



Parashat Vaera



English version

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THE ART OF FEELING FOR OTHERS

This week's Torah portion contains an interesting nuance. It begins with the genealogy of the tribes: *"These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuven... the sons of Shimon... and these are the names of the sons of Levi."* The *Shnei Luchot HaBrit* (Shlah Hakadosh) poses a question: Why does the Torah use the word "names" specifically for the sons of Levi, while this term is absent for Reuven and Shimon?

The Shlah explains that the tribe of Levi, though exempt from the harsh slavery in Egypt, chose to empathize with the suffering of the rest of the Jewish Nation. How? By naming their children after the pain of the exile. Levi named his sons Gershon, symbolizing the alienation of being strangers ("gerim") in a foreign land; Kehat, referring to the dulling of their teeth from suffering (*as in הקקה את שינינו that we say on Seder Night about the Rasha son*); and Merari, reflecting the bitterness ("marar") of their lives. Thus, the Torah says, *"These are the names of the sons of Levi,"* emphasizing their connection to the shared anguish of their brethren.

The Shlah draws a powerful lesson from this: A person must share in the pain of the community, even if they themselves are not directly affected.

Several years ago, three young men were arrested in Japan on suspicion of smuggling. A delegation of rabbis and community leaders approached Rabbi Aharon Leib Shteinman for his blessing, praying that the boys would soon be released from darkness to light. The next morning, Rabbi Chananya Chollak, the head of the organization Ezer Mizion,

visited Rabbi Shteinman and noticed that the Rabbi's eyes were red and swollen, resembling an eye infection. Rabbi Chollak suggested that the Rabbi use eye drops to prevent further irritation.

Rabbi Shteinman replied simply: "Did you not hear? Three boys were arrested in Japan, and who knows what their fate will be in court? I spent the entire night reciting chapters of Tehillim and crying in prayer for their release. That is why my eyes are red."

Rabbi Yehuda HaChassid writes in *Sefer Chassidim*: *"Since all of Israel are guarantors for one another, when one person suffers, everyone must share in that suffering and pray for them."* Amram, who was a Levite, called his daughter the name Miriam, just like his family tradition. The name "Miriam" is understood to be derived from the Hebrew root "מר" (mar), meaning "bitter," reflecting the hardships and bitter experiences of the Jews during their bondage in Egypt. The Jews were in Egypt for a total of 210 years. The last 86 years, of the 210, were the years of bitter slavery and Holocaust. Miriam was born, at the beginning of those 86 years, so she was called Miriam. She was 86 at the time of the Exodus.

Miriam's name was inspired by the bitterness of Egypt. Imagine if parents today tried the same logic. It might go something like this: **Parent**: "We named our daughter 'Traffic Jam' because she was born during rush hour." **Friend**: "And your son?" **Parent**: "Overdraft—because, well, you know how kids are expensive."



People today, are so focused on their own pains, they don't see the pain of anyone else, even the pain of their own children. When your child comes home, and just has no energy to go back for another day to learn by his/her teacher, you have two choices. You can see that the kid is in pain, that the child is suffering with someone who drains their energy. Or you could focus on your own pain, that you don't have time/energy/money/ headspace to deal with this kids issue. Whether or not, the child is manipulating to miss more school, get more vacations, to get more attention, to not work hard, is all irrelevant.

Right now, the child is in pain.

The question is, can you feel your child's pain? Even if he/she is manipulating you emotionally because of the pain they have, most of the time, the child who is manipulating has no idea they are manipulating! Made up suffering, can sometimes hurt just as much as real suffering!

Here is a story I heard, that I can't get over. If someone would ask, who was probably the smartest Jew since the time of the Talmud? I would answer, probably the Rambam. Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon. Maimonides. Well, it was not always that way.

Moshe, son of Rabbi Maimon, was not a studious student. His father Rabbi Maimon, who insisted on excellence, would not have it. *No matter if you work or learn, in my house, you need to be a Talmid Hacham.* You need to know Torah, Halacha, etc. Young Moshe, was asked to leave home.

