

Esh Kodesh: Finding God in the Midst of Suffering

Class III

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1) Leviticus 14:33-45

God spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:

When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "Something like a plague has appeared upon my house." The priest shall order the house cleared before the priest enters to examine the plague, so that nothing in the house may become impure; after that the priest shall enter to examine the house.

If, when he examines the plague, the plague in the walls of the house is found to consist of greenish or reddish streaks that appear to go deep into the wall, the priest shall come out of the house to the entrance of the house, and close up the house for seven days. On the seventh day the priest shall return. If he sees that the plague has spread on the walls of the house, the priest shall order the stones with the plague in them to be pulled out and cast outside the city into an impure place. The house shall be scraped inside all around, and the coating that is scraped off shall be dumped outside the city in an impure place.

They shall take other stones and replace those stones with

1) ויקרא יד:לג-מה

וידבר ה' אל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַל-אַהֲרֹן
 לֵאמֹר:
 כִּי תֵבֵאוּ אֶל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי
 נֹתֵן לָכֶם לְאֶחְזָהּ וְנִתְּתִי נֶגַע
 צֹרֵעַת בְּבֵית אֶרֶץ אֲחֵיכֶם:
 וְבֹא אִשְׁרֵ-לוֹ הַבֵּית וְהִגִּיד לַכֹּהֵן
 לֵאמֹר כְּנָגַע נִרְאָה לִי בַבֵּית:
 וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וּפָנּוּ אֶת-הַבֵּית
 בְּטָרִם יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לִרְאוֹת
 אֶת-הַנֶּגַע וְלֹא יִטְמָא כָל-אִשֶּׁר
 בַּבֵּית וְאַחֵר כֵּן יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לִרְאוֹת
 אֶת-הַבֵּית:
 וְרָאָה אֶת-הַנֶּגַע וְהִנֵּה הַנֶּגַע
 בְּקִירֵת הַבֵּית שֶׁקְעָרוֹתָי
 יִרְקָקוּת אוֹ אֲדָמָדָמָת וּמִרְאִיהֶן
 שִׁפְלֵ מִן-הַקִּיר:
 וַיֵּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן מִן-הַבֵּית אֶל-פֶּתַח
 הַבֵּית וְהִסְגִּיר אֶת-הַבֵּית שִׁבְעַת
 יָמִים:
 וְשָׁב הַכֹּהֵן בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי וְרָאָה
 וְהִנֵּה פֶשֶׁה הִנָּגַע בְּקִירֵת הַבֵּית:



