

The Prisoner Cannot Free Himself

*You are never strong enough that
you don't need help.*

— **C E s a R C h a v E z**

There was a famous miracle worker named Yochanan. But when this great man with healing power became ill, he could not heal himself.

His friend Hanina came to visit him. Hanina said to him, "Give me your hand." He took Yochanan's hand and raised him up from his bed.

"Why couldn't Yochanan raise himself?" the old story asks.

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“Because,” it answers, “the prisoner cannot free himself from prison.”

Every one of us sooner or later feels pain—somewhere, deep inside our body or our heart. That person sitting next to you is in pain. That stranger on the subway is in pain. That person who cut you off, who cut you down, who cut you out, is in pain. The people you love are in pain. You are in pain. To love is to grieve. To live is to hurt.

Pain, emotional or physical, reveals our vulnerabilities. It presses where it hurts. We can grimace and ignore that pain. We can blunt it with pills, booze, sex, shopping, eating, vaping, or weed . . . but no one in pain, despite what they might say at the time, does better enduring their pain alone. The better way is to listen to your pain, respect your pain, and talk about it with people who can help you understand its true source. Pain is an invitation to change the depth of conversation. Face pain’s truth, pour it out to God or to the people you love. Reach out to the people you love and who love you. Tell them. Trust them. They will hold your hand and raise you from your suffering.

There is an old folk tale about a grieving wid- ower who visits the village wise man for some

solace. The wise man gives the mourner a list of ingredients necessary to bake a sweet cake and tells him to go around the village gathering one ingredient from each home. The only requirement is that the ingredients must be from homes never visited by grief or sorrow. At the end of the day, the widower returns to the wise man empty-handed. There was not a single home in the village where someone had not suffered a painful loss.

The story is more nuanced than it first appears. Most people assume that what helped the widower was his realization that everyone suffers pain. My guess is that he, like us, already knew that. I think what made the difference was the conversations that likely took place in each home and with each neighbor.

I am so sorry. I cannot give you an ingredient because I too have suffered terrible pain.

What happened? Tell me about her.

Let me tell you about my loss. How much I miss him. How much I appreciate the wonderful person and gift she was to me.

Tell me more about your fears and sorrow.

Let me share with you how I have managed to go on.

The man's suffering did not end that day, but his healing began. He no longer felt so cursed or alone.

He knew everyone at some time walks through the Valley of Shadows where he too was now traveling. It was the ebb and flow of kindred spirits, fellow sufferers reaching out, sharing, consoling, advising, and caring, that helped pierce the widower's isolation and helped him take the first steps on the path to healing.

Reaching out is not easy for most of us. It is hard for independent, successful, self-sufficient people who are used to helping others to reach out for help themselves when they are suffering. What's more, 80 percent of people with chronic pain suffer from clinical depression, and depression makes people far less likely to reach out for help and less receptive to those who want to help. I know it would have taken years longer for me to make peace with my pain—if I ever would have—without the help of a compassionate and talented psychiatrist and without my friends and family, with whom I was willing to confide my fears.

Sometimes we are afraid we will burden the people we love to the point of alienating them when we need them the most. When I talk with people who are afraid to reach out to their spouse, their kids, their parents, their friends, or their colleagues,

I merely ask them to consider how they would feel if the situation were reversed. What if your sister, your child, your parent, your friend or colleague was suffering and needed help? Wouldn't you want to know? Wouldn't you want to help? "Of course I would" is most often the answer.

You cannot survive terrible pain alone. Trust the people you love enough to tell them you need them, you are afraid, you are confused, you have made a terrible mistake, you have nowhere to turn. You will be amazed by the people—some of whom you had no idea cared so much about you—who, because they too have suffered, feel more keenly your pain. You will be grateful, and in some ways healed, knowing that the people whom you love most love you even more deeply and profoundly than you ever knew, even—especially—when you are broken by life.

Is there risk in reaching out? Will some people disappoint you? Of course. It might seem a little glib to put it this way, but it's very important to remember that when you reach out in pain, the people who really matter don't mind, and the people who mind really don't matter.

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Ideally, this means that all of us who have lived through pain and are grateful to those who responded know we too can free others. Ali, a woman left deaf, mute, and half paralyzed from her many cancer surgeries, typed to me in one of our conversations as we passed a laptop back and forth:

There are angels all around us. Angels in our friends, our family; people we meet. Sometimes you don't see those angels until you really need them. I kept in touch with some of my friends from work, and word got around that I was going to Nashville for treatment. People got together and planned some fund-raising events to help me get through this time and to help with travel expenses. I heard that they had some kind of a bake sale and posted my picture with a little story about my situation in a few places.

I was amazed. I would never ever have thought people cared that much. A co-worker came to my house and gave me a big bag of get-well cards and letters and a check for three thousand dollars. All for me? I couldn't believe it. It was so uplifting to know that I wasn't forgotten.

