

Jewish Responses to Crisis and Trauma

Rabbis Steven Philp and Ethan Witkovsky of Park Avenue Synagogue

I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it – Maya Angelou

Responding to Crises with Joy and Gratitude

If a Jew breaks a leg, they say, “Praised be God that I didn’t break both legs.” If they break both legs, they say, “Praised be God that I didn’t break my neck!” - Yiddish folk saying

Mishna Brachot 9:5

חַיֵּב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל הַרְעָה כְּשֶׁמִּשֶׁם שֶׁהוּא מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַטּוֹבָה, שְׁנֵאמַר (דברים ו) וְאֵהֲבֵתְךָ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לֵבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ. בְּכָל לֵבְךָ, בְּשֵׁנֵי יִצְרִיךָ, בְּנִצָּר טוֹב וּבְנִצָּר רָע {י}. וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ, אֲפִלּוּ הוּא נוֹטֵל אֶת נַפְשְׁךָ. וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ, בְּכָל מְמוֹנְךָ. דְּבָר אַחֵר בְּכָל מְאֹדְךָ, בְּכָל מַדָּה וּמַדָּה שֶׁהוּא מוֹדֵד לָךְ הָיִי מוֹדֵד לוֹ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֵד.

One is obligated to bless for evil just as one blesses for good, as it is said “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul/life and all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) ‘All your heart’ means with both hearts, your good inclination and your evil inclination. ‘All your spirit’ means even at the cost of your life. ‘All your might’ means with all your material possessions. Another interpretation of ‘all your might’ is that whatever treatment God metes out for you, thank God very, very much.

Lecha Dodi (selected verses)

לְכֵה דוּדֵי לְקִרְאֵת כְּלָה. כְּנִי שָׁבֵת נִקְבְּלָה:

מְקַדְּשׁ מְלֶךְ עִיר מְלוּכָה. קוּמִי צְאִי מִתּוֹךְ הַתְּפִכָּה. רַב לָךְ שָׁבֵת בְּעֵמֶק הַבְּכָא. וְהוּא יִתְמוּל עֲלֶיךָ חֲמֵלָה: לכה

הַתְּנַעֲרִי מֵעַפְרֵי קוּמִי. לְבָשִׂי בְּגָדֵי תְּפָאֲרֶתָה עִמִּי: עַל יַד בֶּן יִשִׁי בֵּית הַלְחָמִי. קְרַבָּה אֶל נַפְשִׁי גְּאֻלָּה: לכה

הַתְּעוֹרְרִי הַתְּעוֹרְרִי. כִּי בָּא אֲוֶרֶךְ קוּמִי אֲוֶרִי. עוֹרִי עוֹרִי שִׁיר דְּבָרִי. כְּבוֹד יְיָ עֲלֶיךָ נִגְלָה: לכה

Go forth my beloved to meet the bride, let us welcome Shabbat.

Sanctuary of the sovereign, royal city - arise! - leave your turmoil behind.

Too long have you dwelled in the valley of tears, the compassionate one will provide comfort.

Shake off the ashes. Rise from the dust! Dress in glorious garments, my people, my gem.

Through the son of Jesse of Bethlehem, redemption draws near to my soul.

Awake, awake! Your light is here. Arise! Shine out light, bold and clear:

Wake up! Wake up! Break out in song. Through you the presence of God comes alive.

Mekhilta, 20:20

Rabbi Akiva said: Be not like those who honor their gods in prosperity and curse them in adversity. In pleasure or pain, give thanks.

Learning from Crisis and Trauma

Because I've been in this pit before and I know the way out - Leo McGarry

Proverbs 24:16

כִּי לְשֶׁבַע יִפֹּל צַדִּיק וְגַם יִרְשָׁעִים יִפְּשְׁלוּ בְרָעָה:

Seven times the righteous fall and get up, while the wicked are tripped by one misfortune.

Pri Tzadik, Nitzavim 1:1

But Israel falls and stands as it says, "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I rise again." This is as though the act of falling is the reason that one is able to rise. This is the language of the rabbis, when they speak of "downward motion for the sake of upward motion." That is, through descent one can reach an even greater ascent. Likewise it says, "Seven times the righteous fall and get up." That it is only by falling, they are able to get up.

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 99a

דא"ר אבהו מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין שם צדיקים אינן עומדין שם שנאמר "שלום שלום לרחוק ולקרוב" (ישעיהו נז:יט) ברישא רחוק והדר קרוב מאי רחוק רחוק דמעיקרא ומאי קרוב קרוב דמעיקרא ודהשתא.

Rabbi Abahu says: the place occupied by those who have sinned and atoned cannot be attained by the completely righteous; as it written "Peace, peace to those far off and those who are close" (Isaiah 57:19) at the beginning the verse says "far off" and then says "close". What is meant by 'far off'? Originally far off (sinners initially) and what is meant by 'close'? Close initially and to this day.