them, and take other coating and plaster the house. If the plague again breaks out in the house, after the stones have been pulled out and after the house has been scraped and replastered, the priest shall come to examine: if the plague has spread in the house, it is a malignant eruption in the house; it is impure. The house shall be torn down—its stones and timber and all the coating on the house—and taken to an impure place outside the city.	וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וְחָלְצוּ אֶת-הָאֲבָנִים אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶן הִנֵּגַע וְהִשְׁלִיכוּ אֶתְהֶן אֶל-מַחוּץ לְעִיר אֶל-מְקוֹם טָמֵא: וְאֶת-הַבַּיִת יִקְצַע מִבַּיִת סָבִיב וְשָׂפְלוּ אֶת-הָעֵפֶר אֲשֶׁר הִקְצֹוּ אֶל-מַחוּץ לְעִיר אֶל-מְקוֹם טָמֵא: וְלָקְחוּ אֲבָנִים אַחֲרוֹת וְהִבְיֹאוּ אֶל-תַּחַת הָאֲבָנִים וְעָפֶר אֲחֵר יִקַּח וְטַח אֶת-הַבַּיִת: וְאִם-יָשׁוּב הִנֵּגַע וּפָרַח בַּבַּיִת אֲחֵר חָלַץ אֶת-הָאֲבָנִים וְאֲחֵרֵי הַקְצוֹת אֶת-הַבַּיִת וְאֲחֵרֵי הַטֹּחַ: וּבֹא הַכֹּהֵן וְרָאָה וְהִנֵּה פֹשֶׁה הִנֵּגַע בַּבַּיִת צִרְעַת מִמֶּאֱרַת הָוָא בַּבַּיִת טָמֵא הוּא: וְנָתַץ אֶת-הַבַּיִת אֶת-אֲבָנָיו וְאֶת-עֲצָיו וְאֶת כָּל-עֵפֶר הַבַּיִת וְהוֹצִיֵּא אֶל-מַחוּץ לְעִיר אֶל-מְקוֹם טָמֵא:
2) Rashi on Leviticus 14:34 This was an announcement to them that these plagues would come upon them, because the Amorites concealed treasures of gold in the walls of their houses during the whole 40 years the Israelites were in the wilderness and in consequence of the plague they would pull down the house and discover them	2) רש"י על ויקרא יד:לג ונתתי נגע צרעת. בשורה היא להם שהנגעים באים עליהם; לפי שהטמינו אמוריים מטמוניות של זהב בקירות בתיהם כל ארבעים שנה שהיו ישראל במדבר, ועל ידי הנגע נותץ הבית ומוצאן
3) Esh Kodesh Parashat Mezorah 5700 (April 13, 1940) “When you come into the land of Canaan, etc., and I place a plague of leprosy upon a house in the land of your possession” (Leviticus 14:34). Rashi explains: This is good news for you, etc., because the Amorites had hidden caches of gold in their houses, and through the plague the house is demolished and the treasure is discovered. We must therefore understand: why was the house first shut up for seven days, and only afterward were the stones removed? For once the plague was seen, it was already known that there was a hidden cache there. And especially since, as the Ramban explains—and as is brought in the writings of my holy father and teacher, my master, the	3) אש קודש פרשת מצורע שנת ת"ש כי תבאו אל ארץ כנען וכו' ונתתי נגע צרעת בבית ארץ אחזתכם, ופרש"י בשורה היא לכם וכו' לפי שהטמינו אמוריים מטמוניות של זהב וכו' וע"י הנגע נותץ הבית ומוצאן. ונבין נא א"כ למה הסגיר מתחילה את הבית שבעת ימים, ורק אח"כ חלצו את האבנים, הא כיון שנראה הנגע ידע שכאן מטמון' ובפרט שכפי שאתא ברמב"ן מובא בספרי כ"ק א"מ אדמו"ר מרן זצוק"ל שנגעי



Rebbe, of blessed memory—plagues of houses and garments are not natural phenomena, and thus are entirely for the benefit of Israel, in order to reveal the hidden treasures. If so, why did the Torah command that the house first be rendered impure for seven days? Now, we have no grasp of the intentions of the Torah and its commandments; but what it hints to us, perhaps, is as follows: We know and believe that whatever God does to us—even when, God forbid, he smites us—it is all for the good. But when we see now that God is smiting us not only with physical torments, but also in ways which, God forbid, distance us from Him—there is no heder for school children, no yeshivah [for older students], no bet ha-midrash for communal prayer, no mikveh, and so on—then God forbid, a doubt, a suspicion enters our hearts: could it be that now too His intention is for good? [We think:] “If it were for the good, He should have afflicted us in ways which bring us closer to Him, not by calling a halt to Torah study and prayer, indeed the calling a halt to almost the entire way of Torah life, God forbid! Could this be anything other than afflictions expressing divine rejection of us, God forbid?!” . . . Therefore, we see in the Torah that although the plague of houses was impure and conveyed impurity, nevertheless God made use of it for the benefit of Israel: first the house was rendered impure for seven days, and afterward the hidden treasure was revealed. Therefore the individual cannot really say if something is a plague or calamity. The only thing he can say is that it seems like a plague to him. The truth, however, is that it is a good for Israel; God will bestow good upon us.	בתים ובגדים שלא כדרך הטבע הן א"כ רק לטובת ישראל לגלות המטמוניות הן, ולמה צותה התורה לטמא מקודם שבעת ימים, והנה בכוונת התורה ומצותי אין לנו השגה, אבל מה שמרמז לנו אפשר כי יודעים ומאמינים אנחנו שכל מה שד' עושה לנו, אפילו כשח"ו מלקה אותנו הכל לטובה היא, אבל כשרואים כעת שלא ביסודי הגוף לבד מלקה אותנו, רק גם בדברים שח"ו מרחיקים הם אותנו ממנו ית', אין חדר לתשב"ר ולא ישיבה, לא ביהמ"ד להתפלל בצבור ולא מקוה, וכדומה, אז ח"ו ספק חשש עולה בקרבנו, האפשר שגם עתה כוונתו ית' לטובה, אם לטובה, הי' לו ליסרנו בדברים שיקרבו אותנו אליו, ולא ביטול תורה ותפילה וח"ו ...לכן רואים בתורה שהגם שנגע הבתים טמאה ומטמאה הייתה, ומ"מ עשה בה ד' שליחות לטובת ישראל, מתחילה טמאה ז' ימים ואח"כ נתגלה המטמון, ולכן צריך האיש לומר רק כנגע נראה לי, ואפילו ת"ח שיודע שנגע היא רק כנגע יאמר, להנ"ל, מפני שהאיש בעצמו אינו יכול לאמר אם היא באמת נגע או פגע רק שלו נראה כנגע הי' יכול לאמור, אבל באמת טובה היא לישראל אשר יטיב ד' עמנו.
4) Genesis 37:1 Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan.	4) בראשית לז:א וַיָּשָׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:



