This work is dedicated
with deep appreciation
to the rabbis, teachers and friends who knowingly
and unknowingly helped me transform a journey
through grief into a Labor of Love;
with everlasting love to my life partner Shalom and
our sons David Jonah and Daniel Lev;
and with gratitude to the Holy One who endows us
with the capacity to experience pain, love,
understanding and healing.

PREFACE : A Personal Encounter with the Talmud

I sit in my weekly Talmud study session with a group of local rabbis. It is autumn of 1994, about three months since the sudden death of my ten year old son, Jonathan Gabriel. These days, I, a grieving mother whose world has been shattered, participate in few activities. One activity I have returned to, however, is this study group. Text study has always nourished me spiritually and intellectually, and I am in need of it at this vulnerable time. Today, we study some passages which make me feel as though the sages were speaking directly to me. In a discussion about suffering, the Talmud refers to the death of one's child as the epitome of personal tragedy. In one passage it even suggests that the pain of losing a child is so great that it atones for the bereaved parent's sins. "If a person has studied Torah, engaged in acts of lovingkindness, and buried his own children, all his sins are forgiven him."[1] *The text touches me in a way that transcends the words on the page. I can feel divine compassion in the Talmudic sages' words, which seem to say, "You who have buried your child, we understand the depth of your pain, and the pain itself purifies you. This pain is so great that questions of your worthiness are not relevant. We open our hearts to you and we include you together with the most righteous of people."*

In the same sugya about suffering, the Talmudic sages also talk about something they call "yissurin shel ahava," literally "sufferings of love." They speak of suffering as sometimes reflecting God's love, and seem to assert that there are some forms of pain that God delivers lovingly.

I do not understand the difficult concepts in these texts, yet I already find great comfort in them. I am grateful that the rabbis of the Talmud, without extolling suffering, acknowledge its reality and the need for the sufferer to make theological and spiritual sense of his pain. They do not dismiss the sufferer either by telling him only that his suffering is deserved, or by ignoring and thereby denying his pain. Instead, they attempt to probe more deeply the meaning and the experience of suffering. Since Jonathan's death, I do not encounter this attitude very much in the real world. After the initial crisis, during which so many people reached

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot 5b

out to comfort and support my family and me, many now avoid me, try to distract me, or to "cheer me up." Everyone around me seems to be running away from my sadness, working hard to put fences and barriers around it and around me. But it does not feel helpful or honest to try to deny my painful feelings, and people's avoidance increases my loneliness. My need is not to run away, but rather to plunge into my grief head on, to close my eyes, hold my breath and jump into those icy waters. I am amazed and heartened, as I encounter this sugya for the first time, to read what the sages of the Talmud seem to be telling me: that my pain might reflect, or lead to, nothing less than God's love! They are affirming the possibilities of redemption in suffering. I feel as though they have crawled out from the pages of my book and traveled across the centuries to wrap me in wise, strong, loving arms. They give me hope in the possibility of deep and meaningful comfort for my loss.

This paper is a meditation on the approach to suffering in the sugya in question, Babylonian tractate Berachot, pages 5a and 5b. The work represents and combines three of my life passions. First, my relationship with Jewish sacred texts, which I consider an opening to the Holy One. What I described above represents one of a number of occasions on which sacred texts have literally changed my life. Second, my work as a chaplain and spiritual helper, in which I attempt to find ways to help people feel God's presence in their lives. Third, on a most personal level, I have learned to find meaning and receive comfort for the death of my son Jonathan by exploring the issues of suffering and comforting, trying to understand them for myself and for my work, as well as to teach others what I have learned and to use the learning in my in my spiritual guidance of others.

In the years since my first encounter with this sugya, I have learned that passages from it are often quoted in writing about traditional rabbinic views on suffering. They are also used frequently as texts on healing for those who serve as

spiritual helpers and chaplains. David Kraemer notes in his book "Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature" that this *sugya* constitutes "the longest deliberation (by far) on suffering as such in all classical rabbinic literature." (188) This Talmudic selection offers insight into rabbinic perspectives on the theology, meaning and experience of suffering, as well as insight into the nature of comforting and healing. It attempts a more nuanced approach to the ambiguities, contradictions and challenges of theology's response to the essential "problems" of suffering, such as, why do the righteous suffer, and why does God allow suffering at all?

Since the Talmud is not written as a textbook, the sugya does not offer one comprehensive, coherent philosophical statement about suffering. Although it is highly structured from a literary point of view, as Louis Jacobs writes in his article about it, "we are far removed from anything like a systematic treatment by the rabbis of the theological problem of suffering." (43) However, it nonetheless follows what Jacobs calls a "carefully thought-out pattern" designed to make certain points (41). As it does so, the sugya reflects its historical religious contexts, but it also reaches beyond those contexts to address how humans confront these problems throughout time. The Talmud's engagement in that confrontation on several different levels was what first drew me to this text. Definitive answers cannot be extracted from it, but it offers an array of paths of entry into the universal and eternal issue of suffering and how religion deals with it.

The paper follows the progression of topics in the Talmudic text. It is divided into two broad approaches to suffering, labeled "Explaining Suffering" and "Enduring Suffering." Like the sugya, the paper first addresses ideas about suffering from conceptual religious and historical perspectives. Then, again following the

sugya, the paper attempts to set its theoretical ideas into a context of "real life" through aggadic and anecdotal material, juxtaposing the rabbis' theological statements with their perceptions of how real people respond to suffering. The *sugya* implies a number of lessons about how to comfort one who is suffering, and about the components of healing. I will briefly explore some ideas and tools that it suggests for those who suffer and for those who minister to their spiritual needs.

Each sub-section of the paper is about a theme inspired by the sugya, and each is headed by a quotation that reflects that theme. The more original ideas of this sugya, of *yissurin shel ahava* and of acceptance of suffering, are explored most fully. The full text of the sugya in Aramaic and in English is attached in the supplemental material, as is a general outline of the structure of the sugya.

Different levels of understanding about a topic can be reached through real-life accounts. For this reason, and because these texts have been of personal importance to me, I have interspersed narratives of my own experience as a bereaved mother within these discussions. The Talmud's anecdotes about its protagonists "comment" on the ideas they profess in illuminating and sometimes unexpected ways. I hope that my personal perspectives of the avenue on which I have traveled will provide a helpful avenue of entry into the text. My personal writings are italicized and are told in the first-person. Additional personal writing and poetry are also included in the supplementary section.

Labors of Love: Suffering, Comforting and Theology in a *Sugya* of Talmud

Rena H. Kieval

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<u>תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ה עמוד א</u>

אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: כל העוסק בתורה יסורין בדילין הימנו, שנאמר: ובני רשף יגביהו עוף; ואין עוף אלא תורה, שנאמר: התעיף עיניך בו ואיננו; ואין רשף אלא יסורין, שנאמר: מזי רעב ולחמי רשף. אמר ליה רבי יוחנן: הא אפילו תינוקות של בית רבן יודעין אותו, שנאמר: +שמות ט"ו+ ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע לקול ה' אלהיך והישר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו ושמרת כל חקיו כל המחלה אשר שמתי במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני ה' רופאך! אלא: כל שאפשר לו לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק - הקדוש ברוך הוא מביא עליו יסורין מכוערין ועוכרין אותו, שנאמר: +תהלים ל"ט+ נאלמתי דומיה החשיתי מטוב וכאבי נעכר, ואין טוב אלא תורה, שנאמר: +משלי ד'+ כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורתי אל תעזובו.

אמר רבי זירא ואיתימא רבי חנינא בר פפא: בא וראה שלא כמדת הקדוש ברוך הוא מדת בשר ודם, מדת בשר ודם - אדם מוכר חפץ לחבירו, מוכר עצב ולוקח שמח; אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא אינו כן - נתן להם תורה לישראל ושמח, שנאמר: כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורתי אל תעזובו.

אמר רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא: אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו - יפשפש במעשיו, שנאמר +איכה ג'+ נחפשה דרכינו ונחקורה ונשובה עד ה'; פשפש ולא מצא - יתלה בבטול תורה, שנאמר: +תהלים צ"ד+ אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה ומתורתך תלמדנו. ואם תלה ולא מצא - בידוע שיסורין של אהבה הם, שנאמר: +משלי ג'+ כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח.

אמר רבא אמר רב סחורה אמר רב הונא: כל שהקדוש ברוך הוא חפץ בו - מדכאו ביסורין, שנאמר: +ישעיהו נ"ג+ וה' חפץ דכאו החלי; יכול אפילו לא קבלם מאהבה - תלמוד לומר +ישעיהו נ"ג+ אם תשים אשם נפשו, מה אשם לדעת - אף יסורין לדעת. ואם קבלם מה שכרו - +ישעיהו נ"ג+ יראה זרע יאריך ימים; ולא עוד אלא שתלמודו מתקיים בידו, שנאמר: +ישעיהו נ"ג+ וחפץ ה' בידו יצלח.

פליגי בה רבי יעקב בר אידי ורבי אחא בר חנינא, חד אמר: אלו הם יסורין של אהבה - כל שאין בהן בטול תורה, שנאמר: אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה ומתורתך תלמדנו; וחד אמר: אלו הן יסורין של אהבה - כל שאין בהן בטול תפלה, שנאמר: +תהלים ס"ו+ ברוך אלהים אשר לא הסיר תפלתי וחסדו מאתי. אמר להו רבי אבא בריה דרבי חייא בר אבא, הכי אמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן: אלו ואלו יסורין של אהבה הן, שנאמר: כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח; אלא מה תלמוד לומר ומתורתך תלמדנו? - אל תקרי תלמדנו אלא תלמדנו; דבר זה מתורתך תלמדנו; קל וחומר משן ועין: מה שן ועין שהן אחד מאבריו של אדם - עבד יוצא בהן לחרות, יסורין שממרקין כל גופו של אדם - על אחת כמה וכמה, והיינו דרבי שמעון בן לקיש, דאמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: נאמר ברית במלח ונאמר ברית ביסורין; נאמר ברית במלח, דכתיב +ויקרא ב'+ ולא תשבית מלח ברית, ונאמר ברית ביסורין, דכתיב: +דברים כ"ח+ אלה דברי הברית. מה ברית - האמור במלח - מלח ממתקת את הבשר, אף ברית האמור ביסורין - יסורין ממרקין כל עונותיו של אדם.

תניא, רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר: שלש מתנות טובות נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל, וכולן לא נתנן אלא על - ידי יסורין. אלו הן: תורה וארץ ישראל והעולם הבא. תורה מנין - שנאמר: אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה ומתורתך תלמדנו. ארץ ישראל - דכתיב +דברים ח'+ כי כאשר ייסר איש את בנו ה' אלהיך מיסרך, וכתיב בתריה: כי ה' אלהיך מביאך אל ארץ טובה. העולם הבא - דכתיב +משלי ו'+ כי נר מצוה ותורה אור ודרך חיים תוכחות מוסר. תני תנא קמיה דרבי יוחנן: כל העוסק בתורה ובגמילות חסדים **<u>(דף ה עמוד ב)</u>**

וקובר את בניו - מוחלין לו על כל עונותיו. אמר ליה רבי יוחנן: בשלמא תורה וגמילות חסדים - דכתיב +משלי ט"ז+ בחסד ואמת יכפר עון; חסד - זו גמילות חסדים, שנאמר +משלי כ"א+ רודף צדקה וחסד ימצא חיים צדקה וכבוד, אמת - זו תורה, שנאמר: +משלי כ"ג+ אמת קנה ואל תמכר; אלא קובר את בניו - מנין? תנא ליה ההוא סבא משום רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: אתיא עון, עון, כתיב הכא: בחסד ואמת יכפר עון, וכתיב התם: +ירמיהו ל"ב+ ומשלם עון אבות אל חיק בניהם. אמר רבי יוחנן: נגעים ובנים אינן יסורין של אהבה. ונגעים לא? והתניא: כל מי שיש בו אחד מארבעה מראות נגעים הללו - אינן אלא מזבח כפרה! - מזבח כפרה הוו, יסורין של אהבה לא הוו. ואי בעית אימא: הא לן והא להו. ואי בעית אימא: הא בצנעא, הא בפרהסיא, ובנים לא? היכי דמי? אילימא דהוו להו ומתו - והא אמר רבי יוחנן: דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר. אלא: הא - דלא הוו ליה כלל, והא - דהוו ליה ומתו.

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך! יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. רבי יוחנן חלש, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך! יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה! - אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים. - 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 הממעיט 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 שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך, יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

רב הונא תקיפו ליה ארבע מאה דני דחמרא, על לגביה רב יהודה אחוה דרב סלא חסידא ורבנן, ואמרי לה: רב אדא בר אהבה ורבנן, ואמרו ליה: לעיין מר במיליה. אמר להו: ומי חשידנא בעינייכו? אמרו ליה: מי חשיד קודשא בריך הוא דעביד דינא בלא דינא? אמר להו: אי איכא מאן דשמיע עלי מלתא - לימא. אמרו ליה: הכי שמיע לן דלא יהיב מר שבישא לאריסיה. אמר להו: מי קא שביק לי מידי מיניה? הא קא גניב ליה כוליה! אמרו ליה: היינו דאמרי אינשי: בתר גנבא גנוב, וטעמא טעים. אמר להו: קבילנא עלי דיהיבנא ליה. איכא דאמרי: הדר חלא והוה חמרא; ואיכא דאמרי: אייקר חלא ואיזדבן בדמי דחמרא.

Babylonian Mas. Brachot 5a --- Soncino translation, (footnote material inserted into text

in parentheses)

…R. Simeon b. Lakish says: If one studies the Torah, painful sufferings are kept away from him. For it is said: And the sons of reshef fly upward. The word 'uf refers only to the Torah, as it is written: 'Wilt thou cause thine eyes to close upon it? It is gone'. And 'reshef' refers only to painful sufferings, as it is said: 'The wasting of hunger, and the devouring of the reshef [fiery bolt]. R. Johanan said to him: This (that the Torah is a protection against painful disease) is known even to school children (who study the Pentateuch, where it is plainly said. For it is said: And He said: If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His eyes, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon thee which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that healeth thee (Ex. XV, 26). Rather [should you say]: If one has the opportunity to study the Torah and does not study it, the Holy One, blessed be He, visits him with ugly and painful sufferings which stir him up. For it is said: I was dumb with silence, I kept silence from the good thing, and my pain was stirred up (Ps. XXXIX, 3. E.V. 'I held my peace, had no comfort, and my pain was held in check'.) 'The good thing' refers only to the Torah, as it is said: For I give you good doctrine; forsake ye not My teaching (Prov. IV, 2).

R. Zera (some say, R. Hanina b. Papa) says: Come and see how the way of human beings differs from the way of the Holy One, blessed be He. It is the way of human beings that when a man sells (out of poverty and not for business) a valuable object to his fellow, the seller grieves and the buyer rejoices. The Holy One, blessed be He, however, is different. He gave the Torah to Israel and rejoiced. For it is said: For I give you good doctrine; forsake ye not My teaching.

Raba (some say, R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord (Lam. III, 40). If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said: Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest out of Thy law (Ps. XCIV, 12). If he did attribute it [thus], and still did not find [this to be the cause, let him be sure that these are chastenings of love. For it is said: For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth (Prov. III, 12).

Raba, in the name of R. Sahorah, in the name of R. Huna, says: If the Holy One, blessed be He, is pleased with a man, he crushes him with painful sufferings. For it is

said: And the Lord was pleased with [him, hence] he crushed him by disease (Isa. LIII, 10). Now, you might think that this is so even if he did not accept them with love. Therefore it is said: To see if his soul would offer itself in restitution (Ibid. The Hebrew word for 'restitution' is asham which means also 'trespass-offering'). Even as the trespass-offering must be brought by consent, so also the sufferings must be endured with consent. And if he did accept them, what is his reward? He will see his seed, prolong his days (Ibid). And more than that, his knowledge [of the Torah] will endure with him. For it is said: The purpose of the Lord will prosper in his hand (Ibid).

R. Jacob b. Idi and R. Aha b. Hanina differ with regard to the following: The one says: Chastenings of love are such as do not involve the intermission of study of the Torah. For it is said: Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest out of Thy law (Ps. XCIV, 12). And the other one says: Chastenings of love are such as do not involve the intermission of prayer. For it is said: Blessed be God, Who hath not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me (Ps. LXVI, 20). R. Abba the son of R. Hiyya b. Abba said to them: Thus said R. Hiyya b. Abba in the name of R. Johanan: Both of them are chastenings of love. For it is said: For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth (Prov. III 12). Why then does it say: 'And teachest him out of Thy law'? Do not read telammedennu, [Thou teachest him] but telammedenu, [Thou teachest us]. Thou teachest us this thing out of Thy law as a conclusion a fortiori from the law concerning tooth and eye(V. Ex. XXI, 26, 27). If the master knocks out the tooth or eye of his slave, then the slave has to be set free. Tooth and eye are only one limb of the man, and still [if they are hurt], the slave obtains thereby his freedom. How much more so with painful sufferings which torment the whole body of a man! And this agrees with a saying of R. Simeon b. Lakish. For R. Simeon b. Lakish said: The word 'covenant' is mentioned in connection with salt, and the word 'covenant' is mentioned in connection with sufferings: the word 'covenant' is mentioned in connection with salt, as it is written: Neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking (Lev. II, 13). And the word 'covenant' is mentioned in connection with sufferings, as it is written: These are the words of the covenant (Deut. XXVIII, 69). These words refer to the chapter dealing with the sufferings of Israel. Even as in the covenant mentioned in connection with salt, the salt lends a sweet taste to the meat, so also in the covenant mentioned in connection with sufferings, the sufferings wash away all the sins of a man.

It has been taught: R. Simeon b. Yohai says: The Holy One, blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, and all of them were given only through sufferings. These are: The Torah, the Land of Israel and the world to come. Whence do we know this of the Torah? — Because it is said: Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, o

Lord, and teachest him out of Thy law (Ps. XCIV, 12). Whence of the Land of Israel? — Because it is written: As a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee(Deut. VIII, 5) and after that it is written: For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land (Ibid. v. 7).

