker hand" while at the same time drawing them close to us with our greatest strengths — love and compassion. R. Simcha Wasserman added the following explanation: Imagine putting both of your hands on your child's shoulders and pushing with your left hand while pulling with your right hand. What would happen? The child would actually turn around! Finding the right balance between limits and love can be a challenge, but with perseverance and patience, it can be very effective in helping the rebellious child turn around and head in a different direction.

See more shiurim and articles from Dr. Pelcovitz at www.yutorah.org /teachers/Dr.-David-Pelcovitz

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V'NAFSHO KESHURA B'NAFSHO

The Escalating Trends of Family Alienation and Estrangement

Dr. Norman Blumenthal
Lecturer in Pastoral Counseling RIETS,
Director, Trauma Services
Zachter Family National Trauma Center
Ohel Children's Home and Family Services

Never before have trends and opinions shifted as rapidly as they do today in the age of the internet and social media. Within a matter of years, social adherences and outlooks can evolve from the unthinkable to thinkable. One such evolution is the growing occurrence and acceptance of either severed or markedly diluted family ties.

Broadly speaking, there are two manifestations of this phenomenon. Alienation is a total severing of ties between parent and child, siblings and even more distant relatives such as grandparents, uncles and aunts. Estrangement is more characteristic of significantly reduced contact and interaction, stopping short of a complete cut off.

One of the most egregious forms of this severing of ties is parental alienation. Often occurring in the context of a high conflict divorce, parental alienation is a deliberate and pernicious effort by one parent to nurture within children a disdain and aversion for the other. Akin to brainwashing, children come to believe flagrant lies about the other parent often resulting in a strained if not complete withdrawal from contact.

Children themselves can be deeply affected, not only by losing meaningful contact with both parents but also by being taught to distrust their own instincts and perceptions.

An interesting observation is that while such alienation in the general community is usually the custodial parent (mostly the mother) alienating the non-custodial parent (mostly the father), in the Orthodox Jewish community it is often the other way around. The father and non-residential parent is often the alienator. This seems related to the importance observant Jews put on the preservation and perpetuation of Torah and tradition and the subsequent shame when a child is no longer under the father's roof.

This severing of ties can be extremely painful for the alienated parent, who longs for connection with his or her children—one that is often wrenched

away for the rest of their lives. Often cited is the classic Rashi (Bereishit 37:35) on Yaakov's refusal to be comforted. As unbearable as a death of a loved one can be, there still is a Divinely bestowed *nechama,* comfort. When one is forcibly separated from a loved one who is still alive, there is no comfort. Family estrangement most commonly occurs between adult siblings as well as between grown children and their parents. In recent years, we are observing a marked increase in the latter, often prompted by the adult offspring themselves. While the numbers vary, most studies have found that roughly 25% of adults are estranged or alienated from parents.[1] Tik Tok's #NoContactFamily has garnered millions of views.[2]

Besides the increase in such cessation and dilution of family ties, there is a growing tolerance or even advocacy for such practices. Parental alienation has been portrayed in the media as essential, especially in cases of an abusive parent. In the last year or two, there have been harsh descriptions of children being legally compelled to maintain contact with a divorced parent who has mistreated them and continues to do so. In such cases, severing ties is portrayed as necessary for the child's well-being.[3]

Similarly, there has been an escalating number of articles and presentations considering the virtue or therapeutic value of adult children disconnecting from their parents. These positions are also based on instances of harmful and destructive parent-child relationships, making distancing or terminating contact essential for emotional well-being.[4]

Most therapists from the Torah-observant community will acknowledge extreme situations that require such drastic measures. However, most cases that we see are based on exaggerated and even fabricated reasons, most of which are reparable.

A clear question arises: why is this escalation occurring now? Two possible explanations have been suggested.

It is distinctly possible that this growing dilution of relationships is one of the lasting effects of the COVID pandemic. For roughly two years, all of us were, to varying degrees, "quarantined," forcibly prevented from direct contact with those who would, otherwise, have been a part of our regular life.

A residual effect of this separation may be a heightened tolerance for distance and diminished emphasis on relationships and interpersonal connection. What once might have been considered but deemed unthinkable before the pandemic is now a real possibility.

Another possible cause is our increased reliance on texting and social media for communication. This more distant and detached form of relating may have had the inadvertent effect of creating more superficiality in our relationships that are now, perhaps, perceived as more disposable.

Severed Ties in the Torah

It is indisputable that in the Torah, there had been instances of family members wrenched apart, particularly in Sefer Bereishit. Avraham Avinu is commanded to leave his family and, possibly, even remain out of touch for subsequent years. Many commentators are struck by the fact that Avraham is only informed about the birth of Rivka and other descendants of his family of origin after the Akeida. The Netziv (*Ha'amek Davar*, Bereishit 22:20) suggests that Avraham could not correspond with his family in an effort to protect him from their errant ways. Only after the Akeida, from which his adherence to Hashem and his commandments are solidified by this ultimate test, could he reconnect to his family of origin.

Similarly, we see alienation and estrangement between Sarah and Hagar, Yaakov and Eisav, and, famously, Yosef and his brothers. However, two observations are essential. These breaks are not a result of any petty disagreement, friction over monetary inheritance, "winning" in a divorce or the like. These were disputes regarding the perpetuation of our mesorah and the inheritors of Hashem's legacy.

Additionally, in every one of these instances, there is a reconnection, often painstakingly achieved, with an outcome of full and lasting reunification. The story of Yosef and his brothers is a most impactful example. Our rabbis also convey the successful efforts of Yitzchak to reunite Hagar with his father, prompting some to suggest that Avraham's later wife, Keturah, is actually Hagar (Rashi 24:62).

Yaakov and Esav's reunion is described as highly affectionate and emotional, prompting a commentator to suggest that this should be a template for our relationship with the Gentile world when they are kindly disposed.[5]

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that, at times, families may need temporary separations—but only for the most elevated purposes, and always with the goal of ultimately forging deeper and eternal bonds.

The reasons for such disconnection need to be for crucial spiritual and perhaps even therapeutic goals, accompanied by tireless efforts to

At times, families may need temporary separations—but only for most elevated purposes, and always with the goal of ultimately forging deeper and eternal bonds.

reunite to a greater connection and bond that is henceforth everlasting.

One would be hard pressed to suggest that many of the recently escalating instances of alienation and estrangement can be cast in this framework, though there may be some. Perhaps, when someone is facing the prospect of breaking or diminishing family ties, suitable Rabbanim and professionals ought to be consulted before such a process is initiated. Additionally, no stone should be left unturned in efforts to reverse such breaks and repair the attachment.

The Parent Child Connection

When Yehuda is pleading with Pharaoh (Yosef) to free Binyamin, there is a verse that does not seem to follow logically.

וְעַתָּה כְּבֹאִי אֶל עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְהַנַּעַר אֵינֶנּוּ אִתָּנוּ וְנַפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְנַפְשׁוֹ.

Now, if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—since his own life is so bound up with his.
Bereishit 44:30

The Abarbanel asks the following question. This verse quoting Yehuda should have ended with the outcome of his not arriving with the boy. Indeed, in the next verse he spells that out (וְהוֹרִידוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ אֶת שֵׂיבַת עַבְדְּךָ אָבִינוּ בְּיָגוֹן שְׁאֹלָה.) What is the point of this seemingly extraneous expression *v'nafsho keshura b'nafsho*, his own life is bound up with his?

The Abarbanel goes on to explain how this expression is really part of the argument. One might think that a parent who is missing his or her child will be upset for awhile, but the pain will wear off. That may be true of other relationships, but not that of a parent and child.

כי אין ספק שלא ירגיש אדם אהבתו אל בנו בהיותו עמו בין ידיו, כאשר ירגיש בהיותו נפרד ממנו, כי אז תתחזק עליו תשוקתו.

For there is no doubt that the love a parent feels for a child when they are together is nothing like the depth of longing and emotion felt for a child from whom they are apart. Because, in such instances, his yearning for the child is even greater.

Family ties, especially of a parent to a child, are relationships of the soul, the *neshama*. Rather than diminishing over time or through absences, they only grow in longing and pain. According to the Abarbanel, Yehuda's insertion of this expression *v'nafsho keshura b'nafsho* highlights this eternal and undiminished attachment a parent has for a child, which only gets more profound and intense especially when wrenched apart.

This must be taken into consideration before dismissively endorsing or tolerating a severing of parent-child bonds.

Endnotes

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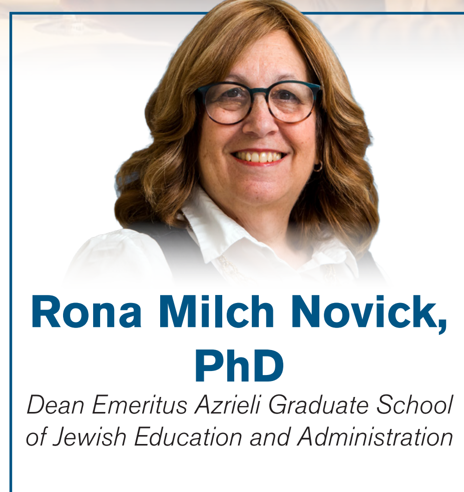
Family Relationships and Dynamics

All in the Family

Torah & Psychology Perspectives on Family Relationships



Rona Milch Novick, PhD

Dean Emeritus Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration

In its initial chapters the Torah makes clear the importance of family. First, through G-d's recognition that people should not be alone:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹקִים לֹא טוֹב הֱיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ.

It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him
Breishit 2:18.

Then, through His commandment *p'ru ur'vu* (Breishit 1:28)—to be fruitful and multiply. The centrality of family and the value of close, caring family relationships permeate Jewish thought, writings, and practice. The powerful impact of family, both on the individual and society at large is also discussed in psychological literature, from early writings by Freud through modern family systems theorists and practitioners.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks highlights the Torah's focus on family:

The concept of family is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. Consider the book of Genesis, the Torah's starting-point. It is not primarily about theology, doctrine, dogma. It is not a polemic against idolatry. It is about families: husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters.
Covenant & Conversation, Behar, Bechukotai 5776,5783

Psychological thought similarly sees family as a fundamental entity. The American Psychological Association dictionary explains that while the structure of families varies (extended, nuclear, stepfamily and even friend groups or *framilies),* family serves as "the fundamental social unit of most human societies."

As foundational in Judaism and to society, what is the primary purpose or task of families? How do they support and advance society at large and Jewish life, specifically? Both psychological theorists and Torah scholars identify families as agents of two important phenomena: socialization and transmission/continuity.

Freud, although he theorized primarily its negative impacts, recognized family as a major force in shaping an individual's thoughts and behavior. Psychology textbooks frequently describe the family as the primary agent of children's socialization, having the greatest contact with the child from birth through their lifetime. Urie Bronfenbrenner, the founder of the

ecological theory of child development, postulated that all individuals are impacted by the various environmental systems surrounding them. The family is part of children's immediate microsystem, Bronfenbrenner argued, and therefore a highly potent source of influence.

Modern era Rabbinic opinions suggest *how* families can best fulfill their obligation to socialize their children. Rav Shlomo Wolbe, in his eloquent sefer on parenting, *Planting and Building* (1999), describes two complementary processes. Rav Wolbe argues that allowing organic growth without parental "building" results in wildness, but building children without nurturing their organic growth produces unthinking robots. Families must balance and combine "building" their children through direct instruction with allowing them to experience their natural "organic growth."

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch also uses the gardening metaphor in his commentary on the Torah commandment to be fruitful and multiply, and emphasizes the critical role parents play (Baror, 2017).

> *Perpetuate your race, plant in the garden of G-d new human shoots, to whom you are everything and whom you train up for G-d. . . Not the birth but the care is the true cause of human increase. But rava includes more than this. The parents are obligated to reproduce themselves through their children. They must recur in the image of their children: and the children are to resemble their parents—not only physically, but spiritually and morally. The parents are to plant and nurture in their children the best of their spiritual and moral powers.*

Psychology research has frequently documented the influence of parents on the development of children's pro-social behavior. Cowell and Decety (2015), studying toddlers, found correlations between parents' views and behavior and their children's behavior and preferences. Decety urges:

> *"If we want our kids to be sensitive to justice—which I believe we do, if we want to live together in peace—and it turns out that the way that we handle or care for our kids can affect their sense of justice from very early on, then we will want to pay attention to that." (Suttie, 2015)*

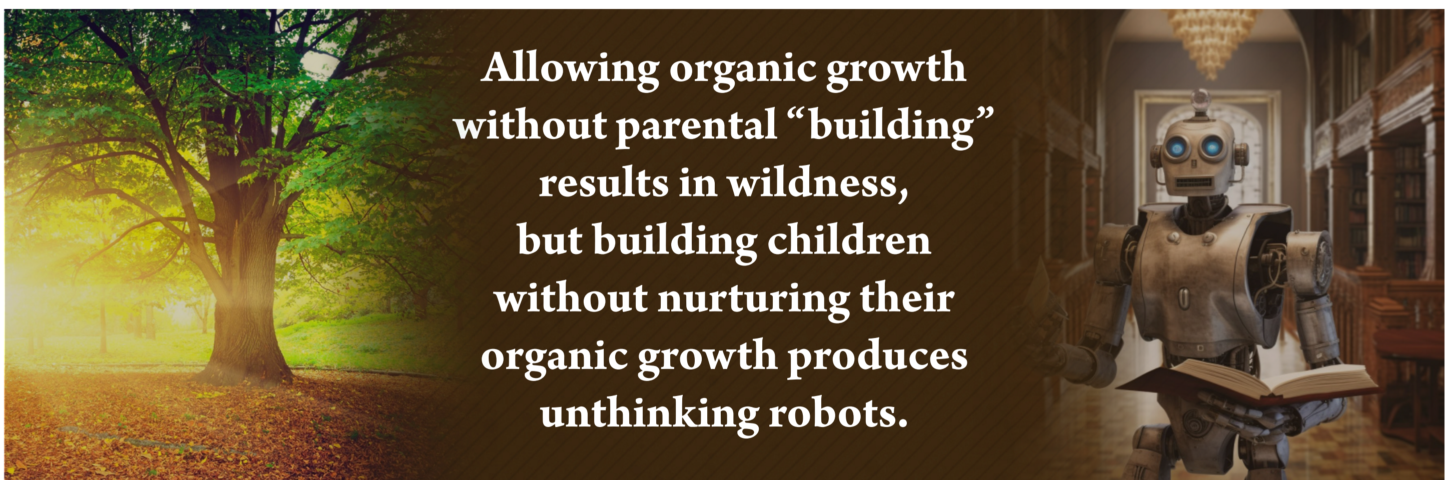
Studies have also found relationships between parents' empathy and that of their children (Strayer & Roberts, 1989); early parental care and children's prosocial behavior towards those in need (Fortuna &Knafo, 2014); and their generosity (Ben-Ner et al., 2017).

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks summarizes this in his statement:

> *Strong families are essential to free societies. Where families are strong, a sense of altruism exists that can be extended outward, from family to friends to neighbours to community and from there to the nation as a whole.*

Given that parental influence is important and powerful, it follows that how parents relate to each other and the world makes a difference. Parents' behavior is constantly observed by their children. Parental navigation of conflict and management of emotions, particularly anger and frustration, sets an example for children. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, underscores the importance of the home environment in his letter addressing a supplicant's marital difficulties:

The central aspect in the manner of conducting a home and family life, is, that it be based on the way of the Torah, whose ways are "ways of pleasantness, and all of its paths are peace." If this rule applies to all activities of a Jew, even outside the



home, how much more so does it apply within the home itself. Of course, since G-d has created human beings with minds and feelings of their own, and these are not uniform in all people, peace and harmony can be achieved only on the basis of "give and take" . . . to achieve true peace and harmony calls for making such concessions willingly and graciously—not grudgingly, as if it were a sacrifice, as mentioned above, but in the realization that it is for the benefit of one's self and one's partner in life, and for one's self perhaps even more, since it is made in fulfillment of G-d's will.

Rabbi Hirsch (Grunfeld, 1962) speaks directly to parents urging them to recognize that their behavior sets an example for their children and contributes to children viewing them as moral and worthy exemplars:

> *You, fathers and mothers, behave in such a manner that your children will have reason to look up to you as their moral and spiritual superiors, that your children will have cause to honor and respect you because they will perceive you as better and more keenly intelligent than themselves.*

The second critical contribution families make is transmission of tradition and continuity. Through teaching, modeling, rituals and celebrations, Jewish families communicate the rich traditions of Torah life. As Rabbi Soloveitchik writes

in his *Family Redeemed* essays (pp. 29-30): "*The parental household is part of the great endless community of the masorah, our tradition, whose task it is to pass on the covenant from generation to generation, from century to century, from millennium to millennium.*"

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes that Judaism is built on the model of family for exactly this reason, the transmission of the Jewish story.

> *The family is the most powerful vehicle of continuity, and the kinds of changes Jews were expected to make to the world could not be achieved in a single generation. Hence the importance of the family as a place of education ("You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children ...") and of handing the story on.*

Whether you take the Torah or psychological view, families matter, to their children and to the world. Throughout his career, Dr. David Pelcovitz has understood this keenly. Whether working with individuals, organizations, children, adults, or groups, he compassionately explores and supports families and communities. Dr. Pelcovitz, in both his clinical work and his research, does all he can to enable individuals and families to flourish. He does so with humility, with wisdom dually informed by Torah values and precepts and cutting-edge modern psychological science, and with great generosity. Dr. Pelcovitz has helped families and communities through trauma and tragedy, and yet fully understands the importance of simcha. He is, not surprisingly, beloved as a teacher, especially for his legendary stories. I count as one of the great honors and privileges of my career being Dr. Pelcovitz's colleague, first at the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, and then at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University. Witnessing the impact of his work, on patients, students, and communities, it is clear how fortunate we are to have him as part of our "family."

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Family Matters

The Power of Family in Torah & Psychology

Rabbi Larry Rothwachs
Director of Professional Rabbinics RIETS and Rabbi, Congregation Beth Aaron, Teaneck, NJ

Family relationships are among the most meaningful and enduring connections in our lives. They shape our identities, influence our perspectives, and provide a sense of belonging that lasts a lifetime. Unlike friendships or professional relationships, which are largely based on choice, family is given to us. This makes family bonds uniquely powerful—capable of providing deep joy and support but also presenting significant challenges.

At the same time, family plays a foundational role in the Torah's vision of human life. From the very beginning, the Torah presents family as the fundamental structure for both personal and national development. The first human relationship is between Adam and Chava, emphasizing that people are not meant to exist in isolation. As the Torah states, "לֹא טוֹב הֱיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ"—"It is not good for man to be alone" (Bereishis 2:18). The creation of humanity begins not with an individual but with a relationship, underscoring that family is the natural framework for human connection. As the Torah narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that family is not just a personal experience but a central element in Hashem's plan for the world.