5) Rashi on Genesis 37:2 Jacob wished to live in tranquility but the troubles with Joseph suddenly came upon him. When the righteous wish to live in tranquility, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: “Is it not enough for the righteous what has been prepared for them in the World to Come, that they also wish to live in tranquility in this world?!”	5) רש"י על בראשית לז:ב בְּקֵשׁ יַעֲקֹב לֵישֵׁב בְּשָׁלוֹה, קִפְץ עָלָיו רָגֶזוּ שֶׁל יוֹסֵף – צְדִיקִים מְבַקְשִׁים לֵישֵׁב בְּשָׁלוֹה, אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לֹא דִין לְצְדִיקִים מִה שֶׁמֵּתְקֵן לָהֶם לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אֲלֵא שֶׁמְבַקְשִׁים לֵישֵׁב בְּשָׁלוֹה בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה:
6) Esh Kodesh, Parashat Vayeshev 5700 (December 21, 1940) “Jacob settled in the area where his father had lived in the land of Canaan” (Genesis 37:1) Rashi (ibid) explains: “Jacob wanted to live in serenity, but the anguish of Joseph leapt upon him. Righteous people want to live in serenity in this world, but the Holy One, says to them, “Is it not enough that you will enjoy serenity in the world to come, that you should want it in this world as well?” My Father and teacher, his holiness R. Elimelech, of blessed memory, comments on this in his writing asking if God’s answer to righteous people, as explained by Rashi, does not hold more than just the simple, obvious meaning. Would God really say this to righteous people? I heard from my holy father-in-law, the righteous and holy one of blessed memory...regarding the song ‘Help those who rest on the seventh [day] in plowing’: that it refers to those who observe Shabbat in their plowing—that is, those who do not speak [about it] at all—end quote of the holy words. It is obvious, for it is taught (Shabbat 113b) on the verse ‘and speaking a matter,’ that one’s speech on Shabbat should not be like one’s speech on a weekday. But it is also possible to explain that it refers to those righteous individuals who ascend so greatly on Shabbat that they are unable to speak what they apprehend and feel. ‘Help... in plowing’—[meaning] in silence due to the greatness of the spiritual apprehension.” This is the difference between the Hebrew words <i>charish</i> (silence) and <i>almut</i> (muteness): When the Torah uses the word <i>charish</i>, there is generally plenty to be said but the subject refrains from speaking. For example, when Mordechai tells Esther, “If you remain silent at this time (<i>im hacharaish tacharishi</i>) then relief and deliverance will appear	6) אש קודש פרשת וישב שנת ת"ש וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגְוִרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: ופירש"י ז"ל ביקש יעקב לישב בשלוה קפץ עליו רוגזו של יוסף. צדיקים מבקשים לישב בשלוה בעוה"ז וכו' ומדויק בספרי כבוד קדושת אדוני אבי מורי זכר צדיק וקדוש לברכה וכי שיך שהקב"ה יאמר להם כך כי שמעתי מכ"ק חותני הרה"צ והק'... על הזמר עזור לשובתים בשביעי בחריש, לאותם ששומרים השבת בחרישה שאינם מדברים עכ"ל הק', פשוט הוא כי איתא (בשבת דף קי"ג) עה"פ ודבר דבר שלא יהא דיבורך של שבת כדיבורך של חול. אבל עוד אפ"ל על אותן הצדיקים שכ"כ עולים בשב"ק עד שאין יכולים לדבר את מה שמשגיגים ומרגישים. עזור וכו' בחריש מגודל ההשגה כי זה החילוק בין חרישה ובין אלמות חרישה ע"פ רוב אומרים כשיש לדבר הרבה ומ"מ אינו מדבר כגון 'אם החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת' 'ואתם תחרישון' וכדומה שבכולם היה להם לדבר רק החרישו משא"כ כשאיש



