


Mishpateem

G-d, Power, Hope, Suffering, and Life

ne of the questions that is always asked by people who read the Jewish prayer book for the first time in English is: Why are there so many prayers reminding us about how powerful G-d is? We constantly talk about G-d Who is great, mighty, and awesome, Who is the most high, Who bestows loving kindness, Who is the master of all things, Who remembers the kindness of the forefathers, etc. Why are we constantly pointing out G-d's greatness and omnipotence? After all, what is G-d, an egomaniac that we have to constantly tell Him how great He is? I thought that we are supposed to emulate G-d's qualities and certainly humility is one of G-d's prime qualities.

Perhaps we can understand this better, why we stress G-d's omnipotence and greatness, if we realize that in our prayers we also stress that G-d is our support and our help and our shield, the One Who is going to bring redemption to the world. We must believe that G-d has power; otherwise, we cannot have faith in Him and in the future. This is similar in a way to our relationship to our doctor. Parenthetically, G-d's power is partially described in our prayers as that of a doctor who cures the sick. As we say in the Amida, "G-d supports all who fall, He heals the sick, He sets the captives free, and He keeps His faith with those who sleep in the dust." We all know that when we go to the doctor, we go to him because we feel that he has power. We feel that he can cure us, that he can, because of his knowledge and expertise, bring healing to our afflictions. We also know that he will most times make us much sicker before he makes us better. Therefore, even though he will sometimes have us take bitter medicine and at other times have us endure operations, we will still listen to him because we have faith that, if we listen to him, we will not only regain our health, but that we will be in much better shape after we have listened to him than we were before. We all know that if we will undergo an operation, we will endure considerable pain, not only from being cut upon and from having all sorts of tubes thrust into us, but also because we will not understand why all these painful procedures were necessary. We also have faith though that after we will have had the operation, our health will be much better. We have faith in our doctor's power to cure us.

This is similar in many ways to the same type of faith that we place in G-d. We know that many times life is going to hurt us and bruise us. We know that many times things are going to get much worse before they get better, but we have faith that if we listen to G-d, meaning that if we live a moral and decent life, ultimately things are going to be much better. This, of course, is the basis of all Jewish faith, that G-d knows many things that we do not know and that, although we believe that we share a common morality with G-d, many times we cannot understand His ways. We do not understand why He had to create pain and suffering and death. If He is so omnipotent, why couldn't He have created a world without any of these things? We have real questions concerning G-d, why He had to create the kind of world that He has created. Judaism does not ask us to lie and deny our questions. We do not have any good answers to why G-d has created this kind of world. We have faith that at the end of days, we will understand but now we do not understand. Just as when we go to a doctor and have him prescribe for us certain exercises and physical therapies which cause us a certain amount of pain which we do not, in most instances, understand, so, too, with G-d. We do not understand why He has prescribed for us what He has in this life.

One of the major reasons why traditional Judaism cannot accept Harold Kushner's popular concept of why bad things happen to good people is because he lets G-d off this hook. He says that G-d created the world and He cannot stop the forces He put in motion. G-d cannot do anything to prevent the evils of the world from happening. All He can do is give us the strength to wrestle with the problems ourselves, but He cannot interfere with the natural forces He, Himself, set in motion. This idea lets G-d off the hook and we do not want to let G-d off the hook. We want G-d to explain to us, at least at the end of days, why the world has to be the way it is. We believe that at that time He will give us an answer. That's why we say in our prayers that He will keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. It is only fair that He will bring back to life all those who helped Him perfect this world so that at the end of days they shall be able to see that all their sacrifices were not for nothing. They should know that their suffering has not been in vain, that it has served a purpose. Levi Yitzchoch of Berdishev challenged G-d in his famous "A Din Torah Mit G-T," the bring-

ing of G-d before a Jewish court to justify His ways. Of course, Levi Yitzchoch of Berdishev backed off at the last moment knowing full well that right now G-d cannot be brought before a Jewish court. G-d will not justify His ways to us now, but immediately Levi Yitzchoch of Berdishev reaffirms our faith that G-d will justify His ways to us at the end of days by launching into the *Kaddish*, which asserts that G-d will, when His kingdom comes, allow us to see the justice of His ways.