Family as the Foundation of Torah

The Torah does not present family life as idealistic or conflict-free. On the contrary, the foundational stories of Sefer Bereishis revolve around the complexities of family relationships—parent and child, sibling rivalry, marital struggles, and intergenerational tensions. From Kayin and Hevel's tragic conflict to Yosef and his brothers' painful separation, the Torah consistently highlights the challenges inherent in family life.

Yet these stories are not merely historical accounts; they offer timeless lessons about the significance of family.

Avraham is chosen to be the father of a great nation not only because of his personal righteousness but because of his dedication to transmitting values to his children. Hashem declares:

כִּי יְדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת בָּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ ה׳.

For I have known him because he commands his children and his household after him to keep the way of Hashem.
Bereishis 18:19

The formation of Klal Yisrael does not begin with laws or rituals but with the creation of a family committed to spiritual growth.

The Torah also emphasizes that family serves as the model for ethical behavior. Many mitzvos governing interpersonal relationships use language that refers to family, such as *achicha* (your brother). This terminology suggests that the ideal paradigm for how we treat others is found within the family unit. The Torah's vision is that the lessons of respect, patience, and responsibility learned in the home shape how we interact with the broader community.

Additionally, the mitzvah of tzedakah reinforces the primacy of family. Chazal teach, based on the Torah's language, that when giving charity, family members take precedence. Not only is there a greater obligation to care for relatives, but doing so is considered an elevated form of kindness. The Torah does not view family obligations as mere social expectations but as fundamental moral and religious responsibilities.

The Torah does not view family obligations as mere social expectations but as fundamental moral and religious responsibilities.

Family as the Foundation of a Nation

One of the most striking examples of the Torah's focus on family occurs at the time of yetzias Mitzrayim. The mitzvos associated with the korban Pesach were designed around the family unit—each household bringing its offering together, or if necessary, joining with another family. The redemption from Egypt was not about individual liberation but about the formation of a nation, and that nation was built upon strong family bonds.

This theme continues in the way we observe Pesach today. The Seder is one of the most family-oriented experiences in Jewish life, structured to promote intergenerational connection. The mitzvah of *vehigadeta livincha* —"And you shall tell your child" (Shemos 13:8)—highlights the importance of mesorah, the transmission of tradition from one generation to the next. The entire structure of the Seder, with its emphasis on engaging children and fostering discussion, underscores the idea that the Jewish people are not merely a nation but a family, bound together by shared history and values.

The Psychological Significance of Family

Beyond its spiritual and national importance, family plays a critical role in emotional and psychological well-being. Psychologists have long studied the impact of family relationships on mental health, self-esteem, and resilience.

From infancy, humans are wired for connection. A stable and nurturing family environment provides the foundation for emotional security and personal growth. Children raised in supportive homes develop a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, and the ability to form healthy relationships. Family also serves as a protective factor against stress and hardship, offering a source of unconditional love and belonging.

At the same time, family relationships can be challenging. The very closeness that makes family so significant can also make conflicts more painful. Unlike friendships, which can be chosen and redefined over time, family relationships come with deep-rooted history and expectation. Disagreements between parents and children, sibling rivalries, and marital conflicts can all test the strength of family bonds.

Yet even in its imperfections, family remains one of the most powerful forces in a person's life. The challenges of family life—learning to communicate, to compromise, to forgive, and to set boundaries—are opportunities for growth. While family is not always easy, it is in these relationships that people often learn their most valuable lessons about love, responsibility, and resilience.

Tension and Resolution as a Torah Model for Family Relationships

One of the most striking aspects of the Torah's portrayal of family life is its realism—rather than presenting idealized, harmonious families, the Torah is replete with stories of conflict,

misunderstanding, and reconciliation. This is not incidental but rather an essential part of the Torah's message: relationships, especially within family, are built through struggle, repair, and growth.

Family Conflict as a Catalyst for Growth

Throughout Sefer Bereishis, some of the most pivotal moments in the formation of Klal Yisrael emerge from family conflicts. Kayin and Hevel's tragic story (Bereishis 4) highlights the destructive potential of unchecked rivalry and resentment. Yitzchak and Yishmael's separation (Bereishis 21) represents the tension between two diverging paths in life, with Sarah's painful decision shaping the destiny of Avraham's lineage. Yaakov and Esav's relationship (Bereishis 27) is marked by deception, fear, and long-term estrangement before leading to an uneasy but significant reconciliation. Yosef and his brothers (Bereishis 37-50) experience jealousy, betrayal, and years of separation before undergoing a dramatic reunion filled with deep emotion and transformation.

In each of these cases, tension is not merely a disruption but a necessary element in shaping individual character and the destiny of the Jewish people. The Torah teaches that family strife, when approached with reflection and growth, can lead to deeper understanding and stronger bonds.

Yosef and His Brothers: A Model for Repair and Teshuvah

Among the Torah's many narratives of family conflict, the story of Yosef and his brothers stands out as a paradigm of reconciliation. Their relationship begins with jealousy and misunderstanding, culminating in Yosef's sale into slavery. Years later, when the brothers unknowingly stand before Yosef as the viceroy of Egypt, the tension resurfaces.

What unfolds in Bereishis 42-50 is not merely a resolution of external circumstances but an internal process of transformation. The brothers undergo teshuvah, with Yehudah—the same brother who initially suggested selling Yosef—taking personal responsibility for Binyamin, showing that they have changed. Yosef tests their sincerity rather than immediately revealing himself, ensuring that their remorse is genuine. When Yosef finally does reveal himself, he reframes their painful past in terms of Divine providence:

וְעַתָּה לֹא אַתֶּם שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הֵנָּה כִּי הָאֱלֹקִים.

And now, it was not you who sent me here, but Hashem.

Bereishis 45:8

This story underscores a profound Torah principle: resolution does not erase pain but transforms it. Reconciliation does not require pretending the hurt never happened but rather developing a new perspective on the experience.

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Psychological Insights: Conflict as a Growth Opportunity

Modern psychology supports this Torah perspective—conflict in family life is not inherently destructive; rather, it is how conflict is handled that determines its impact. The concept of rupture and repair, as developed in attachment theory and family therapy, teaches that relationships are not about avoiding conflict but about learning to resolve it constructively.

John Gottman's research on relationships highlights that successful relationships are not those without conflict but those in which conflicts are processed in a way that fosters understanding and connection. Differentiation theory (Dr. David Schnarch) suggests that family relationships challenge individuals to maintain their personal identities while staying emotionally connected—just as Yosef and his brothers had to redefine their relationships after their painful history.

The Torah's approach mirrors these insights: the goal is not to avoid tension but to navigate it in a way that leads to greater depth, understanding, and growth.

Practical Applications: Torah-Guided Strategies for Family Repair

1. Acknowledging Pain Before Moving Forward

Yosef does not rush into reconciliation. He allows his brothers to express remorse and demonstrate growth before revealing himself. In families, it is crucial to validate feelings rather than dismiss them. Real healing begins when people feel heard and understood.

2. Framing the Past with a Growth Mindset
Yosef's approach—seeing Hashem's hand in his suffering—offers a powerful way to reframe past wounds. While not all pain can be justified, seeing challenges as opportunities for growth can help people move forward. In family conflict, shifting the focus from blame to learning can transform the narrative and enable healing.

3. Demonstrating Change Through Actions
The brothers' teshuvah was not just words but was proven through Yehudah's willingness to take responsibility. In families, trust is rebuilt not through apologies alone but through consistent, reliable actions over time.

4. Leaving Room for Complexity
Yosef's story does not have a perfect ending—there are still tensions, and after Yaakov's death, the brothers fear retribution (Bereishis 50:15). Family relationships are complex, and healing is often an ongoing process. Accepting that relationships evolve and that reconciliation is often a gradual process helps set realistic expectations in family dynamics.

Torah as a Guide for Realistic Family Relationships

The Torah's depiction of family life is profoundly real—it does not sugarcoat the difficulties of relationships, nor does it demand unrealistic perfection. Instead, it provides a model for navigating the inevitable struggles of family life with wisdom, patience, and a commitment to repair. Just as Yosef and his brothers turned a painful past into a new beginning, every family has the ability to work through its challenges and emerge stronger.

This perspective aligns seamlessly with modern psychology, reinforcing the idea that the work of family relationships is not about avoiding tension but about using it as a catalyst for deeper connection and personal growth.

Conclusion

Family is one of the most formative and complex aspects of human life. From a Torah perspective, it is the foundation upon which our values, traditions, and nation are built. From a psychological perspective, it is a source of identity, security, and emotional well-being.

The Torah's emphasis on family—particularly in the context of yetzias Mitzrayim and the ongoing traditions of the Seder—reinforces that family is not just a personal reality but a defining element of Jewish life. Though no family is perfect, it is within these relationships that we find our greatest opportunities for connection, growth, and meaning. By investing in our families with patience, self-awareness, and commitment, we strengthen not only our personal lives but also the greater fabric of our community and our people.

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Family Relationships and Dynamics

Haggadah
A Lesson in Parenting

Rabbi Mordechai Willig

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS and Marah D'asra, Young Israel of Riverdale

The paradigmatic *mitzva* of Jewish parenting, combining rich experiential and deeply inspirational tradition with fundamental and yet profound education, is the *Haggadah*. The word "*haggadah"* is based on the *Torah*'s command, "והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר – You shall tell your son on that day, saying… " (*Shemos* 13:8).

The *Or Hachaim* asks a fundamental question. The first and last words of this five-word phrase seem contradictory. On the verse, "כה תאמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל – *thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the children of Israel*" (*Shemos* 19:3), *Rashi* quotes the *Talmud*, "תאמר – בלשון רכה, ותגיד – דברים הקשין כגידין – '*Tomar' – in gentle language, 'vesageid' – things that are as harsh as wormwood*" (*Shabbos* 87a).

The verb *amar* means gentle language. The verb *higid* means harsh language. If so, "והגדת... לאמר" in *Shemos* 13:8 is an internal contradiction. Do we speak to our children harshly, "והגדת," or gently, "לאמר"? The *Or Hachaim* suggests several answers. I would like to share with you a suggestion of my own.

In general society, the practices of which are often adopted by *Torah* Jewry living in that time and place, two radically different methods of child-raising exist. The first is authoritarian discipline. Children must be taught the rules and punished if they fail to keep them. In this way, the theory goes, they can achieve great things, as their potential is directed by wiser adults and not wasted on the foolishness of youth. This 19th-century attitude, captured in works by authors as varied as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, views discipline as an end in itself, and as the very essence of the upbringing of a proper, virtuous and accomplished child.

Recently, an opposing theory has emerged. Discipline is terrible for a child's development and self-esteem. It stunts his ability to grow and achieve his potential; hence the term "positive parenting," in which the word "no" is almost removed from the vocabulary. Children are to be persuaded that something is wrong, and not forcibly prevented from engaging in it. Misbehavior is handled by soft talk explaining that an action is wrong. There are no punishments, physical or otherwise.

In five immortal words, the Torah rejects both extremes. Parenting must begin with והגדת, with the discipline of harsh words. Red lines must be

drawn and a child who crosses them must be punished. A child who is never disciplined grows into an undisciplined adult, incapable of conforming even to the mores of general society, and certainly not to the more exacting norms of Torah and *mitzvos.* American neo-conservative thinkers have attributed many teenage social ills to unrestricted permissive parenting. These ills include drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, diminished attention span, and general underachievement. Apparently, children are not wise enough to set limits and develop their potential on their own. In Torah society, in Israel and the United States, this type of education has led to the abandonment of Torah observance by great numbers of youth growing up in Torah homes. Unrestricted exposure to modern general culture, given the twin developments of the decadence of society and the greater availability of modern media in the home and beyond, has overpowered the natural tendency of copying the lifestyle of the parents. Does this mean that the Torah endorses the authoritarian approach? After all, we know that many youngsters were brought up that way and became high achievers and upstanding Jews.

The answer is a resounding no, and for two reasons. First, such an upbringing stunts growth. In the short term, it produces results: higher grades in school, better behavior at home and in *shul*. But in the long term, such an education does not allow a child to develop his unique talents and personality.

Second, such a *chinuch* carries a significant risk of rebellion. Perhaps, in earlier times, when we lived in a world of conformity, this risk was minimal. But now, a child who behaves and achieves because he is forced to do so may rebel as soon as the ability to force him is lost. Is discipline an end in itself, enabling a parent to control a child's development, and brag of a high-achieving, well-behaved child? *Chas veshalom*! Discipline is only a prerequisite for the primary challenge of parenting – expressing love and warmth, sharing your innermost soul, talking gently and passionately about love of God, love of Torah, love of Israel, love of all creatures. Indeed, והגדת is no more than a necessary prerequisite for the lifelong responsibility and opportunity of לאמר, of teaching with love and by example, as the wondrous passage of one's children into adults takes place. In these five words, the Torah has taught the secret of successful Jewish parenting. Discipline your child only in order to teach him, gently and lovingly, for a lifetime. That is all. The rest is commentary.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *zt"l*, wrote a book entitled *Planting and Building in Education: Raising a Jewish Child* (Feldheim, 2000; Nanuet, NY and Jerusalem), which expresses similar ideas. When one builds, a precise architectural plan must be followed. There is no room for imprecision or improvisation. This represents the indispensable infrastructure of Torah education. A child must be clearly taught that you may not do this, you must do that. All children must conform to the basics.

The essence of education, however, is planting, enabling a child to develop in his own way, to utilize his own strengths and character traits, to grow on his own. This is "חנך לנער על פי דרכו – educate a child according to his own way" (*Mishlei* 22:6). As the Vilna Gaon comments, forcing a child against his nature, even if successful at first, is a recipe for unmitigated disaster.

Like planting, *chinuch* requires patience. When bringing up my own wonderful, sometimes-rambunctious children, of whom my wife and I are exceedingly, and I hope rightfully, proud, I would repeat over and over again – patience. Rav Wolbe's words, which we heard then on tape, confirmed this idea. "חינוך הוא לטווח הארוך – *chinuch* is a long-range project." Punishment is a quick fix, but love is the only long-term option.

Discipline is only a prerequisite for the primary challenge of parenting – expressing love and warmth, sharing your innermost soul, talking gently and passionately about love of God, love of Torah, love of Israel, love of all creatures.

A word on spanking. The Talmud (*Moed Katan* 17a) prohibits spanking an older child, "בנו הגדול," based on "לפני עור לא תתן מכשל" (*Vayikra* 19:14). *Rashi* in *Moed Katan* explains that the child may rebel and sin, and the parent is responsible for that sin. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh De'ah* 240:20) quotes this *halacha*. Rema, based on a different passage in the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30a), defines an older child as older than 22 or 24 years of age. This certainly strikes us as counterintuitive. In fact, the Ritva interprets *gadol* to mean age thirteen, *bar mitzva*, after which it is common that a youth will respond to a spanking by cursing or striking his parents, both capital offenses.

Rav Wolbe claims that today, striking a three-year-old causes a *michshol*, a stumbling block, and is prohibited. In previous generations, children were more tolerant and had a more positive self-image, and were not damaged by spanking. Today, many children are damaged for life by spanking, especially since rebellion fills the air.

While this is a far-reaching and novel approach adopted in, and for, our times, a precedent exists in the words of the Ritva (*Moed Katan* 17a):

לא גדול גדול ממש, אלא הכל לפי טבעו, שיש לחוש שיתריס כנגדו בדיבור או במעשה כי אפילו לא יהא בר מצוה אין ראוי להביאו לידי מכה או מקלל אביו, אלא ישתדלנו בדברים.

Even if a child is not bar mitzva, if, because of his nature, there is a reasonable chance that he will rebel with words or deeds, and ultimately curse or strike his parent, it is prohibited to hit him. Rather, one must persuade him with words.

Thirteen is simply an average age beyond which spanking may lead to rebellion and is, therefore, forbidden. If today the age is three, then that is the cutoff, as Rav Wolbe says.

On *Pesach*, when we focus on the *mitzva* of והגדת לבנך, we must remember that the primary mode of *chinuch* is *amira*, talking softly and warmly to our children. May our best efforts to raise our children properly be blessed with success.

This essay appears in Rabbi Willig's newly published Haggadah Shel Pesach Am Mordechai, available for purchase at rietspress.org

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Resilience:
Beyond Affliction

Continuing to Trudge up the Mountain

Reflections about Resilience

Rabbi Josh Blass
Mashgiach Ruchani, Yeshiva University

As my children continue to age and we find ourselves heading towards the proverbial empty nest, I reflect on the wisdom that I hope they carry from their upbringing. It is probably a question we have all asked ourselves at one time or another. What are the fundamental middos that parents concern themselves with as their children develop, and which traits do we hope are in place as those same children ultimately set forward upon their own course? While parents can hope that the full breadth of their values and *derech hachinuch* will be incorporated by their children even after they leave the portal of their childhood home, I believe that for me, the two qualities that stand out most are kindness and resilience. Both would seem to be the building blocks of any successful person, or for that matter, any successful community or nation of people.

Resilience. It is what I think about in reflecting on my grandparents emigrating from Poland to Canada right before the war, and observing the lives that they built on foreign soil. It is what I remember from the senior roshei yeshiva in my day coming into Zysman to give a daily shiur, and what I observed watching Rav Aharon Soloveichik zt"l putting on tefillin after his stroke. It is the middah that we have been forced to tap into in our long history and the quality that, out of necessity, we have needed to make a part of our collective DNA. Where does it come from? How did it become a part of our nation, and how can we ensure its continued presence in the life of the *yachid* and of the *klal*?

When we peruse Tanach and the meforshim, we see echoes of this concept of resilience everywhere. I recently came across a comment of the Chafetz Chaim that struck me. As many people note, the Torah spends much time in parshas Toldos describing Yitzchak's efforts to find and dig wells. The sheer number of pesukim is even more noteworthy when we consider how little is expounded upon the life of Yitzchak Avinu.

The Chafetz Chaim writes that this narrative is coming to teach that:

שלעולם לא ירפה האדם את ידיו מלהמשיך את העסק אשר התחיל, אל יאוש ואל כשלון. אם יצחק אבינו חפר ולא מצא מים, חפר באר אחרת עד שמצא מים.

One should never let go of continuing the endeavor that he started, neither to despair nor to failure. If our father Isaac dug and did not find water, he dug another well until he found water.

Very simply, the Torah is teaching us that we can never give up even after multiple failures and even when subject to an array of vicissitudes.

I had a thought many years ago that I have never seen articulated elsewhere

but that always struck me as having merit and value.

When Moshe Rabbeinu descended from Har Sinai, the Torah describes the radiance that emanated from his face, a radiance that he himself was unaware of.

וַיְהִי בְּרֶדֶת מֹשֶׁה מֵהַר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לֻחֹת הָעֵדֻת בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתּוֹ מִן הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אִתּוֹ.