He wandered to the city of Migash. He met there the Gadol Hador, the Ri Migash. The Ri Migash took young Moshe under his wing. After a while, Moshe became a great Torah scholar. The Ri Migash commanded him to go back to his home town where his father was a Rabbi. The Ri Migash gave the young scholar a letter, that he was supposed to give to the Gabbay of the shul. The letter commanded the Gabbay of the shul, that this young scholar should speak in shul, when it is at full capacity, and that this young scholar was to be the next Rabbi of the city.

At the young Rambam's speech, in the audience, was Rabbi Maimon, the Rambam's father, who did not recognize his own son! After the speech, he invited the young scholar to his house for a meal. After the meal, Rabbi Maimon offered his daughter, to marry this young scholar. The young scholar refused, saying he can't marry Rabbi Maimon's daughter. Rabbi Maimon, insulted, asked, why not? He answered, because it is forbidden from the Torah, for me to marry your daughter! The father now was even more insulted, saying, "Why is it forbidden from the Torah to marry my daughter? She is a good, kosher girl, from a good kosher family! I am a Rabbi in town, and she is such a modest girl!!"

The young Rambam replied, "It says in the Torah, a brother can't marry a sister." The father could not believe it! He cried and cried, and apologized from his son, how he mistreated him so many years ago!

We need to feel the pain of the hostages and their families, or at least imagine that we can feel somewhat of their pain, so we can pray for them the way we are supposed to. We need to also feel the pain of our children, when they are going through childhood, teenage life, married life, parenthood, etc.

As I am writing this article, my mother thanked me for giving up my office to someone from my community who needed to come to Israel and needed a place to stay. My mother said, wow! Yosef ! What a chessed! I told my mother, No. I have Hakarat Hatov, I am grateful to this family,...

When I was in 7th grade, in Deal NJ, this visitor's brother was there for me, when I was not accepted by my own friends (because I was a Deal boy, but not a Yankee fan). And then again, that same brother, was there for me, when I was feeling not part of the chevra (friends) in my year in Israel, in Yeshivat Mikdash Melech (I was too yeshivish then for the Mikdash crowd). My mother had no idea, to what extent of pain I was in then, although she knew I was having a hard time.

You see, our Rabbis teach, that a person can be a physical hostage, but one can also be an emotional hostage or spiritual hostage. They need someone to help them release them from that, and the way to

free them from their hostage, is through empathy. By fathoming, how that the person is stuck. The Evil Inclination can hold one down, mostly through depressing thoughts. Lonely thoughts. Helpless and hopeless thoughts.

I don't mean, chas veshalom, in any way, to make light of the pain of the hostages, by comparing hostages to people in pain. But I want people to understand, that there are people alive who have no lives. For example, they are addicted to their phones, hostages of their phones, and they can't stop. If you give them a pill to stop their digital addiction, they would take it. They just don't have such a pill. They know they're trapped in this digital cycle but often feel powerless to break free.

Just today, I overheard one Rebbi in Yeshivat Lev Aharon telling his student something scary. One sixth of this student's day, he spends on his phone. That means, if we combine all the hours spend digitally, that every six years of this person's life, a whole year, is dedicated to just phone usage. Six years he lives life, and on the seventh, brain dead. 365 days, hostage to his phone.

I know this sounds crazy, and nothing hurts a parent more than seeing their child addicted to their device. First and foremost, have empathy. The child knows, he is a hostage to his phone, and he can't stop. Feel their pain, and be there with them, in their pain. How do I compare this to hostage? Our Rabbis tell us, it is worse to make someone sin, then to kill the person. Because when you kill someone, you end his life of This World, which is temporary. When you make them sin, you cause them to end his life of the World to Come, which is eternal. There are people who are not living a life of meaning, because they are stuck in their Yetzer Hara's traps.

The reason why we don't feel the other's pain, is because we are so hyper focused on our pain. We have triggers of guilt, shame, regret, from our own past choices, from our youth, from our parenting mistakes, from our own digital addictions, that

when we see the child in pain, we don't see the pain, we just see his mistakes! We then go into parenting mode, out of fear, that things will torpedo worse, if we don't step up now with some rule, restriction, nasty face, or other parenting tools we thought we had. This is a grave mistake. A child in pain needs a parent, not a critic, and your presence is more powerful than your solutions. If you can just be a loving parent at this time, your child will remember that parental love, till his last breath, even if he forgets everything else that you did for him.