Whence of the world to come? — Because it is written: For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light, and reproofs of sufferings are the way of life (Prov. VI, 23).

A Tanna recited before R. Johanan the following: If a man busies himself in the study of the Torah and in acts of charity [page 5b] and [nonetheless] buries his children (An allusion to R. Johanan himself, who was a great scholar and a charitable man, and was bereft of his children) all his sins are forgiven him. R. Johanan said to him: I grant you Torah and acts of charity, for it is written: By mercy and truth iniquity is expiated

(Ibid. XVI, 6). 'Mercy' is acts of charity, for it is said: He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, prosperity and honour (Ibid. XXI, 21). 'Truth' is Torah, for it is said: Buy the truth and sell it not (Ibid. XXIII, 23). But how do you know [what you say about] the one who buries his children? — A certain Elder [thereupon] recited to him in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: It is concluded from the analogy in the use of the word 'iniquity'. Here it is written: By mercy and truth iniquity is expiated. And elsewhere it is written: And who recompenseth the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children (Jer. XXXII, 18).

R. Johanan says: Leprosy and [the lack of] children are not chastisements of love. But is leprosy not a chastisement of love? Is it not taught: If a man has one of these four symptoms of leprosy (which are enumerated in Mishnah Nega'im I, I) it is nothing else but an altar of atonement? — They are an altar of atonement, but they are not chastisements of love. If you like, I can say: This [teaching of the Baraitha] is ours [in Babylonia], and that [saying of R. Johanan] is theirs [in Palestine] (In Palestine where a leprous person had to be isolated outside the city (cf. Lev. XIII, 46), leprosy was not regarded as 'chastisements of love' owing to the severity of the treatment involved). If you like, I can say: This [teaching of the Baraitha] refers to hidden [leprosy], that [saying of R. Johanan] refers to a case of visible [leprosy]. But is [the lack of] children not a chastisement of love? How is this to be understood? Shall I say that he had children and they died? Did not R. Johanan himself say: This is the bone of my tenth son? (who died in his lifetime. The Gemara deduces from that saying that he regarded the death of children as a chastisement of love. Aruch understands this to have been a tooth of the last of his sons which he preserved and used to show to people who suffered bereavement in order to induce in them a spirit

of resignation such as he himself had in his successive bereavements.) Rather [say then] that the former saying refers to one who never had children, the latter to one who had children and lost them.

R. Hiyya b. Abba fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward (The implication is that if one lovingly acquiesces in his sufferings, his reward in the world to come is very great). He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he (R. Johanan) raised him (He cured him by the touch of his hand)

R. Johanan once fell ill and R. Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could not R. Johanan raise himself? (If he could cure R. Hiyya b. Abba, why could not he cure himself?)

— They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail. (And the patient cannot cure himself.)

R. Eleazar fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He noticed that he was lying in a dark room, (R. Eleazar was a poor man and lived in a room without windows) and he bared his arm and light radiated from it. (R. Johanan was supposed to be so beautiful that a light radiated from his body, v. B.M. 84a). Thereupon he noticed that R. Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep?

Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learnt: The one who sacrifices much and the one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided that the heart is directed to heaven (Men. 110b).

Is it perhaps lack of sustenance? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables. (Learning and wealth. Or perhaps, this world and the next.)

Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son! — He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty (I.e., the beautiful body of yours) that is going to rot in the earth. He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep; and they both wept.

In the meanwhile he said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? — He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand, and he gave him his hand and he raised him.

Once four hundred jars of wine belonging to R. Huna turned sour. Rab Judah, the brother of R. Sala the Pious, and the other scholars (some say: R. Adda b. Ahaba and the other scholars) went in to visit him and said to him: The master ought to examine his actions. (You may perhaps have deserved your misfortune through some sin.) He said to them: Am I suspect in your eyes? They replied: Is the Holy One,

blessed be He, suspect of punishing without justice? — He said to them: If somebody has heard of anything against me, let him speak out. They replied: We have heard that the master does not give his tenant his [lawful share in the] vine twigs. He replied: Does he leave me any? He steals them all! They said to him: That is exactly what the proverb says (Lit., 'what people say'):

If you steal from a thief you also have a taste of it! (Even if your tenant is a thief this does not free you from giving him his lawful share.) He said to them: I pledge myself to give it to him [in the future]. Some report that thereupon the vinegar became wine again; others that the vinegar went up so high that it was sold for the same price as wine.

Condensed Outline of Sugya on Suffering – Berachot 5a - 5b

(based on, but not identical to, outline in Kraemer, pps 189-199)

1. a. Resh Lakish: Study of Torah prevents suffering
   b. R. Yochanan : Schoolchildren know that; rather say that one who has the chance to study and doesn't, God brings suffering upon him

2. Rava, some say R. Hisda:
   a. If a man is afflicted, he should examine his deeds.
   b. If deeds not the cause, attribute it to neglect of Torah study
   c. If Torah study not the cause, they are sufferings of (God's) love

3. Rava, R. Schora, R. Huna said:
   a. Anyone the Holy One desires, He afflicts with suffering
   b. Sufferer must accept them willingly
   c. What is the reward for accepting them? Offspring, long life and learning will remain with him

4. R. Jacob b. Idi and R. Aha b. Hanina dispute:
   a. One says - Sufferings of love are those which do not cause neglect of Torah
   b. One says – Sufferings of love are those which do not cause neglect of prayer
   c. R. Hiyya b. Abba said- R. Yochanan said: both are sufferings of love; using a fortiori reasoning: just as a wounded slave goes free, so a suffering person is cleansed
   d. Resh Lakish similarly learns from a set of verses that suffering cleanses a person of sin

5. R. Shimon b. Yochai taught that God gave Israel three good gifts through suffering:
   a. Torah
   b. Land of Israel
   c. World to Come
      [verses are brought to support a, b, and c]

6. A. A tanna taught before R. Yochanan: Anyone who engages in
   a. Torah
   b. deeds of lovingkindness,
   c. buries his children,
      all of his sins are forgiven him.

   B. R. Yochanan: a and b have supporting verses; Where do you learn c?

   C. Elder taught in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai based on a *gezerah shava* about offspring

7. R. Yochanan: sores and "children" are not sufferings of love.

   A. a. But it says that sores are an altar of atonement
      b. altar of atonement but not sufferings of love
      c. 'sores' are different in Babylonia than in Israel, where there are purity issues
      d. Difference could be between skin afflictions that are private and those which can be publicly seen

   B. Aren't "children" sufferings of love?
      a. If we mean someone had children and they died, didn't R. Yochanan say "this is the bone of my tenth?"
      b. Rather say that R. Yochanan's statement (#7 above) refers to when one had no children at all ; if he had them and they died, those are sufferings of love

8. A. R. Hiyya b. Abba became ill. R. Yochanan went in to him.
   a. He said: Is suffering dear to you?
   b. He said: neither it nor its reward.
   c. he said: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

   B. R. Yochanan became ill. R. Hanina went in to him.
   a. He said: Is suffering dear to you?
   b. He said: neither it nor its reward.

c. he said: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

d. Why could R. Yochanan not raise himself? A prisoner cannot free himself.

C. R. Eleazar became ill. R. Yochanan went into him. He found him in a dark room. R. Yochanan uncovered his arm and lit up the room, saw that he was crying.

a. He asked him: why do you weep?
1). because of Torah? God only cares about your intention not the quantity of study
2) because of food / material comforts? Not everyone can have wealth.
3) because of children? This is the bone of my tenth.
b. R. Eleazar: I am crying because of this beauty (R. Yochanan's) that will rot in the earth
c. R. Yochanan: That is cause for tears; and they cried together.
d. He said to him: Is suffering dear to you? ….. (same as 7 & 8 above)

9. R. Huna's four hundred barrels of wine turned sour.

A. Sages tell him to examine his deeds
a. R. Huna: Am I suspect in your eyes?
b. Sages: Is the Holy One suspected of injustice?
c. They confront him about his incorrect treatment of a laborer
d. R. Huna promises to correct his behavior

B. 1. There are those who say that his vinegar turned back to wine
2. There are those who say that the price of vinegar rose and it sold for the same amount as wine.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is commonly understood in contemporary thinking as a response to the human quest for meaning and for connection, as well as an attempt to create order out of chaos. We need a system within which to explain the world- if all is random, the world is too frightening. In his book "Stages of Faith," James Fowler defines this need:

> Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. (4)

Further defining the function of religion, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes in his article "Religion as a Cultural System," that in its quest to offer order and meaning, religion must respond to three challenges:

> There are at least three points where chaos – a tumult of events which lack not just interpretation but interpretability – threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight. Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it…" (100)

Our *sugya* in tractate Berachot takes up all three of these challenges with regard to suffering: to make cognitive sense of it, to place it within an acceptable moral context, and to suggest ways of enduring it. As the paper follows the path of the *sugya*'s ideas, a picture of these three co-existing strains should emerge.What is especially compelling is the way the *sugya* raises each of these concerns and holds them all in unresolved tension with one another.

Geertz offers another useful framework for understanding religious systems, and how to approach a particular issue, like suffering, within that system. He writes that the beliefs and practices of a religious group can be viewed from two directions which mutually affirm and reinforce one another. One on side, a religious system attempts to describe a view of reality, "the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order." (89) From the other side, a religious system tries to shape the world according to its framework of beliefs, practices and, most significantly, actual experience. Thus, the view of reality and the cosmic order is affirmed intuitively by the way in which it accommodates the religion's way of life and system of beliefs. Geertz phrases this underlying duality of religion:

> Religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of the cosmic order onto the plane of human experience." (90)

These dual sides of religion are similarly described by Jewish religious thinkers, each through a slightly different lens. For example, in a collection of lectures on suffering, Joseph Soloveitchik is quoted as describing two aspects of "halakhic creativity," which he terms "thematic" and "topical" *halakha*, respectively:

> First,..the *halakhic* logos and ethos (the *halakhic* mind and the *halakhic* will) posit unique categorical forms, postulate a set of rules and develop well-defined topics revolving around man and his formal relationship to the ontological orders surrounding him. (87)

His second aspect has to do with human experience:

> At the second level at which the *halakhic* gesture unfolds, axiological experiences (that is, experiences of values) emerge. *Halakhah* … leaps over the barriers of cognitive formalism into the realm of living structural value themes. At this level, "beholding" after a prophetic fashion, rather than "discerning" in the philosophical tradition, is the key word. (88)

Abraham Joshua Heschel also describes religion's need to synthesize two sides in his study of the Kotzker Rebbe, A Passion for Truth:

> Surely moral attitudes depend upon a belief in the congruence between human values and the nature of the world. (285)

Another way to visualize the two directions in which religious need and response flow might be "theology from above" and "theology from below" (Eron, page 38). Each perspective is central, and in order to achieve and retain integrity as a system, the perspectives must combine in a coherent whole.[2]

With regard to suffering, we might apply these religious frameworks as follows: first, we try to understand the "real" nature of the cosmic order. We ask: what is the "objective" reason for suffering? Is it reward and punishment, theodicy, and God's justice? Our answer determines our religious response. In plain language, "I am suffering and I am looking for an external explanation that will make my

[2] Along these lines, I note that in this paper, when I say anything about God's actions, desires or motives, I come from a perspective which assumes that all I know about God is colored by my own projections, or other human projections, of what and who God is, another form of "theology from below." What I say does not reflect an attempt to make objective statements about God.

suffering make sense to me, and guide my behavior." We will see that in fact our *sugya* first approaches its exploration of suffering precisely from this angle.

Corresponding to the other aspect that religion must address, however, our *sugya* eventually turns and approaches from the other side: the actual experience of suffering from the perspective of the sufferer. Or, again in plain language: "I am suffering and I need to project my experience of suffering onto something larger than myself, something transcendent, which helps me endure it and know how to use it."

A distinction should be made for the purposes of this paper between the related but distinct topics of suffering and evil. This *sugya*, and therefore this paper, are specifically concerned with suffering, not with evil. David Kraemer points out that although the questions of why God allows evil or suffering are related, and the exploration of one subject eventually leads to the other, the difference between them is significant. In exploring the topic of evil, we would search for some kind of objective, even absolute, categories within which to define our parameters, particularly from a moral perspective. In contrast, definitions of suffering are subjective expressions of the human condition, related to experience, as Kraemer explains:

> Practically speaking, then, suffering could be a wide variety of things, from pain to illness to the loss of a loved one to the defeat of one's people in a war to financial loss, and so forth. What is crucial is the evidence that someone is uncomfortable with the situation at hand; what defines the category of suffering is not the nature of the event but the quality of the experience. (9)

The subjectivity of suffering does not diminish its importance or relevance to religious thought. On the contrary. As Kraemer also notes, the theoretical

treatments of evil, theodicy and philosophical and theological exploration are all "provoked by the primary experience of suffering" and represent efforts to respond to and make sense of that experience. Suffering, in contrast with the more abstract matter of evil, is a "primary human experience" and therefore might yield more "original" and creative responses than those areas which are already a step removed from direct experience. As stated earlier, although they certainly address theological and philosophical issues, the rabbis of the Talmud operated out of this more direct, and anecdotal, approach to suffering. While this approach may yield a less systematic and intellectually cohesive corpus of ideas about suffering, it reflects their struggles to find their way as religious people living in the real world.

I. Explaining Suffering

"This is known even to schoolchildren:" Developmental Stages of Faith

R. Shimon ben Lakish says: "If one studies the Torah, painful sufferings are kept away from him."…R. Jochanan said to him, "This is known even to schoolchildren…"

The topic of the sugya is introduced with a mention by Resh Lakish of the Torah's power to prevent suffering. His colleague R. Yochanan responds that this is something even a child would know. The sugya begins its transition from the subject of Torah into an exploration of suffering, sparked by R. Yochanan's rejoinder that sounds derisive and seems to imply that the point is ridiculously obvious. Kraemer reads this as an expression of complacency on the part of R. Yochanan, but sees this idea placed here in this way as a kind of simplistic "straw man," set up only to be challenged as the sugya progresses (p. 89).

Rashi is helpful in bringing together the three themes of Torah, suffering and the schoolchildren: Torah study protects from suffering, he says, even in the case of young schoolchildren, because even they (despite their youth) learn and can then follow the passage (Ex. 15:26) about God not striking the Israelites if they stay away from the wrong behavior.

וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו תַּעֲשֶׂה וְהַאֲזַנְתָּ לְמִצְוֹתָיו וְשָׁמַרְתָּ כָּל־חֻקָּיו כָּל־הַמַּחֲלָה אֲשֶׁר־שַׂמְתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא־אָשִׂים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' רֹפְאֶךָ׃

שמות פרק טו פסוק כו

> And Moses said, If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and will do that which is right in his sight, and will give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon you, which I have brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that heals you.

Rashi's underlying implication, of course, is still that correct behavior is what protects from being stricken.

What is it that children know about suffering? It is appropriate that a discussion of suffering begin "at the beginning," with an evocation of a child's understanding. In his book Stages of Faith, Dr. James Fowler delineated developmental phases of faith and religious understanding. He modeled his developmental approach on those of well-known contemporary thinkers on human development : Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. Following their parameters of – respectively – emotional, cognitive and moral development, Fowler developed a scale for religious development. Our very earliest experiences, he posited, begin to shape our understanding of faith and relationship to God.

The developmental issues Fowler identifies for infancy and the earliest years are similar to those elucidated by each of the above thinkers. These are: trust, constancy and the predictability of having one's needs met. Before we can even use language, we develop an intuitive sense about the reliability (or lack thereof) of the world around us, based almost entirely on our experience of our parents and other

caretakers. In our earliest years, we already have a presumption, says Fowler, of a covenantal relationship with the world (16).

If our childhood experiences are positive, the covenantal presumption includes a sense that we are valued, as well as a sense that we will be cared for by those who value us. This basic framework puts order into our world. The nature and quality of that "order" becomes internalized and is what we come to expect as we grow. That sense of order in the child's local world is later transferred and enlarged to include God, and the cosmic order, as well.

As children grow, the covenantal nature of their relationship with the world expands to include their own behavior and the relationship becomes more mutual. Parents teach young children that they too have obligations; that obedience and good behavior yield rewards, and disobedience and bad behavior yield punishment or other negative consequences. Assuming we are reasonably healthy, secure people living in reasonable circumstances, that early understanding is the beginning of the assumption that most of us carry around in our day-to-day lives: if we behave, things will go well for us. Long before we learn anything about God on an intellectual level, or can articulate anything about the world, we assume that God, like all our powerful protectors and caretakers, is fair. Our intuition tells us that the world is both fair and orderly.

Once a child is old enough to begin conceptualizing and concretizing those ideas, he progresses to Fowler's Stage 2, "Mythic – Literal" faith, a phase typically reached at about ten years of age, says Fowler, the age of elementary-school children. In this stage, a child constructs

> a more orderly, temporally linear and dependable world. Capable of inductive and deductive reasoning, the ten-year-old has become a young empiricist. (135)

Now the child consciously believes that as parents do what is best for children, God does what is best for people, the world runs on fairness and reciprocity, and the cosmic order remains intact. The linear logic also begins to connect the child to a group. Its content is based on

> The stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. (Fowler, 149)

It is this developmental stage of religious thinking that R. Yochanan evokes when he notes that "even schoolchildren" – Fowler's "mythic-literalists" – know that the right behavior prevents suffering. A question worth asking is how this "theology of schoolchildren" continues to operate in adulthood. Fowler notes that there are adults who never progress from this stage, in which a basic linear and fairly concrete logic is applied to ideas about life (p. 146).[3] However, it seems that even adults who have acquired a more nuanced, less linear, conceptual framework for religion and for life in general, spend a great deal of time living in the mindset of the "schoolchild." We obey traffic laws, and assume that if we stop at the red light, nobody will crash into our car. We assume that grandparents will die before parents who will die before children. We assume we will wake up in the morning, that day will follow night, and that the laws of physics will continue to apply in our everyday world. Those of us who participate in organized religious life feel a sense of security

[3] This is in contrast to those who successfully negotiate subsequent developmental stages of faith which involve more complex attitudes towards the world, religion and the search for meaning. In its progression through different frameworks, our sugya, interestingly, follows a similar developmental path.

in our almost unconscious assumption that since we are following the orderly practices of our group, all will be well. [4]

It would be difficult to function in our everyday lives if we stopped too often to consider that a random, "unfair" catastrophe might befall us at any moment. Thus, although we know intellectually that it is not always the case, we live our lives "as if" the world is generally fair, the cosmos follows certain rules, and the community follows them as well; we do not focus on the disruption of that cosmos or of those rules.

