

Religious pain

Posted by bright - 28 May 2025 03:20

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## **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](mailto:haragra14@gmail.com).

You're not alone.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by alex94 - 02 Jul 2025 14:14

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[youknowwho wrote on 02 Jul 2025 13:44:](#)

It pains me that on a thread dedicated to religious abuse survivors, we have well meaning people that insist on harping about "ideals".

I impassionedly implore those who find the "victim mindset" offensive, to think about what I am writing. I have no right to tell anyone what to think or post, and I do respect other people's opinions, I just want people to realize how hurtful this comes across...I for one have had *tremendous healing* benefit from bright's posts, but I feel like he is being watered down by a

constant drumbeat of counter points and ideals which continue to water down his very simple point.

Different levels of trauma is definitely not something anyone can judge about another. Some people may have a easier time than others, and they may see value in different perspectives.

I write from my perspective as having gone through trauma, religious and other. When I write dont get stuck, im speaking to myself. To me, its not a ideal, its a lifeline, its my only chance at a positive life.

Many may not be ready to hear this at all, and thats fine. I understand why my perspective is hurtful to them and I should have clearly directed my posts at myself and not as something everyone had to hear.

I am really sorry my posts have caused others pain.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by yitzchokm - 02 Jul 2025 14:26

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I already posted this above but it seems like some people have missed this point:

"According to psychologytoday.com psychologists tell their clients who were abused that they aren't obligated to forgive. **Psychologists also say that it causes a lot of harm when people push those who were abused to forgive when they aren't at a stage where they are capable of forgiving.** Psychologists will suggest forgiveness at a late stage of therapy **if and when it is feasible.**"

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by youknowwho - 02 Jul 2025 14:38

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[youknowwho wrote on 02 Jul 2025 13:44:](#)

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**Many may not be ready to hear this at all, and thats fine.**

Your apology is appreciated although unnecessary, I realize that different people have different approaches.

And I do not wish to negate your own experience.

What I bolded in your words is, once again, an illustration of just how different our experience and perspectives are, for to me, telling a survivor of traumatic abuse that they may not "ready to hear" whatever, is *inherently* a pretty direct way of saying that you believe they are "stuck", and are not yet "ready" to absorb some kind of perspective or ideal.

We are not stuck, and we do not need to be ready for anything. A perpetrator who has inflicted harm and damage and who knows good and well that people are upset at him, yet refuses to be accountable for his actions, deserves not forgiveness nor acceptance.

And I can say and feel that **without being "bitter or angry"**, thankfully those negative emotions have cooled for me for the most part...

We have two totally different modes of expression based on our individual experiences.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 03 Jul 2025 04:43

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I'd like to be vulnerable as well; vulnerability breeds vulnerability

I believe to a degree, I knew that this would start a debate, I was being pretty controversial, and maybe that's what I wanted. I enjoy a good back-and-forth. I apologize if you or anyone was hurt because of this. This leads to the following dilemma.

Maybe you can help me with this, YKW.

Dealing with someone who suffers from religious pain is very different than working through false cognitions in therapy for something like depression. In the case of depression, it's often

enough for a fellow sufferer to empathize, and for the therapist to work through the distortions and triggers in a safe, structured way.

But when the pain stems from religious beliefs, I think empathy alone isn't sufficient. These beliefs often come wrapped in the authority of Torah and spiritual obligation, which makes them feel unchallengeable. For example, if someone believes that Hashem wants them to sit and learn Torah day and night, and that anything less is *believed*, then yes, we can (and must) empathize. Living with such a demanding and punishing image of Hashem is incredibly painful.

But in my opinion, empathy is only part of it. To really help, we sometimes need to gently offer permission to believe in a different version of Hashem, a compassionate, loving one. This requires some level of intellectual engagement, especially if the person believes this harsh view is *Daas Torah*, taught to them directly by all the gedolim throughout the generations.

Of course, there's a fine line between offering healing Torah and giving a full-on *shiur klali*, which can feel irrelevant or even invalidating. The goal is never to debate (although that's fun too for some), but to open a window, subtly and sensitively, that maybe, just maybe, there's another way to see things. I believe I may have crossed that line recently, and if so, I apologize.

But I'd really love to hear from the *oilam*, and from someone in particular (you know who), whether this resonates. And also, where is that line between helpful Torah and a beis midrash-style discussion? How do we offer clarity without sounding like we're trying to "prove" something?

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by SisonYishecha - 03 Jul 2025 05:50

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Great point.

I've found (personally and with Talmidim) that validation, understanding (real emotional understanding), and acceptance are safe and effective tools.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by BenHashemBH - 03 Jul 2025 13:30

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[bright wrote on 03 Jul 2025 04:43:](#)

we sometimes need to gently offer permission to believe in a different version of Hashem, a compassionate, loving one.