When the Jewish people were suffering in Egypt, they had faith that G-d would ultimately redeem him. However, when Moshe first came, their lot got much worse. They were not given straw. The rabbis also explain that they were also not even allowed to gather together anymore for spiritual comfort and to raise each other's spirits. They and Moshe grew greatly discouraged, but G-d assured Moshe and the Jewish people that He knew what He was doing. He assured them that just as when a person goes to a doctor and he is told to undergo an operation which will actually increase his pain, he still has faith in his doctor because he knows that ultimately he will be better off. G-d told Moshe that He was appearing to him with the name "*Hashem*", which means "with that aspect of G-d which wants to have a personal relationship with us." This is the name for G-d, Hashem, which is used in the second creation story in the *Book of Bersishis* which speaks about G-d as G-d the relater, which speaks about G-d as wanting us to be His junior partner in creation. The people then were comforted because they knew that their suffering was not random suffering, that their suffering was serving some purpose. As Levi Yitzchoch of Berdishev said, "G-d, I do not ask You to explain to us why we are suffering. I only ask You to assure us that we are suffering for Thee."

This same thought is stressed in the *Torah* portion *Mishpatim* where we learn, first of all, that we should not wrong the stranger or afflict the widow or orphan and that if we do afflict the widow and the orphan, G-d's anger will wax hot and He will make our wives and children, widows and orphans. The poor and the oppressed have a powerful patron. Ordinary people may think that the orphan and widow are powerless and that you can do with them what you want, but G-d informs us that this is not so because G-d is powerful, and because G-d is their patron: if you touch them, you will be harmed. G-d does not need any partners in creating pain

and suffering on this earth. He wants us to be His partners only in life and in enhancing life, in alleviating pain and suffering and in spreading kindness and compassion. That's why, if you gouge the poor and do not return your neighbor's garment (Which he gave you as pledge for a loan) at night so he could have a covering when he sleeps, G-d will listen to his cries and you will be punished. G-d is more powerful than the mightiest oppressor or tyrant, and it is more important to listen to Him than to listen to any oppressor or tyrant.

This same idea is expressed at the end of the *Torah* portion when Moshe, Aaron, Nadav, and Avihu and the 70 elders of Israel went up Mount Sinai before Moshe received the *Torah* and they saw the G-d of Israel and under His feet was a pavement of sapphire stone which was like the very heaven for purity. The rabbis explain that this brickwork stood for the bricks of the slavery of Egypt. It stood for those who lost their lives making those bricks. It was a mystical vision of purity. The suffering of the people in Egypt had not been in vain, but somehow their suffering had contributed to the purity of heaven, itself. The rabbis say that Nadav and Avihu misconstrued what they saw and that after they saw this, they became hard-hearted and believed that not only was suffering sometimes necessary to fulfill G-d's plan, but that sometimes human beings also had to inflict suffering so that G-d's plan could be realized. The rabbis explain that because of this belief Nadav and Avihu were later struck down at the dedication of the Tabernacle because they had brought strange fire into the Tabernacle. The rabbis explain that this strange fire was their belief that we human beings can cause the death of millions of other human beings if it will bring in a better era, if it will usher in utopian times. That is what Stalin believed and this is what Hitler believed, killing Jews will perfect the world. We do not believe that. We believe that G-d's power and omnipotence far transcends our own. The death and the pain and the suffering that we see about us are real and we cannot explain them. We do not know why G-d has created death, pain, and suffering and why He allows them to continue. We know that at the end of days, G-d will explain it to us and allow us to understand why in human terms but today we cannot understand them. Today we are only a partner with G-d in life and in enhancing life. We can never be a partner with G-d in death. His power and understanding

far surpass ours. All we know is that we cannot bring redemption by causing suffering. Anybody who does not believe this should see the movie "*Schindler's List*." When man tries to be a partner with G-d in death, all he does is bring destruction, cynicism, and hopelessness to the world.

Yes, we must laud G-d and tell Him that He has great power, not because He is egotistical, but because we need to have hope, hope that our suffering has not been in vain and hope that eventually all suffering will be overcome and hope that eventually we will understand our suffering, and especially hope that man will always understand that he can only be G-d's partner in life and never God's partner in death. Let us all hope that that time will come soon. Amen.