Out of love for them, we also want our children to enter the world with the trust described by all the developmental thinkers: we want them to be signatories to the covenant which assures that they will be cared for and that they will do their part in return. That is the orderly world we present to children, despite knowing that that is only one picture of reality. If we utilize the metaphor of God as parent, we might imagine all of humanity in the same position with regard to God's gift to us of the world.

> *My child has died and nothing seems to make sense. I am an adult with plenty of life experience, and I know that bad things sometimes happen. Yet suddenly the universe itself makes no sense. There is no security: friends leave my house and say goodbye, and I panic, not sure I will ever see them again. The sun seems to rise and set each day, and the natural laws of the physical world still seem to apply. But if the sun came up green or the force of gravity suddenly were to disappear, I don't think I'd be any more surprised or shaken up than I feel now. I watch it all going on, and I am like*

[4] The emphasis on reciting *brachot* in our liturgy serves precisely to counter our unthinking assumptions of these aspects of "order," to push us to be conscious of and grateful for them. In that way the liturgy pointedly works to deepen and expand our faith.

an outsider gazing in through the window at a strange and mysterious world. Everything is surprising and unknown; I can't take anything for granted. I feel like Alice in Wonderland – things are backwards, upside down and unpredictable, and there is nothing to make it clearer. I feel cut off and disconnected from the natural order and processes of life; I don't even know what they are. Knowing that things like this happen all the time has not prepared me for the sense that everything has gone out of control.

God is Different: Giving and Receiving – An Interlude?

It is the way of human beings that when a man sells a valuable object to his fellow, the seller grieves and the buyer rejoices. The Holy One, Blessed be He, however, is different. He gave the Torah to Israel and rejoiced.

After the exchange between Rabbis Yochanan and Shimon ben Lakish about framing the relationship between Torah study and suffering, a statement is brought in the name of R. Zera that uses the same verse from Proverbs about Torah. The statement notes that when a person is forced to give up something precious, he grieves its loss. In contrast, when God "gave up" the Torah to Israel, God rejoiced. (Rashi adds that while a *person* in these circumstances would hope that the buyer abandons the purchase so that the seller can reclaim it, *God* urges Israel to hold tight to the Torah.)

Jacobs views this section as a brief digression from the topic of suffering; in fact he identifies it as the only digression in the sugya (33). But one wonders if this comment on the nature of giving and receiving, used here regarding the Torah, foreshadows one of the central themes of the sugya, the giving of, and even more emphatically, the receiving of suffering. Just as people should openly receive God's

gift of Torah, people should embrace anything God gives to people, even suffering. Another possibility is that as the text prepares to enter into the difficult analysis of suffering, it makes a point of telling us first how much God cares about us. God rejoices when God gives people something wonderful and valuable, i.e. the Torah. Perhaps the unspoken corollary is that when God inflicts pain, God suffers as well.[5]

[5] The extensive tradition about God, or the shechinah, suffering with Israel, or with individuals, may have developed to soften the image of an indifferent or angry, punitive God and would be another area to explore with regard to the rabbinic concepts of suffering.

"Examine Your Conduct: " Suffering as Punishment

"If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct."

One way that people try to cope with suffering is by trying to explain it. Again, as explicated by Geertz, human cultures use religion to counteract chaos by 'discovering' an external, logical order which they can impose on reality (99). The Talmud's statement reflects a traditional notion of theodicy that posits such a logical order. Theodicy implies a series of beliefs. It assumes that God is responsible for everything that happens. If that is the case, and if God is absolutely just, then everything that God does, i.e. everything that happens, is absolutely fair. If a person is afflicted with suffering, then, he must have done something to deserve it. According to Geertz' analysis, such a view of the cosmic order, which gives a cause for the suffering, then requires a response from the believer that both reinforces and is reinforced by that understanding. In this case, based on the premise of theodicy, the Talmud's prescription offers a corresponding behavioral response: the sufferer should "search his ways," uncover and acknowledge his errant behavior and correct it.

Most suffering in the Bible, in rabbinic and in medieval Jewish literature takes place within the framework of theodicy. In the Biblical narrative, the cycles of "reward and punishment" begin almost simultaneously with the existence of human beings on earth: humankind is exiled from a world of perfection because of the

disobedience of the first humans, and after Eden, all women will suffer in childbirth as punishment for the misbehavior of the first woman. In the catastrophic great flood, God nearly destroys all of humanity in Noah's generation because the earth is "corrupt" and "lawless."

Suffering in the Bible mostly – although not exclusively - involves a community or the people as a whole. With God's covenantal relationship with the people of Israel at the center of the narrative, communal suffering is almost always portrayed as punishment for betrayal of this covenant. This is the case most notably with the generations of the desert and with the Temple destructions and exiles. (The outstanding exception to this theme, the enslavement in Egypt, is discussed in the next section.) In the wilderness, God repeatedly afflicts the Israelites with all manner of suffering: plagues, biting snakes, and a massive earthquake. Later after the conquest of the land, God warns the people of the terrible suffering they will endure (famine, barren land, illness, death) if they do not follow God's mitzvot. These themes are especially prevalent in Deuteronomy and in the later prophetic literature. God brings suffering on the people of Israel because of their sinfulness and unwillingness to obey God's laws, and repeatedly threatens to bring more suffering if the people do not change their ways.

Individual suffering does appear in the Bible, although less frequently and with less of a consistent theme than communal suffering. The suffering is most often punishment for disobedience of God: Adam and Eve and King Saul are explicit examples. Sometimes, too, suffering is a punishment for errant behavior towards other people. Cain is condemned to wander, and Miriam's illness is punishment for

her speaking ill of her brother, although both of these sins affect the fate of a larger group of people and thus can be considered more than simply personal. [6]

The Bible is filled with varied examples of suffering and punishment. Early rabbinic literature, however, especially the *mishnah* and to some extent the *tosefta* are, according to David Kraemer, virtually silent on the subject. At this time in history rabbinic literature seems to exist out of historical time. He speculates that following the destruction of the Second Temple, the collective pain of the Jewish people was too raw to explore matters of suffering, that they preferred to be in denial (96-98).

As the experience of the destruction became less immediate, the subject began to surface as an issue. Then, there had to be an explanation for these great national tragedies, and the desirable explanation was one that left God and God's justice intact. Thus, notions of theodicy and reward and punishment became stronger than ever. In rabbinic literature the prevalent thinking became that the destruction of the Temple and the end of centralized Jewish sovereignty had come about because of the people's sinful behavior.

Although the national catastrophe had to be explained, over time the focus on it became less exclusive. As Jews no longer held centralized power, and communities became more individualized, interest in the religious life and fate of individuals intensified. A cosmic order that allowed for personal suffering needed to be understood. The system of reward and punishment did not always work as

[6] A notable Biblical example of individual suffering for which no explanation is given is that of the "barren matriarchs." Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah in particular are explicitly described as suffering mental anguish from their lack of children, and there is no suggestion in the text of their situation being a punishment. When each of them finally gives birth, she experiences a strengthened connection with God. In the Bible, the particular suffering of infertility seems connected to spiritual growth, as well as to the biological continuity of the people. This would be an area worthy of further exploration regarding the relationship between suffering, and God's love and spiritual gifts.

well when applied to individuals. It is harder to generalize about the sinful actions of one person or family, and harder to endure and explain personal suffering that appears undeserved. The notions of theodicy needed strengthening, and an attempt to do this came through the development of a belief in the world-to-come. Suffering in this world, especially that which appeared unjust, could be seen as either unimportant relative to the rewards in the next world, or as purification and preparation of individuals for their greater rewards in the world-to-come. At the same time, there was a need for other responses to the problem of personal suffering, and the ground was laid for the development of new ideas about it, ideas which will appear later in our *sugya.*

Even in the Bible, however, there are other explanations for suffering that live in tension with the image of a God who metes out strict justice. One notion that works against the concept of rigid reward and punishment is that of God's mercy, *midat ha-rachamim*. When this quality is elicited, God may allow for change and redemption and even mitigate punishment or forgive entirely. This quality emerges most explicitly in the stories of Moses pleading on behalf of the people, when the Torah introduces the divine attributes of *chesed* and *rachamim*. After the sin of the Golden Calf, there is even a sense that God prefers to see these as the qualities that reflect God's essence, and wants people to arouse them if God is not able to, as in the well-known midrashim on that narrative, in which God teaches Moses how to pray in order to bring out the qualities of God's compassion.

The idea of *midat ha-rachamim* diminishes the harshness of a world predicated on theodicy; there are also instances in the Bible that run counter to the notion of theodicy altogether. Kohelet makes explicit statements against theodicy:

הַכֹּל כַּאֲשֶׁר לַכֹּל מִקְרֶה אֶחָד לַצַּדִּיק וְלָרָשָׁע לַטּוֹב וְלַטָּהוֹר וְלַטָּמֵא וְלַזֹּבֵחַ וְלַאֲשֶׁר אֵינֶנּוּ זֹבֵחַ כַּטּוֹב כַּחוֹטֵא הַנִּשְׁבָּע כַּאֲשֶׁר שְׁבוּעָה יָרֵא׃ זֶה רָע בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ כִּי מִקְרֶה אֶחָד לַכֹּל

> The same fate is in store for all: for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good and pure; and for the impure; for him who sacrifices, and for him who does not; for him who is pleasing and for him who is displeasing; and for him who swears and for him who shuns oaths. (9:2)

Most famous and explicit of the Bible's struggle with theodicy is also it's most extensive exploration of individual suffering, the book of Job, which turns theodicy on its head. Job is targeted by the *satan* precisely because he is righteous and he is not protected by God – on the contrary - despite his uprightness. Both Job the character and the reader of the book have information which challenge the conventions of theodicy, and reward and punishment. The reader knows about the wager between God and *satan*, and Job knows that he has been a good person and does not deserve to be punished. The reader has an "explanation" for Job's suffering, albeit one he may find highly objectionable. Job's experience is more like the real experience of the good person who suffers and does not know why. The unknowability, possible caprice and meaninglessness of "why we suffer" may be one theme of this mysterious book, the full exploration of which is beyond the scope of this paper. [7]

[7] Jack Miles, in the chapter on Job in his book God: A Biography, tries to understand these issues in Job based on the developmental model of God on which his book is based. In this model, God, as a fluid and ever-evolving character continues to shift focus and goals, and to learn about the consequences and effects of God's own behavior, in interplay and interaction with humans, who also continue to develop. This model affects how one views issues like God's role in suffering and offers a fascinating additional approach to the issues at hand.

Rabbinic literature, too, sometimes defies theodicy. The unexplained and stunning deaths of Nadav and Avihu, for example, yield midrashic speculation about the real existence of justice for individuals. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana cites the previous Kohelet passage (9:2) in a discussion of this question and then presents a list of Biblical characters whose fates are inconsistent with just reward and punishment: good people who meet a bad end, and evil ones who prosper. The midrash then uses this list to support the idea that the early and sudden deaths of Aaron's sons does not necessarily mean that they were wicked (Pesikta d'Rav Kahane 26:1).

There has been a tear in the fabric of the universe, and the whole world feels flawed and damaged. As part of that world, I too feel flawed and damaged. My experience has taught me that people suffer undeservedly. I do not believe that the world operates on a system of strict justice, at least not one that our limited minds can grasp. Nor do I believe in that kind of God, because I cannot imagine a divine power so simplistic and superficial, or one so cruel and unforgiving. I know all of that and I also know that I am absolutely not to blame for the death of my son. Yet with all my defenses stripped away by this horrible shock, irrational, primal responses, normally buried, have come to the surface. A part of me feels that I must be responsible for Jonathan's death. I must have done something wrong that caused this to happen; I am, after all, his mother. Or, maybe I am "being punished" for something totally unrelated.

Perhaps these primitive feelings come from way back in my past. The child within me assumes that if something bad happens to me, I must have done something wrong. Even the more adult part of me feels that somehow I carry a stigma – somehow, in some vague way I cannot articulate, I am responsible for bringing tragedy to my son, my self, my family and the world at large. This sense is reinforced, unwittingly I am sure, by people's responses towards me these days. The ones who avoid me, who won't make eye contact, or who seem incapable of even being in my presence. I know that this behavior reflects their own discomfort with my pain and with the terrible sadness of my child's death. But my irrational sense of shame is made deeper as my feeling of being injured sometimes becomes a feeling that I must have "done" something to make people want to keep their distance. It would give me enormous relief to feel as though I could fix what I have broken...

Yissurin: Trials of God's Love

"If he still did not find [anything problematic with his behavior or with Torah study], let him be sure that these are chastenings of love…if the Holy One, blessed be He, is pleased with a man, He crushes him with painful sufferings."

If an individual who is suffering finds no problem in his behavior or in his Torah study, the *sugya* now suggests, something else must be operating: *yisurim shel ahava* – in Soncino's translation "chastenings of love," or, more often translated, as in most of this paper, "sufferings of love."

With this statement, the *sugya* enters new territory. If a suffering person is not being punished, there must be another explanation. To find it, the text now turns the problem on its head and postulates: If the suffering appears to be undeserved, perhaps it expresses some kind of loving action on God's part. In other words, until now, our discussion assumed that suffering reflects negative, punitive or perhaps even hateful, behavior by God towards a person. Since we can find no definitive reason for God to engage in that behavior, let's take a whole new approach. The sages now put forward the possibility that God inflicts *yissurin* on those with whom God is pleased. To develop that line of thinking, the *sugya* must develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what is meant by *yissurin*.

Before exploring the sages' next strategy, we must consider an important issue of language, one that is partly but not entirely a matter of translation, which will have an impact on how '*yissurin shel ahava*' are understood. The word *yisurim* is often translated as "suffering." However, more literal and accurate translations of the word, that also better express the rabbis' thinking about *yisurim*, include: trials,

tribulations, testing, toil, labor and testing. Matthew Schwartz explains that these concepts differ from the broader ones of suffering and punishment.

> All punishment and suffering contain *yissurin*, although *yissurin* do not always represent a punishment. (p. 447)

Schwartz cites the commentary *Yefe Toar*'s breakdown of five categories of *yissurin*, based on the Talmud. These provide a more precise understanding of the meaning of *yissurin* in rabbinic tradition:

1) *Yissurin* which come to a person as a challenge, test or trial, such as the "ten tests" of Abraham. In meeting them, a person can attain a higher level of spiritual development.

2) *Yissurin* which are an inevitable result of man's frailty and imperfections and of the natural course of life and the world.

3) *Yissurin* of love sent to a person to increase his reward in the next world by punishing him in this world.

4) *Yissurin* which wipe out sins.

5) *Yissurin* endured by communal leaders in their role of responsibility for their people.

Schwartz comments about the list that "all five have in common the notion that yissurin are not merely punitive but positive and beneficial…" (p. 447) The benefits of yissurin, as represented on this list and elsewhere, are not only the consequences specific to that event, but their general transforming effect on a person's life.

Definitions of yissurin like tests, trials and labors suggest something more than the passive experience of being subject to pain. The person inflicted with *yissurin* is not necessarily passive; a person can respond actively to a test or a trial. In fact, by definition, the nature and quality of the response is an integral part of a test or a trial. One might even say that *yissurin* demand a response from the sufferer – the sufferer must endure, stand up to, labor through, or perhaps resist, them. Or, the sufferer may learn from the yissurin.

At the minimum, this perspective enables the sufferer to be more than a powerless victim; it challenges and empowers him to respond to his plight. *Yissurin*, in this view, constitute "work" that a person "does" and can use as a path to learning and growth. The ability to use *yissurin* in this way is a unique human ability - to learn from hardship and have the ability to "do the toil." We evoke a similar idea in contemporary parlance when we speak of "working through" our grief or other difficult emotional process. The potentially arduous transformational aspect of yissurin is mentioned in rabbinic literature, for example in this image of Israel compared to a pressed olive:

> ואמר רבי יוחנן: למה נמשלו ישראל לזית? לומר לך: מה זית אינו מוציא שמנו אלא ע"י כתיתה, אף ישראל אין חוזרין למוטב אלא ע"י יסורין
> תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף נג עמוד ב
>
> R. Yochanan said: Why is Israel compared to an olive? To tell you: just as an olive does not produce its oil except through pressing, so Israel does not return in repentance except through sufferings.
>
> B. Menachot 53b

An understanding of *yissurin* as trials or labor both supports, and is supported by, the *sugya*'s explication of *yissurin shel ahava*. To develop their idea, the sages choose a model that is recognizable and accessible to people, the model of a parent-child relationship to describe the relationship between God and people. A good parent, out of love, sometimes chooses to cause pain and trouble to her child. The sages bring support for their notion by citing Biblical sources in which the parental model is used for God:

וְיָדַעְתָּ עִם־לְבָבֶךָ כִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר יְיַסֵּר אִישׁ אֶת־בְּנוֹ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְיַסְּרֶךָּ׃

> Bear in mind that the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son. (Deuteronomy 8:5)

and:

כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֶאֱהַב ה' יוֹכִיחַ וּכְאָב אֶת־בֵּן יִרְצֶה׃

> For whom the Lord loves He rebukes, as a father the son whom he favors. (Proverbs 3:12)

Using a parental model for God changes the discussion. It presumes a different understanding of the nature of God and of the relationship between God and people. Instead of an impersonal God who punishes and rewards according to an abstract set of rules, God as parent operates out of love and concern. Out of caring for the child, and desire for the child's success and maximizing of his potential, a parent may hold a child to high standards of behavior and, for entirely positive reasons, may withhold pleasure or even cause pain. This perspective creates possibilities for viewing suffering in a more nuanced, and certainly more loving, fashion.

