

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Beshalach

How Can We Learn to Focus on the Good Points Within Our Darkness?

Finding the Silver Linings in All Those Insignificant Little Clouds

I love the expression “Every cloud has a silver lining.” I just found out that this idiom was coined in 1634 by John Milton. Rabbi Nachman advocates looking for the good points (silver lining) within ourselves and others even the most wicked people (the dark clouds). I’m trying to look for the good points in the disappointing airline rescheduling of my flight to visit my mother in Denmark, which I spent hours finding and booking. The new rescheduling includes an overlay of 10 hours in Germany. Even if I request a refund, there aren’t any other affordable flights with decent hours during the week that suit both my mother and me. Everything else also seemed to go wrong today. Like our clogged toilets that we paid the plumber to fix but they weren’t fixed correctly. On top of all this, today is the day we host our granddaughters, and I’m apprehensive about how they will manage this grueling toilet situation. I feel like screaming at my husband (and I’m afraid I already did this a bit) for paying the plumber before checking if the toilets were fixed. But then, when I think about the war, and all those mothers who buried their sons, and those who are worried about their sons in Gaza, I’m embarrassed about how trivial my problems are. Instead of complaining, I urgently need to find the silver linings in all those insignificant little clouds. The first silver lining that comes to mind is that this is a test for me to accept and not complain, but rather appreciate that I do have a mother abroad to visit and that I have a home with toilets that will be fixed at some point, hopefully before Shabbat. Most importantly, I must remember my gratitude for having grandchildren and how much *nachat* (prideful joy) their visit gives me. As I’m working on passing the test of everything going wrong today, I’m reminded of the story my husband told on Shabbat. The famous Torah singer and songwriter, Chanan ben Ari, went to visit a wounded soldier in the hospital, who was the only survivor of his battalion in Gaza. When he offered to sing one of his songs for the soldier, the soldier chose the song called “Our Life is Like Strawberries,” which begins, “We don’t have the right to complain at all...” Chanan ben Ari was stunned. Of all people, this soldier could claim a right to complain. The soldier explained, “I’m thankful for surviving with a whole life in front of me. I’m moreover thankful for having the merit of giving my leg for the sake of the Land of Israel!”

Redemption in the Merit of Recognizing the Good Points Within Tragedy

We learn a similar incredible example of finding the silver lining in the cloud from the Israelites that merited to experience the Exodus.

ספר שמות פרק יג פסוק יח

וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דְּרַךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם סוּף וַחֲמֻשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

“So, G-d led the people around [by] way of the desert [to] the Reed Sea, and the children of Israel were חֲמֻשִׁים/*chamushim* – ‘armed’ or ‘one fifth’ when they went up out of Egypt” (*Shemot* 13:18).

Rashi explains the word “*chamushim*” to mean that only one-fifth of the Jewish people left Egypt, the rest perished during the days of darkness. They had to die because they didn’t want to leave Egypt. How could it be that the vast majority of the Jewish people didn’t want to leave Egypt when all the Jews in Egypt witnessed the revealed miracles, through the Hand of Hashem? The midrash gives us a clue: “During the days of darkness, they would bring their dead for burial while the Egyptians sat in

darkness. The Israelites then praised Hashem and thanked Him (for the fact) that their enemies were unable to see their misfortune and take satisfaction in it" (*Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach* 1). Hashem wanted the Egyptians to understand that only they were being punished. Therefore, it was important that they not witness that the Jews were dying as well. We would expect those who survived to be overwhelmed with grief without being able to think of anything but dealing with the burial needs of their dead. Nevertheless, the Midrash tells us that despite the tragedy that had befallen them, they saw Hashem's kindness and thus offered thanks and praise to Him. Because of this quality of *hakarat hatov*, they merited to be redeemed. On the other hand, the Israelites who perished during the plague of darkness lacked this quality. They could not be redeemed because they doubted the redemption and didn't want to leave Egypt (Rashi, *Shemot* 10:22). Anyone willing was taken out, regardless of their other (often significant) sins. Why did 80% of the Israelites remain disbelieving in the forthcoming Exodus? A person who cannot imagine the light at the end of his dark tunnel always remains untrusting. Only those Jews who found the silver lining in the cloud of their tragedy were able to believe in the forthcoming redemption when they witnessed the miracles and the destruction of Egypt. Through *hakarat hatov*, we can process the events of our lives in a way that reveals Hashem's goodness (Based on Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Project Genesis, Inc.).

