

Mindfulness Avodah in Times of Tragedy

We all face painful challenges in life. Loss of a loved one, anti-semitic attacks, health issues, relationship challenges, losing a job. In these situations, we must ask ourselves 'What is the avodah in this situation? How do we process this in a healthy way?' We can not just be victims and passive spectators in our lives letting the circumstances dictate us, yet we must be open to feeling the pain. We have to take action to address the internal and external challenges we are facing. Here are some thoughts.

1. Feel your feelings

The first avodah/response is to be real with your feelings and authentically experience them. Experience your pain, anger, helplessness, fear, sadness, worry. Don't fight your feelings, repress them, judge yourself for them, make decisions based on them, form beliefs based on them, make yourself wrong for feeling them, react to them, express them in a harmful (to yourself or others) way; don't let them dictate your life.

Just sit, breathe deeply and make space to feel those feelings.

Validate and be with the emotion - "I feel now (and that's okay)."

Express them in a healthy way - cry, share them with close supportive people, creative expression through art/journaling/music. The avodah is to experience them fully, without building, perpetuating and drowning in them.

For that, you'll need the next step.

2. Manage your thoughts.

Thoughts need to be dealt with in a different way to emotions.

Unlike feelings, which have to be validated and experienced, thoughts need to be managed and controlled. We need to consciously choose which ones to engage in by identifying if they are healthy and useful or not. Are they serving a purpose? Are they changing the situation, helping me grow and feel more positive? Our thoughts create, build and perpetuate our emotions. Emotions are like fire and thoughts are like wood. The more wood we put on a fire, the more we think about an emotion, the stronger it will become.

For example, imagining terrible scenarios and playing them out in your mind is not helping you or the situation. (Planning for possible eventualities is useful). Trying to make sense of it or work out who is to blame (unless it's in order to make sure it doesn't happen again or to grow personally or spiritually) isn't helping. Why me? It's not fair. If only ... What's wrong with me for feeling this? It's my fault, it's their faultin general, these thoughts are not helping us process the situation and release the emotion, they are just feeding it.

Once we have identified thoughts that aren't serving a purpose - ie they aren't changing or helping the situation, they aren't helping us grow or feel better - we have three choices. I often use the analogy of a bus. When you realise you are on the wrong bus you can either:



Living In Tune

- just keep riding the bus.
- analyse being on the bus - why am I on this bus? Whose fault is it that I'm on the bus? I hate being on this bus ...etc
- get off the bus

The avodah is to become aware of when you are engaging in thoughts that are not serving a purpose, in fact they are just perpetuating the pain, know that you don't have to be thinking these things right now and consciously choose to let the thoughts go. Notice the thought bus, take a deep breath, loosen your neck and shoulders, say "I'm choosing to get off this bus now (and just be present with my feelings)." Once you have given the feelings space to be felt, and become aware enough to let useless thoughts go, you can move on to choosing more positive, useful thoughts to help you process and move on in a healthy way.¹ It takes some practice, and after a while you'll be able to catch the negative thought pattern more quickly and let it go more easily. At some point you'll be conscious enough to just let the bus pass without even getting on it in the first place. This is not repressing thoughts - quite the opposite actually. It is being aware of and acknowledging thoughts, and then choosing to let them go if they are not helping.

3. Do something pro-active (for yourself and to help the situation).

Whilst being totally open to experiencing our painful emotions, we don't want the situation to dictate and define our lives. The purpose, or opportunity, of pain is growth. We are not helpless spectators, we are powerful participants, or even managers of our lives. We must keep functioning in a healthy way. Here are some suggestions:

- Self care. Eat well, exercise, meditate, hot baths, lavender oil, nice music, healthy self expression.
- Keep on living your life as much as you can - Go to work, see friends.
- Even step up and live a greater life than you were living before, use the pain as a motivation to grow (if people have lost their life I could take this opportunity to live a greater life, maybe in their honor, maybe because I value life even more now).

Not only do we not let our pain define us, we use it to take action.

- Do something that can help the situation.
Donate money and supplies.
Visit the grieving families, help with their needs.
Volunteer time and skills. Educate people.
Prayer, tehillim, learning and mitzvahs.
Connect to and uplift others going through the same pain

4. Emunah

Tragedies can really shake someone's emunah. How could Hashem let this happen? Especially to these innocent people. It makes absolutely no sense.

¹ I wouldn't jump to positive thinking before giving space to just feel the emotion. That just represses it and it will come up again.



Living In Tune

The truth is, tragedies aren't the time to *question* emunah, they are the time to *implement* emunah. That is what emunah means. When it doesn't make any sense, we still believe that there is a valid reason and positive meaning behind it.

We must understand this; *it doesn't make sense*, so don't try to make sense out of it. Asking 'Why,' and trying to work out how Hashem runs the world is incredibly disempowering, seeing as finite beings can't understand infinite reality. We have a tiny slice of the full picture. If you could understand it, it wouldn't take emunah (it would be daas). Chochma - wisdom is made up of the words ko'ach and mah - the power of What? Not asking Why but rather What can I learn? What can I do? What is being asked of me now?

This is the foundation of Judaism. Avraham was told to sacrifice Yitzchak. That made absolutely no sense. He had been promised a great nation from this child, he'd been educating the world against child sacrifice, he'd prayed and waited 100 years for this kid, he loved him immensely. He didn't question. There is no point questioning something that doesn't make sense. He got up early and did what he was called upon to do with complete surrender and acceptance. This doesn't mean it wasn't painful, just that he accepted that there was a deeper meaning behind all of it. The Torah says 'Tamim Tihyeh im Hashem Elokecha' be tam - simple, trusting, accepting, sincere with Hashem. Don't try to work everything out.²

Eemunah doesn't take away the pain, the feeling of loss, but it does take away the suffering (useless mental commentary). It means that although I can't understand this, I know there is a deeper meaning behind this and everything will be for the best and make sense in the end.

Accept that this is your reality and not only can you make the most of it, but you can embrace this as exactly what you need to be experiencing now in order to reach higher levels of empowerment, connection and eminah.

We are the most formidable nation on the face of the earth. We have been battered throughout the generations and we are still here, impacting the world - through morality, spirituality, technology - more and more positively than any other nation. We won't be victims to our circumstances, as individuals or a nation. We will get through this as well and we will become stronger. In the war of darkness versus light, light always wins in the end. We represent the light, the world's only hope of salvation. B'Ezrat Hashem

² It's important to know that Avraham's, and our, emunah is not blind faith. He had, and we have, evidence and reason to believe there is a Divine Creator and that everything is ultimately for the best. Therefore, although from our finite perspective we can't make sense out of it, we know that in the infinitely bigger picture it makes sense and will lead us to where we need to get.