The parental model of being in relationship with a loving God addresses one of the religious needs Fowler describes. The child's original, primary relationship of reciprocity, he says,

> plants in us the roots of a lifelong concern, as we seek meaning in our lives, for some form of mutual, covenantal relationship. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being. (5)

To discipline a child is different from inflicting suffering (Kraemer, p. 85). A loving parent does not discipline a child for misbehavior just to balance the scales of justice, or simply as an end in itself. The purpose of discipline is education, to convey ideas and also to have an impact on subsequent behavior. These ideas are stated explicitly in the Bible, for example:

וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־כָּל־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הוֹלִיכְךָ ה׳ אֱלֹהֶיךָ זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה
בַּמִּדְבָּר לְמַעַן עַנֹּתְךָ לְנַסֹּתְךָ לָדַעַת אֶת־אֲשֶׁר בִּלְבָבְךָ הֲתִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָו
[מִצְוֹתָיו] אִם־לֹא׃ וַיְעַנְּךָ וַיַּרְעִבֶךָ וַיַּאֲכִלְךָ אֶת־הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתָּ
וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֲךָ כִּי לֹא עַל־הַלֶּחֶם לְבַדּוֹ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם
כִּי עַל־כָּל־מוֹצָא פִי־ה׳ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם׃

> Remember the long way that the Lord your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, that he might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep His commandments or not. He subjected you to the hardships of hunger and then gave you manna to eat…in order to teach you that man does not live on bread alone… (Deuteronomy 8: 2)

The parallel would be that God (the parent), wants and expects the person (child) to learn something from the struggle he endures. [8]

Using the model of parent in relating to God can also be problematic. In "Encountering God in Judaism," Neil Gillman reminds us that parent-child relationships are complex, and viewing God as the idealized parent may create difficulties. A parental model evokes an array of emotions in different people. In addition, Gillman notes that gender is also a problematic factor in using this model, since the Biblical and traditional Jewish models of "God as parent" view God almost exclusively as father, and employ gender stereotypes to characterize what that means (81).

Additional potential drawbacks to using a parental model pertain to features of contemporary culture raised by Henri Nouwen in "The Wounded Healer." Nouwen notes that the high degree of value that was once placed on ancestors and parents, as well as the need for love and approval by authority figures, has been supplanted by individualism, self-reflection and inwardness. Thus, traditional images such as "God as Father" do not necessarily make sense in our time, and certainly parental images function differently than they have in the past (30).

Nevertheless, using the model of a loving parent, and then going beyond it to a loving God, offers an element of balance to the ideas of theodicy, and reward and punishment. With the idea of *yissurin shel ahava,* just the use of the word love changes the tenor of the discussion; a different relationship is implied.

[8] In this verse, it is notable that God also wants to "learn" something from the test. This can be read in the more obvious as meaning that God is looking to learn how the people will fare on God's test; or, perhaps less conventionally, using a developmental model for God in the manner of Jack Miles, God is looking to learn more about people, how they relate to God, and about Godself.

The perspective of *yissurin* as test and trials that are given by a loving parental God also implies that they are not necessarily out of the ordinary – it is not only those who are sinful and in need of punishment who experience *yissurin*. Re-defining *yissurin* with terms such as 'labor' and 'learning' thus deals another blow to theodicy. It helps explain why suffering is more widespread, and is not just restricted to those who behave badly. Trials and struggles which teach life lessons are a routine part of life; everyone is subject to them. As part of a brief commentary on *yissurin* in Bereshit Rabbah, R. Alexandri declares:

> אמר ליה רבי אלכסנדרי אין לך אדם בלא יסורים אשריו לאדם שיסורים באים עליו מן התורה

> There is no human being who does not experience yisurim. Lucky is the person who has them from Torah (BR 92:1) .

Everyone struggles in life. As the *midrash* states, and as we explore in subsequent sections, what distinguishes one person from another becomes not so much whether he has *yissurin*, because everyone does, but whether he uses them well, and whether the *yissurin* enhance or disrupt his connection to Torah and to God.

As we sit around the table and read about "sufferings of love," my study companions understandably squirm in their seats on my behalf, and make derisive comments out of their kind efforts to support me. Who would tell a newly bereaved mother that she is somehow suffering "for her own good?" That she will learn and grow from the experience? It would be indescribably cruel. And yet… something about this passage, and the phrase "yissurin shel ahava" draws me. Unlike the people I sit with, I do not feel anger and disgust when I read it. Instead, I feel almost a sense of relief. I suspect it is that word "love." Although I have not articulated it, or even been conscious of it, I think I have felt hated by God. Other than the actual loss of Jonathan, the most painful part of this experience is the feeling of being cut off, alone, alienated. Maybe <u>this</u> is the terror, the sense of complete, existential aloneness, that the Biblical writers evoked with the image of "hastarat panim," God hiding God's face. This feels to me like a God who is ignoring me, or who is not even aware of me. Just at a time when I am so in need. An angry God would at least be relating to me. Instead I feel invisible. (Another newly bereaved person recently described his experience to me: "I feel as though I am dissolving into the air.")

I imagine myself like a child who has just suffered some kind of terrible unpleasantness at the hands of my mother or father- I am not sure if it was a punishment, or what the reason for it was… but my concern is not to understand what it was or whether it was fair; my concern is whether or not my mother or father still loves me, will still take care of me. Am I still a beloved member of the family?

In the same way, right now in my adult self, I know all the questions I am "supposed" to be asking: Why? Why did God do this? <u>Did</u> God do this? Why does God allow so much pain in the world? Is there any fairness or justice? Did I do something to bring this upon my son, my family, myself? These questions hover over me, but frankly do not interest me very much. For one thing, they are unanswerable. For another, even if there were answers, I do not see how they would change anything now. My preoccupation right now is to find some way back to wholeness, to a sense of well-being, and above all to a sense of connectedness with the world, with life, with God.

So here I am now, in this state of alienation and disconnection, reading about suffering and God's love. I don't know what this means, but something feels hopeful about it, much more hopeful than the anger towards God and questioning of God that some people discuss with me these days. I do not feel that I am in relationship with God right now, I am too stunned and empty to be in relationship with anyone; but these texts make me wonder: Could this mean that as I am walking this path of suffering, God is still in relationship with me? Instead of the hidden face, I can suddenly imagine that God is hovering in the wings, still caring, still connected, waiting until I am ready.

Acceptance of Suffering

"…if he made himself an offering…" Even as the trespass-offerings must be brought by consent, so also the sufferings must be endured with consent.

The discussion of *yissurin* in the previous passage led us to the possibility that *yissurin* are not purely a matter of God's motives and actions, but involve the experience and response of the sufferer as well. We might say that until now, the text has looked at *yissurin* from God's perspective, or using Geertz' first parameter of seeking an external reality that makes sense; now the text will explore the subject through the eyes of the people living through it – what might be referred to as "theology from below," as it begins to consider the question of how one should respond to yissurin.

Even more important than the content of the sufferer's response may be the fact that she is asked to be a participant in what is happening to her. That in itself builds an element of healing into the suffering. Some of the most difficult challenges for people facing illness, loss or other trial, are their feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and a sense of chaos. People often look for "something to do" to counter those feelings. Telling a sufferer that she is not just a passive, helpless victim, but has obligations and the ability to respond in a particular way is one way to inject a feeling of order into the larger picture, and a sense of control for the individual. As Geertz states,

> while achieving a sense of revelation he stabilizes a sense of direction (p. 95, citing R.H. Lowie).

Prescribing action and response in times of difficulty is one of the tasks of religion. The tradition reflects an intuitive understanding of this need to act in the face of yissurin. In a ritual context, it prescribes responses such as sacrifices, and later, *teshuvah.* A compelling feature of this *sugya* is that here, the primary focus is the inner, spiritual response, rather than literal action. It is the sufferer's inner path which will shape the nature and the effects of the *yissurin*.

The *sugya* tells us that a sufferer must be actively engaged psychologically in the process – his task is acceptance. In order for the *yisurin* to be "*shel ahava*," they must be received with "consent." To support this point, the sages bring a verse from Isaiah's chapter about the sufferer (53:10). They cite the requirement for the sin-offering (and all sacrifices) to be brought voluntarily to underline their statement that *yissurin* become *yissurin* of love only if the sufferer voluntarily accepts them.

Interestingly, Yochanan Muffs, in his book "Love and Joy," asserts that in Biblical usage, the words for love, *ahava,* and for joy, *simcha,* all relate to volitional acts: things being given freely and accepted freely. With respect to *yissurin*, which are associated with both love, as in our texts, and also with the phrase "*sameach biyissurin,*" he concludes that the terms could not be referring literally to love and joy as we use those terms in common parlance.

> The rabbis were not masochists who delighted in calamity, but profound realists who received the divine decree with tacit acceptance. (187)

He chooses to read "*yissurin shel ahava*" as "acceptance with calm resignation." The rabbinic reading, however, seems to suggest something more than "calm," as we shall see.

In this turn of the sugya, we again see the concept of Geertz and others of a religious idea needing to project in two directions: from above and from below, with the two perspectives mutually reinforcing each other (Geertz, 90). In his chapters on *yissurin* in the book "*Torah min-Ha-shamayim,*" Heschel portrays *yissurin shel ahava* as having precisely this dual character. God gives the *yissurin* out of love, because God wants to bestow on people the benefits they can bring, including future rewards. For Heschel, however, the *ahava* also refers to the sufferer's love for God. (98) A person accepts the trials out of his love for God and desire to do God's will.

Several *midrashim* make the point that *yissurin* come out of love and can also be used to enhance a person's love for God:

אמר רבי אלעזר בן יעקב צריך אדם להחזיק טובה להקב"ה בזמן שהיסורין באין עליו למה? שהיסורין מושכין את האדם להקב"ה שנא' (משלי ג) כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח

(Tanchuma Ki Tetze 2)

R. Eleazar ben Yakov said: A person must ascribe good to the Holy One when *yissurin* come upon him. Why? Because yissurin pull a person towards the Holy One, as it is written (Proverbs 3) "for the one whom God loves, God rebukes."

Y*issurin*, then, can be a spiritual tool. Heschel notes that through them a person can know if and how much he really does love God, and through a person can refine and deepen a mutual relationship with God.

אין אדם עומד על אהבה ואינו יודע אם אוהב או לאו אלא מתוך יסורים. (98)

In rabbinic literature, the model and spokesperson for acceptance of *yissurin* is R. Akiva. The *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* quotes him as stating that the distinguishing

feature of the Jewish people is that unlike other peoples, the Jews do not praise and thank God only during good times, but continue to do so in times of trouble as well.

> רבי עקיבא או', לא תעשון אתי, שלא תנהגו בי כדרך שאחרים מנהגין ביראותיהן, שכשהטובה באה עליהם הם מכבדין את אלהיהם .. וכשהפורענות באה עליהן הם מקללין את אלהיהם.
>
> **מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מס' דבחדש פרשה י**
>
> R. Akiva says, "do not do with me," do not behave towards me in the same manner in which others behave in their fear: when good befalls them they honor their gods, but when evil befalls them, they curse their gods. (Yitro, Mas. Ba-Chodesh, 10)

Heschel connects R. Akiva's attitude towards suffering to the twenty-two years he served Nachum Ish Gamzu , a man famous for his optimistic acceptance and his statements about his own life trials, "This too is for the best" (B. Ta'anit 21a; Heschel p. 93-94).

These two sages, and others in rabbinic literature who embrace suffering, express the belief, as we see in our *sugya*, that *yissurin* can offer benefits; those benefits are one motivation for accepting them. However, a more basic theological premise underlies the notion of accepting *yissurin*: the premise that a believer in God accepts all of God's world as it is, the good with the bad. If one truly loves God, then everything that God created and every action of God's should be equally valued and respected.

This premise about God's all-encompassing role raises many theological struggles and challenges. Heschel notes in "A Passion for Truth" that this view has its source in the Bible, which was willing to hold this view despite the problems it creates.

> It would have been simple for the prophets of ancient Israel to say that evil issues from another source, that God is not responsible for it….Out of his absolute certainty that God is One and the Creator of all things, the Prophet proclaimed (Isa. 45:6), "I am the Lord and there is no other. I form light and create darkness." (291)

This Jewish view sees all of life as an organic whole. The world is not divided into the matters that God does or does not control. [9] Nor is the picture of God's world bifurcated into good and bad, the desirable and undesirable. Heschel states, for example, that for R. Akiva there would not even be a concept of "*tzaddik v'rah lo*," a righteous person receiving "bad," because for Akiva there is no "bad" in God's world (98.) Similarly, writes Heschel of the Kotzker, in "A Passion for Truth:"

> He interpreted 'Even the darkness is not dark to thee' (Psalms 139:12) to mean: knowing that darkness comes from Thee, even the darkness is not dark. (278)

Some of the most notable rabbinic expressions of this idea are found in this same tractate *Brachot*. When formulating the liturgical "creation" blessing that precedes the *sh'ma*, the sages struggle with the verse from Isaiah, "Who makes peace and creates evil" (45:7) and change the word "evil" to "all." Rather than a denial of God's role in evil, this change is seen as a way of unifying all of God's world, which can also change the view of evil. Soloveitchik explains,

> The word "*ra,* evil" was supplanted with "*ha-kol*, all things." Apparently, in the perspective of totality, evil vanishes. (99)

Perhaps the best known rabbinic example of this theological expression appears in *mishna Brachot*, with the ruling that a *bracha* is to be said for the bad as well as for the

[9] In contrast, Harold Kushner's popular work, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People" proposes that God's power is limited, and certain evil and suffering is beyond God's control .

good, basing this on the words "*b'chol me'odecha,*" that one is to love God for every "measure" that God gives one (9:5). An aggadic elaboration of the point attributes to Akiva the explanation that one loves God for both goodness and for suffering.

> רבי עקיבה אומר אם נאמר בכל נפשך קל וחומר בכל מאודך, מה תלמוד לומר בכל מאודך, בכל ומדה שהוא מודד לך בין במדת הטוב ובין במדת פורענות
>
> ספרי דברים פיסקא לב

The Sh'ma is a reminder to love God fully no matter what measure one is dealt, precisely because all of it comes from God. Not surprisingly, in its discussions of this idea the gemara focuses on opinions and stories about R. Akiva, and places alongside it the best-known account of Akiva's death, which is meant to exemplify his notion of loving God through suffering. He embraces the martyr's death with joy, as the ultimate way to express his love for God. (Brachot 61b) [10]

The prescription to accept suffering embraces numerous possibilities. R. Akiva himself enumerated a range of human responses to *yissurin*, each personified by a different Biblical character.

> רבי עקיבא אומר ד" בנים למלך - אחד לוקה ושותק ואחד לוקה ומבעט ואחד לוקה ומתחנן ואחד לוקה ואומר לאביו הלקני. אברהם לוקה ושותק שנא" (בראשית כב) קח נא את בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת את יצחק והעלהו לעולה היה לו לומר אתמול אמרת לי (שם כא) כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע שנאמר (שם כב) וישכם אברהם בבקר וגו, איוב לוקה ומבעט שנאמר (איוב י) אומר אל אלוה אל (תריבני) [תרשיעני] הודיעני על מה תריבני. חזקיה לוקה ומתחנן שנאמר (מלכים ב כ) ויתפלל (חזקיה) אל ה, וגו, וי"א חזקיה לוקה ומבעט אח"כ היה לו לומר והטוב בעיניך עשיתי. דוד אמר לאביו הלקני שנאמר (תהלים נא) הרב כבסני מעוני ומחטאתי טהרני.

[10] A different account of R. Akiva's death is given in Midrash Mishlei Chapter 9 in which he dies a quiet death alone in a Roman prison. The version in Tractate Berachot was clearly the one which caught on, perhaps in part because it best expresses what R. Akiva represents, but perhaps also because it gives a theological rationale for martyrdom. Martyrdom as an expression of love for God, and dying "al kiddush ha-shem" has been present among Jews especially in times of persecution, but never acquired widespread acceptance or mainstream affirmation as an ideal or as an ultimate goal.

> Rabbi Akiva tells of a king who had four sons. One is struck and is silent. Another is struck and is defiant. The third is struck and is suppliant; and the fourth says to his father: strike me! Abraham is struck and is silent, as it is written "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, and raise him as a sacrifice." (Genesis 22:2). He could have said, "Yesterday you told me that from Isaac I would see descendants. (Gen. 21:12). Yet (he remained silent) as it is written, "And Abraham rose early in the morning…" Job is struck and is defiant , as it is written, "I say to God, Do not condemn me; Let me know what you charge me with" (Job 10:2). Hezekiah is struck and is suppliant, as it is written, "And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord," (2 Kings 20:2), although some say that Hezekiah was struck and was defiant, as afterwards he said "I have done what is pleasing to you" (2 Kings 20:3). David said to his Father, "Chasten me!" As it is written, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalms 51:4).
>
> Masechet Smachot 8:11

We can delineate two broad conceptual categories of "accepting suffering" that have widely different implications both for belief and behavior. One is the idea that "suffering is a part of life" and therefore the sensible and emotionally healthy course is to accept it. This idea is presumed by rabbinic literature, for example, in R. Alexandri's statement cited earlier that " *Ein lecha adam be-lo yisurin* (BR 92:1) In our sugya, however, the idea of "acceptance" seems to run deeper. R. Soloveitchik 's formulation may be helpful. He delineates two forms of acceptance of suffering. The first he terms "equanimity," an acceptance of resignation, a "stoic approach to stress and suffering" which implies only the absence of any hysterical disturbances and suggests a habit of mind that disowns unpleasant emotions (104). This attitude, he says, characterizes the mentality of modern people who have witnessed so much evil and feel defeated by it. The second response, which he holds up as the ideal, he terms "dignity." With this approach, a person

> accepts suffering and turns it into a great existential experience, one in which he may find self-fulfillment. He bears distress and accepts suffering with *dignity*.