My Brother, I think we all need this.

You can't really instruct someone how to love. They could go through the motions, but that doesn't mean they feel anything. Someone has to help them learn where to look, and then they can hopefully find that relationship you speak of. Taking away pain but living comatose is still a pretty desolate existence. Removing (or lessening) an inhibitor is meaningful when it results in a path forward, in leaving a space for progress. I can also live while bringing that pain with me, or some of it, if I can figure that out. We all do that already, to varying degrees.

What I hope I'm sort of saying is that living isn't a bonus that follows not dying - living is the whole point.

open a window, subtly and sensitively, that maybe, just maybe, there's another way to see things.

Opening my eyes won't allow me to see anything if the window is shut. Neither will opening the window help me much if my eyes remain closed. You need both AND there has to be something to see. If I don't figure out and feel what G-d looks like **for me**, then everything falls short.

It's not my place to speak about trauma, abuse, or anything of the sort. I'm not intending to answer or solve anyone's past CV. All I mean it say is that what you are ultimately looking for is something that everyone needs to discover. How to do that, each person must find their own way.

I don't know if I'm even making sense. These feelings are difficult to try and put into words. Life hurts and then you die is pretty horrible. Life doesn't hurt and then you die is only slightly better. Life is what it is, but I lived - that's what I need to figure out.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 03 Jul 2025 17:40

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Precisely my point. Yes the person will have to internalize it. But like the Satmar Ruv said a machlokes lsheim shomayim sofo lehiskayem, if each party is saying their doing it leshem shomayim that fight will never end. If one believes that this is just how it is and doesn't know or isn't introduced to other possibilities it can be an exercise in futility to help them feel better. What would you say if someone told you, "Life is supposed to be miserable, Im a bal aveira."?

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by yitzchokm - 03 Jul 2025 17:46

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If you are talking about someone OTD the first thing is validation and love. Their struggles with Yiddishkeit are usually secondary to their struggles with life which are usually because of the way they were treated by others. If you are talking about someone who isn't OTD then it is validation and encouragement as we frequently do on the forum.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by alex94 - 03 Jul 2025 18:33

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The Rambam is Shmona Perakim explains that sin of Moshe in this weeks Parsha was that the

Yidden understood from his anger that Hashem was angry at them when he in fact wasn't.

What a message of responsibility to every Mechanech, Rebbe and parent. The student or child naturally places the teacher or parent on a pedestal, therefore seeing them as a representing Hashem and the Torah. When anger comes the students way, even if not expressly in the name of, it effects their perception of who Hashem is and what the Torah means.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by chaimoigen - 03 Jul 2025 22:15

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[bright wrote on 03 Jul 2025 04:43:](#)

I'd like to be vulnerable as well; vulnerability breeds vulnerability

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because of this. This leads to the following dilemma.

Maybe you can help me with this, YKW.

Dealing with someone who suffers from religious pain is very different than working through false cognitions in therapy for something like depression. In the case of depression, it's often enough for a fellow sufferer to empathize, and for the therapist to work through the distortions and triggers in a safe, structured way.

But when the pain stems from religious beliefs, I think empathy alone isn't sufficient. These beliefs often come wrapped in the authority of Torah and spiritual obligation, which makes them feel unchallengeable. For example, if someone believes that Hashem wants them to sit and learn Torah day and night, and that anything less is *believed*, then yes, we can (and must) empathize. Living with such a demanding and punishing image of Hashem is incredibly painful.

**But in my opinion, empathy is only part of it. To really help, we sometimes need to gently offer permission to believe in a different version of Hashem, a compassionate, loving one. This requires some level of intellectual engagement, especially if the person believes this harsh view is *Daas Torah*, taught to them directly by all the gedolim throughout the generations.**

**Of course, there's a fine line between offering healing Torah and giving a full-on *shiur klali*, which can feel irrelevant or even invalidating. The goal is never to debate (although that's fun too for some), but to open a window, subtly and sensitively, that maybe, just maybe, there's another way to see things.** I believe I may have crossed that line recently, and if so, I apologize.

But I'd really love to hear from the *oilam*, and from someone in particular (you know who), whether this resonates. **And also, where is that line between helpful Torah and a beis midrash-style discussion? How do we offer clarity without sounding like we're trying to "prove" something?**

Spot on, brother.

You are accentuating the difficulty of the sensitive balancing/juggling act that you are asking those of those who are capable of trying to bridge the "gap" you spoke of in your original post. Not simple to find the delicate balance while being supportive, sensitive and empathetic.

It's a lot easier to merely empathize, but it often won't truly help the person. Pointing out distortions, opening up new ideas, all without lecturing and all the while trying to preserve dignity and exercise care, gently showing the right way without repeating the mistakes of those that went before, all this without truly knowing what the guy is dealing with, because he hasn't opened up fully .... it ain't easy.

