**B”SD**

**Parshat** **V’etchanan**

Have you ever licked your tears? Have you ever relished in the release? Have you ever marvelled at the fact that salt water flows involuntarily from your eyes when you feel particular emotions? And if you did, didn’t you notice that they always tasted…well..salty?

In his excellent shiur on Tisha B’Av, Rabbi Labinsky teaches (in the name of the Arizal) that embedded in the word “Tzara” (spelled *tsaddik, reish, heih* in Hebrew), meaning travails (see for example the second pasuk of Tehillim 20), is the key to the whole process of mourning, and specifically Tisha B’Av. The first step of mourning properly is to identify and experience our pain. The pain we feel during the Three weeks and particularly on Tisha B’Av is the pain of distance, of a breech in our soul’s connection to its’ ultimate, Original Source, Hashem. However, we should not wallow and become drawn down into this pain of separation. Similarly, it is not healthy to try to escape and ignore this pain, by numbing the pain, distracting ourselves, trying to have fun. Rather, we must seek out the fine line of experiencing pain, staying with it, and growing through it to uplift ourselves.

According to Rabbi Labinsky, the Arizal then teaches that the second step of mourning is hinted to by rearranging the letters of the same word “Tzara” to spell  “Ratza” (*reish, tsaddik, heih*). This word means desire or yearning. We must take the extent of the passion of our pain and channel it into a yearning to reconnect to Hashem. Yet, note that only by properly opening up and experiencing the pain in the first step of the process can we reach the requisite level of yearning.

A clue to the third and final part of our avodah is found by rearranging the letters yet again, this time to spell “Tzohar” (*tsaddik, heih, reish*). This Hebrew word means illumination. When we reach Tzohar we can relish in the illumination, where everything is clear and sweet. We have taken  the “u” (aka the ego) out of “mourning” to arrive at “morning”.

Rabbi Labinsky likens these three levels to the Baal Shem Tov’s teaching that in order to grow, we must experience *hachnah* (smashing) and *havdala* (separation) until we finally reach *hamtaka* (sweetness). The period leading up to Rosh Hashana mirrors this three step process, with the three weeks being the smashing, the period after Tisha B’av and the month of Elul being the separating and Rosh Hashana being the pinnacle and the sweetness.

(Note that in his book Getting to Know Yourself, Rav Ithamar Schwartz explains that in practice it is very difficult to do the ‘smashing’ of the ego/negative before the separating. He advices us to practice separation first, (ie separating from our ego or guf) before we seek to smash/change. And only then can we reach sweetness.)

Regardless of which order we practice the *hachnah* and *havdala*, the message is clear. We cannot reach sweetness without first experiencing pain. Genuine, lasting sweetness is predicated on pain and yearning. And pain and yearning tastes salty (note that Chazal teach that salt can be equated with rebuke, which leads to tears).

It is common in our “quick-fix” generation to bypass pain. Uncomfortable emotions, tears, yearning, longing, the anguish of feeling something is missing. Pain? Pop a Panadol/Advil. Bored? Switch on the screen. Uncomfortable? Turn on the air conditioning. But in fact all these uncomfortable emotions and experiences really stem from one source – the pain of our souls longing to reconnect with their Creator, the pain of distance and separation from our True Source.

So, like the Panadol, the screen time, the air conditioning, when we run away from discomfort we are merely seeking solace in masks and temporary aids. And by numbing our pain, we are deterred from taking a ‘good hard look at ourselves’, rebuking ourselves, fixing ourselves, doing tikkun and teshuva. Quick fix external comforts end up deterring us from experiencing the necessary discomfort which is the best way to obtain true comfort and sweetness, by turning to the original Source of everything.

Perhaps this explains why we eat sweet things on Rosh Hashana and wish each other a “*shana tova umetuka*”. The Three Weeks of pain, and the seven weeks of internalising that pain and then yearning for change during Elul, correspond to the first two levels of saltiness (or rebuke to which Chazal equates salt). But the third level of sweetness is only arrived at on Rosh Hashana. During these seven weeks ahead, known as weeks of comfort, it may be comforting to know that the sweetness of our new year will directly correspond to the pain we just experienced (and the yearning we felt) during the Three Weeks.

This division of ‘thirds’ echoes David Hamelech’s prescription for emuna. In Tehillim 27, he teaches “*kaveh elashem, chazak v’amatz, kaveh el Hashem* (hope to Hashem, strengthen yourself and He will instil courage, and place your hope in Hashem). The Alshish explains that just as someone trying to purify himself is given assistance (see Yoma 38b), so too someone trying to strengthen his faith is assisted by Hashem (see page 68 of the Artscroll transliterated Tehillim).

The Arizal’s prescription to the mourning process (before Tisha B’Av and arguably all forms of mourning) is analogous to David Hamelech’s prescription for *emuna* and hope. First, we must separate from the material or the problem at hand and instead turn to Hashem. Then He will instil inside us the courage we need to confront and “smash” the pain. And subsequently and consequently, we will experience the exhilaration and sweetness of a fortified level of *emuna* in Hashem.

How can we apply this message to our parenting practice this week?

As parents, we often may wish for our children to grow quickly, to reach the next level, to develop right before our very eyes. However, if we are aware that every growth process involves three distinct parts, two of them (separating and smashing) more difficult and perhaps painful, in order to reach the final sweetness, we may have more patience in them and the developmental process.

Growing pains are, well, painful. Yet, knowing that the sweetness of our children’s maturity and ultimate development is embedded in and directly proportionate to these growing pains may make it easier for parents to bear. True, solid, eternal, lasting growth is built on pain and separation. Embuing ourselves and then our children with this lesson is the ultimate *chinuch habanim*.

It is related that an orphan student once approached the Chazon Ish and asked him why he was struggling in his learning. The Chazon Ish promptly replied that as a child, he had not had the benefit of his mother’s tears, crying for her son to succeed in his learning.

When I first heard this story, I felt regret at realizing how many days I had wasted not crying over my children’s Torah learning. But then I remembered Rabbi Nachman teaching that  guilt over prior mistakes is a product of the Yetzer Harah. Rather, he prescribes that the best way to deal with mistakes is to let go of what has been, and focus on what useful change we can make  going forward.

Though we do not enjoy crying and pain, knowing that there is not only a purpose but that the first two stages of pain and separation are fundamental to us achieving sweetness allow us to endure and even enjoy the process.

Wishing you a Shabbat full of comfort. May the tears we all shed - whether for our children or to usher in the Redemption ultimately taste…. sweet.

With bracha