Soloveitchik relates "dignity" to the spiritual uniqueness of human beings, of being created in the divine image and living a life of "kevod ha-briyot." While equanimity is a "state of mind," dignity is "a form of existence." (105) Soloveitchik seeks a spiritual, rather than just an emotional / psychological "acceptance" of suffering, one that pertains to a person's vision of her place in the universe. This view evokes once again the concept of *yissurin* as an active category of trial, labor and toil, an experience that demands spiritual work as well as one that leads to certain moral standards and active responses.

In this view, the acceptance of *yissurin*, reflects both a particular view of one's place in the universe as a human, and a particular relationship with God which is ongoing and which demands "work." For Heschel, then, the embrace of yissurin is actually a <u>reward</u> of loving God and accepting all of God's world. Even the position that leans positively towards accepting *yissurin* has limitations and built-in tensions. Heschel makes the important point with regard to acceptance that a passionate embrace of *yissurim* can apply only to individuals, and only to oneself. Even if one believes that there is benefit to another person's suffering, as Akiva did, it would be unacceptable to embrace someone else's pain with love and enthusiasm:

> מי יכול לקבל את יסורים של אחרים באהבה?
> (98)

It would be similarly incompatible with Jewish tradition to hold up the community's pain as an ideal or to avoid acknowledging it. A central Jewish value is

that the response to the suffering of others is always empathy. As an example of this, Heschel cites the Talmud's discussion of communal suffering:

> תנו רבנן: בזמן שישראל שרויין בצער ופירש אחד מהן, באין שני מלאכי השרת שמלוין לו לאדם, ומניחין לו ידיהן על ראשו, ואומרים: פלוני זה שפירש מן הצבור - אל יראה בנחמת צבור. תניא אידך: בזמן שהצבור שרוי בצער אל יאמר אדם: אלך לביתי ואוכל ואשתה, ושלום עליך, נפשי... אלא: יצער אדם עם הצבור
>
> תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף יא עמוד א

> Our Rabbis have taught: When Israel is in trouble and one of them separates himself from them, then the two ministering angels who accompany every man come and place their hands upon his head and say, 'So-and-so who separated himself from the community shall not behold the consolation of the community'… Another [Baraitha] taught: When the community is in trouble let not a man say, 'I will go to my house and I will eat and drink and all will be well with me'... But rather a man should share in the distress of the community. (B. Ta'anit 11a)

It is also significant to note that despite all of the laudatory descriptions of the gifts of *yissurin*, their desirability seems to apply only "after the fact." Even R. Akiva does not prescribe that one deliberately seek out suffering in order to obtain its many benefits. He and others who think like him are responding to suffering they did not ask for and cannot avoid. Suffering is not held up as a goal, but once it must be endured, it can be beneficial as a result of how one receives it.

These different parameters of response set up interesting tensions between the notions of embracing suffering and combating suffering, tensions which can never be fully resolved.

It is a little more than a year since Jonathan died. Now that some of the more intense emotions seem to be softening, I know that I need of some kind of spiritual framework to deal with this loss. Not an explanation; I know there is not one of those. But a direction, a path to walk down which will lead me back to the world of the living. Since Jonathan's death, I feel disconnected from the security that is expressed in the daily experience of the smooth, functioning order of the universe. I have learned that spiritual wholeness derives from feeling a part of that order, at least for me. When it is sustained and functioning, goodness can emerge, in the way that I experience the world and in the way that I, and others, can behave in it. Right now, I am cut off from that universe and from the Holy One who is the source of that wholeness. I need a solid, reliable and kind world reconstituted around me. I also need a way to be a participant in that world, to respond and react with honesty to my difficult experience within that world.

In short, I need a spiritual path. I read about suffering and death from the perspectives of different traditions; the books that resonate most with me have a Buddhist orientation. They suggest embracing the surrender and openness that can come with intense pain, and direct, honest confrontation with death. I am drawn to the sense of unity, with good and bad, life and death, all part of an organic whole. After all, those who talk about God only in reference to the blessings and the good things in life, have left me stranded. It is all well and good to connect with the divine goodness when things are good – what does that offer me right now when something terrible has happened? That God is not part of my life and I have no means of relating to God? The more organic, Buddhist ideas captivate me, but their Eastern framework is not mine. I need a Jewish way to embrace and transform my pain. This is what I have felt instinctively to be my path for grieving, to take in the pain and work through it, rather than push it away. Yet what I keep finding is that we Jews, instead of learning to accept, always seem to be fighting back against suffering, battling or running away to avoid injury from the outside, or emotional pain from within. I know that my home is still with my tradition, in Jewish prayer, texts and ritual. Judaism is my place of solace and connection to God, yet I can't

seem to gain access to that solace or that connection. I sit in a traditional shul, amidst a caring Jewish community, praying in the language of my ancestors, yet I am spiritually homeless.

After Jon's death, there were people who urged me, "Be angry!" Some of them were angry on my behalf, feeling that his death was "just not fair!" I knew that I had grounds for anger, but I did not want anger. I needed a sense of peace and wholeness that I could find only in acceptance. Sometimes I wonder, what do people think they are offering me, or offering anyone in trouble, when they suggest that they respond with anger and cynicism? Perhaps for a bystander it is more useful to shake one's fists at the heavens with rage about life's injustice. But as the sufferer of a tragedy, I need a positive way to continue my journey through life. I have no interest in a spiritual life of bitterness, nor do I want to turn my back on God. I need to stay in a relationship with God, even if it may be a painful one. If anything, maybe my figuring out how to do that will only make that relationship that much richer and deeper. Could that be the gift that can come with suffering?

Staying in Touch with God: Study and Prayer

"One says: chastenings of love are such as do not involve the intermission of study of the Torah…. And the other one says: chastenings of love are such as do not involve the intermission of prayer."

Having set forth the idea that *yissurin* can be associated with God's love (and love of God), and that one should freely accept those which are, the sages now try to define further what kinds of *yissurin* fall into this category. They return to the subject which led into the *sugya* and has been a sub-text throughout: Torah study. If *yissurin* interrupt Torah study, or prayer, or both, can they possibly be *yissurin shel ahava*?

The rulings on communal fasts state that one should not join the fast if it would hamper teaching of Torah (Ta'anit 11a). The gifts of *yissurin* that are a sign and expression of God's love, are often described as such because they are connected with learning, specifically Torah learning:

אַשְׁרֵי הַגֶּבֶר אֲשֶׁר תְּיַסְּרֶנּוּ יָהּ וּמִתּוֹרָתְךָ תְלַמְּדֶנּוּ׃

תהלים פרק צד פסוק יב

> Happy is the man whom you chasten, O Lord, and whom you teach from your Torah (Psalms 94:12).

R. Alexandri's statement cited earlier acknowledges that everyone suffers; but if one must suffer, one might as well suffer with Torah in one's life than not. As part of the same comment, R. Joshua b. Levi echoes what seems to be the mainstream opinion in the Talmud as well:

אמר ליה רבי אלכסנדרי אין לך אדם בלא יסורים אשריו לאדם שיסורים באים עליו מן התורה שנאמר ומתורתך תלמדנו, א״ר יהושע בן לוי כל יסורים שהם באים על האדם ומבטלין אותו מדברי תורה יסורים של תוכחת הם אבל יסורים שהם באים על האדם ואין מבטלין אותו מדברי תורה יסורים של אהבה הן, כדכתיב (משלי ג) כי את אשר יאהב ה׳ יוכיח

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה צב

R. Alexandri said: There is no man without suffering: happy is he whose sufferings come through his Torah. R. Joshua b. Levi said: All chastisements which come upon man and hinder him from studying the Torah are chastisements of reproof, while all chastisements which do not hinder a man from his Torah are chastisements of love. (Bereshit Rabah 92:1,2)

A classic parable makes this point about Torah, in a particular historical context. Once again, R. Akiva is the spokesperson for ways to receive and understand suffering. The parable cited in his name, and placed near the B. Berachot account of death, tells of the fish who would rather live in danger in the water, their source of life (i.e. Torah), than live in danger on the land, without their source of life.

Our *sugya* continues with a series of exchanges and verse citations to support different relationships between *yissurin*, study and prayer, debating what do and do not constitute "*yissurin shel ahava*." They do not reach a clear consensus or conclusion. Of interest, however, is the question at hand: what constitutes love, or a disruption of love, between God and people? The issue is thus framed as one of relationship. Both Torah study and prayer are means of engaging in relationship with God. As Rabbi Louis Finkelstein famously noted, during Torah study God speaks to us, and when we engage in prayer we speak to God (cited in Gillman, "Encountering God…," p. 87). The mutual nature of religious connection discussed

above (per Geertz), of a connection that flows from above and from below, is satisfied through a combination of Torah study and prayer. Whatever their more precise parameters, the sages here seem to be saying that suffering that cuts one out of one or the other aspect of relationship with God is not "*shel ahava,*" Thus, whatever its nature or benefits, it would involve disconnection from God and the devastating suggestion that God does not care. As Kraemer phrases it in his analysis of the sugya:

> If God loved us, why would God remove the possibility of communication? (192)

Suffering that does <u>not</u> interrupt Torah study or prayer, at its minimum does not interrupt that all–important connection; at its best, it offers one an opportunity to deepen that connection. This leads logically to a rationale that answers the most vexing question for the rabbis: why do the righteous suffer? The answer: those who are righteous, or to phrase it in a more contemporary manner, those who have an established spiritual life, a "good" relationship with God, and with Torah, will know better how to make use of the *yissurin* to deepen that relationship.

In my state of grief, I have dropped most activities except those which are necessary to care for my two living sons. The exception is my study group. Once I am able to concentrate, I find study comforting, both in the group and on my own. The old texts and the language to which I have such a primal connection soothe the child in me who needs soothing. The intellectual challenge stimulates my brain. And I do sense God's presence in these sacred texts; I can hear God's voice in the words.

Prayer is another matter. To pray I must bring something out of myself and direct it to God. This is at first an impossibility; I am too wounded, and do not have enough of an intact "self" from which to project anything. The content of most tefillah seems at best irrelevant and at worst offensive to me. But one day I have a powerful experience when reciting the bracha "me-chayeh ha-meitim." I do not believe in the resurrection of the dead; I do not believe I will literally see Jonathan ever again. But I am surprised to find that saying the words is deeply comforting nevertheless. I realize that to pray can be to enter a realm of imagination that operates on a different level of reality. When I pray, I can put myself in a place, in my head, in which God is waiting to revive the dead, so that I will see my son again and all people will see their lost loved ones. That place doesn't have to be literally real for me to find peace in visiting it. The enterprise of prayer becomes more meaningful; I can throw myself into it more and prayer is a healing experience. Still, there are some words I just cannot say, they stick in my throat – shehecheyanu … it will be a long time before that bracha can cross my lips again.

Suffering as Cleansing and Atonement

"…in the covenant mentioned in connection with sufferings, the sufferings wash away all the sins of a man."

The sugya transitions from discussing more conditional aspects of yissurin – do they interrupt a relationship with God? Are they accepted by the sufferer? to invoke a definite benefit of *yissurin*. Citing the law that a slave who has been wounded must be freed, they introduce the idea that something hurtful can lead to liberation. Similarly, suffering can yield benefits and forms of liberation. They now evoke an idea about suffering that is dominant in rabbinic thought: suffering accomplishes purification, a washing away of sins. ▲

One fairly concrete notion of how suffering brings purification is in how it might prod a person to examine her actions and then repent. This and related ideas are found throughout rabbinic literature, as the statement cited earlier, in which R. Yochanan declares that Israel is inspired to do teshuvah and behave well only by suffering (B.Menachot 53b)

However, a more complex human need is also at play when something goes amiss, either something external, or something in a person's behavior. An individual then feels a spiritual and emotional need to engage in an act of repair, even if the specific damage or misdeed cannot literally be repaired. If something more specific has been done, or can be remedied, the need is even more obvious, but also easier to meet. Healing involves some kind of reparative gesture or action. The need for cleansing and atonement had once been addressed by the system of Temple sacrifices. After the destruction of the Temple, however, the question arose of how to meet this need. One response was the development of the idea of personal

suffering as atonement In fact, suffering could be seen as superior atonement – it involves direct physical sacrifice of one's physical self, while bringing a ritual sacrifice had not.

When the communal life that revolved around the Temple was gone, there was also a shift of focus towards individual religious practice and obligation. This led to more opportunities for individual sin, or feeling of sin, as well as increased interest in the religious life and destiny of individuals. Suffering became one way to imagine oneself cleansed of sin and forgiven by God. In the traditional mind, since everyone is guilty of at least some small sins, even a righteous person can benefit from cleansing by way of suffering:

> אמר רבי אלעזר ברבי צדוק: למה צדיקים נמשלים בעולם הזה? לאילן שכולו עומד במקום טהרה ונופו נוטה למקום טומאה, נקצץ נופו - כולו עומד במקום טהרה, כך הקב"ה מביא יסורים על צדיקים בעולם הזה, כדי שיירשו העולם הבא
>
> תלמוד בבלי מסכת קידושין דף מ עמוד ב

> R. Eleazar son of R. Zadok said: To what are the righteous compared in this world? To a tree standing wholly in a place of cleanness, but its bough overhangs to a place of uncleanness; when the bough is lopped off, it stands entirely in a place of cleanness. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, brings suffering upon the righteous in this world, in order that they may inherit the future world. (Kiddushin 40b)

The idea of suffering as atonement is a step away from direct reward and punishment, and it moved even farther away with the idea of vicarious atonement – suffering for the sins of others. While this idea appeared even in the Bible, most notably in the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53, its evolution and strengthening after the destruction of the Temple suggests an increasing difficulty with the idea of direct reward and punishment. Rabbinic thought focused on the idea of vicarious atonement particularly in *midrashic* explorations of narratives such as the deaths of

Nadav and Avihu. We saw an example earlier from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 26:1, which expressed the opinion that the fact that God struck them down in their youth did not necessarily mean they were sinners. Later in the same chapter the *midrash* broadens its idea and states that Nadav and Avihu are examples of how the death of a righteous person can be an atonement. They compare such a death to the way the day itself of Yom Kippur atones for sin.

[יא] א"ר חייא בר אבא באחד בניסן מתו בניו של אהרן ומפני מה הוא מזכיר מיתתן ביום הכיפורים, אלא מלמד שכשם שיום הכיפורים מכפר כך מיתתן של צדיקים מכפרת

פסיקתא דרב כהנא (מנדלבוים) פיסקא כו - אחרי מות

R. Hiyya bar Abba said, The sons of Aaron died on the first of Nissan, and why is their death recalled on the Day of Atonement? This is to teach that just as the Day of Atonement itself atones, so the death of the righteous is an atonement.
(Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Acharei Mot, 26:11)

If we think back to Geertz' categories of needs that are fulfilled by religion, we see that the idea of suffering as vicarious atonement satisfies these to some extent. It "explains" suffering that seems to defy explanation – there is order and justice in the world that demand that good and evil be repaid, therefore there must be suffering. But if a person is suffering, the sin is not necessarily his, it could be for the sins of others, thus explaining why good people may suffer. This attempts to place a framework of a larger morality onto personal suffering, and if one could accept it, this also might make suffering more endurable, Geertz' third criterion of need. It not only softens the sense of individual blame and sin, but connects one to an expanse of humanity who share the burdens of sin and suffering, and at least in theory, could support one another through these trials.

When one of my closest friends is diagnosed with breast cancer, I can't believe it is possible. Haven't I already "paid my dues" by the death of my son? I know it isn't true, but I feel as though I have offered my sacrifice, I have more than atoned for whatever it is I needed to atone for. I somehow assumed in some crazy way that nothing very bad could ever happen to me or even touch my life again. I guess I am back in the real world, reminded that the score is never necessarily permanently evened.

Jewish Suffering, Jewish Redemption

The Holy One gave Israel three precious gifts, and all of them were given only through yisurim…the Torah, the Land of Israel and the world to come.

The *sugya* was last focused on personal suffering and some of its possible benefits. Now, the *sugya* returns to a general statement about suffering and the people of Israel, a statement that appears in several places in rabbinic literature.[11] God gave Israel three precious gifts through suffering; the sugya now suggests a national context to show that there are great, positive gains to be had through suffering. They do not explain their statement from a historical, theological or psychological perspective, but in typical Talmudic style, they provide supporting verses in which the Bible mentions each of these gifts alongside *yissurin*. The proof text given for Torah is Psalms 94, verse 12 quoted earlier:

אַשְׁרֵי הַגֶּבֶר אֲשֶׁר תְּיַסְּרֶנּוּ יָהּ וּמִתּוֹרָתְךָ תְלַמְּדֶנּוּ׃

Happy is the man whom you chasten, O Lord, and whom you teach from your Torah (Psalms 94:12).

For the land of Israel, Deuteronomy 8:5, also cited earlier, in which it says :

וְיָדַעְתָּ עִם־לְבָבֶךָ כִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר יְיַסֵּר אִישׁ אֶת־בְּנוֹ
ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְיַסְּרֶךָּ׃

Bear in mind that the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son. (Deuteronomy 8:5)

and then connects that suffering with the land two verses later, in verse 7:

כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְבִיאֲךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה
For the Lord your God will bring you to a good land…

[11] Kraemer notes that this rabbinic aphorism normally appears prefaced with the statement "yissurin are precious," a preface which is omitted here. While it is unclear whether the omission was deliberate or an accident of editing and chronology, Kraemer points out that in this text, in any case, the sages do not make a direct positive statement about suffering. (194)

Finally, Proverbs 6:23 is offered as the proof text for sufferings being the route to the World to Come:

כִּי נֵר מִצְוָה וְתוֹרָה אוֹר וְדֶרֶךְ חַיִּים תּוֹכְחוֹת מוּסָר

> For commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light, and reproofs of suffering are the way of (eternal) life.