When Moshe descended from Mount Sinai, carrying the two Tablets of Testimony in his hands as he came down from the mountain, he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant from speaking with Him.

The medrashim essentially all ask the same question: *meiheichan natal*, from where did Moshe Rabbeinu acquire these rays of light emanating from his face? Moshe, for all his greatness, was in fact a human being and the Torah is describing something that sounds somewhat celestial. Additionally, the meforshim question why the *karnei hod* appeared specifically during the giving of the *luchos shnios*, rather than earlier, during the initial giving of the Torah before cheit ha'egel.

The most common answer is expressed by Rashi (Shmos 34:29) quoting the medrash. Rashi writes that:

רַבּוֹתֵינוּ אָמְרוּ מִן הַמְּעָרָה, שֶׁנָּתַן הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא יָדוֹ עַל פָּנָיו, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְשַׂכֹּתִי כַפִּי.

Our Rabbis said: From the cave, that the Holy One, Blessed be He, placed His hand upon his face, as it is said, "And I will cover you with My hand."

Moshe had in fact become somewhat celestial through his intimate encounter with HKB'H. This explanation of the medrash explains where the *karnei hod* came from, but it doesn't explain why it would only happen during the giving of the *luchos shnios*.

While several other cryptic answers exist, I wanted to explore a fascinating line quoted throughout the medrashim. The medrash says that the *karnei hod* affixed onto Moshe's face came from the *kim'a sheb'kulmus*—the ink that was left on the bottom of the pen. Which ink and which pen? What is the medrash teaching us?

Before I suggest my thought, let me mention two insights found in the sefarim. The Ohr HaChaim on these pesukim explained that the "ink" alludes to the letter yud, which Moshe left out when writing the pasuk describing himself as an ענו מכל אדם, the humblest of any person.

Moshe, deeply uncomfortable writing about his own humility, omitted the yud, leaving the word incomplete. It was that ink, that fundamental sense of humility, which radiated from Moshe's face. If anyone has ever been in the presence of a truly great person, a person who perhaps knows their own greatness, and at the same time has a genuine spirit of simplicity and humility, then one understands the radiance of which the Ohr Hachaim speaks.

Another approach is from the *Zohar Chadash* which I saw quoted in the *Pardes Yosef*. Moshe's name was omitted from Parshas Tetzaveh due to the fact that he had told HKB'H that *micheni na misifrecha*—remove me from your book. When Moshe pleaded on behalf of Am Yisroel and, despite their flaws, believed in them so deeply that he was willing to be removed from the Torah, the very ink of Moshe Rabbeinu's missing name became the radiance that shone from his face. What an important reminder about the need to advocate on behalf of Am Yisroel and to not fall into the all-too-easy trap of criticizing the behavior of other Jews.

As meaningful as those two other ideas are, I was always struck by a profound image. It is the image of Moshe Rabbenu as the reluctant leader. The person described by the Ramban as almost the maternal figure for all the nation. The person who until now, and until his death, had to coax, cajole, implore, and inspire the nation to heed the call of wearing the mantle of the Am Segulah. For that same Moshe to come down from the mountain, to hear the *kol bamachaneh*, the sound of the people worshipping the Golden Calf, to feel what must have been unbearable disappointment, and exhaustion, and yet somehow advocate for that nation in front of HKB'H and then to trudge back up that same mountain, feels nothing short of heroic. Nothing short of one who feels such a sense of faith, and such a sense of mission, that he can somehow come back again with strength and purpose. That has always been the memory of Moshe that has stayed most present in my mind—the great man trudging by himself back up Har Sinai.

To me, when I think about the *kim'a sheb'kulmus*, the ink at the bottom of the pen, that's what I think about. Moshe tapping into the resilience that was still present, even under the most trying times. Tapping into those last drops of strength to bring himself to fulfill his holy mission. What radiated from Moshe's face? Strength, resilience, purpose, a higher calling. All of that became so much a part of the religious personality of Moshe Rabbenu and it was those qualities, that essence, that radiated from his face during perhaps his most trying moments. Maybe that's why, when Moshe lost his cool with the nation and rebuked them in Parshas Chukas with *shimu na hamorim*—"please listen, rebellious ones,"—that HKB'H decided that he could no longer lead. His strength and resilience no longer dominated his character, and a new person must step forward into this gap in leadership. The

radiance of Moshe Rabbeinu is what impacted and transformed Am Yisroel thousands of years ago, and the impact of our own resilience is no less felt both by ourselves and by others in our lives today.

We are instructed to not destroy fruit trees when we come into a city *ki ha'adam eitz hasadeh*, because man is like the tree of the field. How so? How is man compared to a tree?

Man seeks to model himself after a tree in the assimilation of two critical elements. The first is the tree's roots. Its sturdiness is found in its depth and in its history. So too, man ideally feels deeply rooted. Rooted in faith, mesorah, *yiras shamayim*, Torah values, a sense of belonging to a community both narrowly and broadly, and a sense of identity that comes from one's family and from one's family's lineage.

The second element of the tree is that it has a sense of purpose and regeneration. It's a living entity whose reason for existing is what it produces and in how it can benefit mankind. Food production, shade, soil regulation, oxygen production, water cycle regulation and many other benefits are all part of the unstated mission of a tree. Man, as well, needs to live with a stated or unstated fundamental sense of purpose. Why am I here? What and who am I impacting? What am I leaving behind? When a person has both elements—rootedness and purpose—then he is able to tap into a deep resilience, both his own as well as the shared and historical strength of Am Yisroel.

Yitzchak attempted to dig the wells that his father Avraham had already dug and in doing so provided for his family and for so many people who were dependent on him. Moshe was introduced in the Torah as the one who came from the Beis Levi and lived his life, having a clear sense of his own purpose. We hope to embody these two elements—rootedness and purpose—that grant us the resilience and strength to navigate our own personal journeys.

If I may, I wanted to say a word about my dear friend and mentor Dr. David Pelcocitz. Dr. Pelcovitz has always been a person with a clear sense of where he has come from, especially in connection to his esteemed father, the great Rabbi Rafael Pelcovitz. Every conversation with him has a relevant dvar Torah or story that emerges from our mesorah. At the same time, Dr. Pelcovitz, with great humility, understatement, and self-effacement, lives with an impassioned sense of purpose. There is no continent and no corner of the world that he has not either gone to or been prepared to go to in order to be of service with his expertise, advice and trademark soft touch. It is no wonder that in combining rootedness with purpose that Dr. Pelcovitz has been able to tap into his own resilience during all the various junctures of his own journey, and it is also no wonder that he has been such a role model for thousands of people throughout his life. I am deeply indebted to him and wish him only beracha and *shefa* in IY'H his many years ahead.

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Resilience:
Beyond Affliction

The Power of Story

Mental Health & Pesach

Dr. Danielle Bloom
Judaic Studies Faculty, SCW

Studies by Drs. Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush reveal that children who know more about their family's past have higher self-esteem, a greater sense of control over their lives, and a stronger belief in their family's ability to overcome challenges. The studies found that families pass down history in three ways. Some families tell a story of ascent: "We started with nothing, and through hard work, we achieved success." Others tell a story of decline: "Once we had it all, but then we lost everything." The healthiest story is one of resilience, an "oscillating narrative" that says, "We've had our ups and downs, but we've always stuck together." This third story, one of both triumphs and setbacks, makes children feel they belong to something bigger than themselves, a legacy of strength that runs through every generation.

This "oscillating" family narrative builds what Duke and Fivush call an "intergenerational self." Children who grow up with this mindset have a unique resilience and a deep-rooted sense of who they are. They see their family not just as individuals but as a unified whole, a group that can adapt, grow, and persevere no matter what. Children and especially adolescents need this sense of belonging to build the confidence to face life's challenges with optimism and strength.

If we want our families to thrive, we need to keep telling and retelling our stories—stories of who we are, what we've overcome, and the values that hold us together. Research shows that the happiest families talk about their shared journey, adding new chapters each time they rise above a hardship. This is the power of family legacy: a living, evolving story that strengthens each generation and instills hope for the future.

As Jews, we are deeply connected to our collective story. It is one of resilience—exile, return, triumph, and survival. Jewish history is not a distant record; it is our story, passed down through centuries, connecting us to each generation's victories and challenges. Nowhere is this more evident than during Pesach.

Moshe had already begun commanding the people about the importance of telling the story of the Exodus in Shemot 12, before they had even left Egypt! In that chapter, Moshe instructs the Israelites to observe the Pesach sacrifice and explain its significance to their children:

וְהָיָה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם. וַאֲמַרְתֶּם זֶבַח פֶּסַח הוּא לַה' אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל בָּתֵּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנָגְפּוֹ אֶת

מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת בָּתֵּינוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקֹּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ.

And when your children say to you, "What do you mean by this service?" you shall say, "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians and spared our houses."

Exodus 12:26-27

This command underscores the importance of storytelling even before the Exodus is fully realized.

The first time the story of the Exodus is told is by Moshe to Yitro. The reaction it engenders is described as *vayichad*, meaning "he rejoiced." Rashi explains this as Yitro's joy, but it can also suggest a deeper feeling of fear or awe as Yitro is moved by the suffering of the Egyptians. Dr. Aviva Zornberg points out that this is the power of a great story—it can access the unconscious mind and tap into deeper emotions. A powerful story can evoke multiple reactions simultaneously, allowing us to feel joy, sorrow, and empathy.

The mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* (telling the story of the Exodus) is fulfilled during Magid, the part of the Pesach Seder where we recount the story of the Israelites' liberation. But how can we bring this mitzvah to life? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, zt"l, explains that while the Torah is the oldest recorded history, it never uses the word "history." Instead, it uses *zachor*, the command to remember. Rabbi Sacks draws a distinction between history and memory: "History is someone else's story. It's about events that happened long ago to someone else. Memory is my story. It's about where I come from and the narrative I'm a part of." This distinction is key to understanding the mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim*—we are not just recounting events, but engaging in memory, connecting to our identity as part of the Jewish people.

On Seder night, we fulfill *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* not by just transmitting facts, but by telling the story in a way that brings it to life. Rabbi Sacks emphasizes that "collective memory depends on how we tell the story." This is why Magid is not a monologue—it's an interactive dialogue, especially with children, inviting participation and questions. It's not enough to simply remember the facts; we must engage with the story, making it personal and transformative.

This ties into *zechirat yetziat Mitzrayim*, the daily obligation to remember the Exodus. Rabbi Sacks' distinction helps us understand that *zechira* is not just recalling an event; it's about making that memory part of our lives. Through daily prayers like *kriyat shema*, we integrate the story into our identity, not just as a distant event, but as an ongoing part of our lives.

The difference between transmitting information and telling a story is profound. A story engages us emotionally and allows us to see the world through a new perspective. This is why we love good stories—they transport us and transform us. *Sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* is not simply about conveying facts; it's about creating a living memory that shapes who we are. When we tell the story on Seder night, we are connecting to our past in a way that defines our present and future.

It is by G-d's design that our foundational religious tradition takes the form of storytelling. If I told you that you were obligated to tell the story of leaving Egypt, where would you find your source material? Most of us would likely turn to Shemot and read through the first 12 chapters. Yet, ironically, the Haggadah never does that. Instead, it weaves together retellings from later sources, including the narration of Yehoshua and Yechezkel, written centuries after the event took place. In fact, the foundation of Magid is four verses beginning with "*Arami oved avi*" from Devarim 26—verses that do not directly recount the Exodus but are part of the declaration a farmer recites when bringing his first fruits to the Kohen. Why is this the chosen text for telling the story of our redemption? To understand why the Haggadah takes its particular form, let's explore the concept of temporal distancing. This is the ability to view your current situation from a distance, allowing you to gain perspective and find meaning. In his book *Chatter*, Ethan Kross explains how taking a historical perspective helps individuals better understand their present circumstances. He writes, "This historical perspective gave her a bird's-eye view of how far she had come, even making her think her ancestors would be proud of her. At the same time, learning about the suffering her forebears endured helped her put her own trials and tribulations in perspective" (*Chatter*, p. 62). This same concept of temporal distancing can help explain the structure of the Haggadah. By stepping back and viewing the Exodus through the lens of history, we gain the ability to relate to our personal and collective struggles, and see ourselves as part of a larger, meaningful narrative.

The farmer living in the land, enjoying his produce, must reflect on his success and see it within the context of *Brit Bein HaBetarim*, the Covenant between the Parts (Bereishit 15). He needs to verbalize and internalize the understanding that he is part of a larger story, the fulfillment of an ancient Divine promise. On Seder night, we, using the words prescribed by the Torah for the farmer, adopt the same mindset. We too are part of the ongoing,

unfolding narrative of Jewish history. This perspective helps us place our lives in a greater context, connects us to our ancestors, and provides the strength to endure.

Erica Brown, in her book *Seder Talk*, writes:

> *With shelves of so many Haggadot, it is not hard to ask why another is necessary. My conclusion: it is not. Appropriately, I asked myself "Mi anokhi?"—Who am I to write my own commentary to this enduring and majestic work? … We write and transmit our Passover truths not to be original but because it is how we satisfy the demand to relive the Exodus story in each generation through ourselves. We should all write our own commentary as a fulfillment of the commandment to make this story truly our own.*

On this night, we transform our collective experience into our own personal stories. The fulfillment of our obligation on Seder night is not simply in telling an event that occurred long ago, but in ensuring that this story is retold.

Therefore, the verses we use in the Haggadah to fulfill the mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* are themselves a retelling of the original story. That is the mitzvah—to make sure the story keeps being retold. The platform of Seder night becomes the springboard for everyone around your table to create a portrait that will inform the story they will one day tell their children. Our mandate on this night is to remind ourselves and our children that we are part of something far greater than ourselves. We are conveying the message that our identity and mission are found in the personal space where *yetziat Mitzrayim* is woven into the narrative of our lives.

As Dr. David Pelcovitz approaches his retirement, I reflect on the transformative role he has played in my understanding of both mental health and Torah. Dr. Pelcovitz, himself a master storyteller, was one of the first teachers to show me how modern psychological principles could seamlessly intertwine with Torah wisdom, creating a profound and holistic approach to living a mentally and spiritually healthy life. Dr. Pelcovitz frequently discusses the concepts of self-efficacy and grit, two psychological constructs linked to greater happiness and lower rates of depression. He ties these ideas to the Torah's wisdom, quoting Rav Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin: "Just like a child needs to be taught to believe in God, so too does he need afterwards to be taught to believe in himself." This shifted my perspective on mental health, showing that belief in oneself is as crucial as belief in God.

When discussing "grit"—the passion and perseverance for long-term goals—he highlights research showing that students who demonstrate grit are more likely to succeed in challenging endeavors, not because they are naturally gifted, but because they possess the determination to keep going despite setbacks. Dr. Pelcovitz often ties this modern psychological concept to a midrash from *Yalkut Shimoni* on Psalms, which states: "A person should learn from someone he wants to learn from and what he wants to learn." This teaching emphasizes the importance of choosing the right mentor and aligning one's goals with personal passions and interests. Dr. Pelcovitz's ability to connect this idea of grit with Torah wisdom makes it clear that perseverance and the pursuit of meaningful goals are not just modern ideas, but concepts deeply rooted in our tradition.

Dr. Pelcovitz's ability to bridge these two worlds—psychology and Torah—is not only academic but deeply practical. He encourages us to view personal growth through a lens of spiritual and psychological resilience. This integration helped me see the Torah not only as a guide for spiritual fulfillment but as a tool for cultivating emotional well-being.

What truly sets Dr. Pelcovitz apart is his unwavering belief in the power of the individual to effect change in their own life. His teachings on mental health are not about fixing "brokenness," but about nurturing potential. This perspective, grounded in both Torah and modern psychological principles, has stayed with me and has shaped the way I approach my own learning, teaching and spirituality. As he retires, I am profoundly grateful for the lessons he taught me. May his legacy continue to inspire future generations of students.

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The Resilience of Am Yisrael

Sheilos UTeshuvos from the War in Israel

Rabbi Reuven Brand
Rosh Kollel, YU-Torah Mitzion Kollel of Chicago

Dedicated to the merit of the members of the IDF and Israel's security services, with special mention of Rabbi Akiva Weiss and his unit (Yachsa"m 933). Rabbi Weiss was a contemporary of mine at Yeshivat Kerem BYavneh over twenty-five years ago, and I had the privilege of meeting him and the heroes of Yachsa"m during a visit in November 2023.

Sheilos uteshuvos (responsa) are an essential component of halachic literature. This genre of Torah learning also often provides historical insight into the challenges that a particular generation dealt with. In many cases, responsa literature has expressed Jewish spiritual resilience—a remarkable phenomenon that Jews have demonstrated throughout the ages. Despite unimaginably challenging circumstances, Jews persevered in their spiritual identity, mitzvah observance, and faith in Hashem. Through questions that rabbis received during challenging times, we learn about the values and heroic devotion lived by questioners who persevered in their pursuit of halachic observance despite their challenges. Through rabbinic answers we learn that the halachic tradition, which Hashem has given us, relates to every life circumstance, even challenging ones.

Since the current war in Israel began on Simchas Torah 5784 (October 7), the Jewish people—those in Israel in particular—have faced enormous challenges. We have also witnessed profound spiritual resilience. We have seen powerful images of commitment to talmud Torah like Rabbi Elisha Lowenstern zt"l Hy"d studying Rambam while seated on a mound of dirt in central Gaza. We have heard stories of unwavering devotion, like that of Saadya Deri zt"l Hy"d donning Tefillin in a bombed-out building just hours before sacrificing his life for kiddush Hashem.

In this context there is a new chapter of responsa being written relating to the halachic questions that have arisen during the current war in Israel. Although most have not yet been published formally, these responsa constitute a living expression of resilience and kiddush Hashem in our day. Two of the leading authors of these responsa are Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, shlit"a and Rav Asher Weiss, shlit"a, two *geonim* and *tzaddikim*, whose role in guiding and strengthening our people during this time is extraordinary. In many cases, they address the same halachic questions from different inquirers. In all cases, through both these poskim and their petitioners, we see the profound spiritual greatness of Am Yisrael.

Here is a sample of questions they address:

Shabbos

Many questions have arisen regarding Shabbos observance during a war. One specific situation was raised by parents of IDF soldiers serving on the battlefield: is it permitted for them to answer the phone if their child—or a number they don't recognize—is calling on Shabbos? The resilience of these parents—or spouses or children—who strive to uphold their Shabbos and halachic observance while living in constant fear for their child's safety is remarkable. Rav Asher Weiss ruled that it is permitted (unlike those who are not living in a community that is under immediate threat or have relatives in dangerous situations). The rationale can be understood considering our general lifesaving halachic guidelines.

