

Religious pain

Posted by bright - 28 May 2025 03:20

Between Therapists and Rabbanim: The Missing Middle We Desperately Need

There's a pain that doesn't always have words.

A type of hurt that hides under the surface, even in the most beautiful places.

People sometimes talk about religious trauma.

But what I went through wasn't really about religion itself.

It was about emotional wounds twisting the religion into a prison.

What I went through isn't just about one person's pain — it's about what I see as an unfortunate gap in our system.

And more importantly, it's about what we can start doing to fix it. Let me share my story with you.

I grew up as a serious bochur.

I pushed myself hard.

I learned day and night.

I was a masmid.

I was successful in yeshiva.

People respected me.

I was looked at as someone who was "doing everything right."

But on the inside?

I never felt like I was good enough.

Let me explain.

Before I got married I had already spent years in therapy. I had worked through a lot - including the terribly trauma I had experienced. I made real progress. I grew. I healed. But there was an aspect to my emotional wounds that I didn't even begin to understand. Although I was accomplishing and successful, no matter how much I learned, how much I accomplished

there was a quiet voice always telling me:

“You’re a disappointment.”

“You’re faking it.”

“You’re not really wanted by Hashem.”

Every word of Torah I learned, every tefillah I said, every bracha I made —

I wasn’t doing it because I wanted to.

I was doing it because if I didn’t, I was worthless.

Not just “bad,” not just “slacking” — worthless.

If I skipped a bracha — I was garbage.

If I zoned out during Shemoneh Esrei — Hashem hated me.

I was a faker, a hypocrite, a walking Chillul Hashem.

Judaism wasn’t inspiring.

Judaism was oxygen — but oxygen mixed with poison.

Shabbos was terror.

Every halacha, every minute, was a test I was set up to fail.

One wrong move, and I was trash forever.

Learning wasn't something I loved — it was a burden I was chained to.

If I stopped learning, I was screaming inside:

“You're disgusting. You don't deserve anything good. Hashem hates you.”

I remember learning a schmooze about bitul Torah.

A healthy person might hear, “Try to make your time more meaningful.”

I heard, “You're a rasha who is killing yourself spiritually with every second you're not learning.”

The worst part?

Inside of me, buried under all the fake smiles, there was a rage building.

I would never have admitted it.

I didn't even let myself know it was there.

But deep inside, there was a part of me that hated God.

Hated Him for what He was doing to me.

For setting up a world where no matter how hard I tried, I would always lose.

For making me live in terror.

or killing me slowly, invisibly, with expectations I could never meet. And hating God made me hate myself even more.

Because who hates God? Only a monster.

Only a piece of garbage.

Only someone beyond hope.

And although I had already spent years in therapy, and had worked through my abuse and much more,

There was an aspect to my emotional wounds that I didn't even begin to understand.

I had plumbed the depths of my psyche. I worked through years of suffering with the help of top therapists and explored numerous innovative modalities. Yet I still had not touched the religious part of the pain.

I hadn't even realized it was there.

At the time when everything broke open again,

I was married.

I had beautiful children.

I was learning full-time in a prestigious kollel —

doing well, respected, trusted, admired.

On the outside, my life was a success story.

Inside, I didn't even realize there was still a volcano waiting to erupt.

But then a life-shattering event tore through everything I thought I had built.

It ripped away the thin layer of safety I had been standing on.

And underneath it, all the old wounds, all the buried rage, came flooding back.

Except now it wasn't just emotional pain.

It was spiritual pain.

It was a soul-deep scream.

I couldn't hide from it anymore.

I was furious.

I was broken.

And the truth is — I didn't want to stay anymore.

If I hadn't had a family depending on me,

I would have left Yiddishkeit completely.

Without hesitation.

Without looking back.

I wasn't held by love.

I wasn't held by faith.

I was held by responsibility.

By the brutal knowledge that if I left, I would destroy more than myself.

The pain was so deep.

Way beyond anything I had ever thought I could survive.

I was trapped in a religion I hated.

Trapped in a relationship with God that felt more like a prison sentence than a covenant.

And every step of the way, every prayer, every halacha, every mitzvah —
instead of drawing me closer to Hashem, only made me feel more rage.

I saw Him in everything that went wrong —
every little frustration, every delay, every disappointment.

It all felt like proof that Hashem was out to get me.

I could have written a reverse hashgacha pratis sefer —
not about miracles, but about all the ways I thought Hashem was trying to destroy me.

And I had no one to turn to.

Not because I didn't try.

I spoke to rabbanim — open-minded, compassionate, very chashuv rabbanim.