for the Jews from elsewhere; but you and your father's house will perish," (Esther 4:14) or as Moses says to the Jews on the banks of the Red Sea, "God will fight for you, and you be silent (*tacharishun*)." (Exodus 14:14) and so forth. In all of these examples, there is plenty that might have been said, but people were silent. Very different is the Jewish person who is, God forbid, so broken and crushed that he has nothing to say; who does not appreciate or understand what is happening to him; who does not possess the faculties with which to assess or assimilate his experiences; who no longer has the mind or the heart with which to incorporate the experience. For him, silence is not a choice; his is the muteness of one incapable of speech.

There are times, it is understood by the Jew, when survival means being reduced, God forbid, to petty, small-minded, and spiritually diminished behavior. Then the Jew cheers himself, adapts and adjusts to the times and the difficulties, until the wrath passes. He says to himself, "It is true that now I am mute, but even a mute can communicate a little with grunts and gestures. I too will speak a little in this way, communicating even in my muteness."

When, however, the sufferings of the Jewish people continue growing, and everyone is even more broken and crushed, then we reach the level we read of in this week's portion. Joseph describes the first dream to his brothers: "Behold," he tells them, "We were binding sheaves in the field. Then my sheaf stood up erect, and your sheaves surrounded it and bowed down to my sheaf." (Genesis 37:7) The Hebrew for the binding of sheaves is *meAlmim alumim*, which is identical to the Hebrew for being made mute, as though Joseph had said, "we were struck mute in the field."

...

(Joseph explains the prophetic meaning of his dream): "We were harvesting the field, and when the exile reached the state of *meAlmim alumim*, 'muteness that is mute' we were bereft of the ability to communicate even in our Torah and our worship of God. Then, behold *alumatii*, my 'muteness' suddenly stood up erect. At first I tried bending my shoulders to the yoke, thinking to adjust myself to the difficulties and to live a life of muteness, but when I saw that even the muteness was mute, I could not bear it. I took the courage to cry out to God even louder, when *alumoteichem*,

הישראלי ח"ו כ"כ נשבר ורצוץ עד שאין לו מה לדבר לא משיג ולא מרגיש אף אין לו מוח ולא לב במה להשיג ובמה להרגיש אז אין זאת חרישה רק אלמות כאלם שאין לו הדיבור

אבל יש שכשאישי ישראלי רואה שח"ו מוכרחה עת צר לעבור בקטנות נפילה ושבירה אז מתחזק ומתאים את עצמו לעת צרה עד יעבור זעם ואומר לעצמו הן אלם אני עתה אבל גם האלם מדבר מעט לפי אלמותו ברמיזה וגם אני מעט אדבר ארמוז באלמותי

אבל כשח"ו מוסיפים הצרות של ישראל להתחזק וכל אחד יותר נשבר ורצוץ אז הוא בחינת 'הִנֵּה אֲנִי וְאֵלֵימִי אֶלֵּימִי בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה וְהִנֵּה קִמָּה אֶלֵּימִי וְגַם-נִצְבָּה וְהִנֵּה תִסְבִּינָה אֶלֵּימִי וְתִשְׁתַּחֲוֶינִי לְאֶלֵּימִי ...