As noted earlier, theodicy is particularly difficult to reconcile with individual suffering, creating a need for a more nuanced approach to reward and punishment. Now the *sugya* looks beyond a reward-punishment model even for the nation. There is no mention of Israel's suffering for these gifts being a matter of punishment. The *yissurin* are simply said to be for a beneficial purpose. There is a powerful precedent, going as far back as the Torah, for thinking about suffering as having a redemptive purpose. It is the paradigm of communal suffering in the Bible, the enslavement in Egypt. As much as, or perhaps more than, anywhere else in the Bible, the anguish of the people, the actual experience of suffering, is specifically described. There is no explanation of this suffering as a punishment for the sins of the people, and no judgment is implied against them. According to the book of Genesis, the events of Mitzrayim are known to God, and are perhaps a part of the divine plan. But no actual <u>reason</u> for this event is spelled out, beyond the earthly, political and historical reason that a Pharaoh came to power who feared the Israelites and chose to oppress them.

The suffering is <u>not</u> inflicted by God as far as the text reveals. However, the release from suffering *was* part of God's plan going back at least to the time of Abraham. The release from slavery – from *yissurin* - becomes the path to redemption. In this foundational story of the Jewish people, suffering leads to the

people crying out to God, and then being saved by God. That is only the beginning of the redemption; the exodus from Mitzrayim was much more than being saved from a brutal situation. It led not only to the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah, and to the Land of Israel, but to a new relationship with God, which the Torah describes as its purpose in the passage recited daily:

אֲנִי ה׳ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לִהְיוֹת לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי ה׳ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם׃
במדבר פרק טו פסוק מא

I am the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God
(Numbers 15:41)

Thus this central story of the Jewish people gives us a model of suffering that is not punitive, that leads to redemption and to a closer and deeper relationship with God. Furthermore, as David Hartman points out in an article on "undeserved suffering," the experience in Egypt and the redemption is one that is used to transform the people's moral and spiritual quality:

> Rather than becoming fixated on our memory of suffering in Egypt, Moses turned the memory of slavery in Egypt into a catalyst urging us to love rather than oppress the stranger "because we were strangers in the land of Egypt." [Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19] … Instead of reinforcing the tendency of persecuted communities to define themselves by their past, i.e. as eternal victims, Sinai infused our consciousness with a vision of new possibilities for moral development. (9)

Enough time has passed; I begin to feel a need to draw something positive from Jonathan's death. When my grief was still raw, I could not imagine creating

anything constructive from this terrible thing. Memorial donations from friends and family had been used, at our request, to build a new pavilion at his camp and to buy supplies for his school's music department. In theory, these memorials were a source of comfort. But they were also a concrete sign that he is really dead, and therefore very painful. I knew they were lovely and meaningful memorials, but they too seemed static and … dead. Now I am ready for something different. I want the members of my community to experience the depth and power of the Jewish approach to bereavement as I have experienced it. I was surviving and even beginning to grow from Jon's death in part because I had been supported by the loving arms of my community and all the traditional rituals which provided a strong embrace. Through these people and these rituals, I had also held onto some sense of God's presence, at a time when I had no inner resources to do so. I wanted to find ways to help others experience God's presence during those crucial times in their lives.

Together with my husband, Shalom, I create a new chesed committee in the shul which will enable all of us to support one another in times of illness and loss. The group is involved with bikur cholim, shemira and tahara for the dead, educational programming, and a number of nichum avelim activities. We name the committee Yad Yonatan, a name with a perfect double-meaning for this living memorial to Jonathan which will reach out a hand to those in need (the group's logo is found on the cover of this paper.)

The work of Yad Yonatan brings me enormous peace and a sense of balance. Through it many community members have learned to give and receive comfort and respect to one another within a Jewish framework. I watch people grow through the doing, the receiving and the learning. I am aware that every act of chesed that takes place through this group has been sparked by my suffering. There has been redemption in Jonathan's death. That does not make his death any less painful, nor does it make it just, but it does give meaning to continuing to live in this world.

Personal Suffering: R. Yochanan, the Grieving Rabbi

"If a man busies himself in the study of the Torah and in acts of charity and buries his children, all his sins are forgiven him

Although at this point the *sugya* continues to use a formal structure of argumentation, the ostensible logic of its content begins to break down. The *sugya* had just listed three examples of gifts to the people of Israel that come through suffering. It now offers a triad that should be parallel, that wipes away the sins of an individual.[12] But the text brings three matters that do not form a logical series: while Torah study and acts of kindness are behaviors within a person's control, and are behaviors which reflect a person's moral or spiritual quality, the third item, "buries his children," is a form of *yissurin* that is none of these. Nevertheless, it is described as bringing automatic forgiveness. In typical Talmudic fashion, a proof text is brought for each of the three listed items, although not, initially, with regard to burying children.

The passage takes on immediate poignancy because of its principal protagonist. A *tanna* lists the three "criteria" before R. Yochanan bar Nappacha, the great Palestinian *amora,* who was known to have buried ten sons, a fact which colors the reading of the *sugya.* R. Yochanan has already spoken in the *sugya* a number of times. It was he who challenged his colleague Resh Lakish earlier regarding the "obvious" fact that Torah study prevents *yissurin*. Now, as the sugya focuses more directly on R. Yochanan the man, we might read that brief exchange a little differently. R. Yochanan finds it too simple, "childish" perhaps, to say that Torah study keeps away suffering; he would like to re-frame the idea and say that if one has the opportunity to study and doesn't do so, suffering comes to him. The great

[12] From a literary point of view, it is also worth noting the continuing pattern of threes here and throughout the *sugya,*pointed out by both Jacobs and Kraemer.

scholar knows from personal experience that Torah study does not prevent suffering; perhaps his alternate reading to Resh Lakish represents his attempt to find a more sophisticated way to think about the connection between Torah and suffering, and in a broader sense, to make sense of undeserved suffering. In any case, his different statement about Torah would not explain his suffering, but at least does not directly contradict his experience.

Now R. Yochanan questions the inclusion of "burial of children" among things that bring atonement, bringing textual support to the other two items, but wondering what textual support can be offered about children. The reader has to wonder if this great sage who usually presents proof-texts with apparent ease, is really unable to find the right verses for this opinion. Or might it be that as a father who has buried ten children, this is a subject he cannot approach with scholarly, or pious, objectivity? Not surprisingly, he is next quoted as stating that "leprosy and children (*banim*)" are not *yissurin shel ahava*.

The *sugya* now attempt to probe categories and levels of different kinds of suffering, continuing to use a *halachic* style of argument. The text ponders whether or not various *yissurin* are connected to God's love. It debates: what are the criteria for defining these afflictions: whether they are visible or hidden? Physical (leprosy) or emotional ("children")? Do they come from a lack of something or a loss of it (children)? Is the nature of one's community (here Palestine vs. Babylonia) a factor? The text is now unsure whether the suffering of "children" (*"banim"*) refers to burying one's children or, perhaps, to not having children at all, and whether one or both afflictions fall within the category of *yissurin shel ahava*. Perhaps these *yissurin* are an atonement but not *yissurin* of love, or are *yissurin* of "atonement" by definition

considered *yissurin shel ahava* because of their great benefit (for the "world to come" as well as emotional/psychological benefit)?

The formal line of argument gets less and less clear as it enters deeper into these discussions and deliberates about what exactly falls under the category of *yissurin shel ahava*. This lack of clarity is borne out by the varied ways particular parts of the sugya are understood by both traditional and contemporary commentators and translators (see Rashi, Tosafot, Steinsaltz, Soncino, Artscroll, Jacobs and Kraemer). The questions and even the positions are not clearly resolved.

Most of all, the text struggles with the lack of clarity of R. Yochanan's position. How, it asks, can he of all people say that "children" do not represent *yissurin shel ahava?* He is the person who goes around showing people, particularly those who are suffering, the bone/tooth of his tenth son.[13] The statement seems to be brought to show that R. Yochanan does see the death of children as *yissurin shel ahava,* but its meaning here is ambiguous, and is read that way by the traditional commentators. However, it could also be read as R. Yochanan's protest against imagining that such a painful suffering could be connected in any way with an experience of God's love. Kraemer proposes the second reading(195).

The debate here is similar to the *sugya*'s earlier one about whether interruptions in prayer and Torah study constitute *yissurin shel ahava*. Again, as Jacobs points out, the passages utilize a *halachic* structure of argumentation, even though the subject matter is *aggadic.* (43) In the present passages, we begin to sense

[13] R. Yochanan was known in the Talmud to have a practice of showing people the bone, commonly understood to refer to a tooth, from the tenth of his dead sons. A reference to this will reappear in one of the sugya's anecdotes about healing, and will be examined further in that context.

that "something is awry," as Kraemer phrases it (195). He points to a subtle shift in structure that may signal this: not only does R. Yochanan seem at a loss for a proof-text, but it is only with regard to "children" that an argument is given in two, rather than three points, and it is here that the text becomes increasingly self-contradictory. He posits that with the ambiguous use of R. Yochanan's statement, the text begins a process of undermining itself, a process which will reach its ultimate expression in the anecdotes about a "real life" Yochanan responding to suffering.

The *sugya* has now moved away from discussions of punishment or whether suffering is deserved or undeserved. In addition, it has left the realm of *mitzvot* such as prayer and study, and entered the purely human realm of illness, family and emotional life. It is as though the earlier topics of interest have become irrelevant, as the *sugya* progresses to its next segment, in which we will "meet" some of the sages as human beings confronting suffering as they might in reality.

> *There is no question that burying my son was the most terrible thing I have ever had to do. I have no interest in finding words to describe it; there are no words and there should not be. I am glad the statements and logic in the Talmud become jumbled when they confront this topic. The text feels honest and real as it stumbles over itself when it tries to categorize the position of Rabbi Yochanan. Some experiences are not meant to have words.*

II. ENDURING SUFFERING

"Are your sufferings welcome to you?"

The sugya now enters the realm of human experience as opposed to speculation about it. It presents a series of anecdotes in which three different sages who are ill are asked whether their sufferings are welcome to them, and each declares "no." Not even the promise of reward, presumably in the next world, or other rewards we have deduced from the text such as learning, atonement or redemption, are welcome to them. Up to this point, our *sugya* has constituted an interesting segment of Talmud; the present narratives transform it into a radical text.

We have heard the opinions of a number of learned, pious men, purportedly all good candidates for living out their own model of suffering. In these "real life" anecdotes, we would expect them to know the potential benefits of their own *yissurin,* and to accept those *yissurin* in a way that reflect God's love for them, their love of God, or both. Instead, as Kraemer suggests in the title of his book chapter on this *sugya*, this is where "The Bavli Rebels" (184-210).[14] The *sugya* seems to have turned on itself and subverted its own line of thinking. We see people behaving in ways that are directly contrary to their own teachings and that certainly do not affirm, reinforce or even acknowledge their stated opinions (although the position of Rabbi Yochanan continues to remain ambiguous).

The sages' responses are terse and uninformative. They do not explicitly reject or affirm the concept of embracing suffering, raise the subject of *yissurin shel*

[14] At several points in his book, Kraemer highlights the contrast between the Palestinian and Babylonian versions of this text and their approaches to auffering. This is not a subject for this paper, but is worth noting. In short, according to Kraemer, "The Bavli supports the legitimacy of protest; the Palestinian tradition, on the explicit level, at least, remains apologetic throughout…condemns protest or, at most, allows it to be spoken through ambivalence. (134)

ahava, or engage in protest. They do not fret over an interruption of Torah study, or even refer to whether such an interruption is taking place. (It is not even clear how deeply they are suffering, with the surprising implication being: apparently it does not matter for the purposes of our discussion whether the *yissurin* in question are severe or mild.)

In the first two vignettes, the "visiting" sages do not berate or question the ill person's lack of acceptance; they simply heal them through the taking of a hand. There does not seem to be any problem with the "non-acceptance." [15] It is notable that while the response of each sage goes against the conventions expressed earlier in the *sugya*, none of them engages in any form of active protest. If this text were seeking to give a directly opposite view, to specifically balance or rebel against the earlier idea of <u>embracing</u> *yissurin shel ahava*, one might have expected Job-like complaint. In contrast with the model of R. Akiva, it could, for example, have expressed the path of his counterpart, R. Ishmael, who chose as his model of response to suffering, Moses, and the prophetic tradition of protest against God. As Heschel discusses in "Torah min Ha-Shamayim" (101), R. Ishmael taught that when seeing his people suffering, one must cry out:

> מי כמוך באלמים מי כמוך שומע עלבון בניך ושותק
>
> **מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מס' דשירה פרשה ח**
>
> Who is like you, oh Lord among the silent, who sees the abasement of your people and remains silent?
>
> Mechilta d. R. Ishmael Be'Shallach, Mas. Shirah 8

[15] This evokes the Berachot account of R. Akiva's death, in which he embraces his suffering, while both his students and the angels protest. Akiva does not chastise them, but offers his teaching about the subject.

Here in our *sugya*, however, protest is not excluded as a possibility, but it is not explicitly engaged in either.[16] This could represent a continuation of purposeful ambiguity on the part of the editor, expressing the tension, lack of resolution and lack of clarity that often accompany experiences of crisis and suffering. Alternatively, it could be a depiction of silence as a response to suffering. These are not mutually exclusive readings, since silence often either reflects or creates ambiguity. This is certainly the case in two most famous Biblical examples of silence in response to *yissurin*: Abraham in the *akeda* story and Aaron following the deaths of his sons. In the face of suffering, silence is another alternative to outright acceptance or rejection.

Heschel's words about silence evoke the need, when talking about accepting or embracing suffering, to differentiate between different kinds of suffering. As we have seen, and as Heschel points out, sometimes redemption from suffering comes specifically through the ethical actions that it inspires or makes possible. Surely. these actions may also sometimes necessitate resistance or crying out, even against God. Again, quiet acceptance of suffering is acceptable only by an individual on his own behalf; if others are suffering, the desired response may be to protest. Heschel wrote in A Passion for Truth:

> There are some forms of suffering that a man must accept with love and bear in silence. There are other agonies to which he must say no. (271)

For some experiences of suffering, words would be absurd. Heschel notes about the Kotzker rebbe that unlike Job, he kept his complaints to himself.

[16] The long tradition of protest against God, beginning in the Bible with Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and Job, offers a whole other range of responses to suffering, and leads to a different set of issues regarding perception of and relationship to God, God's love and justice. These are naturally related to the issues dealt with in this paper, but will not be explored here.

> He was a man of few words, realizing that man could make a fool of himself by questioning, challenging or criticizing the Creator. The phrases that a man thrust against Heaven could easily boomerang... In Kotsk they cultivated the eloquence of silence. (280)

In the emergency room that day, there is nothing to say.In the blink of an eye, I have lost control of everything. My child is slipping through my fingers. We are surrounded by strangers - EMT's, nurses, doctors, the rabbi, funeral directors - one after another they are taking him away from us, his parents. There is no fighting back. I can only receive what is being handed to me, and try to go through the motions as gently as possible. I cannot even begin to think or to feel anger, acceptance, protest or even sadness. Just shock and numbness. In the moment, who could possibly answer a question like "Are your sufferings welcome to you?"

"A Prisoner Cannot Free Himself from Jail"

How is it, asks the *gemara*, that when the great healer and scholar R. Yochanan became ill, he could not heal himself? Wouldn't he of all people have resources as powerful as could be? The text's answer is often quoted in Jewish

pastoral care circles: a prisoner cannot free himself from jail. In other words, no individual, however great her powers, can be totally self-sufficient. This insight may not sound particularly remarkable; but in the Talmud, especially in the context of this *sugya*, it carries significant force and meaning. After all, from what we have read in the earlier part of the *sugya*, we might have expected the source of healing to be Torah study, *teshuvah*, or prayer.

Or, to follow a logical progression in this *sugya*, it would have been more consistent to highlight the acceptance of suffering, strong faith in God, and the belief that suffering was for a good purpose. Instead, it is the involvement of another person that is presented as the primary and necessary means of healing. And all that person has to provide is simple touch. For them as well as for the "patients," no particular words, beliefs, actions, or attitudes are required. On the contrary; in these stories, those who are ill pointedly have an attitude we expect our *sugya* to condemn.

Once again, we see the sugya undermining itself as it contradicts its earlier positions. The fact that R. Yochanan in particular is not able to heal himself, despite his strengths in Torah and in healing, minimizes the significance of those factors while elevating the power and importance of human connection.

> *Other than my surviving children and my husband, what keeps me going is the care and caring of friends. The content of what these friends say and do is irrelevant – I realized in the weeks following Jon's death that anything people say to a mother and father who have just buried their child sounds stupid. I have worked hard not to judge anyone for their words or behavior at this time. I realize that in the face of this loss, people are themselves lost. Most of the things they say sound meaningless; there is no comfort to be had*

from any words. I can sense, though, when some are searching for a way to help, and I see that I have a choice - I can listen to all the inadequate attempts at consolation and reject each in turn. Or, I can find ways to embrace the simple fact that someone is reaching out to me. The choice is obvious. People make small gestures: a meal, a load of laundry, a phone call, a well-timed smile or hug, it is all they can do. These too,seem pathetically inadequate. What are any of these small acts in the face of my child's death? Yet, they are a comfort and a source of healing because they are my lifeline to a world in which goodness still exists. I cannot feel it yet; but these small acts remind me. They are a comfort because I am much too shattered to relate in any meaningful way to anyone, to people or to God, and these people make me feel God's presence through their actions. Simply through the fact that they are here with me and for me. Their attention tells me not only that I must have value, but that life must still have value. And human beings have the capacity to convey that value in the world through the most trivial and seemingly ridiculous gestures.

