Dvar Torah Outline

II:3: Suffering, Collective Responsibility, and דרך ה' Reincarnation

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman examines how suffering accepted with love can benefit not only an individual but an entire generation—and, at the highest levels, humanity across history. He distinguishes punishment understood as satisfying justice from suffering understood as actually cleansing the world and restoring the revelation of Hashem's presence. The discussion then introduces reincarnation as another avenue of divine mercy, while emphasizing that it is a last resort, not an escape from responsibility for one's previous life.

I

Suffering accepted on behalf of others

A. *Text location and review*

- The discussion continues in **דרך ה', Part II, Chapter 3, at the end of paragraph 8**.
- Rabbi Shulman reviews two levels of **ייסורים של אהבה**—suffering accepted with love:
  - **Righteous individuals** may accept suffering on behalf of their generation.
  - **Exceptionally pious individuals** may accept suffering that repairs damage extending back through earlier generations, to Adam's sin and even deficiencies originating in creation itself.

B. *Why relatively little suffering can accomplish so much*

- These individuals are themselves spiritually complete and deserving of good; their suffering is connected to the failings of others.
- Consequently, a relatively small amount of their suffering can satisfy the demands of justice that would otherwise require much greater punishment of the sinners themselves.
- Rabbi Shulman recalls the analogy of a father:
  - One son deserves punishment.
  - Another offers to bear it instead.
  - That selfless willingness awakens the father's mercy and reduces the punishment.

C. *"Relatively little" can still mean severe suffering*

- One individual may be bearing suffering on behalf of thousands of people.
- Even a sharply reduced portion of their combined punishment can therefore remain extremely painful.

- The underlying connection is **ערבות**—the mutual responsibility binding the Jewish people together.

II

How self-sacrifice awakens mercy: the binding of Isaac

3:30

A. *Willingness to bear judgment changes its outcome*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that accepting suffering on behalf of others awakens tremendous divine mercy.
- The person's selflessness allows the demands of justice to be addressed without exacting the full punishment otherwise required.

B. *Why the binding of Isaac is central to Rosh Hashanah*

- Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment, yet its prayers repeatedly invoke Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac and Isaac's loving acceptance.
- Isaac was not being punished for personal wrongdoing.
- Rather, his willingness to become an offering expressed a readiness to help remove barriers between humanity and Hashem.

C. *An offering creates closeness*

- Rabbi Shulman connects **קרבן**, an offering, with **להתקרב**, drawing close.
- An offering functions as a bridge between humanity and Hashem.
- At the binding of Isaac, Hashem accepted the willingness to sacrifice:
  - Isaac did not actually have to die.
  - The ram was accepted in his place.
  - The spiritual effect was accomplished through mercy rather than through the full sacrifice.

D. *Acceptance is a choice; the suffering itself may not be*

- These righteous individuals do not necessarily choose whether suffering will arrive.
- Their choice is whether to receive it with love.
- Two equally great individuals may have different experiences because Hashem has different missions for them.
- Rabbi Shulman also connects this outlook to Rosh Hashanah prayer:
  - Looking beyond one's private needs.
  - Rejoicing in Hashem's kingship even when its personal consequences are uncertain.

III

Greater merit, identification with humanity, and the limits of acceptance

7:30

A. *Suffering also strengthens the righteous individual*

- Accepting suffering for others increases the individual's merit and spiritual strength.
- This, in turn, expands the person's capacity to repair damage caused by others.
- Rabbi Shulman recalls the previous discussion of the **Ten Martyrs**, whose suffering was connected to repairing the sale of Joseph.

B. *Their place in the World to Come*

- Those who suffer for their generation become leaders among the righteous.
- Those whose suffering benefits humanity across generations become the "leaders of the leaders."
- Their ultimate distinction is their exceptional closeness to Hashem.

C. *The greater level is not necessarily measured by greater pain*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that the difference may lie less in the intensity of the suffering than in whom the person can embrace.
- Accepting suffering for a close relative is more immediately understandable than accepting it for:
  - A distant member of one's community.
  - An entire generation.
  - People who lived thousands of years earlier.
- The highest level requires profound humility:
  - Transcending identification with one's own body and immediate circumstances.
  - Identifying with humanity across both space and time.

