

## **Bringing Your Sadness to God** **By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis**

A certain rabbi immersed himself in sacred texts and prayers all his life. This unworldly man had an uncanny ability to understand all who sought his counsel. Sinners, drunkards, gamblers, adulterers, people with anxieties, fear's, and depressions all came to see him. After meeting with the rabbi, each one left pleased.

The rabbi's disciples asked how the rabbi could understand the problems of these troubled Men and women who came from the darker places of life.

The rabbi explained, "When they come, I listen to them. I look deep into their eyes and discover that their weaknesses are reflections of my own. It is not that I have done what they have done, but I sense within me their lusts, desires, weaknesses, and temptations. I find myself in them."

The rabbi continued, "Once there was a man who came to me with confessions of his transgressions. Though I listened attentively, I could find nothing whatsoever that I had in common with him. Then I knew the truth. I must be hiding something within myself of which I was not fully conscious."

We are not so different from one another. We are born from common soil, taken from the same dust of the earth and informed by the same *tzelem*, the same image of God within each of us. We may be different in stature, in status, in financial power. But all of us share a common emotional life that includes fears of rejection and abandonment, itches of jealousy, nagging self-doubts, and depressions that lay us low. And one of our most common emotions is sadness.

### **We All Feel Sad Sometimes**

Sometimes I feel negative but I cannot figure out its source. The negativity descends like a fog and covers everything, entering into every crevice and corner of my life. I find nothing to smile about. The world is shrouded in darkness and I find myself in a foul mood. I try to busy myself, but my busyness is joyless. I try to be involved with life, but I resist activity.

### **Sadness Is One Thing...**

**But depression is another. Depression is a clinical illness, an illness for which you need to seek professional medical help.**

**Warning signs of depression may include a loss of interest in activities you previously enjoyed; an increase or decrease in appetite; a change in sleeping patterns; difficulty in concentrating; or a sustained feeling of depression that is interfering with your daily activities.**

**If you think you may be suffering from depression, you should contact a mental health or medical professional for help.**

I am immobilized. I sit before a page of print and read it over and over without comprehension or joy.

My darkness reminds me of the wisdom of the rabbis who said, "The *Shechinah* [God's presence] does not dwell in sadness or in indolence." The rabbis associated sadness with laziness, melancholy, and immobility. When I am despondent, I feel helpless, hopeless, paralyzed. When I feel this way, I sometimes leaf through the prayer book to find a compatible soul. This reminds me that I am not the only one who has experienced melancholy.

## **We Find Company in the Words of the Prayer Book**

Opening the prayer book, I come upon a familiar morning prayer written in the plural "we," but I now read it as if it were written in the singular "I."

*"What am I, what is my life, what is my goodness, what is my righteousness, what is my help, what is my strength, what is my might? What can I say before the Lord my God, God of my fathers? Are not the mightiest as naught before Thee? And men of renown as though they were not wise, wise men as if they were not with knowledge, and men of understanding as though they were lacking in discernment. For in Your eyes the multitude of their works are emptiness and the days of their lives are vanity. The preeminence of man over beast would be naught and the days of their lives are a vanity."*

In this prayer, a soulmate expresses my despondency, and once again I know that I am not alone.

This person understands. Eagerly I read on:

*"Were it not that I am of the people, a child of the covenant, descendant of Abraham, my beloved to whom at Moriah Thou gave his promise, seed of Isaac his only son who was bound upon the altar, the congregation of Jacob Thy first born whom Thou named Israel and Jeshuran out of Thy love for him and Thy delight in him. It is therefore my duty to give thanks unto Thee and extol Thee, to bless and hallow Thy name in offering the praise of thanksgiving. Happy am I. How goodly is my portion, how pleasant my lot, how beautiful my heritage. Happy am I who prays morning and evening declaring twice every day, 'Hear O Israel the Lord my God, the Lord is One.'"*

## **Judaism Affirms the Power of Hope and Optimism**

Our tradition is deeply committed to life and to joy. While it does not deny sadness, it has a response to it.

This vital tradition affirms life and raises hope in me.

The above prayer reveals a profound optimism in Judaism. I understand its mood better when I contrast it with other traditions. Many Eastern religions accept *dukkhah* as the principal noble truth about life. *Dukkahhah* means "suffering" in the Pali language. Birth is attended with *dukkhah*; decay is *dukkhah*; disease is *dukkhah*; dying is *dukkhah*; death is

## "Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God."

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

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*dukkha*. In Judaism, there is also *dukkha*. We call it *tzarot*, which literally means “narrowness” or “tightness,” but also means “troubles.” Though we have troubles in this world, we also have *simchah*, or happiness. Though there is sickness, there is also health. Though there is sadness, there is also joy. Though we know fear, we also know courage.

I turn to Psalm 27, a psalm that is read throughout the High Holy Day period: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evil drew near to destroy me, even my enemies and my foes they stumbled and fell. I have faith that I shall yet see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Hope in the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Yea, hope in the Lord.”

### Talking with God through Prayer Can Help Us in Our Sadness

How is this light of God revealed? God is found in life and in serious conversation. To find God, we must enter into a dialogue with our *tzelem*, the image of God that lodges within us and contains the potential for wisdom, sanity, morality, and healing. This dialogue with the *tzelem*, with the God within, is called “prayer” (in Hebrew, it is called *tefillah*). Prayer can be an internal debate. It sometimes feels as if we are wrestling with ourselves.

