

Jews Supporting Jews: Some Sources for Reflection or Discussion

Tsarat rabim hatzi n'hamah
“Sorrow shared is sorrow halved” or
“Company in distress makes sorrow less.”
(Lit., “The suffering of many is half of comfort.”)
Jewish folk saying

“Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs him down...” (*Proverbs 12:25*)
R. Ammi and R. Assi [explained it differently]:
One said: One should force it down;
the other said: One should talk about it with others.*
Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 75a

*One connects the word *yashhenna* (bows/weights him down) with the Hebrew *nassah*, “to remove”; the other with the Hebrew *suh*, “to speak”.
(Note: The verse from Proverbs 12 ends with: “but a good word makes him glad.”)

The great Hassidic master, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelekh, said that in addition to the psychological value of unburdening oneself to another, there is yet an additional advantage to doing so:
Assume, he said, that person A was adjudged by God to bear suffering. If A relates his plight to person B, and B so empathizes and identifies with A that he shares A's suffering, then B now suffers as well. However, since the Divine judgment was not for B to suffer, justice requires that B be relieved of his suffering. But B's relief is contingent upon A's relief, so Divine justice therefore requires that A be relieved of his distress to spare B from unjust suffering. The essential ingredient of this method, said Rabbi Tzvi Elimelekh, is that when one listens to a person's distress, he should sincerely empathize and feel the other's suffering as much as though it were his own.

“Your people, when altogether, are righteous.
They shall inherit the eternal land.”
(*Isaiah 60:21*)

Brotherhood among Jews is so dear to God that it obscures individual defects. “Your people, when altogether, are righteous.” Collective righteousness depends on a feeling of equality, togetherness.
One of the Hassidic masters, when being taught Hebrew as a young child, was told that when two *yuds* are written together, they should be read as the name of God. When the child came to the end of a sentence, which was marked by two vertical dots (“:” -- as a colon), he pronounced the name of God. “No, no!” said the teacher. “When the two *yuds* (Jews) stand alongside each other, then it represents God. If one *yud* is above the other, then this is not God. This shows that things have come to an end.”
And so it is. When we stand alongside each other, God is with us. If we consider ourselves to be above another, we have reached the end.
The above two teachings adapted from Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, MD, Living Each Day (New York: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1995; pages 41 and 153.)

When you want to seclude yourself for private meditation,
have a companion with you.
It is dangerous to carry out this practice alone.
Two people should be in the room;
each one communing with the blessed Creator.
There will be times when you are so completely connected to God
that you will even be able to enter into solitude
in a room full of people.

Reb Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1811) Tzava'at HaRivash, # 63
(Quoted in Or Rose with Ebn D. Leader,
God in All Moments: Mystical & Practical Spiritual Wisdom from Hasidic Masters,
Jewish Lights, 2004; p. 122)

Share all your negative thoughts and feeling
-- those that oppose our holy Torah,
and are brought forth by the evil inclination --
with a spiritual mentor or trusted friend....

Do not leave out anything from these conversations
because of your shame or embarrassment.

By speaking about such things,
by bringing them into the open,
you will break the power of the evil inclination,
so that it will not rise up against you at other times.

You will also retrieve the good counsel of your friend,
which is itself a wondrous treasure,
A pathway to God

R. Elimeleh of Lizhensk (1717-1787) Tzetel HaKatan, # 13
(Quoted in Or Rose with Ebn D. Leader,
God in All Moments: Mystical & Practical Spiritual Wisdom from Hasidic Masters,
Jewish Lights, 2004; p. 126)

Every people draws sustenance from others, from the heritage of the generations, from the achievements of the human spirit in all eras and all countries. Mutual dependence is a cosmic and eternal law. There is nothing in the world, large or small, from the invisible electron to the most massive bodies in infinite space, which has not bonds with its fellows or with unlike bodies. The whole of existence is an infinite chain of mutual bonds, and applies to the world of the spirit as well as to the world of matter.

David Ben Gurion, Atlantic Monthly, November 1961

Do not separate yourself from the community.
Pirke Avot, Mishnah 2:4

Israel's reconciliation with God can be achieved
only when they are all one kinship (lit., "brotherhood").
Talmud, Menahot 27a

It is one of the great compensations of life
that no man can help another without also helping himself.
Ralph Waldo Emerson (OK, so he wasn't Jewish!)

Required Helpfulness

Individuals having to contend with stressful and dangerous situations may sometimes experience enduring positive changes in their lives when they are required to perform actions that significantly help others in their personal times of need. Rachman (1979*) refers to this phenomenon as "required helpfulness." It was originally observed among the citizens of war-torn Britain during World War II. Doctors found that after aerial bombardments, citizens who served the immediate needs of others, to essentially protect the safety and well-being of others, experienced fewer than anticipated adverse psychological reactions from the trauma of the aerial assaults. One observer even noted that individuals who were of poor mental health prior to the air raids were actually faring much better following the raids if they had a personally satisfying job to perform that others saw as socially necessary....

The phenomenon of required helpfulness has also been tested experimentally. Researchers asked a group of individuals who were very fearful of snakes to help other individuals with similar fears. By modeling effective coping strategies, the helpers actually experienced a reduction in their own fear responses...

From Mark Katz, On Playing a Poor Hand Well (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997)

**S. Rachman, "The concept of required helpfulness," Behavior Research and Therapy, 17 (1979), pages 1-6.*

Helping One Another

As one hand washes the other, so must one person help another.
Leon of Modena, in Tzemah Tzedek, 1600

If you want to help pull a friend out of the mire, don't hesitate to get a little dirty.
Ba'al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, 1700-1760)

The Lord will help – only: Help me, Lord, until the Lord will help!
Yiddish Proverb