D. *Even great sages sometimes declined such suffering*

- The Talmud records great individuals saying that they wanted neither the suffering nor its reward.
- Rabbi Shulman cites the commentators' explanation:
  - They feared that overwhelming pain might produce resentment or another negative response toward Hashem.
  - In that case, accepting the suffering might not accomplish its intended purpose.
- Their refusal was therefore not necessarily a rejection of spiritual service, but concern about its dangers.

E. *Distinguishing voluntary acceptance from an unavoidable situation*

- The highest motivation is service of Hashem for its own sake and a desire to help others—not simply securing a greater reward.
- Where an opportunity to avoid suffering exists, great individuals may take it.

- Where suffering is unavoidable, as with the Ten Martyrs, the task is to accept it with as much love as one can.

IV

Beyond judicial accounting: suffering, purification, and trials

16:00

A. *Paragraph 9 introduces a deeper explanation*

- Until this point, the discussion has largely followed the framework of justice:
  - Wrongdoing occurs.
  - Punishment is required.
  - Once the punishment is borne, the account is settled.
- Rabbi Shulman now introduces a second perspective: suffering does not merely settle an account; it can remove evil that has become embedded in a person or in the world.

B. *Connection to the earlier discussion of individual suffering*

- Earlier chapters explained that suffering can prepare a person for the World to Come.
- This is not only because a person must clear an outstanding liability.
- On a deeper level, suffering can cleanse the person of the spiritual damage produced by sin.
- The same distinction now applies to suffering borne on behalf of others.

C. *Suffering and trials are distinct concepts*

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes:
  - **ייסורים**—afflictions or suffering.
  - **ניסיונות**—trials that call upon a person to act and actualize spiritual potential.
- A trial asks whether a person will do something difficult.
- Suffering concerns the painful condition itself, such as illness, bereavement, or financial loss.

D. *Job illustrates suffering—and the test within it*

- Job's losses move progressively closer to his own person:
  - Property and livelihood.
  - Children.
  - Bodily health.
- Rabbi Shulman clarifies that suffering can itself become the setting for a trial:
  - The affliction is the suffering.
  - How one responds to it can be the test.

V

A personal illustration: Rabbi Shulman's grandfather

20:30

A. *A late beginning in Torah observance*

- Rabbi Shulman describes his grandfather, **Dov Ber ben Yitzchak**, who grew up in the former Soviet Union without a Torah education.
- He possessed exceptional intelligence, character, and love of learning.
- He embraced Torah observance late in life and underwent circumcision at age seventy-six.

B. *The apparent loss of unrealized potential*

- Rabbi Shulman and his brother reflected on how much their grandfather might have accomplished had he received a Torah education from childhood.
- His late beginning initially seemed to leave extraordinary abilities without enough time to develop fully in Torah.

C. *Fifteen years of severe suffering*

- His grandfather endured relentless, severe itching for approximately fifteen years.
- Despite the suffering, he continued observing the commandments, praying for others, and blessing his family without complaint.
- Rabbi Shulman named his commentary on **דרך ה'**, **באר בדרך**, in his grandfather's honor while he was ill.

D. *Rabbi Shulman's understanding of those years*

- Rabbi Shulman understood his grandfather's loving endurance as an opportunity for spiritual accomplishment beyond what an ordinary lifetime might have provided.
- He stresses that such suffering is not something one casually requests.
- Nevertheless, when a person is placed in that situation, the response can generate tremendous merit for the Jewish people.

E. *Returning to the subject under discussion*

- This discussion concerns righteous individuals suffering for others—not necessarily people being punished for their own sins.
- When a person has sinned, repentance can address that wrongdoing.
- Here, the righteous individual's contribution is accepting suffering on behalf of a generation or the wider world.

VI

Suffering as an actual cleansing of creation

25:00

A. *Sin changes the spiritual condition of the world*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that wrongdoing is not merely entered into a heavenly ledger.
- It introduces spiritual impurity into both individuals and creation.
- That impurity conceals Hashem's light, creating additional layers of distance between humanity and Him.

B. *Removing impurity restores revelation*

- As spiritual impurity is cleansed, Hashem's light becomes revealed again.
- This is not simply an external arrangement in which Hashem withholds His presence until a penalty is paid.
- The wrongdoing itself creates a barrier; removing its effects removes that barrier.

C. *The same mechanism operates individually and collectively*

- Suffering can cleanse:
  - An individual of damage caused by personal wrongdoing.
  - The wider world through the suffering of exceptionally righteous individuals.
- Their suffering can therefore benefit people far beyond themselves.