The Mishna in *Yoma* 83a teaches

מי שנפלה עליו מפולת, ספק הוא שם ספק אינו שם, ספק חי ספק מת, ספק נכרי ספק ישראל – מפקחין עליו את הגל.

If a building collapsed on a person, and it is uncertain whether he is there or not, whether he is alive or dead, whether he is a gentile or an Israelite—one must clear away the rubble for him.

and the Gemara (84b) explains

אמר רב יוסף אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: לא הלכו בפקוח נפש אחר הרוב.

Rav Yosef said that Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: In matters of saving a life, one does not follow the majority.

Even when the concern for saving a life is distant, we are still cautious and violate Shabbos, as the *Shulchan Aruch* rules (Orach Chaim 329:3): אף על פי שיש בו כמה ספיקות—even if there are numerous doubts.

Hence, even though it is possible—or even likely—that the person calling is not reaching out for urgent assistance, on the chance that the call is related to a lifesaving situation, one is permitted to answer. If—Hashem yishmor—the soldier is injured, even the sound of a family member could add a measure of strength, which could be lifesaving.

Enemy Property

The resilience of IDF soldiers in preserving their humanity and spiritual mettle—despite the potential negative spiritual effects of taking human life and destroying property—is evident in several questions Rav Rimon received regarding the use of property in conquered areas. One soldier inquired if it is halachically permissible to charge his cell phone in an abandoned Arab home. Another asked if it is permitted to take provisions from a house that is slated for demolition. Rav Rimon responded that it is prohibited for several reasons:

א. הצבא כגוף צבאי יכול לקחת שלל, כפי שאכן נעשה פעמים רבות. אולם, הצבא אוסר על חיילים לקחת שלל לעצמם, ופרט לכך שתמיד צריך להישמע להוראות הצבא, הרי שמסתבר שהחלוקה הפרטית מתאפשרת רק על-ידי הסכמה ממלכתית, וכשאין הסכמה כזו אסור לקחת שלל.

ב. במלחמת עמלק נאסרה לקיחת שלל. אין לדמות מלחמה זו למלחמותינו, אך דומני שניתן ללמוד משם עיקרון שיש מקום ליישמו גם בנדון שלנו. מדוע שאול נענש כל-כך על שלקח שלל מהמלחמה? הרי הוא חמל רק על מיטב הצאן, ובאופן כללי הרג כמעט את כולם? שמעתי פעם ממו"ר הרב ליכטנשטיין זצ"ל, שבכך ששאול חמל על מיטב הצאן והבקר הוא הפך את כל המלחמה שלו לבלתי נכונה. מלחמת עמלק היא גזירת ה'. כאשר אדם נהנה מתוצאות המלחמה, הרי שיש כאן הנאת עצמו, ואין הוא פועל על פי הנחיית ה'. ממילא, הופך ההרג המוצדק והנכון לרצח. המקרה שלנו שונה בתכלית השינוי, אבל עיקרון זה ניתן ליישם גם לגביו. הצבא יכול לקחת שלל לצרכים צבאיים או לצורך המדינה, אבל לא נכון שאדם פרטי ייקח שלל, ובכך תהיה לו הנאה מן המלחמה. זו מלחמת מצוה, אולם תכונות ההרג וההשחתה הן תכונות המנוגדות לאופיינו. לכן כל כך חשוב שבבצענו מלחמה חשובה זו, לא תהיה לנו מכך כל הנאה אישית. מלחמה היא עניין לאומי, ציבורי, ואין מקום להנאת היחיד בתוך מלחמת המצוה של העם.

A. The army, as a military body, can take spoils, as has indeed been done many times. However, the army forbids soldiers from taking spoils for themselves, and aside from the fact that one must always obey

the army's instructions, it seems reasonable that private distribution is only possible with state consent, and when there is no such consent, it is forbidden to take spoils.

B. In the war against Amalek, taking spoils was forbidden. This war should not be compared to our wars, but I believe there is a principle from it that can be applied to our case. Why was Shaul so severely punished for taking spoils from the war? After all, he only spared the best of the flock, and in general, he carried out the command to destroy almost everyone. I once heard from my teacher, Rav [Aharon] Lichtenstein, of blessed memory, that by Shaul sparing the best of the flock and cattle, he turned his entire war into something unethical. The war against Amalek is a decree from God. When a person benefits from the results of the war, there is personal enjoyment, and he is not acting solely according to God's direction. Consequently, the justified killing becomes murder.

Our case is completely different, but this principle can also be applied to it. The army can take spoils for military needs or for the needs of the state, but it is not right for a private individual to take spoils and thereby have enjoyment from the war. This war is milchemet mitzvah (mandated war), but killing and destruction are characteristics that contradict our nature. Therefore, it is so important that in carrying out this important war, we should not have any personal benefit from it. War is a national, public matter, and there is no place for the individual's benefit within the context of a milchemet mitzvah of the nation.

Yom Tov

Many questions have arisen regarding the observance of Yom Tov. The first series of questions arose regarding Chanuka, shortly after the outbreak of the war. Rav Rimon was asked by a group of soldiers about an ingenious Chanuka lighting plan: Due to the danger of their location being discovered by terrorists, they inquired if they could light long-lasting candles in the window of an abandoned structure late in the afternoon that would burn into the night. The IDF soldiers would be able to see the lights from their position at a safe distance, and simultaneously any nearby enemies could be fooled into attacking an empty building! The soldiers specifically asked if this arrangement would allow them to recite a bracha, which itself would give them strength during the highly anxious and difficult battle.

In a lengthy responsum, Rav Rimon explores the unique nature of the mitzvah of Chanukah lighting, which is distinct from most mitzvos that are *chovas hagavra* (personal obligations). Chazal frame this mitzvah in the context of the home (*Shabbos* 21b: *mitzvas Chanukah ner ish u'veiso)*— the obligation is one candle per household—and *mitzvah l'hanicha al pesach beiso mibachutz*—it is to be placed outside the doorway. Hence, it is highly questionable whether one may ever fulfill the mitzvah of Chanuka lighting when it is not adjacent to one's house. Yet there is the possibility that there is a second, separate halachic rationale: *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle. One expression of this can be found in our practice to kindle Chanuka lights in a beis knesses. Although this practice is not found in the Gemara and it is hotly debated among Rishonim, we follow the *Shulchan Aruch*'s ruling and light in shul with a bracha because of its public nature:

ומדליקין ומברכין (בבית הכנסת) משום פרסומי ניסא.

We light with a beracha in synagogue because it constitutes publicizing the miracle.
Shulchan Aruch **671:7**

Hence, some Poskim raise the possibility of lighting Chanuka candles at a public event where a minyan for davening will occur, even if it is not one's home (see *Shu"t Yabia Omer, Orach Chaim* 7:57:6). In the situation in Gaza, where many soldiers would see the lights at night, Rav Rimon proposed that perhaps a minyan for Mincha could be arranged before the afternoon lighting creating a scenario similar to a beis knesses for lighting with *pirsumei nisa*.

Amputees

One of the tragic consequences of the war is the thousands of soldiers who were injured in battle. Some of these injuries are severe, including the loss of limbs—Hashem yirachem. One solider inquired about the proper time to recite the bracha of Shehechiyanu on his new prosthesis. Another soldier inquired about wearing a computerized prosthesis on Shabbos that senses a person's movement.

One notable hero, who lost both of his legs and the lower portion of his right arm, sought halachic guidance from both Rav Rimon and Rav Weiss during

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his rehabilitation at Sheba Hospital in Tel Aviv regarding his fulfillment of the mitzvah of tefillin. The Gemara in *Menachos* (36b) teaches that *tefillin shel yad* is typically placed on the left arm. One reason is because the Torah says ידכה, with an extra *heh*, which is interpreted to mean יד כהה, the weaker hand.

For this young man, the question arose: should he continue placing his tefillin on his left arm, despite its injury and limited functionality, or should he now place it on his right arm, since it is inherently weaker and may now be considered כהה?

Rav Rimon and Rav Weiss both emphasized this young man's incredible spiritual heroism and resilience, which he demonstrates in his commitment to his mitzvah observance given the physical, emotional and psychological challenges of the circumstance.

Life Cycle

Life cycle events have prompted halachic questions by religious reserve soldiers. Rav Weiss was asked for guidance by a soldier whose firstborn son (who required a pidyon haben) would reach his thirty-first day while the father was stationed near the front in Gaza. Should the pidyon haben be delayed until the father returns home? Rav Weiss instructed that although the Rama (*Yoreh Deah* 305:10) disallows *shlichus* for pidyon haben, the overwhelming consensus of Acharonim (see *Pischei Teshuva* note 16 there) rejects this opinion, and therefore, the father should appoint an agent to redeem his son on his behalf. Rav Weiss gave specific directions regarding the coins and how the father should participate in the celebration virtually; the soldier would recite the standard text and berachos over Zoom.

In another case, Rav Weiss was asked regarding Sheva Berachos: a soldier who returned home for two days of leave to get married (itself an act of incalculable faith and spiritual bravery), returned to the front in Gaza. When he gathers with his fellow soldiers to eat upon his return, should they recite Sheva Berachos in his presence (and in the absence of the bride)? Rav Weiss notes that this question depends on our understanding of the nature of Sheva Berachos: are these berachos relating to the joy of the groom? The bride? Both? Or perhaps it relates to the joy of friends and family participating in the simcha? If the celebratory berachos are an expression of joy by the principal participants, we should require at least the chassan or the kallah (the opinion of the Ran, *Sukkah* 11b). However, if the berachos are an expression of joy over the occasion, we would recite them if the meal in celebration of the wedding were held even in the absence of the groom and bride (the opinion of the *Tevuos Shor*, Hilchos Shechita 1:59).

Family life

There is another crucial aspect of Torah life that is affected by the war—a topic that needs to be addressed but only obliquely in this public format due to its sensitive nature: *taharas hamishpacha*. Machon Puah—the worldwide leader in halachic support for those struggling with fertility, women's health, men's health, genetics or intimacy—fields halachic questions regularly regarding these issues. Rav Gideon Weitzman, Machon Puah's senior advisor who has been answering complex *niddah* questions for decades, has shared (in a personal conversation on February 12, 2025) that throughout the war, the Machon has been flooded with calls pertaining to situations where the timing of mikveh or fertility treatment has been challenged due to deployment. The dominant—and most inspiring aspect of these questions—has been the overwhelming commitment of husbands and wives to observe these halachos with integrity, even when it comes at great personal and emotional cost.

We learn from the nascent teshuva literature in this war that the halacha provides spiritual and religious guidance in every circumstance and that every generation is blessed with poskim capable of handling the most complex questions with sensitivity, erudition and insight. More importantly, we reveal the firm commitment of Am Yisrael to Hashem, His Torah and His mitzvos. These questions demonstrate the spiritual strength and resilience of individuals and of our people as a whole. May the merit of the *mesirus nefesh* for Torah be an eternal merit for Klal Yisrael.

I am grateful beyond words to Maran HaRav Asher Weiss shlit"a and Maran HaRav Yosef Zvi Rimon, shlit"a, who graciously shared their unpublished teshuvos with me for this piece. Our entire generation is forever in their debt for their worldwide Torah leadership.

Resilience: Beyond Affliction

Elements of Resilience

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Assistant Professor, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education & Administration
Director of Leadership Scholars, Sack-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership
Associate Rabbi, Kingsway Jewish Center

The survival of the Jewish people is built on resilience. Our story is saturated with narratives of pogroms, persecutions, inquisitions, exiles, and destruction. Amid these disasters, many were killed, and survivors were confronted with physical, spiritual, and psychological suffering. Yet, as much as our story is permeated with trauma, it is also defined by resilience.

Resilience, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."[1] Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun coined the term post-traumatic growth, which refers not only to the ability to move forward after hardship, but also to the positive transformations that can emerge as a direct result of traumatic events. These include an appreciation for life, improved relationships, personal strengths, increased opportunities, and spiritual development.

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "Look through Jewish history and you will notice one thing: we are a super-resilient people. The more pressure we've been under, the stronger we've become."[2] In a 2014 speech to students at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Sacks extracts from Jewish history a grand narrative of resilience.

> *Somehow the Jewish people learned not merely to survive catastrophe, but to grow through it. If you think about it, Churban Bayit Rishon [the Destruction of the First Temple] brought about the renewal of Torah and the lives of the Jewish people as symbolised by Ezra and Nehemiah.*
>
> *Churban Bayit Sheini [the Destruction of the Second Temple] brought about the great writing down of the extraordinary literature of Torah sheba'al peh, Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara.*
>
> *The Crusades led to the Chassidei Ashkenaz. The Spanish Expulsion led to the Mystics of Tzfat. Even the Holocaust led, a mere three years later, to the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel.*[3]

What exactly are the elements of this historical communal resilience? How do the Jewish people cope with the trauma and emerge positively transformed

despite the deep wounds and visible scars?

In his book, *Rescue the Surviving Souls: The Great Jewish Refugee Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, Jewish historian Adam Teller analyzes the aftermath of the Khmelnytsky massacres in the seventeenth century.[4] He is particularly interested in how Jewish communities coped with the traumatic events and the necessity to assist refugees and rebuild communities. Professor Teller applies the modern psychological model of Dr. Richard Mollica, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, as an analytical framework for interpreting historical literature. Dr. Mollica's "self-healing approach" is a holistic method loosely broken down into four categories of resilience: social, behavioral, spiritual, and psychological.[5]

Building on Teller's precedent, we will use this framework to examine Jewish resilience not only during the Khmelnytsky massacres, but throughout Jewish history. In keeping with the theme of this publication, we will incorporate insights from the lectures and writings of Dr. David Pelcovitz, a world-renowned expert in trauma and resilience. I had the privilege of being a student of Dr. Pelcovitz while I was pursuing a master's degree at Azrieli and rabbinic ordination at RIETS. His teaching and modeling strongly influenced my decision to become a psychologist. He was also instrumental in bringing me into Azrieli, where I had the wonderful opportunity of co-teaching several courses with him.

The most important initial insight is that there is no one right way to cope. In *The End of Trauma: How the New Science of Resilience Is Changing How We Think About PTSD*, a book assigned by Dr. Pelcovitz in his doctoral course "Social Emotional Learning and Spiritual Development," trauma expert George Bonanno writes that a thorough analysis of the data challenges the commonly held narrative that specific methods or traits guarantee resilience. Instead, he asserts that there is no single road or clear path to overcoming trauma. As Dr. Pelcovitz notes in his article "Coping with Loss and Terror: Jewish and Psychological Perspectives," "Research and clinical practice in recent decades have found considerable variability in the coping strategies that children and adults effectively employ in coping with traumatic events in their lives."[6]

Social

One of Dr. Pelcovitz's frequently cited psychological studies is the Kauai Longitudinal Study. The study explored the impact of biological and psychological risk and protective factors of 698 children born in 1955 on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. One of the greatest factors that enabled children to succeed despite significant risk factors was "a close bond with at least one competent, emotionally stable person who was sensitive to their need."[7] As Dr. Pelcovitz elaborates, "[t]hose facing even the worst kind of trauma and loss are buffered and protected by the knowledge that they have somebody in their corner. Such social support is a key predictor of which children will emerge relatively unscathed from even the harshest difficulties."[8]

Another study Dr. Pelcovitz is fond of quoting is "the hill study." Researchers found that an observer's perception of a hill's steepness was influenced by whether they were viewing it alone or alongside someone else.[9] When we have social support, the challenges we confront seem less daunting than when we are alone.[10]

Another important social protective factor that Dr. Pelcovitz emphasizes is the importance of family in cultivating resilience. Hamilton McCubbin and colleagues identified ten characteristics of resilient families: communication, equality, spirituality, flexibility, truthfulness, hope, hardiness, family time and routines, social support, and health.[11] Dr. Pelcovitz often quoted the research of Marshall Duke of Emory University, who found that children who knew more about their family history and narrative were more resilient in the face of adversity.[12]

Behavioral

Dr. Mollica's self-healing approach emphasizes the importance of refugees maintaining agency rather than becoming passive. Professor Teller connects this to the resilience of many Khmelnytsky massacre refugees, whose strong drive to work contributed to their ability to rebuild their lives.

After the outbreak of the war in Israel in 2023, Azrieli hosted a webinar for teachers titled "Talking to Students About the War and Terrorism in Israel." In the session, Dr. Pelcovitz emphasized the importance of maintaining a relatively normal classroom routine as a key to strategy for alleviating stress. Additionally, during the disruptions of Covid-19, Dr. Pelcovitz emphasized the importance of maintaining structure and routine to mitigate stress and uncertainty.[13]

Dr. Mollica also highlights the importance of refugees to engage in altruistic behaviors as a key behavioral strategy for resilience and recovery.

In virtually every talk Dr. Pelcovitz gives in response to communal tragedy, he

suggests that one of the best strategies for personal coping is to do kindness for others. After Hurricane Katrina, Dr. Pelcovitz worked with adolescents who were distraught after losing so much in the wake of the disaster. Dr. Pelcovitz and colleagues decided to pair these adolescents with younger children who were also suffering, empowering the adolescents to be a resource for the even more vulnerable. This was essential in helping both the adolescents and the younger children cope with the loss.[14] There is nothing as powerful as reaching out and being helpful to others.[15]

Psychological

In *The End of Trauma*, George Bonanno emphasizes that most people do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after experiencing a trauma.[16] As Dr. Pelcovitz noted in his talk, "Divrei Chizuk for the Meron Tragedy," resilience is the norm. It may take time. It is normal to feel distressed and distraught after a tragedy. However, over time, most people tend to learn from the tragedy and move forward.[17]

While it is unknown which internal psychological characteristics best lead to resilience, hope and optimism are often linked as important protective factors.[18] In a talk in memory of long-time Azrieli professor Rabbi Dr. Chaim Feuerman, "Hope and Optimism: Lessons on Resilience Learned From Dr. Feuerman,"[19] Dr. Pelcovitz quoted a powerful Midrash on the verse in where Yaakov says, "For your salvation I hope, Lord" (Genesis 49:18):

אמר רבי יצחק הכל בקווי, יסורין בקווי, קדושת השם בקווי, זכות אבות בקווי, תאותו של עוה"ב בקווי.

Rabbi Yitzchak says, "Everything is through hope; [relief from] suffering is through hope, sanctification of the Name is through hope, the merit of the patriarchs is through hope, the desire for the World to Come is through hope."
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Turning to optimism, he cited a study by Dr. Martin Seligman, founder of positive psychology, in which researchers analyzed presidential nomination acceptance speeches for pessimistic versus optimistic speech patterns. The results were striking—candidates who conveyed pessimism lost 18 out of 22 elections.[20] Seligman's later work, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*[21] is an oft-referenced book in Dr. Pelcovitz's courses. Pessimists assume that negative life events are permanent, pervasive, and personal. However, they can shift this "explanatory style," by reframing challenges as temporary, local, and external, fostering a more optimistic outlook.