I begin to believe in the existence of malachim, *messengers from God. In the early months of our bereavement, I encounter many of them. It is as if God delivers messages of comfort to me through them. Often it seems as though when I am nearing a point of despair, one of these messengers appears on the scene. There are dozens of examples, like this one, from the first day of school, one month after Jonathan's death.*

It is September, the first day of return to a "normal" schedule: back to school, time to resume. Our two sons leave early in the morning. My goodbye to them feels momentous. Every separation, even this one, so simple and routine, reverberates with the loss of Jon. My stomach tightens as I see the yellow school buses go up and down the street, children all fresh and combed, with their new clothes and backpacks, climbing aboard in anxious excitement. Jonathan so loved his school buses, and the bus drivers were his best friends. I stand in the front hall of our home thinking, I will never survive this.

Suddenly I look down and notice an envelope which has been slipped under the front door. A brief but eloquent card from the parents of one of Jon's classmates, saying they were thinking of Jon and of us on this day that they

knew would be especially difficult. A small stroke of tenderness which holds me and helps carry me through the moment.

How incredibly powerful we humans are! Even as I experience the most profound helplessness of my life, I can feel that power; sometimes I am overcome by the feeling that we humans can do anything. Then I can also believe that I will someday have my life back.

"This is the Bone of my Tenth Son:" The Wounded Healer

According to Talmudic tradition, R. Yochanan was bereaved of ten sons, and was accustomed to carrying around a bone (commonly understood to refer to a tooth) of the last son he buried. He displayed this tooth in an attempt to comfort those who were suffering bereavement or other *yissurin*. Interpretations of this

custom vary, and its meaning does not become definitively clear in our *sugya* either, but it clearly was considered relevant enough to the *sugya* to be mentioned here twice.

We saw that earlier R. Yochanan's custom may have been used to show that he considered loss of children "*yissurin shel ahava*." Traditional commentators on our passage seem to agree. Rashi notes that a great man like R. Yochanan could not have deserved punishment, therefore his losses had to represent "sufferings of love." Tosafot, commenting on this passage, have a different basis for their opinion: R. Yochanan would only have displayed the tooth to comfort sufferers if he considered his trials *yissurin shel ahava,* and believed that the suffering as well as his response to it was something in which people would find meaning.

In the climactic vignette of our sugya, R. Yochanan attempts to understand and comfort R. Eleazar with this "bone" of his tenth son. David Kraemer understands this act as an attempt to show a childless Eleazar[17] that his fate could have been even more painful. He views R. Yochanan as bitter about his loss and willing to share his difficulty with it in order to comfort others (198). I believe the portrayal of R. Yochanan is left more ambiguous.

From a pastoral care perspective, R. Yochanan's practice raises a number of questions about what constitutes healing behavior, what meets the needs of the patient[18], and how the personal history of the healer affects the interaction. Other questions pertain to the point of view of the spiritual caregiver: how does one handle one's own struggles when needing to support others, and when and how is it

[17] A fact which may not be historically accurate, according to Kraemer, but which is the presumption in this narrative.
[18] I use the label "patient" to refer to the recipient of healing. It it not necessarily limited to medical patients.

appropriate or not appropriate to use those struggles with other sufferers? This *sugya* does not address these issues directly, except to remind us through R. Yochanan that healers are also sufferers, again highlighting the idea that everyone suffers.

R. Yochanan embodies what Henri Nouwen famously called "The Wounded Healer." In his book of that title, Nouwen's thesis is that one brings comfort and healing to sufferers not by being an authority figure, or a symbol of perfection and wholeness, but precisely by using one's own imperfections and woundedness to connect with the other person:

> He is called to be the wounded healer, the one who must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others (82).[19]

In order to do this, one must have the self-awareness and ability to articulate one's own struggles and strengths. Nouwen writes:

> Only he who is able to articulate his own experience can offer himself to others as a source of clarification (38) .

In addition, he must have the emotional and spiritual strength to be human in the relationship:

> This service requires the willingness to enter into a situation, with all the human vulnerabilities a man has to share with his fellow man. (77)

Rabbi Jack Bloom, in his essay "Curing and Healing," addresses similar needs of the spiritual healer.

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[19] A Jewish and more contemporary model of the "wounded healer" might be seen in the Hasidic tradition, especially in Rav Nachman of Bratslav, whose path, his biographer Art Green notes, "based on the model of the suffering tzaddik rather than on the regal model" (44). In the case of Nachman, however, he seems to have seen great suffering as what separated and elevated him above others, rather than as what linked him to humanity. The Talmud does not seem to portrary R. Yochanan in this way.

> The visiting Symbolic Exemplar needs to develop some immunity to that very human tendency (to take on the "coloring and feelings" of the environment), while not becoming so closed off, distant, and removed that he cannot be of use to God or humankind. He needs to be centered, balanced, safe in the storm, not buffeted to and fro by it…The rabbi's Self needs taking care of first. Knowing that her Self is a relationship and attending to any wounded parts is primary. Nothing can happen without that. The rabbi's own feelings of fright, inadequacy, helplessness, vulnerability, or whatever need to be attended to. (235)

Presumably, Rabbi Yochanan wants to demonstrate and share the power of his faith and his ability to survive in the face of the most horrible losses. But the manner and tone with which he shows the "bone of his tenth" to people is not portrayed clearly, and that is what will determine how it is received and the resulting healing effects or lack thereof. It could be received as being done in an unhelpful, arrogant spirit of minimizing other people's pain, by showing them that he had endured worse, and perhaps meant to exhort them not to complain. A patient might understand his act as demonstrating a lack of compassion and as self-centeredness on the part of the helper. Alternatively, R. Yochanan's actions may reflect a shared woundedness, a la Nouwen. It is hard to know from the text the precise flavor of R. Yochanan's action, and whether it achieves the connection described by Ram Dass in a true helping encounter, when "Hearts that have known pain meet in mutual recognition and trust" (88).

> *During the shiva week, an acquaintance comes by and tells me of her brother's death at the age of ten. Her mother, she recounts, never stopped grieving until she died, well into her nineties. A woman we know who suffers excruciating pain from a chronic muscular condition, and who is completely homebound, shows up at our door. She manages to stay only*

long enough to relate that she too lost a son, and felt compelled to come see us; then she leaves. We hear an endless stream of stories, tales of human sadness, of children dying, and of parents' neverending grief. They flow before us like a river of witnesses, speaking of the losses they have endured or witnessed. At the start of our shiva, a friend warned us that Jonathan's death would evoke memories for many people, and would move them to pour out their own sadness. Our friend urged us to protect ourselves from all the emotionally needy people for whom we would provide a captive audience. But rather than wanting protection, I find myself listening intently to each story, soaking it in. I want to know about this new world of tragedy and grief into which I have been thrust, I want to connect with others who have lived in it; I am greedy for everyone's story. Perhaps the stories should depress me, but I feel comforted instead.

Of course I am sad for the sorrow of others, in fact my own raw sadness make me react even more strongly to it. But in the loneliness that is grief, it soothes me to learn of so many others who know what it is to suffer this kind of tragedy. I can see that although losing a child may be an "unnatural" event, it is still a part of the human condition, and I am still a part of the community of humans.

A few months later, I study about Rabbi Yochanan, a renowned scholar and healer, who showed the bereaved and depressed the bone of the tenth of his dead sons. My study partners find this quite gruesome; I feel that I understand it well. I imagine that all those people who paraded through my house during shiva were showing me the bones of their tenths, and I am grateful that they did so.

Why Do You Weep?... Give Me Your Hand

The climax of our *sugya* begins with the third of the *bikur cholim* vignettes: R. Yochanan enters the room of R. Eleazar, who is ill and lying in the dark. Perhaps, as some say, he is too poor to live in a home with windows. Or perhaps, it is being alone that keeps him in the dark – after all , we just learned that nobody can be

healed without the help of another person. Now R. Yochanan brings light into the room, the light of his own shining beauty and of another human presence.

In the light, R. Yochanan sees that his friend is weeping. He proceeds to question R. Eleazar, looking for an explanation for his friend's tears, preferably an explanation that will yield an easy solution. He suggests the first two conventional explanations that come to mind: Are you crying because you did not study enough Torah? Are you crying because you are a poor man? If so, there are well-known rabbinic principles that will convince R. Eleazar not to cry over these. R. Yochanan quotes them. But these are apparently ineffective interventions; there is no response from R. Eleazar.

R. Yochanan's initial missteps represent common pitfalls of the spiritual helper and other helping professionals. They can be understood in a few possible ways. First, as pointed out by Dayle Friedman in her article "*PaRDeS*: A Model for Presence in *Livui Ruchani*," he jumps to conclusions about what is troubling R. Eleazar – beginning with the lack of light, and moving on to more abstract ideas like Torah study and his economic status (51). He makes assumptions which reflect only his own thinking of the moment, and which do not connect him with his patient's experience or inner state at all. To make matters worse, he not only makes these assumptions, but he verbalizes them to R. Eleazar, creating further distance between them.

In his article on "Curing and Healing," Jack Bloom lists these behaviors as the first "don'ts" of how to speak with a suffering person and he explains why they undermine healing:

> Don't tell people that they shouldn't think or feel the way they think or feel. ..Telling people that they shouldn't feel or think something is a way of implying that something is wrong with them. It only serves to reduce their confidence... (244)

Another of R. Yochanan's errors may be his being too much in his formal role as the all-knowing spiritual helper, and too little in his own humanity. Indeed, the formal identity of R. Yochanan is a powerful one for his time and in his circle. He is the picture of success. His learning and scholarship are beyond compare. He has the respect of his colleagues and the close friendship of at least one, R. Shimon ben Lakish. According to Talmudic lore, women gape at his amazing appearance and are inspired to produce beautiful babies when they look at him as they leave the *mikveh*. He is known to have great healing powers as well. R. Yochanan may arrogantly assume that surely he can figure out what is ailing R Eleazar, and heal him of it.

Many factors might be at play in snaring R. Yochanan in these typical "helper's traps," in which he jumps to conclusions and is unsupportive. Among them might be: the pride of knowing that he is good at the healing work he does, compassion for his friend and the desire to ease his suffering, impatience with the imperfections of life, and a great sense of responsibility to God and to his fellow human beings to use his potential to "fix" things. So far, he in his "official" role and his perceptions have been at the center of this visit, instead of the inner experience and the circumstances of the sick man, who has still done nothing in this encounter but cry.

R. Yochanan seems to correctly sense that he needs to alter his approach, as he does with his next question, "Are you crying because of the lack of (or the loss of)

children? Here is the bone of my tenth son." With this, R. Yochanan begins to step out of his role just a little, and to feel and show himself as a human being. He is not only one of the great sages of his time, he is also a man who has tragically buried ten sons, he is a person who knows suffering. Still, he continues to attempt to tell Eleazar what Eleazar is feeling and thinking, and Eleazar does not immediately respond. Perhaps now, when he has not succeeded through conventional "sage-like" ideas, platitudes, or the use of himself as an example, he is silent.

At last R. Eleazar speaks, perhaps because R. Yochanan is finally silent; perhaps because he senses a little softening, a little more humanity, in Yochanan. It is precisely this humanity – or, humanness – that causes Eleazar to weep. I am crying, he says in effect, because life is so hard and so painful, and because of you. Because even you, who are pious and learned, beautiful and accomplished, and even though you have suffered terrible sufferings and tried to use those sufferings for good, in the end you will die and rot in the earth just like anyone else.

Now R. Yochanan understands. "That is something to cry about," he declares.[20] Eleazar's pain was not about some circumscribed aspect of his life that needed fixing, or about some abstract regret. It was a deeper and broader pain, caused by the mysterious cruelty inherent in being human, the existential fact that in the end, we all meet the same fate. When Eleazar confronts him with this, R. Yochanan at last sets aside his detached persona and his platitudes. He does not contradict his friend or try to talk him out of his feelings. At last he sits with him as

[20] Jacobs sees humor in R. Eleazar's statement about R. Yochanan's beauty: "What else but humour can be the meaning of R. Yochanan's declaration…"Now that is something to cry about." (44) I have experienced other readers react similarly, but I prefer to read this as a profound moment of interpersonal connection. Kraemer also does not read this line as humor, but as "profound irony." (245).

a fellow human being, and they weep together about the pain that is a natural part of being alive.

The culmination of this scene is first of all an example of the power of "presence" that is frequently emphasized in discussions of spiritual guidance. The well-known motto of this teaching is the statement of meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein, "Don't just do something, stand there" (quoted in Friedman, p. 42). When we encounter a person in trouble, it is the natural desire and instinct of most of us to want to correct or fix the problem, or at the very least to explain it. This desire on the part of individuals corresponds to the larger "goals" of religion identified earlier. But very often, there is no concrete action to be taken and no explanation that will make the struggle make sense. Often, it is human presence that can be offered and that can be the greatest help. As Ram Dass notes in his book on the nature of the helping relationship:

> Even in those situations where another person is completely enmeshed in the web of a suffering mind and is not receptive to help in re-perceiving the situation, we can be of comfort. We can offer our own empathy, own our own experience, our own understanding of how it feels when we suffer: the resistance, tension, fear, withdrawal, self-pity, doubt, the utter separateness
> …perhaps there will be nothing we can *do.* Then we can only *be* and *be with* the person in his or her pain, attending to the quality of our own consciousness. (88)

R. Yochanan has now been able to share his vulnerability and his tears, essential to his role as healer. Now R. Eleazar's need for connection is met, and R. Yochanan can ask him the basic question of our sugya: whether his sufferings are

welcome to him. Like the other sages in the stories, Eleazar says that they are not, and R. Yochanan takes his hand and heals him.

R. Yochanan could not be effective with R. Eleazar while unable to respond as a person. At the same time, were he to completely relinquish his role as sage and healer, he would also lose his ability to help. If he were in either role exclusively, he could not serve as an effective spiritual guide. Jack Bloom writes about the need for rabbis to serve as "symbolic exemplars" but also to always retain their humanity:

> Rabbis need to learn how to be in touch with, accept and *love* their other selves. They need to move back and forth between their symbolic self and their 'regular" self with grace and elegance appreciating both without trying to obliterate either one… (182)

> *When Jonathan died, I did not understand much about what I needed, but I knew that I needed a rabbi. I didn't know why. Many people avoided us during those first months, or evaded the subjects of Jonathan and of our grief. I assumed it was because I radiated so much intense hurt, or because I evoked something too painful to think about. But when our own congregational rabbi, as well as the many rabbis we knew, seemed to avoid us or not to care, their lack of response was particularly powerful and the implications for me were greater. On the one hand, as the daughter and daughter-in-law of rabbis, the mystique of a rabbi was different for me. I know very well that rabbis are human beings. I could not be fooled or soothed when our rabbi and others presented a professional persona, with formal rabbinic statements and ritual diversions. I needed genuine people. When our rabbi did interact with us, he seemed to be trying to give us something complicated, something grand, befitting a Rabbi. But gifts that were complicated and grand went over and beyond us. We felt humbled and small, flattened by our loss. We needed someone who could meet us down in the depths.*

At the same time, while I needed our rabbi to be human, and with us on a human level, I knew that a rabbi also symbolized, or even was, my connection to the Divine, perhaps serving as an emissary of God. So the rabbi's apparent rejection of me suggested a number of terrifying possibilities: either God didn't care about me, or perhaps God cared, but could not help. If even rabbis found it difficult to be in my presence, and was turning away from me, did that mean there was no balm for my grief? Or, did it mean that I was not worthy of receiving this balm, not worthy of my rabbi's, or God's, attention and concern? If these representatives of God couldn't face my tragedy, was facing it beyond even God's power? I could not answer these frightening questions, but only knew that I felt cut off from God and afraid.

CODA: R. Huna's Atonement, Order is Restored…or Is It?

The powerful vignettes about R. Yochanan and the sages who do not accept suffering turned the initial ideas of the *sugya* upside down, reversing and undermining both their conventional and unconventional wisdom. Following these vignettes, there is one final story that seems "tacked on" and not an organic part of the sugya's development. In this story, R. Huna suffers a major economic loss when

vast quantities of his wine turn to vinegar. His colleagues suggest that he examine his actions to make sure he is not being punished for some misdeed. This statement shocks the reader. By this point, the *sugya* had moved far away from a world view of deserved suffering; now it seems to come right back to the beginning and to overturn everything it has just expressed. In fact, just to make sure we do not miss the point that we are back in the mindset of theodicy, R. Huna's friends challenge him explicitly: Do you suspect God of punishing someone unjustly?

We recall one of the provocative statements which helped move the *sugya* through its progressions of ideas, the statement that when God is pleased with a man, he crushes him with painful sufferings. That statement was made in the name of this same R. Huna, who here is yet another example of a sage not accepting his sufferings.

It turns out in the story that R. Huna's behavior was in fact problematic: he was mistreating a tenant and using faulty reasoning to justify his unethical behavior. Apparently, then, the text wants to imply that his personal disaster does represent a punishment, and an example of suffering as God meting out justice. After being instructed by his friends as to the impropriety of his behavior, and after "suffering" financially as he has, R. Huna is inspired to atone and he promises to correct his behavior. Once he does so, his fortunes change for the better. The vinegar changes back into wine, the implication being that just as his misdeed had been punished, his repentance was now rewarded.

This vignette seems to undermine everything that came before. The puzzling morass of ideas and responses about suffering suddenly revert to the "schoolchildren" perspective that good behavior brings reward and bad behavior is

punished.[21] This may reflect the Talmud's understanding that, as was discussed earlier, we cannot always be focused on complex existential questions like suffering. Even for those of who do not subscribe fully or on an intellectual level to the notions of theodicy, R. Huna's outcome might provide some sense of relief as the complexities and struggles of the preceding passages are replaced by a simpler view that allows for clear causality of events and for more control over our destinies. We need this view as we carry on with our daily lives, try to do the right thing, and care for those we love. At the end of this difficult sugya, perhaps the text felt the need to return to those orderly, simple notions that provide a foundation for our everyday lives. Perhaps the Talmud offers the R. Huna story, an expression of the most conventional ideas about reward and punishment, and why people suffer, to bring us back to that mode.

It must be noted, however, that the return to order and clarity is only partial. With its ending, the *sugya* stays true to its ambiguous, challenging character: in the end, all agree that R. Huna's fortunes are changed back for the better; but some say that it wasn't because the vinegar changed back to wine, but because the price of vinegar went up so high that it brought in as much money as the wine would have.