I reached out to organizations — big, respected ones.

They listened. They cared. But no one knew how to help.

There was no one who really dealt with this kind of pain, an emotional issue with Hashem Himself.

No one was able to get to the root of what I was going through.

And I started to feel completely hopeless.

Like maybe no one ever could help.

I didn't believe therapy could help me.

I had already tried.

So many times.

But thankfully I did.

Because this therapist was different.

He challenged me.

He pointed out how extreme my beliefs about Hashem were —

how black-and-white, how childish, how full of fear and self-hatred. And even more importantly, he introduced me to a unique Rav who is able to portray Yiddeshkeit in a beautiful, yet simple way.

At first, I doubted him completely.

He wasn't just challenging a few ideas.

He was shaking my entire identity.

Of course Hashem demands perfection.

Of course if you sin, you're a rasha.

Of course Hashem criticizes you if you fail.

But he didn't just argue with me.

He gently pushed me toward a different perspective, one that changed my life.

Through conversations, through reading, through listening —

I was exposed to a totally different picture of Hashem.

Not a distant, perfectionistic, judge.

Not a punisher or a relentless impossible--to-please master.

but an unconditional source of love.

and i began to learn how to build an entirely different kind of relationship with him and with His

Torah. A genuine connection, not one built on a divine score card, red tallies and brownie points.

These new ways of thinking and living certainly weren't easy to accept.

They didn't match what I had internalized from my years in yeshiva. (Though I now fully understand that they are in perfect harmony)

It didn't match what the fear in me believed

I fought it.

It sounded too soft, too fluffy, too fake. But over time, I realized:

The God I had hated wasn't real.

He was a projection of my pain — not the truth of Torah.

And the real Hashem — the One who had been hidden behind all that fear —

was waiting for me with love. With more love than I loved myself. Love not for some perfect version of me, but for the real broken, fighting one.

I had to rebuild everything.

My entire Yiddishkeit.

But as difficult as this was, it was the most rewarding thing I experienced. I became alive! I started understanding concepts I had always struggled with. My neurons started firing on all cylinders and I made connections and understood new deep meanings in everything I learned and did.

I stopped learning because I had to.

I started learning because I wanted to.

Because I wanted to understand and connect.

And even though I still sometimes struggle with fear and guilt —
now I know how to handle it.

The rule is that Hashem loves me.

No one dies from a question —
as long as there's a healthy foundation of emunah.

I realized how deep and beautiful the Torah really was. Simcha jumps out at me from every area of religious life. Today, my Yiddishkeit is different.

When I daven, I think:

Hashem just wants to spend time with me.

He wants a small, quiet meeting — just me and Him.

Even if I can't concentrate.

Even if my mind drifts.

He just wants me to show up.

He treasures my effort.

He treasures the fact that I'm there.

Not my performance.

Me.

Before I bench, I don't think, "I have to."

I think:

Hashem moved the entire world to get me this piece of bread.

He loves me that much.

Before every mitzvah, I try to find one point of meaning —
one spark of connection.

And slowly, I also started seeing Hashem inside the world.

When I feel a moment of love —
that's not random.
That's Hashem sending His love to me.

When I experience compassion —
that's a small reflection of Hashem's own compassion toward me.

When someone does a kindness —
that's a little glimpse of Hashem's kindness shining into the world.

The more I open my eyes,
the more I see that Hashem isn't hiding.

He's everywhere.

In the good.

In the beauty.

In the acts of love and mercy that fill this world when we're willing to look for them.

Maybe it sounds fluffy.

Maybe it sounds too soft for some people.

But this is the truth.

This is what saved me.

Not through fear.

Not through guilt.

But through love.

Real love.

Hashem's love.

And for the first time in my life,

I'm not just surviving.

I'm alive.

This is the part nobody talks about.

There are thousands of people carrying this kind of pain —

people who feel trapped inside a broken relationship with Hashem.

But there seems to be nowhere to turn.

Therapists, even the best ones, often don't have the background to fix religious wounds.

And even when they do, the pain is so tangled up with Torah and mitzvos that it's hard for a person to trust them fully — especially someone coming from years in yeshiva.

Rebbeim, on the other hand, may know Torah deeply —

but most aren't trained in emotional trauma.

Even when they recognize pain, they don't always have the tools to address what's really going on underneath.

This isn't a criticism of rabbanim.

And it's not a criticism of therapists.

It's just a reality:

There's a gap between the two.

And for someone stuck in the middle —

emotionally hurting, spiritually drowning —

that gap can feel like a black hole.