Spiritual

After reviewing several important coping strategies in his essay "Coping with Loss and Terror," Dr. Pelcovitz notes that "turning to God to answer our prayers is perhaps the most powerful form of coping. In addition to the obvious spiritual benefits, the psychological benefits of prayer include the comforting knowledge that there is something that we can actively do in the face of events that are otherwise out of our control."[22]

Based on Dr. Mollica, Professor Teller writes that spiritual practices were essential for the refugees' resilience, as "the emotions are contained by concrete rituals and practices, which gives survivors a specific time and place where feelings can be expressed and understood."[23] It was essential that refugees could tell their traumatic stories to construct a narrative that gave

In addition to the obvious spiritual benefits, the psychological benefits of prayer include the comforting knowledge that there is something that we can actively do in the face of events that are otherwise out of our control.

them the opportunity to integrate the experiences into their life narratives. It was also important that these events could be assimilated into an accepted worldview, in this case, as an expression of the covenant, and one more link in the long chain of Jewish suffering.

This analysis aligns well with Dr. Pelcovitz's frequent emphasis on the importance of "meaning-making" in the resilience process.[24] In *Life in the Balance*, Dr. Pelcovitz writes that "[t]here is a growing body of research in Psychology that mirrors the ancient wisdom of the Torah, documenting that resilience is the norm when tragedy is dealt with in a manner that is imbued with meaning."[25] Understanding that suffering can lead to growth and taking an active problem-solving stance when confronting challenges assists in this process. Dr. Pelcovitz then focuses on Judaism's role in generating meaning, combining it with research on the importance of family narratives:

> *Judaism is filled with holidays and rituals that convey a strong sense of inter-generational purpose and continuity. In addition to the value of sharing the narrative of our story as a people, sharing the individual family history in terms of*

the family's successes, failures, challenges, and inspiration is an important component of conveying purpose and meaning to the next generation.[26]

In a lecture during Covid-19, Dr. Pelcovitz explicitly connected this research to the Pesach Seder, with the importance of intergenerational familial connections and the emphasis on retelling our national story of resilience.[27]

While "in every generation" we have existential challenges to our survival, through communal support, altruistic behaviors, psychological character strengths, and spiritual strivings, with God's help we will continue to persevere with resilience "from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to a Festival, from darkness to a great light, and from enslavement to redemption.[28]"

Endnotes

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Empathy:
Sharing in the
Suffering of Others

Are We Giving Tzedakah for the Right Reasons?

Moving Beyond Empathy

Adapted from The Harry & Lena Cabakoff Memorial Lecture given on September 6, 2023.
Listen to the original lecture at www.yutorah.org/lectures/1074052.

Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman
Sgan Rosh Kollel, Bella & Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon
Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS
Rabbi, Ohr Saadya, Teaneck, NJ

The founding father of the Jewish people, Avraham Avinu, earned his status as the founder of the Jewish people through his behavior. This is what the Torah tells us explicitly after describing an extraordinary episode of his hospitality in great detail, that it's because of such kindness, taking care of those in need, that he earned that title. Immediately after that description, the Torah tells us that God declares that it's because of that that I have selected him, because he will teach his family and his descendants in such a fashion, to treat people this way to and take care of the needy; this why he is going to lead the entire new nation that will be the Jewish people. The story that the Torah describes there which leads up to this selection is a fascinating story. But the truth is there's a problem, if we look at the entire story all the way to the end, especially with the way the Talmud fills in the details.

We're told that here Avraham, before he engages in this hospitality, is actually recovering from surgery and recuperating. He just had his circumcision, his *bris*, at an advanced age, and God decides he should have a day off to relax. He arranges that it should be a very hot day, because normally Avraham would extend himself in hospitality and take care of all the travelers, attending to the needs of anyone who was passing by. Making sure it was a very hot day guaranteed there wouldn't be anyone on the road. Therefore, Avraham was alone, and God comes to visit him, to model another act of kindness, visiting the sick. A part of that mitzvah is to see, what does the patient need: perhaps he needs chicken soup, or ice cream (my father always would come to the hospital and ask what flavor ice cream the patient likes). Avraham's response is "I don't want ice cream - I'm all about kindness, and I'm miserable here without anyone to take care of. I need visitors, I need to extend some hospitality."

God acquiesces, and before the conversation is even over, three guests appear. Avraham is able to take care of them, and he does so in grand style. The Torah goes into tremendous detail about how he attends to their every need. It's because of that that we're told he will be selected as the ancestor of the Jewish people. But that's a problem; there's something about the story that doesn't quite work.

Imagine the following scenario: a wealthy but busy philanthropist seeks to make a personal donation to a particularly needy recipient. He tasks his assistant with finding the perfect candidate. A short time later, it seems he has succeeded wonderfully. He returns accompanied by an individual who appears completely penniless, bedraggled, and starving, dressed in rags. The philanthropist, delighted at the opportunity, immediately turns over a large sum of money to the visitor, who displays tears of gratitude. The philanthropist feels a tremendous sense of gratification at his accomplishment.

However, a little while after that, he looks at his window and sees his assistant, talking to the same individual, who no longer presents the same image: now he is well dressed, appears well-taken care of, and leaves in an expensive car. Demanding an explanation, the philanthropist is told that the recipient is actually an actor, who in reality is quite wealthy and has no need for the donation. Nonetheless, the assistant assumes his employer should have no objection. He sought the satisfaction of having made a donation, and he received what he was looking for. What could be the problem?

It would seem to go without saying that the philanthropist would not accept this explanation, and would likely be furious. His good intentions have been subverted; the money he had reserved for a needy recipient instead went to an imposter. Presumably, the assistant will soon be out of a job.

And yet Avraham seems to have undergone a very similar experience, and nonetheless, he has no complaints. The three "travelers" who served as guests to alleviate Avraham's discomfort were actually angels, without any human need for hospitality. Thus, Avraham's efforts on their behalf would seem to be comparable to the one who unknowingly lavishes charity on an individual who is not in need. What was the value in providing a counterfeit *chesed* opportunity?

Nonetheless, Avraham is grateful for the experience, and an insight into his persona explains why. The mandate to treat others with kindness, a fundamental value of the Torah, is directed by two parallel commandments. One is the Golden Rule, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which, among other responsibilities, obligates service to those in need. The second is *imitatio Dei,* the obligation to follow in God's path. The Rabbis explain that this seemingly daunting task is accomplished primarily through engaging in acts of kindness; just as God tends to the needs of humans, so must those who would seek to emulate Him. It is this principle that was discovered by Avraham.

Avraham represented *chesed* as a character trait, one he internalized and bequeathed to his descendants as an immutable hallmark. In the development of the personality that would set the template for the Jewish people, every expression of kindness was precious, every opportunity to hone the charitable instinct was an investment in the foundation of a nation reflective of God's message on Earth.

This is evocative of a widely quoted statement of the Rambam in his commentary to *Pikei Avos*. Commenting on the statement that "everything [is assessed] based on the multitude of the action" (*rov ha*-ma'aseh) he explains that we look at how many times an action is repeated. He considers the question of one who has to decide how to allocate his charitable funds: he could give $100 in one lump sum, or he could give the same $100 as ten $10 gifts. Better to do the latter, even though it's going to have the same overall impact. If he has to reach into his pocket ten times, to write out a check ten times, ten acts of generosity, that is going to have an effect on his soul. That's a part of pursuing this character transformation, the search for divinity.

What is Empathy?

What exactly is the character trait that we're looking for? Today it is very popular to talk about empathy. Broadly defined, for our purposes, we will describe it as identifying with the needs and the feelings and the emotions of others. This is a topic that's been discussed for a long time even though the word hasn't been around for so long, but it was discussed for example by the Scottish philosophers in the 1700's, David Hume and Adam Smith. They were pushing back against what they called "the selfish hypothesis," the idea that man could only be motivated by pursuing his own needs. They called "sympathy" what we would today call empathy, a word didn't exist yet, and they talked about it in different ways. Hume referred to what we would call "mirroring", a kind of automatic connection to what one would witness in somebody else's experiences. Adam Smith took it a little bit further, writing about an active decision to put oneself in somebody else's position.

Only about a hundred years ago, in the early 1900's, the word empathy came into use, from a German word which means "to feel into." The notion became popular that this type of experiencing what somebody else is going through was very crucial to moral development. There are many different usages of the word, but broadly speaking, some kind of experiencing what other are going

through became perceived as very central to moral development. One of the main advocates of this position is researcher C. Daniel Batson, who advocated what he called "the empathy-altruism theory," that it's necessary to feel empathy in order to be motivated to do anything on behalf of anyone else. He defined empathy very broadly, as all the different feelings that one has in concern for what others are going through. He conducted studies in which he felt he was able to chart a difference between simply feeling distress at seeing others suffering, and actually caring about the fact that they were suffering. If one had the choice of either escaping witnessing somebody else's problems or actually doing something about it - when that actually took greater effort - those who simply felt distress would run away, while those who actually cared would go to the greater effort of actually doing about it.

Others disputed these findings, but this nonetheless became widely accepted, that it was crucial to feel empathy in order to be motivated to act on behalf of others. Others, such as Martin Hoffman, also claimed that "the roots of all morality could be found in empathy". There were those who then connected this to biological factors: in the early 1990's there were researchers in Parma, Italy who claimed to have found in monkeys - and they assume this is true in humans also - what they call "mirror neurons" neurons in the brain that normally should fire when the body is moving, but in this case they fire when they see other monkeys doing something, and the assumption is they're connecting to what they're witnessing, that they're feeling a part of what other monkeys are doing, and that presumably humans also can feel connected to what other humans are doing and experiencing. They consider this to be a tremendous find; one prominent neurobiologist said that "the mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology".

More recently, another scientist, Paul Zack, wrote a book called *The Moral Molecule*, in which he claims that it's oxytocin that allows people to feel a bond to each other, and that's going to be the key to all moral decisions, because being able to connect to other people's feelings is what makes everything rise and fall. All morality is connected to that because without that bond, nothing happens. It is unclear, from a perspective of a belief in free will, how comfortable we would be tying it all into these alleged biological factors, and there is much controversy that surrounds these findings.

Empathy in Torah Sources

Still, the importance of feeling some type of connection to the experiences and the emotions of others, what is broadly called empathy, certainly does have a strong rooting in Torah sources. One prominent example involves Moshe Rabbenu. One of the first things that we hear about Moshe is that he is raised in the house of Pharoah and that he is isolated from all of the suffering of the Jewish people, but nonetheless, he "grows up", and the Torah tells us that he "goes out" and he "looks", he sees their suffering. Rashi comments, "he set his eyes and his heart to anguish over what they were going through". That is what would be called cognitive

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and affective empathy, in that he set his eyes to see to understand what they were going through, and also his heart that they should he should feel it as well. R. David Tzvi Hoffman notes that the *pasuk* says "he saw" twice, and he understands that the first "he saw" means that he contemplated, tried to really see what was going on and internalize it; and then "he saw" again, he looked a second time with this newfound understanding of what the suffering meant, so that he could really relate to it. R. Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim LaTorah,* offers another level of interpretation, quoting a *pasuk* in Koheles that "seeing" should mean understanding, and thus that he understood – again, cognitive empathy - but noting further that it was a total partnership, a complete joining of their experience, which would be called affective or emotional empathy.

The tribe of Levi, from which Moshe came, was not a part of the slavery. R. Yonasan Eibshutz explained that Pharaoh's fortune tellers told him that they foresaw that the savior of the Jewish people is going to come from the tribe of Levi, so they advised that they should be excluded them from the enslavement, so that they won't care about it. They underestimated this power of empathy that Moshe Rabbenu had, that even though he wasn't a part of that experience, he was able to put himself in their shoes and to identify with this active process with their suffering, to feel that empathy, and to decide he was going to do something about it.

Further, this is one of the attributes of God, that is described at the time that God tells Moshe "I will be… I will be with them during this time of suffering and I will be with them in their future suffering." This is evidently one of the attributes of God, and we are told to imitate his attributes.

This is true specifically in the context of the mitzvah of *tzedakah.* We find that the Torah says that, not only are we commanded to "open our hands" and give to those who are poor, but the Torah surrounds that also with verses of prohibition: that we are not allowed to "clench our fist" or to "harden our hearts" when we are approached. There is a range of interpretations, but the Rambam understands that to mean that there's a specific commandment relating to our compassion and empathy; we may not turn off our emotional connection to those who are suffering and those who are in need. Separate from the obligation to give, we also have to feel the empathy for their situation of need.

The *Kesav Sofer* notes that the commandment to loan money, which is connected to the commandment to give charity, is phrased in an unusual way, as if it's optional, even though it is actually obligatory. He suggests that it's meant to convey that we are supposed to specifically connect and to empathize, to join in the suffering of those who are in need so that we feel motivated to give because we want to as if it is a voluntary act even though it is actually a commandment. And that's why the Torah phrases it that way in order to send that message that it's supposed to come from this internal feeling of connection.

On top of that, not only is empathy presented as a motivation, but it's also an end in of itself, just as we find in all areas of life. For example, one who goes to the doctor doesn't only want the doctor to take good care of him and cure his problems, but also wants to see that he cares, to feel the empathy, and will rate the experience accordingly. He wants to perceive that as an end in and of itself. We find this also in the Talmud, which tells us that a part of the mitzvah that God modeled when he visited Avraham is to be there to experience the problem together with the patient. That is an end in and of itself. The Talmud teaches that the visitor takes away a part of the illness of the patient.

Apparently, not everyone can do this, but specifically a visitor who is a "*ben gilo*." What does that mean? The more well-known interpretation is that it is something mystical in nature, that they share the *mazal* of the patient. But according to other interpretations, it's simply a commonality. If there's some kind of a common base between the visitor and the patient, such as being in the same age group or of the same temperament, that allows them to create a bond, that has an actual effect and the patient will recover quicker, or will be alleviated to some degree, because of that bond.

Thus, we find that empathy is certainly present in *halakhic* and in *hashkafic* sources, both as a motivational force, as a part of the mitzvah of *tzedakah,* and as an end in and of itself. It's certainly reasonable to theorize that Avraham is working to develop that attribute even when there aren't actual human recipients of his charity and of his hospitality, and that the Rambam is advocating cultivating that attribute. It may be that this is reflected in contemporary science. Some studies have shown that you can enhance empathy through virtual reality, through pretending that one is actually taking care of real people even if they aren't. These studies, reflected in the writings of Abigail Marsh and others, have shown that there are lasting effects from virtual reality experiences and that empathy actually has been improved.

The Argument Against Empathy

Yet at the same time, there's been some degree of pushback against empathy. In fact, there's actually a book with that title, *Against Empathy*, written by a professor at Yale, Paul Bloom. This book is not some kind of ruthless capitalist manifesto arguing against charity or against helping others; it's actually subtitled *The Case for Rational Compassion*. Bloom argues that empathy can actually do a lot of harm. Even if one were to think that perhaps this is the work of a cynic contrarian, Bloom is not alone. Another recent book, *Humankind* by Rutger Bregman, who is very far from a cynic, is subtitled *A Hopeful History*. He discusses just about every study that has cast a negative light on human nature, and essentially reassesses all of them to present them much more positively and optimistically, in a much more hopeful light. And yet, he includes a whole chapter called "How Empathy Blinds us", in which he essentially writes that empathy is the cause of all the world's problems, stating that "one thing is certain: a better world does not start with empathy". There is a significant movement that argues that empathy is very much unhelpful to productive decisions or to benefiting the world.

What would be the problem with empathy? Why would there be such arguments and such literature claiming that we're not necessarily gaining from all of the celebration of empathy? One problem is that empathy is limited. Our emotional capacity is not infinite. There's a quote that's attributed to Stalin, which may or may not actually have been said by him, that one death is a tragedy and a million deaths is a statistic; we eventually run out of our capacity to care. Probably more accurately, the economist Thomas Schelling referred to the "identifiable victim effect," claiming that we only are able to care about those who we can point to and identify; when it becomes a hundred thousand, when it becomes a million, then we lose our ability to care. The philosopher Jesse Prince talked about the "cuteness effect," alleging that we tend to empathize with those that we find attractive, or cute, or appealing, rather than with those that are less so.

Even some of the great advocates of empathy, such as Martin Hoffman, talk about the "here and now effect" and the "availability effect"; we're able to care more about those that are here, that we see, but not those that are less so. Others talk about simply the fact that empathy may not be as strong a motivation as other factors, and more seriously, it can sometimes cause us to take the wrong side and can work against forces of justice and fairness. Even the great advocate Daniel Batson has noted through his studies that "high empathy individuals often tend to favor the targets of their empathy at the expense of others."

The Torah, in the context of justice, forbids us from empathizing at times. In the context specifically of *tzedakah,* we have a number of rules which seem to push us away sometimes from empathetic concerns. To mention three:

1. We have an obligation to make sure that the recipients of *tzedakah* are actually legitimate and deserving. There's a debate in some sources as to whether there's any mitzvah at all if one gives *tzedakah* to those who may not really be deserving or may not be genuine. There's a statement in the Talmud which sounds cynical, but reflects genuine realities: we should be grateful for the fraudsters because they save us from guilt; we can blame our lack of generosity on them, if we don't give to anybody because we don't know who to trust. In any event, it is a reality that there are those who are false and insincere and we may not fulfill any mitzvah in giving to them; and even if there is a fulfillment, that may apply only to those who are giving from their personal funds, but certainly those who are managing public funds donated to by others have a much greater responsibility to make sure that the recipients are worthy. If they are guided only by their empathy, they will make very serious mistakes.

2. In addition, there is also a list of priorities when it comes *tzedakah,* which has very serious *halakhic* weight. For example, the principle of *aniyei irkha kodmim* mandates that there must be attention paid first to those who are closest to you, whether geographically or familially

The Torah is telling us that we have to balance maintaining the concern and the empathy with the rationality at the same time. **Yet, we also have to recognize that intellectualism can only take us so far, as much as it is necessary.**

or otherwise, and that sometimes must override pulls of emotion or empathy or other types of concern that impacts decisions in a different way.

3. There's also sometimes a limit on generosity: people of average income are only permitted to give a fifth of their assets to *tzedakah*. Otherwise, they themselves may become dependent on charitable sustenance, thus becoming limited in their own ability to continue to be generous. Even though their emotional pull may say, "I want to give away everything," the *halakhah* prohibits it. This is once again an area where empathetic desires may lead one to make decisions that contradict the rule.

There is also what's popularized as the "effective altruism" movement, and *halakhah* recognizes that to some extent as well. It is noteworthy that there are those who disagreed with the Rambam, when he said that one should prioritize the spiritual growth of the donor in *tzedakah* decisions, notably R. Yaakov Emden (d. 1776). He wrote that one should prioritize the impact when making these decisions. Further, he held that even if one is looking to affect one's personality, this will be better accomplished by making a donation with a bigger impact, which will bring a greater sense of accomplishment.