מאלמים אלומים בתוך השדה בתורה ועבודה הבחינה אלם עוד נתאלמה יותר עד שגם כאלם א"א לדבר אז 'והנה קמה אלומתי וגם נצבה' מקודם כבר רציתי להטות שכמי ולחיות חיי אלמות אבל כשמאלמים אלומים אז לא יכולתי כבר לסבול את האלמות ונתחזקתי לצעק יותר אל ה' ואז והנה תסבינה אלומותיכם וכו' שגם אתם נתחזקתם על ידי

וזה צדיקים מבקשים לישב בשלוה בעוה"ז להתאים את עצמו להגלות וצרות אמר הקב"ה 'לא דיין להצדיקים מה



your ‘muteness’ surrounded mine and you took strength from me.” This is the meaning of the original quote from Rashi with which we began this chapter. “Righteous people want to live in serenity in this world.” They want to adjust and adapt themselves to the exile and the troubles. But the Holy Blessed One says, “It is not enough for the righteous to be satisfied that the future will be good, that they will survive. Even now, they must toil to arouse heavenly mercy, so that God will save Israel immediately.”	שמתוקן להם לעתיד לבוא באמת לא דיין מה שלעתיד. יהיה טוב רק גם עתה יעוררו רחמים שמעתה יושיע ד' את ישראל
7) James A. Diamond, “The Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe: Diverting God’s Gaze from a Utopian End to an Anguished Now,” <i>Modern Judaism</i> 30, no. 3 (2010): 299–331, at 302. A more appropriate term for this kind of silence ... is André Neher’s nocturnal metasilence or “nonsilence” (lo dumiya) of Psalms 22:3, which he defines as “more silent than silence. It is the fall of silence into a deeper stratum of nothingness; it is a shaft hollowed out beneath silence, which leads to its most vertiginous depths.”	
8) Psalm 22:3 My God, I cry by day—You answer not; by night, and have no quiet	(8) תהילים כב:ג אֱלֹהִי אֶקְרָא יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה תַּעֲנֵנִי וְלַיְלָה וְלֹא־דַמְיָה לִי
9) Joseph B. Soloveitchik, <i>Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah in Tradition</i> Spring 1978 Issue 17.2 pp 56-57 Redemption, we have stated, is identical with communing, or with the revelation of the word, i.e. the emergence of speech. When a people leaves a mute world and enters a world of sound, speech and song, it becomes a redeemed people, a free people. In other words, a mute life is identical with bondage; a speech-endowed life is a free life. The slave lives in silence, if such a meaningless existence may be called life. He has no message to deliver. In contrast with the slave, the free man bears a message, has a good deal to tell, and is eager to convey his life story to anyone who cares to listen. No wonder the Torah has, four times, emphasized the duty of the father — a liberated slave — to tell his children, born into freedom, the story of his liberation. Free man who is eager to tell his story is always surrounded by an audience willing to listen to his story. The slave has neither a story nor a curious audience. Moreover, he is not merely a speechless being, but a mute being, devoid not only of the word, but of the meaningful sound as well. What is responsible for the dumbness of the slave? The lack of a basic experience, namely that of suffering or distress, which is perhaps the most central aspect of the human I-awareness. Suffering is not pain. Though colloquially the two words are used as	



synonyms, they signify two different experiences. Pain is a natural sensation, a physiological reaction of the organism to any kind of abnormality or tissue pathology. It is, as Aristotle already knew, a built-in mechanical signal that warns man whenever his physical existence is menaced from within; it is an integral part of the body's security system. Pain, as instinctual reaction, is immediate and non-reflective. As such, it is not restricted to humans: the beast is also exposed to and acquainted with pain.

Suffering or distress, in contradistinction to pain, is not a sensation but an experience, a spiritual reality known only to humans (the animal does not suffer). This spiritual reality is encountered by man whenever he stands to lose either his sense of existential security (as in the case of an incurable disease) or his existential dignity (as in the case of public humiliation). Whenever a merciless reality clashes with the human existential awareness, man suffers and finds himself in distress.

The animal is exposed to pain; so is the slave. When the slave meets with pain he reacts like the animal, uttering a sharp, shrill sound. However, the howl of the beast, like the shriek of the slave, lasts a moment in the darkness and hush of the night. In a split second all is silent again. There is no aftermath to the pain-sensation of the animal or the slave; there follows no complaint, no request, no protest, no question of why and what. The slave does not know suffering, lacking, as he does, the very existential need-awareness which generates suffering. He is never in distress because he has no human needs. The needs of a slave are, like his shriek, not human: the etiology of his needs is exclusively biological. The absence of suffering mitigates the sharpness of pain.

Former inmates of concentration camps have told me that they had, with the passage of time, become inured to any pain or torture, as if they had been totally anesthetized. They were dumb beings. They not only stopped speaking, but ceased to emit coherent sounds, as well.

