

## **Rosh Hashanah September 14, 2015**

My dear friend is dealing with a challenging health issue.

It is what it is.

A congregant was just killed in a tragic auto accident.

It is what it is.

It is what it is.

How often do you find yourself saying that?

If an anecdotal assessment is any proof, it is probably said more often than recognized.

Yet what does it mean?

When a person says "it is what it is," its likely meaning is:

"There is nothing I can do about it."

That it is fate that it is unchangeable, that there is nothing possible that I could do to change the situation for the better.

Perhaps that is correct with respect to ultimate outcome.

It is thus a feeling of profound disempowerment, of wanting to do something, and flailing as a fish when pulled from the water.

All of us know that experience of disempowerment as an uncomfortable place to be.

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Then there's this:

My son just got a big promotion!

*Mazel tov!*

We just celebrated our 45th wedding anniversary.

*Mazel tov!*

My second grandchild was just born.

My niece is becoming bat mitzvah.

We just got back from the nicest wedding.

Mazel tov, mazel tov. Mazel tov.

This is the sound of joy, of celebration.

We sing, we bless, we dance when we hear news that celebrates being in life. *Siman tov u'mazel tov, yiyeh lanu: good signs and good luck, may it also be for us.*

It is instinctive--it is also very Jewish.

For Jews are a life intoxicated people, and the opportunity to celebrate has led to a phrase that is used commonly: *only simchas*, that is, we should meet only at happy occasions.

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That is the Jewish way.

Dealing with what is, reality, in times of suffering and times of joy and all that is in between.

Often we find ourselves flung from one extreme to the other, from our sense of rejoicing to our deep sadness.

Our sadness leaves us feeling powerless, while instinctively, celebration and joy leave us feeling upbeat, happy.

In our perceived powerlessness, we often feel resigned, angry, sad.

In expressing joy, we feel alive, vibrant.

In life, these are the two poles.

We live between them.

All the days of our lives are our experiences of bouncing between these experiences, and everything else that comes along our way.

We call it being in life.

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Judaism acknowledges that life, as we know it, is always lived between joy and sorrow.

The ancient psalmist captured this poetically in Psalm 90:

“Give us days of joy equal to the number of days of suffering.”

Words that are said every Shabbat and festival morning to this very moment.

The Psalmist recognized, as did the rabbis of the Talmud, that joy and suffering are part of what it means to be alive.

On the journey from when we enter the world to our ends, life is a great gift where we human beings are blessed to have the ability to live lives of

meaning, to take the good, the bad, and everything in between as the *chomer*, the material, for making our brief time in life matter.

This raises a question: what do we do with what life gives us?

One of the great gifts of Jewish life is that our tradition guides to make meaning throughout the experiences of our lives, the joyful and the sorrowful.

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Suffering is not meaningless. For we are not completely powerless when we or others are suffering. We do not have to sit on our hands or say “it is what it is” and watch a family member or friend suffer.

From the Talmud comes a great example that has led to the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, of visiting the sick.

There, stories are recounted of rabbis engaged in a discussion of their physical suffering, for it is important for us to recall that they, too, were human beings.

These rabbis who were suffering wondered if their suffering could be a sign of God’s love:

R. Hiyya b. Abba fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their

reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

**And another:**

R. Johanan once fell ill and R. Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward.

He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

**And another:**

R. Eleazar fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He noticed that he was lying in a dark room, and he bared his arm and light radiated from it. Thereupon he noticed that R. Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learnt: The one who sacrifices much and the one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided that the heart is directed to heaven.

Is it perhaps lack of sustenance? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables.

Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son!

He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to rot in the earth.

He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep; and they both wept.

In the meanwhile he said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward.

He said to him: Give me your hand, and he gave him his hand and he raised him.

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In each of these stories, one repeated after the other, you hear our sages categorically rejecting suffering as a sign of God's love.

Rather, you see here that time and again it is human empathy and compassion raised above suffering that offers a healing presence.

It is that human encounter that has within it the potential to ameliorate suffering. That is a true gift.