Balancing Empathy and Rationality

Of course, it is still a balance, and the aforementioned prohibitions regarding *tzedakah,* not to harden our heart or to clench our fists. loom large. There is a discussion in the *poskim* how exactly one navigates the issue, if somebody is asked for a donation and declines, if seemingly they are indeed violating two Torah prohibitions. There are those who suggest that perhaps the Torah is being literal when it uses that kind of language, "don't harden your heart, don't clench your fist"; it all depends on the attitude. If one is asked for *tzedakah* and responds, "I would love to give you, and my heart is breaking for you, but there's only so much I can give and I have priorities that are close to me that I have to take care of also, and I have a responsibility to make sure that my money is allocated wisely" perhaps one is not in violation of these prohibitions. However, if one declines with the attitude of, "you're not my problem, I don't care. Work for it yourself. I don't have any obligation," then one would be in violation of these prohibitions.

Apparently, the Torah is telling us that we have to balance maintaining the concern and the empathy with the rationality at the same time. Yet, we also have to recognize that intellectualism can only take us so far, as much as it is necessary. One of Daniel Batson's more widely cited studies was conducted at the Princeton Theological Seminary, where he tested seminarians and told them that they have to go give a sermon on the other side of the seminary, and that they're late and have to run. Meanwhile, he hired actors placed along the way pretending to be in obvious distress, to see if the subjects would stop to take care of them while they were running to give the lecture that they were late for. Many of them did not stop. What was the topic of the lecture they were supposed to give? Stopping to take care of people who are in need. Apparently, intellectualism can only take one so far, and the emotional component is needed to some extent, and that's a part of the balance that's always going to be necessary, and that is a part of the challenge.

R, Chaim Hirschenson discussed this balance in his work on *Maseches Horiyos,* where the Talmud talks about the different priorities that have to be invoked in life saving. He wrote about the fact that there are challenges that require sometimes balancing the heart and the head and the logic and the emotion. He noted that on the one hand, the Talmud says in *Bava Metzia* that there is a policy of "your needs come first"; if your property is lost and somebody else's property is lost, that which is yours has to take priority before you take care of somebody else's property. However, at the same time, the Talmud does say that whoever is too exacting in that rule and in worrying about his own needs first will ultimately forget about the whole idea of *chesed,* and consequently he'll end up needing to be the recipient of other people's charity. This essentially reflects the idea that yes, logic has to dictate that we must have rational rules; however, if we totally become disconnected from the emotional empathetic side, we may forget about *chesed* and *tzedakah* completely, and that's certainly not going to be the kind of people that we want to be.

He commented as well on the oft-cited passage later in *Bava Metzia,* containing the debate between Ben Petura and R. Akiva regarding somebody who is traveling in the desert, and has only one bottle of water and only he or his travelling partner can survive. Ben Petura ruled that better they should split it so that this one shouldn't have to see his fellow die, even though this means they'll both die. R. Akiva argued: your life takes precedence. Despite the fact that he was the one who said that the key principle in life is "love your neighbor as yourself," that one should feel that empathy, and care about the other, still there has to be a logical

system that surrounds all of that, and ultimately, you have to worry about yourself first.

At the same time, Ben Petura was reflecting the emotional need that has to be there, and they balance each other out and they are both present in humanity. If we forget about one, or we forget about the other, we're not going to have a system; both views are included in our Talmud. Even if ultimately there has to be a system that regulates how we behave, we recognize that the empathy and emotion is always going to be part of how we think and how we analyze.

So ultimately what does this mean for us? Perhaps it's different than what we often say when, for example, we talk about money. There, we often say that the problem is we see money as the end, when really it should be the means to an end. When we talk about empathy, maybe we should say it the other way around: we use empathy sometimes as a means to an end, as a way to make decisions, while really, it's actually an end in itself, with inherent value.

However, as a way to make decisions, empathy is flawed and unreliable. We need sometimes to have more rationally based decisions, and to recognize that we make decisions because we are following God's path. Empathy is a part of decision making; we can't be, like Paul Bloom, against empathy and say that we reject the whole concept, because it's a key part of what makes us human and what connects us to God's path. Nonetheless, it is not a perfect way to fully assess a situation. It is more of an end than a means, the opposite of other factors, while it remains an essential part of our system.

It may be comparable to the relationship between *ahavas Hashem,* love of God, and *yiras Hashem,* reverence for Him, in that reverence for God is a crucial part of how we serve Him; but, ultimately we look to love as the more positive overall motivational force. Both of them are necessary and are crucial parts of how we relate to God, but ultimately love becomes the overarching, guiding theme.

Whenever there is a leap year in the Jewish calendar, we add an extra month. This is a mitzvah from the Torah, to ensure that Pesach is always in the springtime. Why is this so important? The Midrash relates that God declared: Look at the *chesed* that I did for you, I took you out of Egypt at a time that wasn't too hot and wasn't too cold, at the perfect time, in the springtime. This priority and emphasis is very hard to understand. Would we have turned down the Exodus if it had been in the winter or the summer? What's the idea of saying that we have to memorialize specifically that Pesach is in the springtime?

R. Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht explained by noting that there is a concept of *chesed,* and there's also concept of *rachmanus;* they are two separate qualities. The descendants of Avraham are identified both as being *rachmanim* and *gomlei chasadim,* two separate ideas. It's one thing to feel compassion when another is collapsing in front of you, when someone is starving and obviously needs some food and some relief, and they're crying and you can't turn away. That is *rachmanus*. It's a whole other quality to be able to say that even when there's no shrieking, when no one's calling out, when there's no blatant undeniable need in front of me, I still want to know: how can I make things better? How can I be giving even when there's no outcry?

That's what it means to be a descendant of Avraham. At the very origin of the Jewish people, God made sure that we remembered that we are not only *rachmanim,* as crucial and as vital as that is, to be responsive to the cry of those who are suffering and those who are miserable. We are also by our very nature giving and providing for those who are not so obviously in need, because giving by itself is an attribute of God, and is goodness by its very nature, and that must also direct our decisions. We will be there for those who are suffering, and we will also be giving, because that is the essence of God, and both of those must be there together.

When reciting *selichos,* the thirteen attributes of *rachmanus* are invoked, as we are told to do so when we look for God's forgiveness. Some understand that statement to mean not only that we should say them, but that we should seek to live them. We understand that there are thirteen attributes, that *rachmanus* is nuanced and complex and more than we can understand; that it's not one thing and that it's made up of so many different components. In order to emulate God, there is a lot that we have to try to understand and incorporate and bring in to what it means to be a giving person, to truly emulate everything that God has modeled for us and asked us to be. However, if we are successful in doing so, if we are able to truly give empathy its proper place, to give *rahmanus* its context together with everything it should mean, then we should be privileged and blessed that the greatest challenge we should have is figuring out how to allocate and share all the blessings that God bestows upon us.

Empathy:
Sharing in the
Suffering of Others

Empathy in Egypt

Dedicated in honor of Dr. David Pelcovitz—a humble yet towering leader, a pioneering force in our community, and a mentor and teacher to thousands, each of whom he cares for deeply on a personal level.

Empathy as a Defining Attribute of a Jew

The defining characteristics of a Jew have always been compassion and kindness, starting with our patriarchs and matriarchs and continuing through Moshe and the great leaders in each generation. In fact, the Gemara[1] notes that the three "signs" of a Jew (akin to the two kosher signs of a kosher animal) are (1) compassion (2) a sense of humility and (3) a commitment to acts of kindness. Moreover, as codified in the Rambam[2] and *Shulchan Aruch*,[3] we question the lineage of those who are cruel and lack compassion, and are strongly urged not to marry into a family with those traits.

It is plausible to assume that the character trait of empathy falls into this category as well. Empathy is broadly defined as the ability to correctly interpret the emotions and perspectives of others and respond appropriately.[4] When we express empathy, we are making a clear statement to the one in pain or distress that, "I am with you and am trying to feel what you are going through." Unlike sympathy, which feels more like an outsider or spectator observing someone else's pain, empathy allows us to experience and identify with the pain of another. Sympathy often fuels disconnection while empathy can create greater connection.[5] Further, an empathetic orientation not only seeks to understand what someone is going through, but to understand what might be practically helpful.[6] For example, if someone is stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire or accident, sympathy means stopping to look and feel bad for the plight of another. Empathy means pulling over

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Kalinsky
Max and Marion Grill Administrative Dean, RIETS
Dean, Undergraduate Torah Studies, Yeshiva University

to the side of the road and waiting with them until help arrives. In fact, one of the 48 characteristics listed in the final chapter of *Pirkei Avos*, known as "*Kinyanei Torah*"—the essential traits for acquiring Torah—includes the capacity to be *nosei b'ol im chaveiro*, to carry our friend's burden.

Students of Dr. David Pelcovitz have often heard him reference a study[7] in which participants were asked to assess

the steepness and difficulty of a hill that they were asked to climb. The study found that those accompanied by a friend perceived the hill to be less steep compared to participants who faced it alone.

Origins in Egypt and During Servitude

The characteristic of empathy was ingrained in the Jewish people during their slavery and ultimate redemption from Egypt. The following are a few examples.

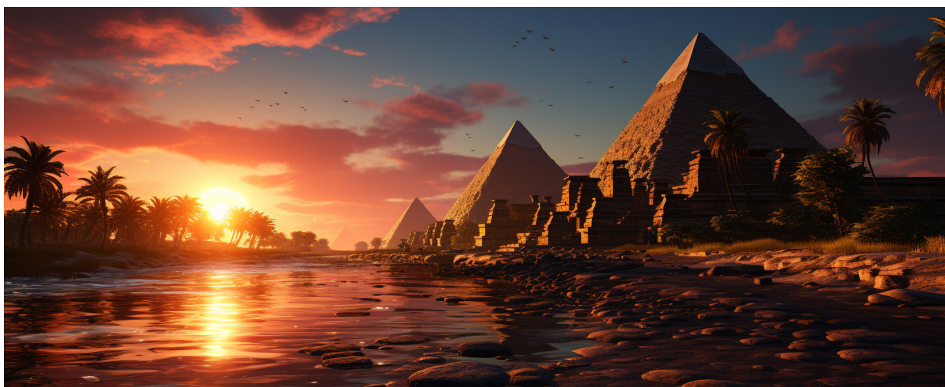
וַתֵּתַצַּב אֲחֹתוֹ מֵרָחֹק לְדֵעָה מַה יֵּעָשֶׂה לוֹ: וַתֵּרֶד בַּת פַּרְעֹה לִרְחֹץ עַל הַיְאֹר וְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ הֹלְכֹת עַל יַד הַיְאֹר וַתֵּרֶא אֶת הַתֵּבָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקָּחֶהָ: וַתִּפְתַּח וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה נַעַר בֹּכֶה וַתַּחְמֹל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִיַּלְדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה.
שמות ב:ד- ו

His sister stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done to him. Paroh's daughter went down to bathe in the river while her maidens were walking by the river. She saw the basket in the reeds and sent her handmaid, and she took it. She opened it and saw him, the child, and behold, it was a boy crying. She felt compassion for him and said, "This is one of the children of the Hebrews."
Shemos 2:4-6

The daughter of Pharoh encounters a child in the water, brings him to her and notices a "child" crying. She has pity on him and exclaims, "this must be a Jewish child." The commentators struggle to understand both the definition of "child," since Moshe was indeed only a "baby" and the connection to the realization that this must be a Jewish child. Rashi, citing the Midrash, assumes that the "child" is referring to Moshe, yet somehow his voice was that of a more mature child (some say even that of a 13-year-old), and she knew he was Jewish from the fact that he would not nurse from an Egyptian woman. The Gemara (*Sotah* 12b) says that she recognized Moshe's Bris Milah, a sign of his Jewishness. However, the Chizkuni and Baal HaTurim[8] interpret the verse differently, understanding the "child" to refer to Aharon. According to this reading, she identified the baby as Jewish not by physical signs, but by witnessing the deep care, concern, and empathy of an older brother watching over his sibling in the Nile. This moment serves as our first introduction to the future leader of the Jewish people.

Second, a few verses later, the Torah's the first description of Moshe as he emerges from Pharoh's palace brings us to an encounter with an Egyptian striking a Jew.

וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו וַיַּרְא בְּסִבְלֹתָם וַיַּרְא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו: וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וָכֹה וַיַּרְא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיַּךְ אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחוֹל.
שמות פרק ב



In those days, Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers and saw their affliction; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, and he struck the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.
Shemot 2:11-12

The first thing the Torah tells us about Moshe is that he "sees their affliction." He notices his surroundings and the suffering of his people. Rashi goes further and states:

וירא בסבלתם: נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מיצר עליהם.

He saw their affliction—He set his eyes and heart to be distressed about them.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1965, Germany) adds an additional twist to our understanding of the episode. We may have thought that the purpose of Moshe turning from one side to another before striking the Egyptian was to protect himself and ensure that nobody else was looking. However, Rabbi Mecklenburg[9] understands this instead as Moshe surveying the scene to see if another Jew was present and able to come to the aid of his brother. When seeing none, Moshe inserts himself and saves the Jew by striking the Egyptian.

Further, the Shelah Hakadosh (d.1630, Tzefat) notes how unlike the other tribes, when listing the names of the family members of Levi, the Torah adds the word "shemot"––"the names of."

אֵלֶּה רָאשֵׁי בֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲנוֹךְ וּפַלּוּא חֶצְרֹן וְכַרְמִי אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפְּחֹת רְאוּבֵן:
The following are the heads of their respective clans. The sons of Reuven,

Yisrael's first-born: Chanoch, Pallu, Chetzron and Carmi; these are the families of Reuven.

וּבְנֵי שִׁמְעוֹן יְמוּאֵל וְיָמִין וְאֹהַד וְיָכִין וְצֹחַר וְשָׁאוּל בֶּן הַכְּנַעֲנִית אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפְּחֹת שִׁמְעוֹן:

The sons of Shimon: Yemuel, Yamin, Ohad, Yachin, Tzochar, and Saul the son of a Canaanite woman; these are the families of Shimon.

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי לֵוִי לְתֹלְדֹתָם גֵּרְשׁוֹן וּקְהָת וּמְרָרִי וּשְׁנֵי חַיֵּי לֵוִי שֶׁבַע וּשְׁלֹשִׁים וּמְאַת שָׁנָה:

These are the names of Levi's sons by their lineage: Gershon, Kehat, and Merari; and the span of Levi's life was 137 years.

To explain this difference, he answers that the members of the tribe of Levi did not experience servitude like their brothers in Egypt. Therefore, the Levites needed additional reminders to *feel* the pain of what their brothers went through each day. Their brothers were forced to perform backbreaking work under Egyptian taskmasters. What did Levi do? He called his children names after the suffering that his brothers had to endure in Galus. Gershon = we are strangers in another land; Kehat = blunted teeth; Merari = bitter lives. In fact, we learn the lesson of empathy from Hashem, when He reveals Himself with the words "I will be with you" throughout the Jewish People's sojourn in exile.[10]

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik[11] elaborates on the development of empathy specifically *through* our years as slaves in Egypt. Had we not experienced what it means to be exposed to suffering and pain we would not have developed our sensitivity for those in distress and for the less fortunate.

> *The experience of Egyptian servitude underlies the very morality of the Jew. If asked what characterizes Jewish morality, I would answer with a single Yiddish word: rachmanus. The English translation of mercy, compassion, sympathy, or empathy do not capture its full meaning. Rachmanus refers to the exceptionally tender and warm approach of one individual to another. The word rachamim in Hebrew is derived from rechem, the womb; it means the love of a mother for her child. The fact that in Egypt the Jews were exposed to all kinds of chicanery and humiliation, the fact that they were treated there like subjects, not people, engendered in the Jewish people sensitivity and tenderness toward their fellow man. Our extraordinary sensitivity to the widow and orphan bears witness to our sympathetic understanding of and involvement in the travail of others (see Rambam, Hilchot Deot 6:10). This would never have happened if not for our sojourn in Egypt. Without the experience of slavery, we would have remained unexposed to suffering, emotionally vulgar and insensitive. That is why the Torah, whenever it speaks of our duty to respect the feelings of others, particularly the lonely and defenseless, introduces the motif of our servitude in Egypt (ex. Exodus 22:20, 23:9, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 10:19). Had we not been in Egypt, had we not felt the pain caused by the whip, we would not have understood the divine law of not oppressing the stranger or the law of loving one's neighbor.*
>
> *In the Egyptian bondage, a community of pain came into existence. G-d told Moses, "Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharoh, that you may bring ammi, My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). In other words, they suffer not as individuals, a multitude of persons incidentally subjected to the same destiny, but as an entity, a people linked together by awareness of their solidarity, Each one feels the pain of his fellow Jew, I want you to take out of Egypt "the children of Israel," so many individuals, as well as "ammi, My people" as a special entity.... Had Jacob remained in Canaan, his children and future generations would not have developed extra sensitivity vis-a-vis fairness and honesty. We would not have hated cruelty and ruthlessness with passion and zeal. Had we not spent years of horror, we could not have grown and developed into a great nation.*

Dr. David Pelcovitz has played a crucial role in shaping generations of mental health professionals[12] and rabbinic leaders who serve Jewish communities across the world. His integration of psychological insight with Torah values and guidance has equipped countless rabbis with the tools to respond sensitively to their communities' mental health needs, combining professional training with a sense of responsibility and empathy – a characteristic engrained within the DNA of the Jewish people during their bondage in Egypt.

Endnotes

1. תלמוד בבלי יבמות עט.

שְׁלֹשָׁה סִימָנִים יֵשׁ בְּאוּמָּה זוֹ: הָרַחְמָנִים, וְהַבַּיְישָׁנִין, וְגוֹמְלֵי חֲסָדִים. רַחְמָנִים — דִּכְתִיב: "וְנָתַן לְךָ רַחֲמִים וְרִחַמְךָ וְהִרְבֶּךָ". בַּיְישָׁנִין — דִּכְתִיב: "בַּעֲבוּר תִּהְיֶה יִרְאָתוֹ עַל פְּנֵיכֶם". גּוֹמְלֵי חֲסָדִים — דִּכְתִיב: "לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת בָּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ וְגוֹ'". כֹּל שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה סִימָנִים הַלָּלוּ — רָאוּי לְהִדָּבֵק בְּאוּמָּה זוֹ.

There are three distinguishing characteristics of this nation (the Jewish people): They are merciful, they are bashful/modest, and they perform acts of loving-kindness. They are merciful—as it is written: "And He will give you mercy and be merciful to you and multiply you" (Deuteronomy 13:18). They are bashful—as it is written: "That His fear may be upon your faces" (Exodus 20:17). They perform acts of loving-kindness—as it is written: "For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him" (Genesis 18:19). Anyone who possesses these three characteristics is worthy of joining this nation.

