

What To Do

WHEN LIFE SUCKS!

A Torah Guide To Sanity

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

Copyright © 2009 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.

Let's be honest; life sometimes really sucks! Don't complain to me about my non-Rabbinic choice of words! Being a Rabbi means having to be honest and sometimes things get so bad that the word "sucks" is the best word to use to describe them. What's more, everyone of you reading this knows this to be true! Yes, life sometimes can be a real joy, most times life is just what it is, no great highs and no great lows and then there are times when things just "suck." And it seems today that more and more people are experiencing this more and more.

Life and living have never been easy. We can look to the role models of our Torah ancestors to see this. As righteous as the ancients were their lives were still filled with turmoil, tribulations and tragedies. So much for religion being some kind of a magical safeguard against all of the real troubles in life.

Ya'akov Avinu was a righteous man who walked with G-d. Yet, it did not protect his daughter from being raped in Shekhem. Ya'akov Avinu could even fight and defeat angels, yet this did not protect his son Yosef from having to serve as a slave in Egypt for 13 years, nor did it give Ya'akov clairvoyance enough to see that his son, presumed dead, was actually alive.

Torah makes it very clear that when Yaakov's trusted sons informed him that Yosef was dead, he was so overwhelmed by the news that he was too distraught to believe anything else. Ya'akov was broken on the spot and for the next 22 years suffered from despair and what today would be defined as clinical depression.

Torah does not record G-d reaching out to Ya'akov to advise him of the truth. Torah does not record G-d even trying to comfort Yaakov. No, Ya'akov the righteous, the man who fought with angels sunk into depression and no one in Heaven or on Earth was able to save him. No one can use any other term to describe this other than to say that this really "sucked!"

As people of faith who live by Torah, we believe and we know that everything has its purpose and that the Ways and Means of Heaven are beyond our mere mortal abilities to understand. We all know that the story between Ya'akov and Yosef had a happy ending, but this is not the point! The point is not what happens in the end, but rather the point is what was it like going through the hard times before the end came? This is what we have to focus on!

We have to be honest and acknowledge that G-d did not intervene to save Ya'akov from twenty-two years of a living hell. This was not the first time, nor was it the last time that G-d would allow human beings to suffer through life all the while knowing that the Divine Plan in the end will bare

blessed fruits. Any of this sound familiar? How many of us have experienced our own little “living hells” apparently without any Divine intervention to help us make things better?

Yes, this is life! And sometimes it can really suck! And sometimes, pray as we do and as religious and we are, still it seems that all we receive from Heaven is a Divine “busy-signal” every time we call out in prayer. We proclaim in our religious faith that “this too is for good” and that “G-d has His reasons.” Yet, all the while that we cry out our religion, we are still suffering, just as did our father Ya'akov before us.

We must learn from this a rather profound and sobering lesson. Isaiah 55:8-9 recorded it in very appropriate prophetic words. G-d told Isaiah in prophecy that, “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,*” says HaShem. *As the Heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts [higher] than your thoughts.*”

Simply stated, we do not and cannot understand what G-d does and why He does it. What's more, and this should be obvious; there really isn't much that we can do to manipulate G-d and to persuade Heaven to makes our lives forever comfortable and happy. G-d has His ways and sometimes those ways include periods when our lives, despite our best efforts to the opposite will still suck!

So, what hope is there for us? Isn't there anything we can do to avoid adversity and hardships? Many Rabbis will offer you here much advice, but in the end, do all the words and good wishes really make the hard times any easier? Actually, sometimes, yes they do! The good wishes and wise words of our friends do make a great difference. Sometimes it is our friends and closet colleagues who are the only ones who provide for us some type of solace when the going gets rough and we are down in the pits. Maybe there is some Divine Wisdom concealed in all this.

Maybe this is G-d's way to get us to turn to one another for help and support, and to learn to rely on one another for support, the natural way, as opposed to relying on G-d for some supernatural intervention. Maybe as we face life's hardships, the purpose of it all is to teach us how to act humanely with one another. Maybe life sucks to teach us a great lesson about what to do about life at the very times when it sucks the most!