The best parenting tool we have is love. Feeling their pain, deeply, and showing them that we are accepting them and loving them no matter what. When we show our children, that we accept them, when they can't even accept themselves, nothing will cure them more. No psychologist, coach, teacher or mentor, can do this healing for them of, acceptance and containing, like a parent can. Because this is pain, that they need someone with a much closer relationship with them, to heal them.

Truth be told, they are usually not doing anything on their phones 90 percent of the time, anyway. I asked Chat GPT, what are the funniest things, that kids waste time on their phone most of the time doing. 1. The Quest for the Perfect Filter (to make them look like someone they wish they looked like) 2. Staring at the Endless Abyss of 'Suggested For You' 3. Emotional Rollercoaster of 'Likes' and 'Followers' 4. Watching People Watch Paint Dry on YouTube 5. Watching Other People Eat Food 6. Who's dating who gossip 7. Getting Into Deep 'Discussions' About Which Disney Character Would Win in a Fight 8. Reading Reviews of Movies They're Not Going to Watch 9. Spending an Hour Trying to Get Their Avatar to Wear the Right Hat in a Game 10. Rewatching the Same 5-Second Video of a Dog Sneezing 50 Times

This is it. How sad. What a pity. How could you get upset at a child who is so lost, without first understanding that the child is so dysfunctional, because of the pains the child is going through?

THE ART OF LIVING A LIFE OF TUTIM

Are you ready for goosebumps?!

One of the first soldiers that got wounded in the Oct. 7th war, was one of the two, out of all his squad, that survived. All his friends were shot and died. He also got a bullet in his leg, and not long after he was wounded in combat, he found himself in the hospital, with an amputated leg. In his company were other injured soldiers, with missing limbs. Some without feet, others without hands.

A Dati singer, Hanan ben Ari, came to cheer him up. Hanan asked him, “What song do you want me to sing for you?” The wounded soldier, looked at Hanan. He then looked at the wounded soldiers with no hands, at those with no feet, that were with him, in the hospital. He told Hanan, that he lost almost all of his friends in his squad ... and he could have been one of them. “What makes me any different than my friends that died? Why did G-d save me? Only G-d knows!”

He said to Hanan, “But you know what, Hanan! We have no rights to complain! אין לנו בכלל זכות להתלונן Hanan! Sing us your song, ההיים שלנו תותים, Our lives are strawberries!!! In what merit am I even alive!? I have nothing to complain about!”

Hanan ben Ari’s song, Life is Strawberries, is a humorous song, that talks about all the annoying things of life, especially life in Israel, and how everything is so קשה, is so hard. And then, the high part, is that no matter what, life is beautiful, like strawberries, and we have no right to complain! We have so much to be thankful about! It is a song that puts a smile on any Israeli’s face.

Hanan couldn’t believe this song request from this soldier! “If you would not have asked me to sing that song, I would not have the guts to even play that song for you! How can I sing such a happy song, seeing all of you soldiers with missing limbs! I don’t even know if I would be able to sing such a joyous song, while seeing all you here like this in the hospital! But because you asked me, I will do anything you ask, and I will try to sing it... But you should just know, that I need to disconnect my mind from my emotions! I can’t even fathom what you are going through, and that you can even think of this song, where I sing that הכל סבבה, an Israeli

slang word, that means, that everything is awesome!”

The soldier though, did not feel like Hanan thought he felt! The soldier felt, that he was so happy to be alive! A 20-year-old boy, with no leg, but with more years to live! And with the ability to thank G-d on all that he has! This soldier had a choice. He could look at one leg and say, “Why do I deserve this?! My life is messed up!!” Or the soldier can choose to transcend, to be like an angel that looks at his one leg and says, “Thank you G-d! I could have died at combat, just like my friends! I lost my leg for my People, for my land, for G-d!”