2. רמב"ם איסורי ביאה יט:יז

וְכֵן כָּל מִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ עַזּוּת פָּנִים אוֹ אַכְזָרִיּוּת וְשׂוֹנֵא אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וְאֵינוֹ גּוֹמֵל לָהֶם חֶסֶד חוֹשְׁשִׁין לוֹ בְּיוֹתֵר שֶׁמָּא גִּבְעוֹנִי הוּא. שֶׁסִּימָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָאֻמָּה הַקְּדוֹשָׁה בַּיְשָׁנִין רַחֲמָנִים וְגוֹמְלֵי חֲסָדִים. וּבַגִּבְעוֹנִים הוּא אוֹמֵר (שמואל ב כא ב) "וְהַגִּבְעֹנִים לֹא מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה" לְפִי שֶׁהֵעֵזּוּ פְּנֵיהֶם וְלֹא נִתְפַּיְּסוּ וְלֹא רִחֲמוּ עַל בְּנֵי שָׁאוּל וְלֹא גָּמְלוּ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל חֶסֶד לִמְחֹל לִבְנֵי מַלְכָּם וְהֵם עָשׂוּ עִמָּהֶם חֶסֶד וְהֶחֱיוּם בַּתְּחִלָּה.

Similarly, whenever a person is characterized by insolence and cruelty, hating people and not showing kindness to them, we seriously suspect that he is a Gibeonite. For the distinguishing signs of the holy nation of Israel is that they are meek, merciful, and kind. With regard to the Gibeonites, [II Samuel 21:2] states: "The Gibeonites are not of the Jewish people." For they acted extremely brazenly and would not be appeased. They did not show mercy to the sons of [King] Saul, nor did they show kindness to the Jews to forgive the descendants of their king, while [the Jews] had shown them kindness and allowed them to live.

3. *Even Haezer* 2:2.

4. Chrysikou, E. G., & Thompson, W. J. (2016). Assessing cognitive and affective empathy through the interpersonal reactivity index: An argument against a two-factor model. Assessment, 23(6), 769-777

5. Brown, B. (2013, December 10). Brené Brown on empathy. [video]

6. Saxey, Matthew (2020) "Empathy v. Sympathy: Are My Attempts Really Helping Others?," Family Perspectives: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1, Article 7.

7. Schnall S, Harber KD, Stefanucci JK, Proffitt DR, Social Support and the Perception of Geographical Slant. J Exp Soc Psychol. 2008 Sep 1;44(5):1246-1255.

8. בעל הטורים שמות פרק ב (פרשת שמות)
והנה נער בכה. זה אהרן שהניחתו אצל התיבה (יל"ש ח"א רמז קסו). נער בכה בגימטריא זה אהרן הכהן.

קיצור פענח רזא שמות ב':ו'
נע"ר בכ"ה – בגימט' וד"א אהר"ן הכה"ן שאהרן הי' בוכה על הילד היולד מאימת פן יקראנו אסון המים ומתוך כך חמלה עליו ואמרה מילדי העברים זה ולא אסופי או שתוקי שדרכן ג"כ להיות מושלכים בסוף וקנה, כן פי' ר"י חסיד.

9. הכתב והקבלה שמות פרק ב
ויפן כה וכה. חשב משה שאחד מאחיו העברים העומדים סביבו יתקומם על המצרי ויציל את אחיו המוכה מכת מות. וירא כי אין איש. ראה שאין ביניהם גבר בגוברין, ואין מהם שם על לב צרת אחיו להשתדל על הצלתו; וכ"א ברבה רי"א וירא כי אין איש שיקנא להקב"ה ויהרגנו, מלת איש תואר לאדם חשוב כמו הלא איש אתה (ש"א כ"ו); ובזה התישב מה שהתעוררו המפרשים על יתור לשון ויפן כה וכה דמדכתיב וירא כי אין איש ידענו שפנה כה וכה, גם על השלילה לא נופל כ"כ לשון וירא ויותר היה ראוי לומר כי אין רואה.

רוביצה תרצב ףתתשהל הצרו הז רבד עדי יולו תולגב ויה אל יול טבש יכ אוה ןינעה .01
אל ץראב סה סירג יכ סש לע ןושרג סש ונייהד תולגה סש לש וינבל תומש ארק השע המ
דומלי ןאכמו ... סהייח תא וררמיו סש לע ירמר סשו תוהק סהיניש סש לע תהק סשו סהל
השמל ךרבתי סשה עידוה ןכו .ול תעגמ הרצה ןיאש פ"עא רוביצה רעצב ףתתשהל סדאה
.תרחא תולגב סהמע 'האו הז תולגב סהמע 'הא רשא 'הא - וניבר

11. Rabbi Y.D. Soloveitchik - Festival of Freedom (p.133-134)

12. Dr. Pelcovitz was instrumental in the formation of the partnership between the Wurzweiler School of Social Work and the Sara Schenirer Institute in 2017, which has to date graduated over 600 women and men, many of whom work within the orthodox community.

Empathy: Sharing in the Suffering of Others

Guardians of Dignity

Pesach is a time of remembrance and renewal, a season in which we not only celebrate our freedom but reaffirm our collective mission as a nation called to serve Hashem. It is a festival of community—of families and communities coming together, bound by shared tradition and a sacred sense of purpose. From the mitzvos of *aliyah l'regel* to the *korban Pesach*, our Yom Tov experience is built upon the foundational principle of connection. We are meant to join, to invite, and to experience the Seder not in isolation but in the company of those we cherish most. Pesach is, in a word, a time for family.

Yet, as we all know, family can be complicated. We are blessed to live in an era of extraordinary medical advancements, where increased longevity allows us more years with those we love. And still, along with this blessing comes a profound responsibility. When the very people who once led our Sedarim and guided us through the intricacies of preparation can no longer do so, how do we honor them? How do we balance ensuring the observance of mitzvos with preserving the dignity of those who instilled in us the values we hold dear?

One common challenge for families with a parent suffering from dementia is managing the sale of their chametz. When an elderly parent begins to experience cognitive decline, families are often faced with difficult and painful conversations—about whether it is still safe for them to drive, whether they can continue donning tefillin, or whether they can competently engage in financial transactions. Selling chametz is no exception and can be particularly sensitive, as it touches on both halachic requirements and the dignity of the individual. Approaching this issue in a way that both satisfies halachic standards and upholds the honor of

Rabbi Kalman Laufer

Director Bioethics and Jewish Law Program RIETS, Judaic Studies Faculty YU and SCW

a parent requires careful thought and sensitivity, ensuring that their role in the mitzvos they have upheld for so long is maintained with the utmost respect.

The Gemara in *Chagiga* (3b) identifies the characteristics of a *shoteh*—someone who, due to cognitive decline, lacks the capacity to make halachically valid decisions.[1] Rashi, in his commentary on this Gemara, specifically extends this principle to include transactions, emphasizing that

a *shoteh* may not engage in any form of commercial dealings because he lacks the requisite cognitive capacity to demonstrate commitment to a sale. This halachic principle introduces a significant complication: If a person suffering from dementia is considered a *shoteh* and therefore unable to effectuate a sale, how can we ensure that his chametz is properly sold before Pesach? This challenge necessitates a careful approach that upholds both halachic validity and the dignity of the individual involved.

To address this, the Gemara introduces the role of an *apotropos*—a guardian authorized to act on behalf of those unable to do so themselves. The classical case for the appointment of a guardian is found in the case of orphans who, in the absence of a parent, require financial and legal oversight to ensure their well-being. The Gemara, in *Maseches Gittin* 65a, acknowledges that while minors can sometimes engage in financial transactions, their capacity is limited to the sale of movable items (*metaltelin*), excluding more complex transactions such as real estate. The Rambam (*Hilchos Mechira* 29:4), in codifying the laws of guardianship, explicitly extends the role of an *apotropos* beyond orphans to include a *shoteh*, applying the same principles and legal structures.

A possible precedent emerges from the laws of terumos and maasros. Produce grown in Eretz Yisrael may not be eaten until the requisite tithes have been separated. This requirement becomes particularly challenging when the land is owned by a *shoteh*, since halacha explicitly prohibits separating terumah from another's produce without their express permission (Mishna, *Terumos* 1:1). The Mishna also states that a *shoteh* lacks halachic standing to separate the tithes himself or to provide such consent to others. This creates a halachic dilemma regarding how the produce can be properly tithed.

Recognizing this unavoidable issue, the Tosefta (*Terumos* 1:1) rules that an *apotropus* can take tithes on behalf of the *shoteh*. How does this mechanism work? The Ramban, in his comments to *Gittin* (52a), suggests two answers. Initially, he suggests that we can apply the principle of *hefker beis din hefker*—granting Beis Din the authority to restructure financial ownership. In the Ramban's case of a minor orphan, or in our case a *shoteh*, Beis Din would appoint a guardian with the power to separate tithes on their behalf, ensuring the mitzvah would be fulfilled correctly. Since the separation of terumos and maasros is a fundamental requirement with no alternative means of fulfillment, Beis Din's intervention was deemed essential.

At first glance, one might assume that the same principle should apply to chametz: just as a *shoteh* cannot separate tithes, he also cannot sell his chametz and a guardian should be able to act on his behalf. However, there is a crucial distinction. Unlike terumos and maasros, where separation is the only halachic option, selling chametz is not the primary requirement—it is a workaround. While the institution of selling chametz is broadly engaged and permitted, it is not the ideal way to fulfill the mitzvah of getting rid of one's chametz. Given that reality, Chazal may not have extended the same rights to a guardian under the mechanism of *hefker beis din hefker* to chametz sales because selling is not inherently required. Instead, they may have only empowered a guardian to dispose of the chametz altogether.

The Ramban prefers an alternative mechanism to explain the role of a guardian in halacha. The Gemara, in *Kiddushin* 42a, cites the pasuk (Bamidbar 34:18) "*v'nasi echad nasi echad mimateh tikachu*" as the source allowing a guardian to aid in the disbursement of inheritance to various orphans. Just as the leader of a shevet is responsible for dividing and apportioning land among its members, a guardian appointed by Beis Din holds a similar responsibility. The same Gemara cites this pasuk as the basis for the principle that a person may act to benefit another even without their knowledge, and that such an act is binding.

Ramban utilizes this discussion to propose that a guardian's authority in halacha may stem from his ability to act in the best interest of the one he represents rather than from a direct appointment by Beis Din. If this principle is accepted, it opens the possibility of extending *zachin l'adam shelo b'fanav* to the sale of chametz on behalf of a *shoteh*.[2]

However, applying *zachin* in this case is a creative extension of the concept rather than an obvious application. Unlike *hefker beis din hefker*, which grants Beis Din direct authority over financial matters, *zachin* requires an assessment of whether the action is unequivocally beneficial to the individual. While typically, *zachin* is not employed for real estate transactions due to the uncertainty of whether the individual would have agreed, in this case, where the prohibition of owning chametz is absolute, it is reasonable to assume that any person would prefer to sell rather than see their chametz become worthless, a consequence of owning chametz on Pesach. Thus, *zachin* may provide the necessary halachic framework to allow a guardian to sell chametz on behalf of a *shoteh*.

The challenge, of course, lies in how we

can empower a guardian in halacha. The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that in principle, the responsibility falls to Beis Din to ensure the appointment of a guardian when one has not been designated by the deceased prior to their passing.[3] Even though we no longer have the formal communal institutions of old to manage such appointments, many poskim suggest that in the absence of a formally designated guardian, the person who assumes financial responsibility for the individual effectively becomes the halachically empowered guardian.[4] This framework is critical in the case of a person suffering from dementia, where often no formal appointment has been made, and instead, responsibilities are gradually distributed among family members.

Yet, even with a halachically valid mechanism for selling the chametz of a *shoteh*, the emotional burden remains significant. Parents experiencing dementia are often aware of their diminishing independence and may resist the changes happening to them. The *Aruch HaShulchan*, in discussing the requirement to appoint a guardian for a *shoteh* as one would for an orphan, makes an important distinction: he notes that there is an even greater obligation to appoint a guardian for a *shoteh* than for an orphan.[5] The unique challenge of an independent adult gradually losing control over their own life is profound, and the responsibility we bear to ease both their practical and emotional burdens is equally significant.

With this in mind, it is appropriate for the primary caregiver to take on the role of arranging the necessary steps for selling the chametz on behalf of a parent with dementia. If the caregiver also manages the parent's financial affairs, he or she is well-positioned to act with decisive authority. Yet, beyond the halachic necessity, selling the chametz in this way presents an opportunity to demonstrate love and respect for those we hold dear. Even when difficult or seemingly unnecessary, involving the parent—whether by bringing them to visit the Rav or simply allowing them to symbolically take part in the sale—preserves their dignity and affirms their continued place within the mitzvos of Pesach. As we prepare for Yom Tov, Pesach reminds us that we do not leave anyone behind. In that spirit, we must ensure that everyone, regardless of ability, remains part of the journey.

Pesach is not just a time of meticulous preparation—it is a time of deep reflection and connection. It is about the conversations we have around our tables, the Torah passed from generation to generation,

The Haggadah compels us to look at our own families and ask: **Who among us feels trapped, overlooked, or disconnected? How can we be more compassionate and more attuned to the needs of those who may struggle to participate?**

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and the commitment we renew each year to bring the richness of Torah into our lives. When we care for our parents, ensuring they continue to be part of this cherished experience even as their roles change, we fulfill one of the most profound mitzvos of all.

The Haggadah calls on us to see ourselves as if we, personally, had left Mitzrayim. This charge is not merely historical—it is personal. It compels us to look at our own families and ask: Who among us feels trapped, overlooked, or disconnected? How can we be more compassionate and more attuned to the needs of those who may struggle to participate?

May we merit a Pesach of true redemption—one in which we not only remove the chametz from our homes but also remove the barriers that prevent those we love from participating. May we bring each other closer, in spirit and in practice, and may we be zocheh to celebrate together in unity, with respect, love, and unyielding devotion to the values that define our people.

Endnotes

1. While the manner in which we assess whether a person meets the threshold for *shoteh* in halacha is certainly complex, we will assume for the purposes of this article that moderate to severe dementia symptoms would qualify for a *shoteh* designation.
2. See *Ketzos HaChoshen* 243:8, regarding the application of *zachin* to the sale of chametz.
3. *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 280:1-2. See also *Erech Lechem* there.
4. See *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* 4:13 and *Responsa Minchas Asher* 3:124. While Rav Asher Weiss rejects the framework of *zachin* to explain guardianship in totality, that may be due to its weakness as an exclusive framework to deal with non-financial scenarios.

5. *Aruch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat* 235.

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Empathy:
Sharing in the
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Empathy & Humility

The Heart of Human Connection

Dr. Yael Muskat
Dean of Mental Health and Wellness, Director of Counseling Center YU

In a world that feels fractured and in need of healing, there is a gnawing question that can unnerve educators, therapists, and clergy as they work towards providing comfort. Can meaningful support and guidance truly make a difference? At a time when artificial intelligence can answer complex questions, analyze emotions, and even diagnose mental health conditions (Elyoseph, 2023), what, if anything, sets human therapists, educators, and friends apart?

As we honor Dr. David Pelcovitz—a psychologist and educator who has profoundly impacted thousands of lives—the answer becomes clear. One person, one interaction at a time, can change the world. Dr. Pelcovitz has exemplified the power of human connection, providing healing, comfort, and guidance in ways that transcend data and algorithms. This article will delve into one characteristic which is at the heart of human connection and is an inherent part of the Jewish character: empathy.

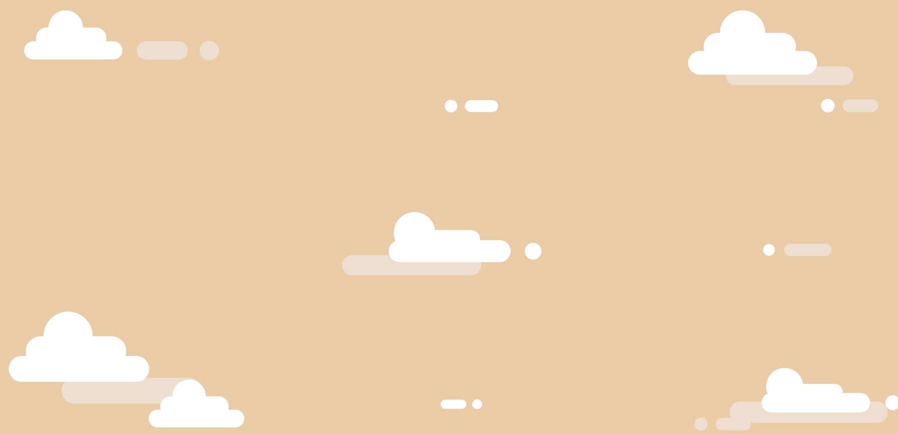
The Power of Empathy in Therapy

A brief interaction with AI reveals its limitations and sheds light on the human dimension at the center of healing. Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of the therapist-client alliance is a key predictor of positive treatment outcomes (Wampold & Imel, 2015). While AI employs pattern recognition and language modeling to generate responses, it does not truly *understand* emotions, nor can it *relate* to human experience (Norcross & Lambert, 2019).

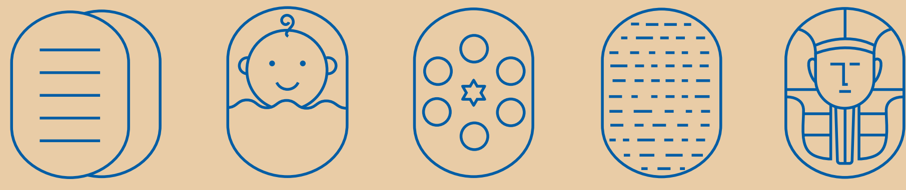
At the heart of the therapeutic alliance is empathy. The American Psychological Association defines empathy as "the ability to understand and share another person's feelings and experiences" (APA, 2022). Similarly, psychologist Daniel Batson describes it as, "a psychological state in which one perceives another's situation and experiences emotions congruent with the other's emotional state" (Batson, 2011).