The final vignette's ambiguity may also be expressed through a subtle and clever literary device – if the image of vinegar is used to symbolize suffering, as it sometimes does, it may be deliberate that the final story speaks of the possibility that the price of vinegar rose very high; in other words, suffering could be exchanged for great rewards, or the opposite: suffering exacts great costs!

[21] Jacobs says that this story was placed at the end of the sugya precisely to give it a "happy ending" (42).

We are left with two possibilities: R. Huna's vinegar turned back into wine, a divine reward that affirms the orderliness of God's world. And if, as others say, his fortune turned because the price of vinegar rose so high, it could be the hand of God at work a little less directly, finding a way to reward R. Huna's repentance. Or, perhaps R. Huna's "happy ending" had nothing to do with reward or with his behavior at all; perhaps the market price of vinegar rose because of economic forces in the purely human domain; or simply by chance. The *sugya* ends with neither a definite sense of order nor complete clarity. Perhaps it ends with a shrug, or a wink.

CONCLUSION

Lessons from the Talmud

This paper followed the development of our *sugya* from its more conventional, theoretical dialogues on the question of "why does suffering happen?" to "how should one receive suffering?" which offered more complex thinking about what it means to connect suffering to God's love. Finally, the *sugya* moved to the

subject : "how can we endure and alleviate suffering?" The *sugya* attempts to respond to basic human cognitive, emotional and spiritual needs to make sense of the world and of God's behavior, to feel loved by and in relationship with God, and to feel that the world is an orderly, benevolent place. Meeting all of these needs requires an essentially positive understanding of God and of the world, and as it faces these challenges, the text seeks positive ways to confront suffering.

The *sugya* never offers definitive answers, or a systematic understanding of how to respond to suffering. It does, however, generate ideas that seem to be generally accepted by the sages of the Talmud and others of their era. These ideas include the following:

1. The worst suffering is that which disconnects one from God. Torah study is the most essential and powerful way to stay connected. Therefore, in order to be "*yissurin shel ahava*," suffering cannot be something that disrupts study, or one's relationship with God.

2. There can be benefits to suffering. Some of these lie in the inner experience of the sufferer, while others involve the active response of the sufferer in the world. In the rabbinic mind, benefits may include:

- balancing of the scales; punishment for sin : justice
- learning, through 'trial" and "tribulation"
- atonement and cleansing of sin, personal or communal
- greater reward in the world to come
- deepened relationship with God
- redemption through moral response which improves the self and/or benefits the community

3. A person (or a nation) benefits from suffering by virtue of how he receives it. Suffering will not be a "gift" unless one actively finds a way to use it as such. The ability to embrace *yissurin* reflects a particular spiritual and theological stance. It is a corollary of embracing all of God the Creator's world as containing both blessing and suffering. Suffering is not out of the ordinary; it is part of the natural order.

4. Suffering does not absolve a person of responsibility for *mitzvot*; on the contrary, its source of redemption may be specifically through ethical deeds.

In its series of vignettes about healing, the *sugya* shifts its focus and lodges a quiet protest when it implies that no matter what theology says, individuals in the midst of the experience of suffering are not able to embrace it, or even to use their deep faith to heal from it. R. Yochanan serves as the personal exemplar of the *sugya*'s struggles between theoretical notions and real life, and of the tension between conventional ideology and the challenges of faith when those ideologies confront human experience. We noted the ambiguity of his positions, as his comments and his behavior seemed to subvert his more conventional, pious statements. His climactic scene with R Eleazar follows the overall structure of the *sugya*, almost as a microcosm of it, as he moves from formal and impersonal theological statements to personal association and finally to a moment of deep, mutual connection.

At the end of the anecdotal section about healing, (with the exception of the "coda" with R. Huna), God seems hardly relevant. The *sugya* strongly implies that no matter what we believe, or what words we use, the compassionate touch of

another person and human interaction are what heals the patients. Even prayer is not present in these scenes.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that at the end of the *sugya,* God remains firmly standing, so to speak. Throughout the *sugya*, neither R. Yochanan nor the other sages ever abandons the framework of theodicy (and as noted, this framework is affirmed by the R Huna story, although still leaving us with a question about its acceptance of theodicy.) None of the sages in the *sugya*'s discussions or anecdotes turns away from God, or even complains of God's or the world's apparent injustice, although they seem to struggle with it and with their own suffering. In the final analysis, the *sugya* has more to say about the subjective experience of suffering than about philosophical questions such as why God allows suffering.

The lack of definitive resolutions about explanations for suffering, in fact, illustrates one aspect of the experience: the inability to make clear sense of it. The Talmud is also making a statement about the difficulty, or perhaps impossibility, of using theology, or maybe even deep faith, to heal from suffering. Thus, one way to read the *sugya* is as a comment of protest against the reliance on abstract religious ideas, without actually affirming or negating the ideas themselves, when human contact is what is needed most. As Kraemer comments during his summary of the Bavli's position:

> As long as we remain in the realm of theory, a perfect system of justice can be maintained. When speaking of suffering, on the other hand, it is far more difficult to escape the genuine problem presented by the individual experience. As long as the discussion has no name, we may rationalize all we wish. As soon as we must speak of R. Yochanan's loss or R. Eleazar's illness, it is impossible not to hesitate and to allow questions to resound. (208)

We might also try a slightly different approach and read the different parts of the *sugya* as a whole unit in which sections are meant to complement, rather than undermine each other. We could read the entire *sugya* as a series of ideas that in combination comprise a quest for meaning that would help with the problem of suffering. As Geertz points out,

> As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable – something, as we say, sufferable. (104)

In his article about suffering, Matthew Schwartz sums up this *sugya* with a similar idea, stating that it:

> doesn't "solve" theodicy but offers a "way of living usefully" with *yissurin* despite our inability to understand why they are. (448)

Jewish pastoral care literature also makes this point repeatedly, such as in Eron's article, in which he re-defines the statement of Elisha ben Abuyah that "*leit din v'leit dayan*" (B. Kiddushin 39b). When catastrophe strikes, as in the Kiddushin *sugya,* it is not helpful to focus on whether there is judgment or a judge (i.e. God), he writes. In a time of suffering, the task is not to focus on God's behavior but rather on how people choose to live and behave. Ultimately, people make the judgments and people are the judges. Eron writes:

> *Yesh din* - …Judgments can be made but they are human judgements…Even in the presence of tragedy we have the power to assess the situation and define a response to it. … *Yesh dayan*- …there are many judges but they are human judges. As judges, we can make the negative judgment that if God is the judge, then God must be either cruel or weak. But we can also make the positive judgment that as human judges, we now have an

> opportunity to be merciful and supportive or cold and uncaring. (36)

Again, the idea of *yissurin* as "labor" or trial helps re-define the question as well as the response: from "why do I suffer?" to "how am I going to respond to this suffering in a way that will inject something positive and redemptive into it?" The one who experiences the *yissurin* has the power to shape their nature through her response. If we view the entire *sugya* from this perspective, we might say that the first part, rather than being undermined by the second part, informs the second part. The first part provides ideas and paths that all people share and with which we struggle as we strive to find meaning and positive connection in times of *yissurin.* The second part illustrates an effective behavioral way to respond to suffering, through compassionate outreach.

Another slightly different lens through which to read the *sugya*, draws again upon James Fowler's developmental theories of faith cited earlier. The level of discourse later in the *sugya* seems to reflect Fowler's fifth stage, called "conjunctive faith." In this stage, a person can grasp both, or many, sides of an issue simultaneously, and can see beyond a pre-conceived, narrowly defined ideology. Fowler notes that this stage can be best described through images and examples, such as:

> looking at a field of flowers simultaneously through a microscope and a wide-angle lens;" "realizing that the behavior of light requires that it be understood both as a wave phenomenon and as particles of energy" (184)

In this stage, a person has learned to accept the world as it is, with its many apparent contradictions and paradoxes, even if what "is" seems to challenge his preconceived notions. Fowler emphasizes that this thinking might sound uncritical, but is far from

it. Rather, it follows and is a step ahead of, learning to think critically, and represents an ability to synthesize many different views that are the result of critical understanding. This stage represents a

> willingness to let reality speak its word, regardless of the impact of that word on the security or self-esteem of the knower

and being

> alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions (185).

Corresponding to Fowler's "conjunctive faith" stage is the thinking of Jack Bloom in his book The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar. Bloom writes about the importance of people learning to use "Both/And" instead of "Either/Or" thinking, also accepting the paradoxical and contradictory parts of themselves and others. This line of thinking reflects a particular spiritual understanding and acceptance of people: that each of us contains many 'selves' which are sometimes contradictory. Instead of feeling negative about our contradictory selves, and trying to reconcile them, he urges us to embrace them:

> In a [Both/And] sense, being truly human means having more than one self. The task is for these selves to be in loving relationship with each other (183).

Bloom urges rabbis and other clergy to use his model both for themselves and in their roles as spiritual healers:

> The overall message a rabbi needs to get across is that she is an advocate for all "selves." A rabbi's work is to help the patient know, "You really do exist as a human being. You have a center, a core of being that is blessed, that goes beyond your illness,that is beyond the part that you present for the world to see." (232)

Achieving wholeness, according to these approaches, does not require that one resolve all of one's inner conflicts, and make everything consistent; wholeness can mean learning to embrace the opposites and contradictions as part of the beauty of one whole person.

The concept of *yissurin shel ahava,* related to a theology of accepting all of God's world, good and bad, fits well with Fowler's "conjunctive faith" and Bloom's psychological approach of [Both/And]. All are frameworks that reach toward the spiritual ability to embrace all of life with honesty and clear-sightedness, yet without trying to resolve its many opposing and contradictory elements. Each of these approaches might be understood, like *yissurin shel ahava,* as viewing the world through a multilayered lens, accepting it with all of its contradictions, and learning to receive what it offers as love, and to love in return.

The embracing of God's world, including embracing people with all of their flaws and contradictions, might lead us to a slightly different way to articulate the lessons of our *sugya.* Until now we have read it in a linear vertical fashion, and imagined it progressing, perhaps advancing, through different approaches to suffering, with each stage replacing the one preceding it. The *sugya* seemed to demand that we understand it as holding up intellectual and cognitive faith in *opposition* to emotional and interpersonal healing. I suggest that it may be more helpful to visualize the *sugya* through a non-linear array of co-existing questions, ideas and responses to suffering. These do not have to be in opposition to one another, but, a la Fowler and Bloom, might all achieve acceptance, and a kind of spiritual and psychological "peaceful coexistence." Especially at a time of *yissurin,* all of the issues of the *sugya* might be simultaneously at play for a person. This

perspective has implications and lessons for "how to suffer," as well as for how to be helpful to one who is suffering.

In my personal reflections on each part of the *sugya,* which reflect one example of an experience of suffering, I attempted to show how the different ideas raised in the text reflect the range of simultaneous thoughts, feelings and needs of one who is suffering. The "map" below offers a visual representation of what the inner life and needs of a suffering person might look like, based on the ideas in the *sugya.*

Tools for the Sufferer and for the Spiritual Helper

One who provides support and guidance to someone who is suffering needs to stay aware of all the different levels at which the person may be functioning, and

to affirm, as in Bloom's conceptualization, each "self" that is part of that person. Similarly, people who suffer can be taught and encouraged to embrace all those parts of themselves, to accept their inner contradictions and try to be at peace with them. This is not to say that every response to suffering is equally helpful or desirable. One task of the sufferer and of the one who is helping her is to select which responses to cultivate and strengthen. The point, however, is to accept the fact that difficult and contradictory feelings exist. That fact should not be cause for negative perceptions of the person either by others or by herself, nor should it be seen as fragmentation, but rather as normal and as a reflection of what it means to be a whole person.

Rabbis and other spiritual helpers have many tools at their disposal to affirm the "whole person," and to contribute to healing. Many of the traditional rituals and structures of Judaism address the needs which have been presented in this paper. Rituals related to death and mourning, for example, are not measures only of basic emotional comfort, but in a more profound way they serve to inject meaning into the confrontation with death, one of the most basic and universal sources of suffering. The recitation of *kaddish* is one of the most obvious examples of affirmation in the face of suffering and loss. *Tahara*, the loving preparation of a body for burial, is a statement of the value and worth of that body and that person in spite of his or her death, and in spite of the fact that everyone must die. The customs of *shiva* and *nichum avelim* are not just ways to be "nice" to someone, but also make a statement , if sometimes only implicitly. They assume and acknowledge the diverse needs of the mourner / sufferer, and let her know that there is still order and compassion in the world. All of these rituals and customs also make the statement that people are not

helpless in the face of suffering, as they guide people towards ways to find meaning and learning in their struggle. Similarly, while the primary function of a mitzvah like *tzedakah* may be to ensure that the material needs of all members of the community are met, it also says that there is something one can do in face of poverty or inequality, and guides one as to how to do it. The rituals and structures of tradition provide a blueprint for the "work" of *yissurim.*

These lessons of healing can be taught when communities and individuals cultivate deeper and more sophisticated understandings of spiritual life in general, along the lines of Bloom's and Fowler's models. This can be thought of as a kind of "preventive education." How a rabbi speaks about God from the *bimah*, and in classes, and during "good times," can affect how the issues in our *sugya* are handled when the bad times appear. For example, emphasizing that "good" comes from God, or making a comment that "God must love you" when something good happens, creates difficulties when something bad happens. Taking an unchanging stance that "fighting back" is always the way to deal with adversity, and never to accept what is given, can leave a person in despair when faced with a situation in which there is nothing to fight for or with. Rabbis can teach about redemptive possibilities in suffering in the way that they talks about it to their communities. For example, a custom like giving tzedakah as a memorial for the dead can be framed explicitly as more than Jewish fund-raising or a pro forma gesture to comfort the bereaved. It is also a profound statement of human empowerment in the face of the struggles and pain in life, and a positive statement of faith and hope and the embracing of life. Just as God takes people in death, and on one level people cannot

defeat death, God has also empowered people to rise above death by enabling us to use it to promote life and goodness.

A rabbi must affirm the pain and negative responses to struggle, but can also strengthen the redemptive possibility in suffering by asking questions like, What strengths / learning / blessings do you think you will take from this experience? Clearly, discussions about drawing something positive from suffering must be handled with great sensitivity, or they can be interpreted as unfeeling or dismissive of a person's pain. This is all the more reason for spiritual leaders and teachers to discuss these issues in more general ways, in other venues and at other times. People who have thought about the different facets of suffering during more emotionally neutral times, and been able to internalize a multilayered approach to these questions, will have more inner tools to face the challenges of *yissurin* and perhaps to draw something positive from them.

Creative prayer is a powerful tool for addressing the many facets of suffering, and it calls out for further development in contemporary Jewish practice. A basic and important use of spontaneous and creative prayer is to model for people that one can "talk" to God and remain in that relationship no matter what is transpiring in one's life. By praying spontaneously in someone's presence, the spiritual helper shows the person how that can be done. In creative, spontaneous prayer, some of the harder issues of theology and suffering can be addressed in a non-threatening manner. For example, a rabbi can use different names or descriptions for God that will address the person's immediate need or struggle, such as Mysterious One, Source of Healing, Who Knows the Secrets of our Hearts, Source of Nurture, and so

on.[22] In addition, ideas and emotions can be raised indirectly by placing them in a prayer that is not directed in the second-person to a patient. It can be exceedingly difficult, for instance, to tell a man who is deeply entrenched in denial that he needs to accept the fact that his wife is dying, and to make decisions accordingly. It is possible, however, to raise the subject indirectly by letting him "overhear" the rabbi praying to God that this wife will be blessed with a husband who is able to consider God's intentions and make choices that will be wise and in his wife's best interest. Similarly, instead of the insensitive act of "telling" someone that she might gain positive learning and wisdom from her suffering, one could acknowledge the total picture and suggest the "benefits" of suffering by asking God in her presence to please help her receive learning and wisdom even in the midst of her terrible pain.

Ultimately, the most effective ingredient of healing is the ability of the rabbi to be a caring presence who represents spiritual wholeness. As R. Yochanan learned in our *sugya*, that requires the rabbi's bringing into the interaction his own contradictory life struggles, and the ability to embrace them all together despite their inconsistencies. In that way, the spiritual helper models acceptance, even if it is never specifically articulated. Meaningful presence means that the rabbi must be willing to share her humanity at the same time that she acts as a symbol of the Divine. Then, like R. Yochanan, the rabbi might take the hand of the sufferer and heal him.

> *I am supporting a family through the long illness and imminent death of a loved one. As I walk through the experience at their side, I see that within myself I too am working through all the same questions and struggles the*

[22] The attached booklet from the National Center for Jewish Healing, "When the Body Hurts, the Soul Still Longs to Sing" contains wonderful examples of creative personal prayers which can be used or which can serve as models for the creation of similar prayers. Naomi Levy's "Talking to God," and CLAL's "Book of Sacred Jewish Practices" also contain such examples and models of creative prayer.

family brings to me. As I hold all of these conflicting feelings and try to honor each one, I can serve as the exemplar for the family, as someone who represents order amidst the chaos, and acceptance: acceptance of them, and acceptance of what God places before them right now. When I am able to carry out this role in a spirit of love for the dying person, the family, and for God, I hope that I serve to keep them lovingly close to the Holy One, whose presence is so powerful when we hover at the edge between life and death.

God of Mystery Who sits B'seter elyon, *I have never been one to ask "why?" It doesn't matter to me why the sun rises every day and warms my face - as long as it does. Would it help me to know why a child is born who could never be what he might have been, or why one summer morning he simply was no more on this earth? Or why suffering and blessing can be so intertwined? Only You know if suffering will ever be gone from this world, or if death will come to an end.*

If I have to ask something, and it seems that we are designed to keep asking, I'll ask "what?" or "how?" How can I take the gifts that have come from pain, gifts of learning, of strength and of compassion, to help make Your presence more strongly felt in this world? I pray that I will continue to find ways to do so, and am grateful for the opportunity.