D. *The ultimate direction: the perfection of creation*

- The suffering of these great individuals progressively removes impurity from creation.
- The world moves, stage by stage, toward its ultimate perfection.
- This completes paragraph 9's explanation of collective suffering.

VII

Reincarnation as another avenue of divine mercy

29:00

A. *Paragraph 10 introduces another factor in divine providence*

- Rabbi Shulman turns to **גלגולים**—reincarnations.
- A person's present circumstances cannot always be understood by examining the present lifetime alone.
- Earlier lives may be another factor explaining why seemingly similar people receive very different circumstances.

B. *Multiple opportunities to reach the ultimate goal*

- Rabbi Shulman places reincarnation alongside other avenues Hashem provides for spiritual restoration:
  - Repentance.
  - Cleansing through suffering.
  - Purification after death.
  - Benefit through collective responsibility.
- Reincarnation provides another opportunity for a soul to accomplish what it previously failed to accomplish.

C. *The same soul returns in another body*

- A soul may enter this world more than once, in different bodies.
- It can then:
  - Repair damage caused in a previous life.
  - Complete a spiritual task previously left unfinished.

D. *A warning against treating this as an attractive option*

- Rabbi Shulman strongly emphasizes that the corrective reincarnation discussed here is a **last resort**.
- It is not comparable to restarting a game without consequences.
- It can involve a very difficult life, and a person should strive to fulfill the present lifetime's responsibilities rather than rely on another opportunity.

VIII

Corrective reincarnation versus a shared spiritual root

34:30

A. *Why reports about great souls require a distinction*

- Rabbi Shulman addresses descriptions of one great sage as a reincarnation of another.
- Such descriptions do not necessarily mean that the earlier sage failed and had to return for correction.
- He uses the reported connection between the Ramchal and Rabbi Akiva as an illustration.

B. *A shared root is not necessarily the identical soul returning*

- A later soul may be rooted in, closely related to, or an extension of an earlier great soul.
- Rabbi Shulman compares this to a descendant's connection with an ancestor:
  - There is a meaningful relationship.
  - Their missions may be connected.
  - They are not necessarily the identical soul.

C. *The corrective return being discussed here*

- The present passage concerns the same soul returning because its earlier life did not accomplish what was required.
- Rabbi Shulman describes two forms of failure:
  - **Active wrongdoing:** damage that must be repaired.
  - **Failure to fulfill one's purpose:** necessary accomplishments left undone.
- In this framework, reincarnation is a severe corrective measure, not evidence that a great soul simply wanted another opportunity to achieve more.

D. *Awareness of a previous life*

- A person does not ordinarily remember having failed in a previous incarnation.
- Rabbi Shulman notes that the Vilna Gaon's commentary on Job discusses ways of recognizing aspects of this subject, without developing those details here.

IX

Final judgment includes every lifetime

38:30

A. *Why deliberately failing cannot secure a better restart*

- A person might imagine abandoning a disappointing life in the hope of beginning again under better conditions.
- Rabbi Shulman rejects this reasoning:
  - Another lifetime does not erase the previous one.
  - A new opportunity is not a cancellation of responsibility.

B. *The final accounting is cumulative*

- At the ultimate judgment, the soul is assessed according to everything it experienced and did across its incarnations.
- All the circumstances and opportunities of those lives enter the accounting.
- Reincarnation may reset certain practical circumstances, but it does not delete the spiritual record.

C. *The practical implication*

- The opportunity for another life should not diminish the urgency of this one.
- The purpose is to repair and complete—not to evade the consequences of earlier choices.
- Rabbi Shulman concludes with this warning, leaving the continuation for the next session.

X

In Summary

- **Collective suffering:** Righteous individuals can accept suffering for others, with the highest levels extending concern across generations and throughout humanity.
- **Mercy through selflessness:** Willingness to bear suffering can awaken mercy, allowing relatively little suffering to accomplish what much greater punishment otherwise would.
- **Purification, not merely punishment:** Suffering can remove spiritual impurity and restore the revelation of Hashem's presence, bringing creation closer to perfection.
- **Acceptance has limits:** Even great sages sometimes declined suffering because they feared responding improperly; loving acceptance is not a casual or universally attainable demand.
- **Reincarnation as a last resort:** Corrective reincarnation offers another opportunity, but it must be distinguished from descriptions of great souls sharing a spiritual root.
- **No erased responsibility:** Final judgment includes all of a soul's lifetimes, making the present opportunity for repentance and fulfillment all the more important.