Even when someone in this situation asks an emunah question, the answer they need isn't just intellectual.

Because usually, what's underneath the question isn't just doubt —

it's fear. Shame. A belief in a terrifying, angry, impossible-to-please God.

Its not enough to answer, "Why did Hashem bring tzadikim through the camps?" with "svivav nissru meod"

The real question he is asking is:

"How can I possibly love a God who kills even His best children?"

"How will I ever be enough for Him?"

If no one helps the person rebuild their whole picture of Hashem,
then no brilliant answer will help.

This kind of healing takes time, Torah, and deep emotional insight.

And the people who can truly offer that —

who understand the Torah world and the emotional world —

are few and far between, and are so busy they don't have the time for the back and forth that is needed.

We need people who can bridge the two worlds —

people fluent in Torah and fluent in emotional healing.

People who understand what a sugya feels like,

and what trauma feels like.

Not instead of rabbanim. Not instead of therapists.

But a new middle.

Someone who knows the Torah — and also knows the wound.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach either as different individuals have different needs and different emotional challenges.

I don't know exactly how and what needs to change.

But I do know this: awareness is the first step.

I've spoken to well-known organizations and rabbanim.

But even they didn't have a concrete thing to do.

That's why I'm writing this.

Because until we start talking about it —
until we recognize this silent struggle —
nothing can change.

But something has to.

P.S. A special hakaras hatov to Rabbi Dovid Aaron who shared with me so much of his time, clarity, and insight which helped me get to where I am today.

If you're struggling with this kind of pain, or if you're trying to help someone who is —
and you want to talk, share, or explore ideas —
you can reach out at haragra14@gmail.com.

You're not alone.

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 21 Aug 2025 05:14

Interestingly, Chazal themselves seem to support this more nuanced way of looking at the “two notes.” The Gemara tells us that the Amoraim would whisper pesukim to themselves about the lowliness of man when they feared gaavah. This shows us that a healthy person can focus on one aspect of truth at a given time. The key is that they knew it was only *part* of the truth.

That, I think, is the crucial distinction. There's nothing unhealthy about focusing on the “dust and ashes” note when facing arrogance, or on “the world was created for me” when facing despair. We can and should focus on the part that is necessary to motivate us in the moment. The problem only arises when one is taught, or comes to believe, that their current perspective is *the whole truth*, and there is no other truth.

The deeper Jewish perspective is that a person's body is indeed lowly, but their soul is infinitely lofty. Both are true, and the challenge is knowing which facet of truth to emphasize in each situation. When a person struggles with ego, it won't help to think about the loftiness of the neshama; the focus needs to be on the frailty of the guf. On the other hand, when someone feels worthless, anxious about their religiosity, or crushed because, nebach, they had to "cop out" and go to work, focusing on man's lowliness won't help. At that moment, we need to speak about the greatness of each individual's tafkid.

But many of us grew up absorbing the perception that there is only *one* "true" way of serving Hashem, a single narrow path. That's why it often takes not just a paper, but an entire shiur klali to undo that damage and show the fuller, more balanced truth

=====

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by chancyhk - 25 Aug 2025 20:07

[bright wrote on 21 Aug 2025 05:14:](#)

Interestingly, Chazal themselves seem to support this more nuanced way of looking at the "two notes." The Gemara tells us that the Amoraim would whisper pesukim to themselves about the lowliness of man when they feared gaavah. This shows us that a healthy person can focus on one aspect of truth at a given time. The key is that they knew it was only *part* of the truth.

That, I think, is the crucial distinction. There's nothing unhealthy about focusing on the "dust and ashes" note when facing arrogance, or on "the world was created for me" when facing despair. We can and should focus on the part that is necessary to motivate us in the moment. The problem only arises when one is taught, or comes to believe, that their current perspective is *the whole truth*, and there is no other truth.

The deeper Jewish perspective is that a person's body is indeed lowly, but their soul is infinitely lofty. Both are true, and the challenge is knowing which facet of truth to emphasize in each situation. When a person struggles with ego, it won't help to think about the loftiness of the neshama; the focus needs to be on the frailty of the guf. On the other hand, when someone feels worthless, anxious about their religiosity, or crushed because, nebach, they had to "cop out" and go to work, focusing on man's lowliness won't help. At that moment, we need to speak about the greatness of each individual's tafkid.

But many of us grew up absorbing the perception that there is only *one* "true" way of serving Hashem, a single narrow path. That's why it often takes not just a paper, but an entire shiur klali to undo that damage and show the fuller, more balanced truth

Rabbi Bright.