The Emunah of Am Yisrael is on fire! Just in time for the Mashiach! This year, תשפ"ד is perfect for Mashiach to come, as it is the same numerical value of פְּקוּד פְּקוּדַת הַלֵּל the secret password that Moshe was told by G-d in the Thornbush, to tell the Nation, that the time for the Redemption has arrived. And in this upcoming month, the month of Shevat, which is the acronym of שִׁנְשַׁמְע בִּישׁוּרוֹת שְׁנוֹבוֹת, we should hear good tidings.

Emunah is the key to Redemption. You can choose to ask why all the bad things are happening, לָמָּה הַיְהוָה הִרְעִיבָה לְעַמּוֹת הָאָרֶץ. Or you can choose, if you wish, to say it is all G-d’s mercy! When G-d sent Moshe to the people, G-d told Moshe to tell the Nation, the words that answer all of their questions, וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹקִים, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵינוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה, I am G-d! G-d told Moshe, that the first step of Redemption, is to believe that everything that we are going through, is great! It is all G-d!

You can only get out of hard times, through שמחה, through happiness, as the prophet tells us, כִּי־יִרְשָׁמְתֶּךָ, תִּצְאֹר. (Yeshayahu 55:12) When G-d wants to save us, he has a process. He doesn’t just save us first. He first takes us out of the stuck mindset, and only then, He saves us! There is an order for the four terms of Redemption. First G-d does הוֹצֵאתִי - He takes us out, and only then, does He take step two, והִצַּלְתִּי, and save us. Why? Why doesn’t G-d first save us, and *then* take us out? Because when a person is in hard times, there are two things that are hard. There is the pain, which is a reality. And there is suffering, which is a perspective. Pain and

Yeshiva from his parents, and he waited for the bus. A car passed, with a driver, who was not religious. The driver stopped and offered to take Shraga, asking where he is headed. Shraga said, that he needs to get to Netivot. The driver responded, that he is headed somewhere near Netivot, and he can drop him off a kilometer away from his Yeshiva. Shraga took the offer. They opened conversation, and the driver learned that Shraga was on the way to his yeshiva. The driver said, "If that's the case, I will drive you to the door of your yeshiva! I have a great respect for Yeshiva boys!" Shraga thanked the driver, and said, "In the merit of the Mitzvah that you are doing, nothing bad will happen to you! The Rabbis teach, that שלוחי מצוה אינם ניזוקים! G-d watches over those who do his Mitzvot!" The driver though, responded, "Although you say that, it does not always work! There was a yeshiva student, that his name was Pinhas Weiss. He was coming home from a test on his Torah studies, and he was busy with his Mitzvah of learning Torah,... He even had a Sefer in his hand, and suddenly a car came and ran him over, and he died on the spot! You see! This spiritual protection, it does not always work!!"

Shraga answered this non-religious, nice guy, what R' Haim Kanievsky would say. The time for Pinhas to return his soul to his Creator, was after 18 years of life. G-d knows that this boy's soul was on a high level, that he has a lot of Torah and Mitzvot, and G-d wanted him to die, while he was in middle of doing a Mitzvah, because that is the greatest

thing! The driver than said, "You just explained to me a lot of questions I had!"

They continued their conversation, while Shraga held back from saying that he is Pinhas's brother. He asked the driver how he knows about the tragedy of Pinhas Weiss? After all, there are about 360 car accident deaths in Israel a year. "I am a Zaka member, and I was one of the first at the scene... When I saw Pinhas's face, I saw he had a special shine on his face, something that I never saw before in a dead person's face. Pinchas's face will never leave my memory, he looked as if he was smiling somewhat. I decided to attend the funeral, and I felt I want to do something to uplift his soul. I took upon myself to wear Tefillin daily. Even though I don't wear a Kippah, but since his passing, a day hasn't passed that I did not don Tefillin."

They reached the Yeshiva, and before getting out of the car and saying goodbye to his new friend, Shraga turned to the driver and said, "Take a good look at me... Do I look familiar?" The driver said, "Wow! You look like Pinhas Weiss!" Shraga confirmed that he is Pinhas's brother. They hugged each other, and cried!

*What a nation! A gentle people with a faith of steel!
A nation that weathered all the storms, that have come and gone, a nation of the unsung heroes of the world!
A nation, that is the greatest miracle in the world! (Avraham Fried- My Fellow Jew)*

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A"H