It's easier to give up without trying, especially if you don't want to do any harm inadvertently...

But doing what's easier hasn't helped anyone lately...

Real life usually doesnt have easy answers.

Thanks for being a Bright spot in a world that's often full of shadows.

chaimoigen

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 04 Jul 2025 01:04

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[alex94 wrote on 03 Jul 2025 18:33:](#)

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That is an amazing source! Really powerful in understanding myself and my responsibility to others...

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 04 Jul 2025 01:06

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[chaimoigen wrote on 03 Jul 2025 22:15:](#)

[bright wrote on 03 Jul 2025 04:43:](#)

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It's easier to give up without trying, especially if you don't want to do any harm inadvertently...

But doing what's easier hasn't helped anyone lately...

Real life usually doesn't have easy answers.

Thanks for being a Bright spot in a world that's often full of shadows.

chaimoigen

It definitely helps, especially when you give it:) But for real healing to start, yes, we have to take some risks...

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by youknowwho - 04 Jul 2025 14:54

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[bright wrote on 03 Jul 2025 04:43:](#)

Dealing with someone who suffers from religious pain is very different than working through false cognitions in therapy for something like depression. In the case of depression, it's often enough for a fellow sufferer to empathize, and for the therapist to work through the distortions and triggers in a safe, structured way.

**But when the pain stems from religious beliefs, I think empathy alone isn't sufficient. These beliefs often come wrapped in the authority of Torah and spiritual obligation, which makes them feel unchallengeable.** For example, if someone believes that Hashem wants them to sit and learn Torah day and night, and that anything less is *believed*, then yes, we can (and must) empathize. Living with such a demanding and punishing image of Hashem is incredibly painful.

But in my opinion, empathy is only part of it. To really help, we sometimes need to gently offer

permission to believe in a different version of Hashem, a compassionate, loving one. This requires some level of intellectual engagement, especially if the person believes this harsh view is *Daas Torah*, taught to them directly by all the gedolim throughout the generations.

Of course, there's a fine line between offering healing Torah and giving a full-on *shiur klali*, which can feel irrelevant or even invalidating. The goal is never to debate (although that's fun too for some), but to open a window, subtly and sensitively, that maybe, just maybe, there's another way to see things. I believe I may have crossed that line recently, and if so, I apologize.

But I'd really love to hear from the *oilam*, and from someone in particular (you know who), whether this resonates. And also, where is that line between helpful Torah and a beis midrash-style discussion? How do we offer clarity without sounding like we're trying to "prove" something?

Bright, your first point about differentiating between religious trauma versus other false cognitions is *spot on*, I appreciated your highlighting of this distinction.

When emotional issues that arise are rooted in the misinterpretation of religion, there is often a profound struggle of the mind, sometimes leading to debilitating inner confusion.

And while gently offering permission to believe another perspective, which is technically *primarily* an intellectual adjustment, is absolutely essential, nevertheless it can be more complex than that. Because sometimes, the **emotional** damage is constantly blocking out new perspectives.

For example: If one was led to believe in an unhealthy, unbalanced view of Hashem as being a "high-demand G-d", although of course Hashem always wants us to do better, reach higher, and grow, if it is *disproportionately harped on*, then we lose the value that we should have of ourselves, our own Avodah. We lose the inner sippuk that is the fuel for further healthy growth, because we live in the constant neurotic shadow of a consistently disapproving G-d. It is an intellectual shift to adjust that to a more balanced perspective, yes. But emotions of shame and guilt, deeply ingrained inner voices of criticism, and the depression and paralysis that results, are going to give battle to those new perspectives.

So is it just about new perspectives? Or are there deeper emotional issues? And were those issues there beforehand, and negative religious experience simply "added fuel to the fire", or were these emotional issues a *direct* result of that negative experience?

Was the negative spiritual experience primarily based on unhealthy, toxic misinterpretation? Or was it *predatory* in nature, using religion to foster dependency, to control, to assert power and inflict pain?

So now I am looking back at this very professional sounding megillah before I hit submit, and I guess what I am saying, in an awfully long-winded ramble, is I DON'T KNOW! Maybe the solutions are far more complex than we would like them to be. Seems like Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was kind of saying the same thing.

What are your thoughts?

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by mountainclimb - 07 Jul 2025 03:42

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My Rosh Yeshiva said that part of Bitachon is recognizing that Hashem will take care of us in the next world as well as this world, even if we sin. Gehennom is a cleansing, healing fire, painful, but not something to be afraid of. Even coming back as a gilgul or being in the kaf hakela will ultimately be good for this, even if we want to avoid it.

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