A shud i didnt read your posts in my formative years. I am exactly the type of kid that you are describing. I was and always will be sensitive. I always felt that the world is asking too much from me. And I was never good enough. Oh, the bad things i heard growing up! my rabbis would always find the most intense pieces to teach us! Like its expected from us to reach that madriga in one minute..... I still remember some of them an they still haunt me.

One overused vort is why Vidu Maaser is called Vidu when its basically us telling Hashem that we did all those mitzvas? So the answer they gave is that as a yid, we are "supposed" to FORGET our mitzvas and only remember our avierus. So we are saying vidu for remembering our mitzvas!

Now, im sure a very holy tzaddik wrote this and its true on some level. But for the vast majority of us? That is literally a recipe for depression! Anyway im rambling here. But you get the point, I agree with you. And I am trying my best to fix this within my own sphere of influence. If we all do that, we can have a big impact on the next generation of yiden.

=====
=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 28 Aug 2025 13:42

Sorry you had to go through (and maybe still are going through) that. Honestly, I never heard that one.... I did hear that even in our mitzvot we had bad intentions, so we need to repent, yeah, same idea. On that note, I wanted to ask everyone about their elul experience. I think most people here are trying as hard as they can, or have unfortunately given up trying because it's so hard. Has anyone felt that adding in an element of "eimas hadin" really ever helped them grow or come closer to Hashem? Has it done the opposite? Has anyone come out of these 40 days feeling good about their accomplishments (aside from feeling "ah, I survived")? Has anyone made any significant change because of the "eimas hadin" and seen it last and become a healthy part of their lives and identity? If not what do you think is going wrong? And if yes, please tell us how:)

=====
=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by BenHashemBH - 28 Aug 2025 15:13

Not sure if this answers your question directly, but this is how I relate to days like Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Tisha B'Av.

The intensity does give me connection to Hashem.

Even a Yomim Noraim full of al cheits, and feeling like life has been mostly al cheits, davka these times I need eimas hadin, cuz otherwise I'd have close to nothing. If not eima, then what feeling could I feel that would bring me to be vulnerable and honest enough to really show up? Not love. Halevai love, but I'm not on a madreiga that it alone would penetrate deep enough to bring out the connection that I need for it to be real.

When I am afraid, and I show up to bare myself while feeling the fear, then I'm being real. I'm exposing myself. I'm open in a way that is much harder for me to access without eima. I'm worried about missing out, of letting the day come and go without really touching me the way it should. Maybe it's just me, but I have a much harder time with Purim and with Simchas Torah. I have to dig really deep just to temporarily access some true feeling of joy. But on Yomim Noraim, eima is already cutting deep, and the other feelings, like love, are much easier to access once the excavation has already exposed my inner emotions.

I'm afraid, but I'm not running away, hiding, or pretending. I'm afraid but here, because I care about You. And the more I care about You, the more I can feel that You care about me too.

Yes, I feel relieved afterwards. It's very intense. But I would never really want to skip it. For all the discomfort, what I gain is something that I do not get any other time. These are my most genuine moments with Hashem. Avadeh for me it is a healthy part of my life and relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu. For a few days of the year, it is clear beyond any doubt that I want so badly, that I need to be close to Him, and that He indeed loves me too.

=====
=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by bennyh - 28 Aug 2025 16:00

Bright, I think the purpose of eimas hadin—and stick with me here—is not to get us to feel closer to Hashem or for us to feel better about ourselves, it's there for us to achieve...eimas hadin—to put our every flaw and lapse, however minor, in all of our ugliness, under the harsh light of truth. And for most people it serves that purpose quite well.

If you're feeling closer to Hashem or uplifted, or better about yourself, you're not doing eimas hadin right.

That national collective sigh of relief motze yom kippur? That's a feature, not a bug.

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by BenHashemBH - 28 Aug 2025 16:09

[bennyh wrote on 28 Aug 2025 16:00:](#)

If you're feeling closer to Hashem . . . you're not doing eimas hadin right.

Well darn

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by chosemyshem - 28 Aug 2025 16:29

[bright wrote on 28 Aug 2025 13:42:](#)

On that note, I wanted to ask everyone about their elul experience. I think most people here are trying as hard as they can, or have unfortunately given up trying because it's so hard. Has anyone felt that adding in an element of "eimas hadin" really ever helped them grow or come closer to Hashem? Has it done the opposite? Has anyone come out of these 40 days feeling good about their accomplishments (aside from feeling "ah, I survived")? Has anyone made any significant change because of the "eimas hadin" and seen it last and become a healthy part of their lives and identity? If not what do you think is going wrong? And if yes, please tell us how:)

It's interesting.