Talmud Bavli Chagigah 27a

א"ר אבהו אמר ר"א ת"ח אין אור של גיהנם שולטת בהן. ק"ו מסלמנדרא, ומה סלמנדרא שתולדת אש היא הסך מדמה אין אור שולטת בו. ת"ח שכל גופן אש דכתיב (ירמיהו כג, כט) הלא כה דברי כאש נאם ה' על אחת כמה וכמה. אמר ריש לקיש אין אור של גיהנם שולטת בפושעי ישראל קל וחומר ממזבח הזהב. מה מזבח הזהב שאין עליו אלא כעובי דינר זהב כמה שנים אין האור שולטת בו פושעי ישראל שמלאין מצות כרמון דכתיב (שיר השירים ד, ג) כפלח הרמון רקתך אל תקרי רקתך אלא רקנין שבך על אחת כמה וכמה:

[After a discussion of why the implements of ritual sacrifice were overlaid with metal which rendered them susceptible to impurity]

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: the light of Gehinom has no power over the sages. So too with the salamander, the salamander is born out of fire and one who anoints themselves with its blood is immune to fire. How much more so for sages, whose entire bodies are made out of fire, as it is written “Is not my word like fire? Says the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:29) (i.e. they are immune to fire).

Sarah Williams the Old Astronomer to his Pupil

But, my pupil, as my pupil you have
learned the worth of scorn,
You have laughed with me at pity, we have
joyed to be forlorn,
What for us are all distractions of men’s
fellowship and wiles;
What for us the Goddess Pleasure with her
meretricious smiles.

You may tell that German College that
their honor comes too late,
But they must not waste repentance on the
grizzly savant’s fate.
Though my soul may set in darkness, it will
rise in perfect light;
I have loved the stars too fondly to be
fearful of the night.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, 402-403

Should we then despair because of our being unable to retain perfect purity? We should, if perfection were our goal. However, we are not obliged to be perfect once and for all, but only to rise again and again beyond the level of the self. Perfection is divine, and to make it a goal of man is to call on man to be divine. All we can do is try to wring our hearts clean in contrition. Contrition begins with a feeling of shame at our being incapable of disentanglement from the self. To be contrite at our failures is holier than to be complacent in perfection.

Responding to Crises Through Action

Despair is not a strategy. - Ruth Messinger

Pirkei Avot 2:16

הוא הנה אומר, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין לקבול ממנה.

[Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.

Jonah 3:1-10

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינֹנָה שְׁנִיט לֵאמֹר: קוּם לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקֵרָא אֵלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיהָ: וַיִּקָּם יוֹנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה כְּדָבָר יְיָ וַנִּינְוָה הִיטָה עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֱלֹהִים מִהַלָּךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים: וַיִּחַל יוֹנָה לְבוֹא בְעִיר מִהַלָּךְ יוֹם אֶחָד וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וַנִּינְוָה נִהְפָּכֶת: וַיֹּאמְרֵנוּ אַנְשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ־צוֹם וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים מִגְּדוֹלָם וְעַד־קִטְנֵיהֶם: וַיִּגַע הַדָּבָר אֶל־מֶלֶךְ נִינְוָה וַיִּקָּם מִכִּסְאוֹ וַיַּעֲבֵר אֲדָרְתוֹ מֵעָלָיו וַיִּכַּס שֵׁק וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הָאָפֶר: וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינְוָה מִטַּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיְגַדְּלוּ לֵאמֹר הָאֵדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבְּבִקָר וְהַצֹּאן אֲלֵי־יִטְעָמוּ מֵאוֹמָה אֲלֵי־רֵעֵו וַיָּמִים אֲלֵי־יִשְׁתּוּ: וַיִּתְפַּסּוּ שָׂקִים הָאֵדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֱלֹהִים בְּחַנּוּקָה וַיָּשֻׁבוּ וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הַרְעָה וּמִו־הַחַטָּם אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם: מִי־יִדְעַע יָשׁוּב וְנָחַם הָאֱלֹהִים וְשָׁב מִחַרוֹן אַפּוֹ וְלֹא נֹאבָד: וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדַּרְכָּם הַרְעָה וַיִּנְחַם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: **2** “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.” **3** Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with the LORD’s command. Nineveh was an enormously large city a three days’ walk across. **4** Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day’s walk, and proclaimed: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” **5** The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. **6** When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. **7** And he had the word cried through Nineveh: “By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! **8** They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from their evil ways and from the injustice of which they are guilty. **9** Who knows, perhaps God may turn and relent? God may turn back from wrath, so that we do not perish.” **10** God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment that had been planned, and did not carry it out.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b-55a

כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה - נתפס על אנשי ביתו, באנשי עירו - נתפס על אנשי עירו, בכל העולם כולו

Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's household and does not, is punished for the actions of the members of the household; against the people of their town and does not, is punished for the transgressions of the townspeople; against the transgressions of the entire world and does not is punished for the transgressions of the entire world.

Presence as Action

Pirkei Avot 2:4

הלל אומר, אל תפרש מן הצבור, ואל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך, ואל תדין את חבֵרְךָ עד שתגיע למקומו, ואל תאמר דבר שאי אפשר לשמע, שסופו להשמע. ואל תאמר לקשאפנה אשנה, שמא לא תפנה:

Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not be assured of yourself until the day of your death. Do not judge another until you come to stand in their place. Do not say something that cannot be heard, for in the end it will be heard. Do not say, "I will learn when I have time," lest you never become available.

Bartenura on Pirkei Avot 2:4

אל תפרוש מן הציבור אלא השתתף בצרתם. שכל הפורש מן הציבור אינו רואה בנחמת הציבור [תענית י"א ע"א]:

Do not separate yourself from the community — but rather share in their troubles. As anyone who separates from the congregation will not see the congregation consoled (Taanit 11a).