

EMBRACING PAIN

Background

Rebbe Yochanan had lost ten sons. He used to carry around a small bone from the corpse of his last son. The *Maharsha* explains that he did this out of his great love — for the pain that he had suffered.

Rebbe Yochanan wasn't a masochist. He was a deep, caring individual with real emotions who had a bond of love and attachment to his children.

Questions

One of the greatest tragedies that can afflict a person is the loss of a child. How could he have loved the pain that he endured? If a person is philosophical, he might be able to make peace with his loss and learn to live with it. But how can that pain be precious to him? How can he cherish that suffering?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ה/ב

רבי אלעזר חלש על לגביה רבי יוחנן חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא חזייה דהוה קא בכי רבי אלעזר אמר ליה אמאי קא בכית אי משום תורה דלא אפשת שנינו אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים ואי משום מזוני לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות ואי משום בני דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר אמר ליה להאי שופרא דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא אמר ליה על דא ודאי קא בכית ובכו תרוייהו אדהכי והכי אמר ליה חביבין עליך יסורין אמר ליה לא הן ולא שכון אמר ליה הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה

Rebbe Elazar fell ill, and Rebbe Yochanan went to visit him. He noticed that he [Rebbe Elazar] was lying in a dark room, and he bared his arm and light radiated from it. Then he noticed that Rebbe Elazar was weeping and he said, "Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learned, '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 of enjoying two tables. Is it perhaps the children?"

"This is the bone of my tenth son!" he replied. "I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to rot in the earth."

He [Rebbe Yochanan] said, "On that account, you surely have a reason to weep," and they both wept. After a while, he said, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?"

He [Rebbe Elazar] replied, "Neither they, nor their reward."

He [Rebbe Yochanan] said, "Give me your hand." He [Rebbe Elazar] gave him his hand, and he raised him.