It is important to confront the self I have ignored while I have been occupied with the pettiness of existence, with the grasping of mindless pursuits. My *tzelem* asks, “What is it that bothers you? Why are you so sad?” I answer, “Because everything conspires against me. I am filled with apprehension and anxiety. I am overwhelmed by deadlines I must meet, by appointments to be made, by an article that was rejected, by a quarrel with a friend, and a harsh word with my beloved.”

The *tzelem* answers, “Notice the way you think. Notice how your negativity has an uncanny way of attracting bad news. You have become a magnet that attracts only negative filings and negative feelings. Observe how fear attracts fear, anxiety attracts anxiety, worry attracts worry”

The voice of the *tzelem* is penetrating. I have painted myself into a narrow corner. I am in narrow straits, in *tzarot*. I feel that there is no exit. The *tzelem* points the way out.

### Tease Apart the Strands of Your Sadness

How can I break the grip of this relentless self-accusation and relieve myself of this heavy weight? The *tzelem* counsels, “Separate the threads that have been so entangled and knotted that they seem unbreakable.” The *tzelem* proffers a line from the prophet Isaiah: “Precept by precept, precept by precept, line by line, line by line, here a little, there a little.” This mantra of wisdom calms my fear. I do not have to do everything at once. The *tzelem* urges me to remember, “This is not your first anxiety. Remember what happened to you before. You overcame that yesterday and before that as well.”

The *tzelem* understands my compulsions to stamp labels on myself: “I am lazy. I am slow I am friendless. I am foolish. I am impulsive. I am a failure. I always mess up.” The *tzelem* points out how in negativity I am drawn to totalitarian words like “always” or “never” or “everyone” or “no one.”

## **Cultivate Perspective, Faith, and a Positive Attitude**

The *tzelem* counsels me, “Remember the Exodus. Do not say that you have never enjoyed freedom and liberation and hope. Remember the journey of your people from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, from darkness to light, from bondage to redemption. There is an attitude toward life that informs the way a life is lived. It is not an accident that the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis concludes that “God saw everything that He had made and it was very good.” The Chafetz Chayim (a nineteenth-century rabbi and writer on ethics) commented, “Despair not. It is darkest before the dawn. Before light was created, all was darkness on the face of the deep.”

You need faith, a way to believe that you have the will and the way to achieve your goal. This does not

### **Untie**

**Dear God,**

**We are bound with very tight knots.**

**They choke off air and stop the blood from pulsating freely.**

**The knots make us like computers with carefully controlled circuitry.**

**The knots in our brains tie our creativity—our link with You.**

**We follow the knot around in its intricacy—but it remains a knot.**

**The knots in our hearts keep us from crying and dancing when we long to—**

**They tie us to the posts of the fences that separate us from each other.**

**The knots in our muscles keep our teeth clenched, our jaws locked, our legs crossed, our shoulders stooped, our backs bent, our chests from inhaling and exhaling the full sweetness of life's breath.**

**O, God, untie all our knots!**

**-RABBI SHEILA PELTZ WEINBERG,  
KOL HANESHAMA FOR SHABBAT VEHAGIM**

mean that you have a Pollyanna faith that foolishly believes that the housefly is looking for a way to get out, but a faith rooted in trust. Psychologist Erik Erikson put it succinctly: “Hope is the favorable ratio of basic trust over distrust.” Trust is a basic attitude toward life.

Sometimes I enter a room where people I have not met before are waiting for me to deliver an address. It is my attitude that is determining. Either I enter the room feeling that these people will not like me or enter the room feeling that these people are like myself and have a capacity for understanding, for sympathy.

Trust in myself and in others is an essential orientation to life. I come from a tradition whose basic attitude is informed by hope. I have met people whose sour attitude is summed up in the phrase, "Tomorrow will be worse." That attitude has nothing to do with reality. There are people who, no matter what good news comes their way, cannot rejoice. They cannot wait till tomorrow to dispel their good fortune.

## **Thought, Action, and Prayer Can Lead You through Your Sadness**

There are things that can be done to overcome despondency. Some of it is done by correcting thoughts that are untrue or misleading. Some of it is done by doing something that will release you from the paralysis of heavy emotions. This may be as simple as leaving home and walking in the woods or coming to the synagogue and meeting with people. You might listen to others and learn that you are not alone in your struggles. The silent meditative prayer is an especially good opportunity to wrestle with an emotion that has gotten out of hand. It is helpful to identify and properly label our difficult emotions so that we may act with wisdom and with moral purpose.

There is a Hebrew term in the Bible for prayer that is used when referring to Isaac's prayer. The Talmud suggests that the root of that word for prayer is *atar*, which means "pitchfork." It is called this because a pitchfork is used to toss a bale of hay, to move it, to transform it. "Pitchfork prayer" is an instrument of change and transformation. And prayer properly understood and used can enable change, especially the power to change negative moods and emotions and feelings that can overwhelm us.

And if the sadness persists, if it clings to me, if it interferes with my work and love, I am counseled by my *tzelem* to seek out help from others. The sages in the Talmud stated it clearly: "It is prohibited to live in a city in which there is no physician." God is within me and between us, one *tzelem* seeking another.

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**PHOTO:** Four species of rose are native to Israel. Photo © by Palphot Ltd.

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