What about when we are not the victim of suffering, but the witness? What do we do for a person in pain who is our family, our friend, our colleague, our neighbor? What can we do to ease another person's suffering?

One of the great Rabbi Akiva's students became ill, but none of the sages went to visit him except Rabbi Akiva, who swept and cleaned the floor for him. Because he did this, the student recovered.

The student said to him, "Rabbi, you have revived me!"

Then Rabbi Akiva returned to the academy and taught, "Those who do not visit a sick person might just as well have spilled his blood."

Rabbi Akiva understood the importance of reaching out, and Woody Allen was right when he suggested that the single most important thing in life is showing up. Time and time again I hear it from those who are hurting. The simplest gestures matter.

"I have learned many things these last few months," wrote Rabbi Nachum Braverman, after his baby girl Yael was diagnosed with cancer. "All of my friendships were tested in the crucible of those terrible days when we first learned of Yael's illness. I began to value simpler qualities in my friends than

I had previously. Caring seemed more important to me than brilliance, and far more rare.

“At a time when I needed it badly, there were few people who took the time to involve themselves in my life. At first I judged harshly those who didn’t come forward until I considered whether I would have behaved differently myself. I realized how often I had failed others through preoccupation with my own talent, which was clearly much less important than the ability to care.” This was from an article he wrote many years ago in a now defunct magazine called *Olam*.

One of the things I often tell people who are in the beginning stages of a painful ailment or crisis is that they are gratifyingly about to find out who their friends are, and disappointingly who they are not. A lot of people run away when trouble comes to someone they know. Maybe because they subconsciously fear that the affliction will somehow metastasize to them, or maybe they just don’t know what to say or do to help. But in any case, there is no doubt that some people will disappoint you when you are in need and others will surprise you with their ability to show up.

Two of the greatest figures in the Bible are Abraham and Moses. Each of them was called by God and each of them answered the same way, with the Hebrew word *Hineni*—"Here I am." We too are called by our own suffering and the suffering of those around us to reach beyond ourselves, to reach out with the simplest of words—*Here I am*.

Week after week I get calls from people asking me what to say to their loved one who is facing the scalpel or chemo or divorce or public shame or so many other types of pain. The truth is, there are no answers to the chaos that is pain. There is nothing to say except "*Hineni*—Here I am." In fact, what you don't say when someone is suffering is even more important than what you do say. I often tell people never to say these seven words: *Let me know if you need anything*. Saying "Let me know if you need anything" puts the burden on the sufferer rather than on us. When my father-in-law died recently, many of the very same people who were in the pews when I preached about never saying "Let me know if you need anything" said just that in e-mails and text messages. "Let me know if you need anything" smacks of false empathy and the hope that the sufferer will not actually respond.

When you visit a sick person, think of what he or she needs most and if it's in your power, give it. If you are visiting in the hospital, make your visit brief so that you do not exhaust the patient. If the person is mired in the pain of the moment, try taking him or her on a sort of mental vacation back to happier times. I sometimes ask people to tell me about the best vacation they ever had, or to tell me the story of when they met their beloved husband or wife, or their first kiss, or the funniest thing that ever happened to them. A brief escape and a brief reminder of happier times is a welcome and loving gift.

When I visit someone who has received get-well cards in the hospital or at home, the cards from family and friends are usually taped up on the wall or set out on a table. Notes, cards, calls, and visits mean a lot. If someone asks to be left alone for a while, respect it. Otherwise, visit, call, e-mail, visit, call, e-mail, visit, call, and e-mail some more.

It's our job to anticipate the needs of people in pain and meet them without being asked. Help with the obvious things: carpool duty, healthy dinners delivered to their doorstep, playdates for the kids, send a massage therapist to their house, take some of the pressure off at work, go with them to

doctors' appointments. Sometimes a little creativity is in order. But whether your friend who is suffering is far away or close to home, most important of all is to listen, and listen bravely. People in pain are worried and they need someone to worry with them. Be willing to listen, no matter how sad it makes you. Listen and be unafraid to talk of death or fear. This is real friendship. This is real love.

Help in less obvious ways too. Ways that restore dignity and hope. A great teacher and writer named Joseph Telushkin tells a beautiful story about his father, Shlomo. Shlomo worked full time as an accountant for one of the world's greatest religious leaders. Suddenly Shlomo was afflicted with a stroke. One day while Shlomo was still in the hospital, his son Joseph received a call from one of the religious leader's top aides, who had an accounting question he wanted Joseph to ask his father. It had been only a few days since his father regained consciousness. He was weak and confused. So Joseph hesitated to ask him the question. The assistant persisted and explained that at a meeting earlier that day, when this accounting question came up, the great leader said, "Ask Shlomo." When the leader was reminded how sick Shlomo was, he repeated, "Ask Shlomo."

