

Room to Breathe

written by Yossi Katz

November 14, 2013



When it rains, it pours. It often happens this way: first you have one problem, then another comes up, then a third... Before you know it, you feel completely overburdened, as if you can't even breathe. You imagine all of the world's issues being lumped together and heaped on your shoulders. But it gets even worse.

Our typical reaction to feeling overwhelmed is to hibernate in a state of utter disconnect. We cut ourselves off from friends, from our true selves, and especially from God. We feel hopeless and despondent, unable to cry out to our Father in Heaven, the only One who can bring about our salvation. This vicious cycle is summed up by the golden rule, "If you pursue anguish and problems, your anguish and problems will pursue you."

While our troubles are not at all easy to deal with and we are truly in pain, nevertheless, we have overlooked something fundamental. Rebbe Nachman teaches that

every problem and trouble we face is packaged together with a silver lining. As difficult and as bitter as life can be, God's kindness and love for us is present in every situation. The benefit may not always be obvious; in fact, it may only be our realization that our situation could be much worse. Our job is to find those seemingly hidden threads of relief and, rather than disconnect, use these opportunities to express our gratitude and thanks to God for the little bit of good we have discovered.

In order to pacify the anger of his brother Esau, who was upset with him for stealing his father's blessing, Jacob sent a handsome tribute. Everything that Jacob did was with great wisdom. He told Esau, "I have acquired an ox and a donkey" (Genesis 32:6). Then he separated the different species included in his tribute, as he told his servants, "Leave a space between one group and the next" (ibid. 32:17).

On a simple level, we can understand Jacob's separation of the animals in his tribute as a way to avoid the prohibition of *kelayim*, or mixing species. However, a deeper explanation is that the "ox" refers to Esau (see Isaiah 34:7-8) and the "donkey" to Ishmael (Ishmael is called a "wild donkey of a man"; Genesis 16:12). These two adversaries and their attendant nations were to be the rulers and oppressors of the Jewish people in exile. They represent the exile and all of its bitter problems.

Our Patriarch Jacob understood that if all of our troubles were lumped together at once, we would become overwhelmingly despondent, truly exiled from God. So Jacob taught us the secret of separating our problems into "groups" and looking for the "spaces" of relief.

When life gets bumpy and we find ourselves becoming emotionally overcome by our constant problems, we can give ourselves breathing room by finding the little specks of good and salvation that exist within our troubles. And when we search out those spaces of relief, our oppressors become powerless. We then merit the ultimate redemption: an indestructible bond with God. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhhot Kilay Beheimah 4:8