



## STUFF HAPPENS

*HARAV Y. REUVEN RUBIN SHLITA*

*AVOS PEREK 5 MISHNA 3*

"Stuff happens" is one of my favorite axioms. In everyone's life, unexpected things occur that cannot be explained nor anticipated. We go along life's highway and then, out of nowhere, something happens and we are called upon to find an inner strength that will see us through. We can wax philosophical at such turnings, but it doesn't make it any easier.

In truth, though, these are the building blocks of our character. Either we grow and become better people through such adversity, or we stumble and gain nothing from what had to happen anyway.

As a communal Rav, I see my fair share of such events, and I never cease to wonder at how people react to them. A good example of this is the eye-opener I received at Rafael's funeral.

I was called upon to officiate at the levaya of one of the lesser-known members of the community. Rafael was a tragic figure who had lived a life of what seemed to be sad desperation. Very bright but stricken with several infirmities, he seemed to have no friends and lived on his own. He found it difficult to communicate, since his speech was impaired, and folk generally shied away from him. He passed away alone and was found by the caretaker who used to look in on him.

When I received the call that he had been found, I felt a huge wave of sadness, realizing how he must have spent his last moments so alone. We arranged for the levaya, making certain there would at least be a minyan, for Rafael had no family. At the arranged time, the hearse arrived at our community's funeral facility. The minyan stood around the black-draped coffin, and I took my place at the shtender.



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Just as we started to intone the proper prayers, I heard the sound of people approaching. Looking up, I could not fathom what I saw. Tens of people, all dressed in pajamas, were entering the hall. Some were in wheelchairs; others were being supported by what was obviously hospital staff.

It turns out that these sweet neshamos were the entire wing of a long-term medical facility, where our own Rafael had been a periodic patient over the last several years. These ill folks had grown to love Rafael because he had inspired them with his joy for life. To them he was the light that shown forth in an otherwise dark world. The head nurse told me she had never experienced such an outpouring of sadness as when word of Rafael's passing reached the hospital's ward. All his acquaintances had insisted on coming to pay their respects.

I was left speechless. This man had overcome more than anyone could imagine. He had taken what life had handed him and had given hope to those in similar circumstances. Yes, "stuff happens" - but it's what you do with it that makes all the difference.

This Shabbos I had the opportunity to take part in a couple's fortieth wedding anniversary. The couple involved are greatly admired by one and all. Sadly, they were never blessed with children, but they have wholeheartedly devoted themselves to make sure that every aspect of shul life should run with perfection. The husband has been an example of dedication to Torah ideals for generations of our young, and his eishes chayil has given her wholehearted support despite the numerous late nights alone that such support entails.

In my few remarks at the celebration, I touched on a mishna I want to share with you: "Our forefather Avraham was tested with ten trials, and he withstood them all, to show the degree of our forefather Avraham's love for G-d" (Avos 5:3). Avraham Avinu was that unique individual whose every act would be inscribed into all future Jewish souls. Time and again he faced unbelievable trials, and at each juncture he grew even greater. The love he had for Hashem flowered with the stuff of that adversity.

Let us look at those trials for a moment. Avraham Avinu wasn't given tribulations that were leading him to even greater heights of spirituality in a clear progression. Each one was thrown at him from a different direction. First, he is directed to go to Eretz Yisrael. Fine, he decides, this will be my homeland. Wait a minute, says Hashem. There's a famine. You need to leave and go to Egypt, with all the troubles that entails.

Then comes another one. Avraham, you are the head of your family, but you have to heed your wife when it comes to a decision concerning your own flesh and blood.

Finally comes the hardest one. Avraham, you prayed for years to have a son with Sarah your wife. Hashem performed a miracle, and even at such an advanced age, Sarah was blessed with a son. Now be so kind and take him up a mountain to be sacrificed.

With each trial, Avraham was not only being asked to do something difficult, but he was also being told to change a course he thought was already set. Life's "stuff" is difficult enough. What makes it even more traumatic is the way it seems to be thrown at you with no rhyme or reason. As Hashem showed through Avraham's tests, part of the very difficulties of such events is that they seem to be at odds with what preceded.

With the understanding we have gleaned through Avraham's ordeals, we gain a measure of safety within ourselves. We realize that nothing is done randomly, and part of the growing process is

this very aspect, this awareness. To a Torah Jew, there is no such thing as a life lived in random. Everything is mapped out; it's all there for our greater good.

The heart of any real test is how we accept the new realities. How many of us have had dreams fall apart despite our greatest efforts? In any relationship, there are times that are difficult. Such moments can either bring the people involved closer together, or they can act as a vehicle to drive them apart.

The deciding factor is usually what it is that one seeks in the relationship. For some, every relationship is built on selfish, self-serving goals. In this case, love for another person can never really grow because one's own ego stands in the way. To the Torah Jew, however, there is the realization of Avraham Avinu. His love for Hashem not only withstood life's trials, it grew even stronger.

We have been told this information by the Mishna not only so that we can feel pride in our ancestors, but to understand that such love is not only possible but is in fact the true goal to which we should aspire. Yes, Avraham had a unique relationship with Hashem, and we are nowhere near such spiritual heights. Instead, Hashem has given us more mundane opportunities. Those around us need our support, and no matter what "stuff" comes along, we can grow ever closer if we share in life's trials and gain strength from them.

That couple, with their forty years of shared life together, had seen more than their fair share of difficulties, yet they are closer today than ever. Refael, my hidden tzaddik, also saw plenty of "stuff," probably more than most would be able to bear, yet he gave something special of himself to others. He used what life had given him and made it a positive force in his life.

You may say all this is well and good for life's spiritual superstars, but that's not so. The mishna speaks to everyone; it calls out to every soul. Avraham Avinu broke the mold, and he made it possible for all his children to turn life's difficulties into the stuff of majestic growth. That's why we are here. That's why we are Yidden.

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