Now knowing that the question came directly from the great leader, Joseph went to his father's room and posed it to him. Shlomo offered an immediate response. At that moment Joseph realized the leader's brilliance and compassion. The leader knew how sick Shlomo was, but he also understood how important it was for him, lying in a hospital bed, confused and half paralyzed, to still feel needed.

"All of my friendships were tested
in the crucible of those terrible days."

The greatest deed is to ease the suffering of another, and most people will do just that if given the chance. I know who reached out a hand when my suffering was at its most unsightly. I remember Andy and Dahlia's flowers, and Audrey's, Deborah's, and Geri's too. I remember the e-mails; my friend Bruce, who showed up and installed Apple TV to get me through the long months of recovery. Cindy brought a cushion so that I could sit in a chair with less pain. My physician and friend Jay called every day; so did my consulting physician, Ted. Don and Nancy showed up with dinner, Barbara made me soup, David brought over Stephanie's gooey blonde

brownies, Hannah put her arm around me and carried me to the bathroom, and so did Aaron. When I lost my appetite and so much weight, Betsy made me countless grilled-cheese sandwiches—the only thing I wanted to eat for weeks; comfort food in the deepest meaning of the word. Stacy and Alberto sent cupcakes, each with a single letter on top, that together spelled out *Get well soon*. Marilyn sent the most ridiculously delicious ice cream from Cincinnati. Rick made sure the hospital checked me in without waiting. Daniel came over to the house to cut my hair. My nephew Andrew sent me a new iPad to help me with answering e-mails while lying down. Another friend, also named Andrew, who had had similar surgery, called when I was at my lowest just to tell me he knew I was suffering and to promise me that “Everyone gets better.” At that moment, however slightly, the clouds began to lift. I remember each fellow sufferer of pain who was willing to listen to my fear that I would never walk again; each gesture of connection and caring.

Both Judaism and Christianity anticipate the future coming of a messiah or a messianic era of redemption for all of humankind. “Where shall we look for the Messiah?” asked the ancient sages.

“Shall the Messiah come to us on clouds of glory, robed in majesty and crowned with light?”

One sage imagines this question posed to no less an authority than the prophet Elijah himself. “Where,” the sage asks Elijah, “shall I find the Messiah?”

“At the gate of the city,” Elijah replies.

“How shall I recognize him?”

“He sits among the lepers.”

“Among the lepers?” cries the sage. “What is he doing there?”

“He changes their bandages,” Elijah answers. “He changes them one by one.”

Reaching out to those who suffer, one by one, is a holy act.

“On the morning of my final course of treatment,” writes Marlene Adler Marks of her battle with lung cancer, “I was ready for the long, seven-hour routine now familiar to me. . . . My portacath was easily accessed. The intravenous drip of steroids and kidney stabilizers was set in motion. [My friends] Emily, Joyce, and I were discussing the career prospects of our adult children. At 2 p.m. the doorway filled; my oncologist and the staff brought a chocolate cake and sang ‘Happy Last Chemo to You!’ . . .

“At 6 p.m., we caught the mistake. The IV pump had a glitch. . . . For two and one half hours, while Susan, Cynthia, and Rona had been discussing art museums and second careers, I’d been getting nothing from a blocked port.

“And so I was back at the beginning. Not just the beginning of the day, but, my thoughts sent spiraling, the beginning of my life. Fear took over, my blood pressure rising into the stratosphere. And I knew, with a certainty only six months of lung cancer could produce, that this was bad news. My grandmother, who died before I was born, had had high blood pressure, followed by a stroke. She’d gone blind. All my life seemed pointed at this moment, this awful dark joke. My cancer wouldn’t kill me, but high blood pressure might.

“Can you meditate?’ nurse Stephanie asked as she turned down the light. . . .

“Om,’ I began. And ‘Shalom.’

“I started the slow counting of the breath, in and out. I saw myself on a sandy beach of a tropical island at sunset. I breathed God in, and tried to breathe fear out.

“Nothing worked. The slower I breathed, the worse my fear became. I was the proverbial speck,

MORE beautiful

THAN BEFORE

a victim of a senseless universe, with the
terror of my grandmother's legacy
whispering in the wind.

"And my blood pressure stayed high.

"Then I heard the rustle of leaves. . . .
Susan was there, flipping through the
newspaper nearby.

"'Hold my hand?' I asked her. Within
minutes, I was breathing normally. My
blood pressure had stabilized.

"So on the very last day of
chemotherapy, one valve of an IV tube was
constricted, but another valve, the valve of
the heart, opened up.

"I know nothing about bravery. I know
only about need. . . . [about] reaching out, to
friends who are close at hand."