We all know that in the end everything will work out, one way or another. We all know that the hardest part of anything is getting through it. Yet, how we get through it is the greatest test of our character, our resolve and our faith.

Let's be honest, being religious is no guarantee to bliss, happiness and blessing. We all know plenty of religious people who have more than their fare share of problems. Let's face it, from our human point of view, life simply is not fair, and that's the end of it. Nothing is going to change that; not prayers, Torah study or the observance of mitzvot. Life is the way it is as it is ordained by Heaven, period. There is nothing more to say!

So, now that this has been said, let us turn instead to what can be done. **While we cannot control what happens to us in life, we can indeed control how we respond to what happens to us in life. When we suffer from whatever hardships that befall us, we are either broken by them or strengthened by them. Adversity and suffering is like a burning fire, the fire will either melt us down to nothing, or refine us and make us pure. Which will be our destiny is our decision alone. We did not start the fire but we can control its burn. We choose to be melted or to be purified.**

Yes, life sucks! There is no doubt about it, but as the old saying goes, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” This is the true Torah Way. And who knows? Maybe this is why G-d sends adversity into our lives in the first place?

We all know that eventually there will be a happy ending. There really is a Divine purpose and reason for everything bad that happens. While we may not understand it and we most certainly like it even less, nonetheless once the fire has dissipated and we come out the other side stronger, purer and more refined, we are often actually thankful for the experience.

Ya'akov Avinu suffered through hell for twenty-two years due to the loss of Yosef his son. Yosef suffered even more. He was betrayed by his own brothers. He was so unfairly treated. He was falsely enslaved, falsely accused of rape and falsely imprisoned. If anyone had reasons to be bitter, it was Yosef. What Yosef's brothers did to him was far worse than anything Ya'akov ever did to his brother Esav. Yet, Esav chose to have the fire consume him with hatred. Yosef, on the other hand allowed the fire to purify him and to make him better.

To this day, Esav is the enemy of Ya'akov, whereas Yosef is leader and firstborn among his brothers. A messiah will come forth from Yosef and it will be he who will defeat the seed of Esav. Why is this to be so? To teach us all a lesson. **The brother who succumbed to hate and became an enemy will be defeated by the brother who overcame hate and rose to be a king.**

Yes, life sucks! But we can chose how we deal with it. We can chose to become an Esav or we can chose to become a Yosef. **We can chose to be overwhelmed or we can chose to overcome.**

Yosef made peace and prospered. Esav makes war and is destined to be defeated. Yosef rose to the occasion. Esav sunk to the depths. Yosef was eventually embraced by his brothers. Esav's hate causes his brother to have to destroy him. Yosef's adversity brought the best out of him. Esav's adversity brought the worst out of him.

And as for Ya'akov, he suffered, numb, unable to rise up or to sink down. But this too was by G-d's plan. Ya'akov the man suffered but he was revived. He was revived through his living son Yosef. The nation of Ya'akov/Yisrael also suffers and is numb with shock, pain and loss; but out of Yisrael will rise another Yosef, a Mashiah Ben Yosef. Like his namesake before him, he will bring comfort and solace to his father and his people.

The prophet Ovadiah (1:18) has written, *“And the house of Ya'akov shall be fire and the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Esav shall become stubble, and they shall ignite them and consume them, and the house of Esav shall have no survivors, for HaShem has spoken.”*

When live sucks, our solution is to rise above it, as did Yosef. By doing so, **we “take the bull by its horns,” we take control and do the best we can with what we have. Like Yosef we turn to our brothers in complete forgiveness, work together and then, only together, do we make things better. “Behold how pleasant it is for brothers the dwell in unity” (Psalm 133:1).**

May we all merit to learn to be like Yosef and not like Esav. Maybe then life won't “suck” as much.