For the unwell person, there is perhaps no experience more disheartening and disempowering than to be ill.

Which is why we are given concrete steps to take as human beings to alleviate the suffering of another is *bikur cholim*, the obligation to visit those who are unwell.

Notice that it is an obligation.

This is intentional. There are many people, especially before modernity, who were unaware of how contagion worked.

The analogue, today, is that there are some people who are fearful of being in a hospital, rehabilitation center, or assisted living facility. Yet in each and every one of those places, for those who are there as patients and residents, the visit of someone from outside the walls is often the highlight of the day.

For all that is disempowering in the experience of illness, Jewish tradition holds that when we engage in the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*,

visiting the sick, with each visit, we take away 1/60th of the illness.

The rabbis chose this infinitesimal number to reflect how powerful an experience it is for one who is well to visit someone unwell.

More importantly, though, it can have a powerful effect on the person we are visiting.

It can raise the person's spirits.

It can make the person feel remembered.

It can restore, at least momentarily, the person's dignity where their body is not giving them much dignity.

To do this mitzvah, it is important to visit and stay only as long as is appropriate for the ill person. This is not a card game or golf course visit.

Rather, it is a way of your being with a person who is suffering and demonstrating your humanity by your presence.

We remind the person that they are still who they were before they became ill.

We invite them to talk about other matters beside their illness.

We speak to the person as the person was known before becoming ill. The subject matter should be what you would have talked about had one of you not been ill.

It is no fun to make a patient recount an illness time and again.

In the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*, we make our presence a healing, for the ill person, for ourselves.

Rather than the illness being “it is what it is” *bikur cholim* is an opportunity to engage in one of Judaism’s most holy and most human acts.

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Another place of human discomfort is around end of life.

Judaism give us human, practical direction around what we are to do for the mitzvah of *nachum aveilim*, comforting mourners.

For the person who has experienced the loss, it is important to realize that Judaism understands the radical nature of losing a human being.

This is why after the funeral and interment, Judaism offers the mourner a place to be cared for, to forget about daily human concerns like work, school, and other engagements. It is known as shiva, and it is important to observe it for the week.

This time is meant for healing.

It is also an incredibly jarring thing for the mourner to experience, letting yourself be taken care of in your own home.

Yet in mourning it is not your responsibility to entertain. It is your time to grieve.

During those seven days you are allowed the time to let the shock of the loss begin to wear off. The body puts itself into shock when the death happens; only days into shiva does the shock begin to wear off.

This is when you and your loved ones begin to incorporate the reality of that person being gone from your world as you experienced them.

This is a huge rupture to your being.

Your world is changing, and the seven days, much like the seven day creation story, allow you the time and space to remake your world without your beloved.

Our bodies need that time. Our minds need that time. It is a time not to be truncated, no matter the age of the person who died.

Observing a week of shiva also allows those of us who wish to comfort you the time and space to do so.

Even with our desire to comfort one in mourning many of us find ourselves deeply uncomfortable when we are searching for ways to comfort one in their grief.

For those of us who choose to engage *nachum avelim*, the comforting of one in mourning, please know this: **there are no right words prescribed by our tradition.**

In fact, our tradition suggests that your physical presence is enough.

The hug, the nod of the head, the being surrounded in a time of loss speaks volumes, much more than “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Remember that a shiva call is not a social visit. It is a time for the mourner to sit and be surrounded by caring community in a time of unfathomable loss.

It is up to those of us who want to offer comfort to allow the shiva house to be a quiet place, to allow our presence to alleviate, ever so little, the sense of loss.

In so doing, when the mourner rises from shiva, and we walk around the block, the community is there to bring the mourner back to life, remade.

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Visiting the ill and comforting the mourner.

Two situations where we could find ourselves saying “it is what it is” where we have the opportunity to take action, to make a difference.

Jewish ways.

Holy ways.

Ways that prize being in life.

We should never lose focus in a world that bounces between suffering and joy that we are privileged to be in life.

We must remember that in all we do we Jews do not accept “it is what it is.”

We are about making life matter.