I think this has been commented on extensively, but definitely progressing in the struggles with lust has in a way lowered the intensity of yamim noraim. It's amazing how much teshuva was fueled by thinking I'm doomed (see: nuclear reset button.) And yeah, there were times I went the whole elul sparkingly clean - and then of course inevitably exploded into a binge fest before succos. (Actually, last year was the first time in a long time that the post-yom-kippur binge fest didn't happen.)

I think this change is a positive. I think.

But to answer the main question, without these days I'd continue a long slow slide into complete meaningless. Is it pleasant? Idk, I feel more alive, I'm thinking more, connecting more, etc. But fear is an unpleasant feeling. Would it be nice if I could have the same effect from feelings of endless love? Sure. I don't see how to do that. Maybe others do live that way. My stretch goal has been trying to have more bitachon that Hashem isn't trying to kill me.

Edit:

To respond to Benny's point. V'gilu b'raadeh.

Pardon a childish mashal, but do players feel upset about getting to the super bowl? Obviously not. Ayyy if they mess up they'll be ruined. Ayyyy it's so much pressure. No.

It feels good to perform at a high level. It feels good to work on important things. It feels good to have a chance at a winning a big stake.

The reason it feels like pressure is because it feels hopeless. If we thought we could win we'd be pumped. But we're pretty darn sure we're gonna lose. We'd like to rage quit, but we're scared of dying. So we screw down hard to get through. And then pop.

Eimas Hadin means welcome to the big leagues.

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by kavey - 28 Aug 2025 16:50

[bennyh wrote on 28 Aug 2025 16:00:](#)

Bright, I think the purpose of eimas hadin—and stick with me here—is not to get us to feel closer to Hashem or for us to feel better about ourselves, it's there for us to achieve...eimas hadin—to put our every flaw and lapse, however minor, in all of our ugliness, under the harsh light of truth. And for most people it serves that purpose quite well.

If you're feeling closer to Hashem or uplifted, or better about yourself, you're not doing eimas hadin right.

That national collective sigh of relief motze yom kippur? That's a feature, not a bug.

Sources please...this is way beyond me but it's within my scope to quote "Atta Nosein Yad L'Posh'im"

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by hashemisonmyside - 28 Aug 2025 17:33

to me personally the fear part didn't help, it's more the love and the caring part that helps you, but not talking for others...

=====

Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - Yesterday 14:04

I know how painful it can be to reach the end of Elul and feel like nothing happened. Many of us carry the guilt, shame, or even denial of an Elul that seemed to go nowhere. Sometimes it's easier not to think about it at all than to face that sense of rejection. I get it...and honestly, I feel it too.

But I think there's a fundamental mistake many of us make in how we approach Elul. We

imagine that our first step is to suddenly repent from our biggest struggles, driven by fear of judgment. We measure success by whether we've made dramatic life changes. The problem is, the change that comes from external pressure rarely lasts. At best, we resist it subconsciously; at worst, we manage for a little while and then find ourselves back where we started on the 11th of Tishrei. Life change is an unrealistic goal (unless someone just needed a tinsy push) so we dont succeed. We then look at ourselves as having failed another dreaded Elul.

That can't be the whole picture. Fear and shame don't create lasting growth, and most of us already know that from experience. What we've been struggling with all year doesn't magically disappear in a month. A more realistic and hopeful approach might be to focus on the *small things*, the mitzvos or habits we've neglected simply because they slip under the radar: saying benching with a bencher, pausing for a bracha, or other simple acts that we just don't get around to. These are doable, they build confidence, and they create ripple effects that can carry us forward.

The Rambam writes that the shofar comes as a remez, a wake-up call. But "waking up" doesn't mean instantly conquering our hardest battles. We are already wide awake and staring them in the face! Many of us are already fighting those struggles with everything we have. To tell ourselves we should suddenly flip them overnight is not only unrealistic, it also dismisses all the hard work we've been doing. Waking up can mean opening our eyes a little wider, taking one step forward, and letting that step remind us we're growing and moving toward Hashem. If that is our goal, We can move ahead with confidence knowing that we did reach my goal in Elul. We've succeeded!

Elul isn't about rejecting ourselves for not being perfect. It's about reconnecting, in a way that's real and sustainable. Even the smallest steps count, and sometimes, they're the ones that last the longest. (See Ohr Yisrael were he makes a similar point from another perspective) (Additionally there may be a concept of baasher hu shom. That is not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about the teshuva of Elul)

=====

=====