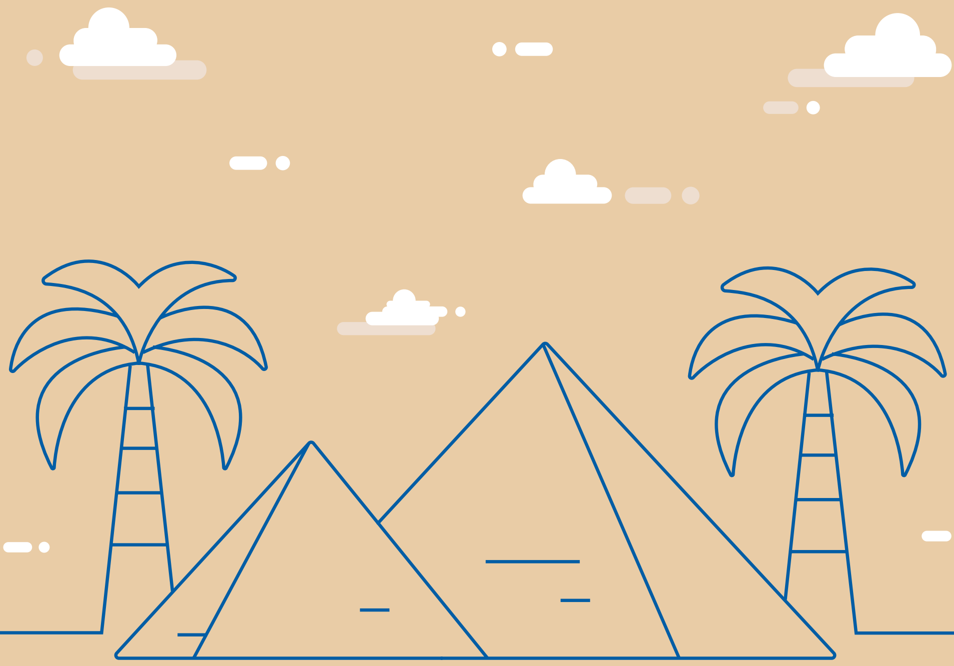
Therapists who actively listen and respond with attuned empathy create a safe space for clients to explore their emotions. However, research shows that empathy alone is not enough—its effectiveness depends on how it is applied. Simply identifying a client's feelings (empathic accuracy) does not necessarily lead to growth. Instead, therapists who pair empathy with an exploratory approach—expressing curiosity, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging deeper reflection—help clients process emotions more effectively (Elliott et al., 2018).

Empathy must be purposeful and specific to the relationship. Furthermore, while certain behaviors—such as interrupting frequently, avoiding eye contact, or dismissing



EL AL wishes you a holiday filled with renewal, hope, and freedom.





client feedback—are clearly not empathic, there is no single set of behaviors that universally defines empathy. The perception of empathy is highly individualized; some clients prefer warm, emotionally expressive therapists, while others respond better to a more business-like approach. What truly matters is that clients feel understood and accepted, and that their therapist is making a genuine effort to connect with them on their wavelength.

Empathy Beyond Therapy: Strengthening All Relationships

The principles of empathy extend to all human relationships. In friendships, family dynamics, and professional interactions, empathy fosters trust and strengthens connections. Research has shown that empathy is a key predictor of relationship satisfaction, reducing conflict and increasing emotional intimacy (Davis, 2015). People feel comfortable being vulnerable with those who "get it"—those who strive to see things from their perspective with genuine care rather than judgment.

The Holiday of Passover: A Celebration of Empathy

Empathy is undeniably essential for strong relationships and effective therapy, but does Judaism offer a distinct perspective or connection to this fundamental trait? The holiday of Passover provides a profound answer. More than just a historical account of liberation, the Exodus narrative is the Jewish nation's birth story. As the weary, long-suffering Jewish people emerged from the shackles of slavery, empathy became woven into their very identity. The Passover story illuminates the role of empathy in the Jewish ethos in two ways: it teaches us the responsibility to show empathy toward others and reveals the boundless compassion that G-d extends to His people.

The Story of Passover: Pathway to Emotional Empathy

EMPATHY TOWARDS OTHERS

The Passover narrative emphasizes that shared suffering fosters empathy for the marginalized. From the very beginning, G-d embedded this sense of compassion into the Jewish DNA. Rabbi Jonathan Saks points out that having experienced the dehumanizing effects of slavery in Egypt, the Jewish people were inherently sensitive to this pain. The Torah builds on this empathy and repeatedly commands us, "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). In fact, Nechama Lebovitz points out that this directive is mentioned 36 times, more than any other in the Torah. History has proven that the Jewish people have taken this message to heart. Jewish individuals have been disproportionately involved in social justice movements, from leading labor rights efforts to playing key roles in the Civil Rights Movement and refugee advocacy. Empathy is the Jewish legacy and even in freedom, the memory of their own suffering serves as a constant reminder to treat others with understanding and care (Sacks, 2013).

G-D'S EMPATHY TOWARDS US

Just as G-d instilled deep empathy for others in the Jewish soul, He also planted within them the unwavering belief that He cares for them and loves them. G-d's use of empathy to build the relationship with Bnei Yisrael is illustrated for the first time in His encounter with Moshe at the burning bush. Rather than manifesting in an overwhelming display of might, Hashem chose a lowly, burning bush to convey, as Rashi explains (Shemot 3:2), "*Anochi Imo Batzara*"—"I am with them in their suffering." At this pivotal moment, Hashem sent a profound message: He not only hears His people's cries but feels their pain.

Another example is seen in that the Torah uses many words to B'nei Yisrael's suffering: "The children of Israel groaned because of their labor, and they cried out, and their cry for help rose up to G-d from their labor. G-d heard their groaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. G-d saw the children of Israel, and G-d knew" (Exodus 2:23-25). The detailed language—sighing (וַיֵּאָנְחוּ), crying out (וַיִּזְעָקוּ), and a cry for help (שַׁוְעָתָם)—serve as a reminder that every nuance of despair, fear, and exhaustion was acknowledged by a compassionate God who was deeply invested in their welfare, even when they weren't aware of it.

These two pillars of emotional empathy—feeling compassion for others and recognizing Hashem's compassion toward us so that we can emulate it—form a powerful, uniquely Jewish foundation for becoming an empathic person.

Humility: The Pathway to Cognitive Empathy

The empathy discussed until now was emotional empathy, which is achieved by having a shared experience and feeling another's person's pain. However, true empathy is not limited to situations where we have shared another's experience. In many cases, empathy requires something even more challenging: the ability to understand perspectives vastly different from our

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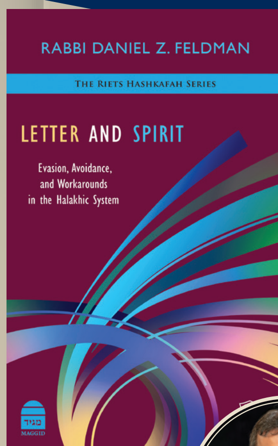

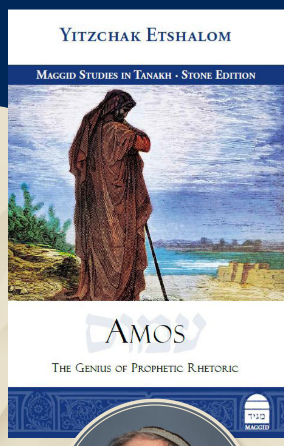

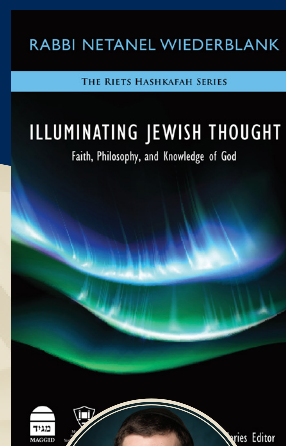

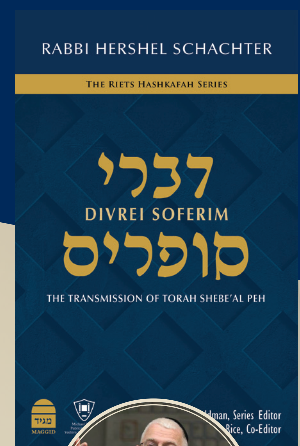

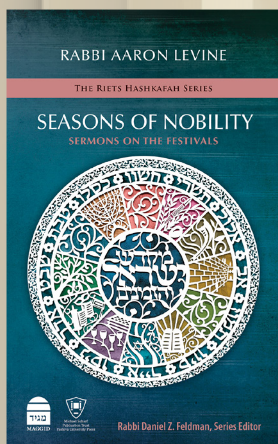

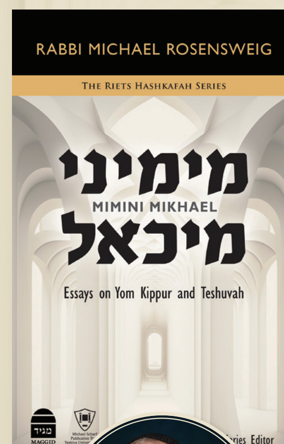

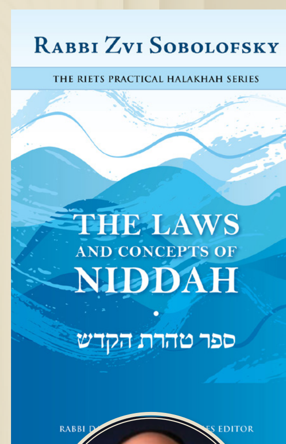

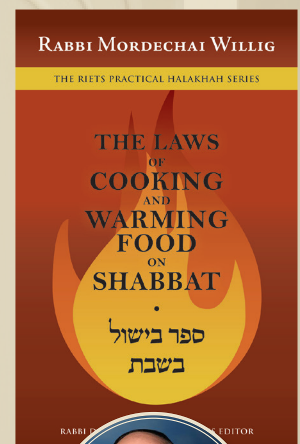

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own. This form of empathy, known as cognitive empathy, involves stepping outside of ourselves to grasp another person's reality.

While no single trait guarantees the development of cognitive empathy, one characteristic stands out—humility. Research indicates a strong correlation between humility, empathy, and emotional intelligence (Davis et al., 2011). Humble individuals are more open to different perspectives, better at regulating their emotions, and more likely to engage in understanding and reconciliation.

Hashem Himself models this humility as a pathway to empathy. His decision to reveal Himself through a simple, unassuming burning bush is a striking demonstration of divine humility. Despite His infinite power, Hashem chose to lower Himself to the level of His suffering people, showing that even the most exalted being can be accessible and compassionate. The Maharal of Prague (*Gevuros Hashem*, Ch. 23) reinforces this idea, explaining that Hashem's true greatness is found in His care for the small and weak—a theme central to the message of Passover.

This concept is further echoed in *Masechet Megillah* 31a, where Rav Yochanan states, "In every place that you see the greatness of G-d, you also see His humility." The Torah itself reflects this balance: in Devarim 10:17, Hashem is described as "the God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God." Yet immediately afterward, in Devarim 10:18, the verse shifts to emphasize His justice and care for orphans, widows, and strangers. This juxtaposition underscores a profound truth—true greatness is inseparable from humility and empathy.

In sum, empathy is not only at the heart of successful therapy and meaningful relationships, but also the foundation of Jewish identity. Paradoxically, Hashem subjected His people to the hardship of slavery to instill in them a profound and enduring compassion—one that would drive them to care for the most vulnerable members of society. The Jewish people are thus tasked with infusing their interactions with empathy, ensuring that their legacy of understanding, care, and humility endures through every generation. The story of Passover teaches that true liberation comes not only from physical freedom but from the ability to care for and understand one another. Just as Hashem demonstrated empathy for His people, so too are we called upon to infuse our interactions with genuine understanding and humility.

The Legacy of Dr. Pelcovitz: A Life of Empathy & Humility

This message of empathy and humility pays tribute to the profound legacy of Dr. Pelcovitz. For over three decades, I have been blessed to have Dr. Pelcovitz as a mentor, professor, and source of support and inspiration, offering invaluable guidance whenever needed. He has mentored and guided countless therapists, clergy, and educators, all of whom deeply respect his extensive knowledge and clinical expertise. He is renowned for his rare ability to connect with individuals from all walks of life, and he does so because of his genuine humility. He approaches every interaction with curiosity, never assuming superiority, always welcoming others' perspectives. As such, Dr. Pelcovitz skillfully uses meaningful stories as a core teaching method, always learning from the diverse individuals he encounters. His commitment to understanding and caring for others has inspired the therapists at the Yeshiva University Counseling Center and professionals worldwide.

Additionally, Dr. Pelcovitz has long championed the cause of the vulnerable, particularly in his pioneering work on domestic violence and trauma management. He has been teaching about the protection of victims for over three decades, long before the widespread understanding of abuse and neglect. Dr. Pelcovitz has internalized and embodied the lessons of Passover, living out a legacy of empathy and humility that continues to inspire and transform lives.

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Empathy: Sharing in the Suffering of Others

Attaining Freedom through Empathy

Rabbi Ezra Schwartz
Rosh Yeshiva and Harry Rabin Professor of Talmud and Jewish Law
Associate Director of the Semikha Program, RIETS

Primo Levi, the renowned chronicler of the Holocaust, writes in *Survival in Auschwitz* about the "Law of the Lager"—the brutal survival code that governed life in the Nazi concentration camps: "Eat your own bread and, if you can, that of your neighbor."

Levi was saved by a man, Lorenzo, who defied the Law of the Lager and shared his daily ration of bread with him. However, it was not the nourishment Lorenzo provided that truly saved Levi. In his words, "it is due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving."

For Levi, Auschwitz was not only a place of murder, torture and annihilation, it was also a place where people were stripped of their dignity and basic humanity, where they were deprived of the basic human quality of helping others. Our most basic humanity is compromised by our inability to have compassion for and care for others. If we don't see and understand someone else's need, even if we are faced with unbearable misfortune and have the most legitimate reasons why we can't be empathic, nonetheless our lack of empathy and our consequent inability to perform kindness to others compromises us as people. The slave, whether in Auschwitz or Mitzraim, who is incapable of chesed, is debased and deprived of his humanity.

This may be a core lesson of Pesach. Freedom is not attained when the shackles of slavery are broken. Freedom comes when we regain our human capacity for kindness. As slaves, we were not able to demonstrate kindness and compassion. In an insightful comment in the *Sefer Kol Eliyahu*, widely attributed to the Vilna Gaon, psukim are interpreted that the Jewish people did not initially borrow vessels from the Egyptians. First the Torah says *v'yishalu ish me'es re'euhu*, they borrowed from their fellow Jews (*re'ehu* is used by Chazal in the specific sense of referring to Jews). The reason we had to first borrow vessels from our fellow Jew was to acclimate ourselves to chesed, to lending our things to others, something that we were unable to do while slaves.

This may be the reason why we begin the Seder with Ha Lachma Anya. We are not actually inviting guests in; had that been our objective it would have been done long before we sit down at the Seder. Rather, we are articulating our capacity for kindness. Yes, we ate

this bread in Egypt, when we were slaves. However, now we are free, and we can help others. When we extend invitations for others to join us, we proclaim that freedom.

The centrality of empathy and chesed to Pesach can be seen in so many ways. The very fact that we call the holiday Pesach rather than Chag HaMatzos, the term the Torah uses for the seven-day festival, dovetails with the theme of chesed. Onkelos (Shemos 12:23) translates Pesach not as "pass over," but as *viyechos*, the Ribono Shel Olam showed compassion. We use the name Pesach to demonstrate the importance of chesed, which lies at the heart of the Pesach experience.

The *Tur* (417) comments that the three yomim tovim correspond to the three Avos. Pesach corresponds to Avraham, Shavuos to Yitzchak and Sukkos to Yakov Avinu. While the connection between Pesach and Avraham Avinu is often highlighted to emphasize the theme of *emunah*—as Pesach is the festival of *va'ya'aminu Bashem*—it also conveys another important lesson. Avraham Avinu is the paragon of chesed. It was Avraham who epitomized *hachanasas orchim*. On Pesach, we reenact the chesed of Avraham by engaging in *hachnasas orchim*. There is an opinion that Avraham Avinu was circumcised on the 13th of Nissan. This would make the 15th of Nissan the third day after his bris, the day he greeted his angelic visitors. It is only fitting, therefore, that we invite guests to reenact the *hachnasas orchim* demonstrated by Avraham on the 15th of Nissan. (See *Mizrachi*, Bereishis 18:1 cited by Rav Eliakim Dvorkes, *Nesivei Haminhagim*, Nissan page 194.)

Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 429) teaches that there is a special mitzva of *maos chitim* in preparation for Pesach. As Rav Bezalel Zolty notes (*Mishnas Yaavetz* #7), this mitzva is not merely a form of tzedakah; it is not included in *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah* alongside the halachos of tzedakah. It is a halacha specific to Pesach. Unlike ordinary tzedakah, in which the obligation is to provide the *ani* the wherewithal to perform a mitzva, *maos chitim* provides the *ani* the form of matza he desires. Should he desire shmura matza beyond the minimal halachic requirement, *maos chitim* will provide it. The lesson of *maos chitim* is unusually empathic. Don't give the poor man matza; that would potentially demean him and the bread could possibly be termed *nahama d'kisufa* (bread of embarrassment). Instead, we give the poor man wheat, which he bakes into bread. The lesson may be to enable the poor man to bake his own matza which the *Rosh* (cited in *Shulchan Aruch* 460:2) understands to be a special mitzva. However, more fundamentally, when the poor man is himself a part of the process of baking, he does not feel degraded and impoverished. *Maos chitim* gives wheat, not matza, to protect the dignity of the poor person.

Rav Velvel Soloveitchik (*Chidushei Maran Riz Halevi, Chametz U'matza* 7:7) explains that according to the Rambam, beyond the well-known commandments of Pesach—eating matza and marror, drinking four cups of wine, and recounting the story in the Haggadah—there is an additional mitzvah: to actively experience freedom.

Maos chitim provides the poor man the opportunity to sit at the Seder *derech cheirus*, like a genuinely free person. Had the mitzva been to hand the poor person matza, he or she would only fulfill the mitzva of matza. *Maos chitim* enables the poor man to fulfill the Torah commandment of *derech cheirus* as well.

The lesson that chesed lies at the core of Pesach can be seen from a comment of *Tanna D'vei Eliahu* (chapter 23, 21 in *Ish Shalom* edition). In addition to the widely known merits for the Jewish people leaving Egypt—maintaining their Hebrew language and continuing to perform the mitzva of mila— there is another merit that was responsible for them to leave Egypt: they came together and formed a collective commitment to perform chesed, acts of kindness, to each other:

שנתקבצו וישבו עד שהיו כולם באגודה אחת,
וכרתו ברית שיעשו גמילות חסדים זה עם זה,
וישמרו מילה בבשרם, ברית אברהם יצחק
ויעקב, ושלא יניחו לשון יעקב אביהם וילכו
וילמדו לשון מצרים מפני עבודה זרה.

They gathered and sat together until they were all in one group, and they made a covenant to do acts of loving-kindness with each other, and to preserve the circumcision in their flesh, the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that they would not abandon the language of Jacob their father, and go and learn the language of Egypt as a result of idolatry.

This midrash underscores the major role chesed plays in Yitzias Mitzraim.

Dr. David Pelcovitz taught me, and so many others, the importance of empathy, the ability to deeply understand another person, which is essential to performing chesed, one of the foundational mitzvos of Klal Yisrael.

See more shiurim & articles from Rabbi Schwartz at www.yutorah.org/teachers/Rabbi-Ezra-Schwartz

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