How do We Transform Bitter to Sweet?

The test of finding the light at the end of the tunnel is ongoing. Just three days after the miracles that enabled the Israelites to leave the sea, they started complaining:

ספר שמות פרק טו פסוק כג

וַיָּבֹאוּ מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשִׁתּוֹת מִיַּם מַרְתָּה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מַרָּה:

"They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah, because they were bitter; therefore, it was named Marah (*Shemot* 15:23).

The phrase "because they were bitter" is missing the subject. So, it's not clear that it was the water that was bitter. An alternative interpretation that I personally heard from Nechama Leibowitz was that they – the Israelites – were bitter. They were so wrapped up in their own fears and discomforts that even their sense of taste was affected. They didn't trust that G-d would provide food and water; they thought only of themselves and felt empty and bitter. Had they totally forgotten the miracles that Hashem had performed for them at the sea less than three days prior? Rabbi Brad Artson explains that the way for us to become a holy people lies not in external miracles, but in inner transformation. That transformation is accomplished through small, simple steps. By gradually incorporating mitzvot into our lives, we can, with time, remake ourselves in the Divine image.

The New Year of the Tree – A Time for Celebrating the Light Hidden Within the Darkness

The holiday of Tu B'Shevat is a time for hidden beginnings. The New Year of the trees is celebrated at the time when all the fruits and leaves have fallen, and the tree stands bare and naked, when the cold and dark envelop nature with its muddy cover. The secret of Tu b'Shevat gently whispers; "when everything looks dead, dark and murky, life, light and glory are hiding just below the surface." The New Year of the Tree teaches us to pay attention to the renewal of nature, even within the cold darkness and encourages us to enjoy and praise Hashem for the little things in life – the flowering almond tree, and the fruits of the land of Israel. Tu B'Shevat is not about the drama of a big-ticket

miracle. It's about performing mitzvot to celebrate the countless small things with which G-d has blessed us like beautiful trees, delicious fruit, and our sense of sight, taste, smell, and touch to appreciate them. Although we are mourning the fallen soldiers and crying for all our losses, we must look for the silver lining within the cloud. Let us be inspired by our heroes who sacrifice their life or leg, for the sake of the Land of Israel and the unity of our people. Let us continue our efforts to remake ourselves in the Divine image and seek out the small, good points within the darkness, appreciating the daily miracles all around us.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Beshalach – Finding the Good Points Within Our Darkness

We've all been there: times when it feels like everything is going wrong, and the darkness seems to be closing in on us. Whether you are facing personal struggles, dealing with difficult people, facing challenges in your career or relationships, or just feeling overwhelmed and down seeing the good points in your situation can be challenging. However, maintaining an optimistic outlook is essential for mental and emotional well-being.

- **Focusing on the things you are Grateful for** – Finding the points within your dark situation can help you put things into perspective and shift your focus from the negative to the positive.
- **Keeping a Gratitude Journal** – where you write down a few things you are grateful for daily. You might be surprised at how much you can be thankful for, even in the darkest of times.
- **Connect With Others** – It's easy to isolate yourself when feeling down, but connecting with others can provide much-needed support and perspective. Reach out to friends, family, or a support group, and make an effort to spend time with people who are positive and uplifting.
- **Take Care of Yourself** – When you're struggling, taking care of yourself physically, emotionally, and mentally is essential. This might mean getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising, or finding healthy ways to cope with stress. By taking care of yourself, you'll have the energy and resilience to face challenges.
- **Find Meaning and Purpose** – When you're feeling down, it can be helpful to remind yourself that Hashem is in charge and everything is from Him to help you become a better person. Train yourself to ask, "How is this challenge helping me grow?"