

Savlanut – Patience 2

*When something bad happens to you and you did not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief.*¹

The meaning of *savlanut* as sufferance is a derivation from the earlier and deeper meaning of its Hebrew root: to bear a burden. In that sense it is the *middah* par excellence since at all times it serves as a reminder of our obligation to bear the burden of the other. It is therefore, also, the most common and most difficult *middah*. It is the most difficult particularly because without *savlanut* we can not begin to address ourselves to the rest of the *middot* to come. As we have already said, lack of *savlanut* is the result of a rebellion of the self against the contraction that accompanies the birth of the soul. It is precisely the threat of the other in his or her presenting him or herself as *a burden to bear* that is so threatening. Every other is not only a potential burden to bear, but an actual burden to bear. Yet every other is also an essential component in the formation of our own soul. The extent to which we can *suffer* the pain of contracting the self to bear the burden of the other even in the face of the rebellion of the self is the measure that we can use to gauge the progress we make in rediscovering the soul potential in every one of us. It is the fact that our soul is in constant formation, as we will explain below, that *savlanut* is also the most commonly encountered *middah*.

Imagine this as a process that is always at hand. We walk into the supermarket and in our rush to finish our shopping we find ourselves in a long line made longer by the difficulty someone is having reading the price on a particular item, or by the fact that the card reader is working slowly and someone is having difficulty paying. In each of those cases we are presented with another person who in that very moment has a burden, perhaps many burdens. That person's burden attempts to enter into our consciousness. Is there room for it? Not if we listen to the fearful advice of our self (here we can certainly name that self as *Yetzer HaRa*.) The incursion of this person *as a burden* into our consciousness presents us with the opportunity to contract the screaming self and enlarge our soul or to give the self full reign all but eliminating the soul in that moment. This is the choice that we have often spoken about in *mussar*. In this analysis we also come to

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 108-115.

understand that the soul is not a static entity. It is constantly expanding and contracting depending on our ability to either cultivate our *middot* or not.

This then raises some questions regarding the soul itself. If we understand that it is a continually expanding or contracting entity and we recognize the difficulties, the pain that is involved in its expansion over against the self we need to explore what our resources are in trying over and over to expand it. In other words, what is our motivation? In other contexts we have spoken about the essential role that joy plays in *mussar* theory and practice. In the context of discussing the pain that accompanies the creation of a soul we might conclude that at every moment, faced with this soul-expanding choice, our lives are a constant experience of pain. In fact, there are those who have understood *mussar* in this way and on account of this understanding there are many who would turn away from *mussar*. It is therefore very important that in light of our analysis we explore the source of joy inherent in the creation of the soul, a joy even in the face of pain.

Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm, one of the primary students of Rav Israel Salanter, the founder of the modern *mussar* movement taught in his *magnum opus: Hochma U'Mussar* the following on this question.

A well known saying of the wise: ‘pain and joy are interlaced with one another’ – that is, after pain will come joy and the joy will be much greater than if one hadn’t experienced the pain before the joy.

Rav Simcha goes on to explicate this saying with reference to the sapphire brick work that Moses and the elders of Israel saw beneath the throne God. He explains that this brickwork was composed of the pain of the people Israel, concluding that God, literally, sees the world only through the pain of Israel. He goes on to say:

And now : ‘When they saw as it were the heavens for clearness,’ they were already redeemed. Why did the Torah need to add the phrase ‘a pavement of sapphire’ as a memorial to the pain of Israel? Only, it would seem, so to speak, that God had before them the pavement of sapphire in contrast to the very heavens for clearness to raise, as it were, the joy in contrast to this.

Rav Simcha draws the conclusion that the Torah includes the reference to the pavement of sapphire, which he defines as being made up of the pain of Israel, in order to teach

Moses and the elders that only by virtue of the pain they have sustained can they experience and appreciate the joy that the clearness of heaven presupposes. If we translate this into the language of our *mussar* work we can say that Rav Simcha teaches us the following things. First, that it is what we might call the reality of existence that pain and joy are interlaced. Pain does not exist absent joy and joy does not exist absent pain. Second, that what our tradition conceives of as the “Divine view” of the world is none other than the world viewed through the pain and suffering of others, that God, as it were, God’s self can only “see” the world through bearing its burden of pain. Third, and this is the crucial learning, that the more pain we bear the more joy is released. How so? We remember that the *Yetzer HaTov* is not external to our being. Though it may be overcome by the power of the *Yetzer HaRa*, when the self is constricted to allow for the bearing of the burden of the other the space that is created into which the other is taken is not empty! It is precisely the “space” of the *Yetzer HaTov*. Rav Simcha discovers this through the idea of the “clearness of heaven” that constitutes the Divine view that transcends the sapphire brickwork. We discover this in the experience of bearing the burden of the other. Whether it is while waiting for the check-out person to finish someone else’s order or waiting for the card-reader to be fixed, after and sometimes simultaneous with the pain of the constricting self we experience the joy of the now expanding *Yetzer HaTov* as it welcomes the other into its space. There is no good vocabulary to name this experience, but joy, sometimes small and sometimes great, is an experience that we are all at least a little familiar with when we indeed allow ourselves to put the self on hold even for a moment. This joy is fragile, but motivational. The more often we experience it, the more we recognize its presence or its potential presence in every moment, the less difficult it becomes to suffer the pain of the *Yetzer HaRa* in anticipation of experiencing the joy of the *Yetzer HaTov*.