RABBI EPHRAIM SPRECHER
Faculty, OU Israel Center

Serving God **In Joy** Despite Corona

King David tells us in Tehillim 100, "Serve G-d with Joy." How is it possible when we are surrounded by a deadly invisible enemy called CORONA?

Rambam provides the solution - the Fear of Gd. When someone fears Gd, he serves Him in joy. As it says, "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright of heart." (Tehillim 97:11) A person derives happiness from serving Gd.

Yet, if someone's entire focus in this world is just family, physical pleasure and acquiring possessions, then, if Gd forbid, tragedy strikes, he will plunge into despair, depression and overwhelming grief like Iyov.

In "The Guide of the Perplexed", Rambam devotes two chapters to Iyov. In verses 3:22-23 of Iyov, Iyov's friends try to calm him down, but in vain. However, by the end of the book Iyov is calmed down. What change has he undergone? Have his troubles ceased? No! Not at all! His troubles are still with him, but his relationship to them has changed.

At the beginning of the book, "Iyov sits among the ashes" (2:8). In other words, he is enveloped in earthly concerns. Yes, he is righteous, but materialism and physical possessions are very important to him. The suddenly his world collapses, when his wealth is lost, and his children die, and he becomes afflicted with a painful skin disease. He becomes deeply depressed and broken in spirit.

Later on, however, Iyov says, "I abhor and regret dust and ashes" (4:26) by which he means, "I reject my entire enslavement to worldly concerns."

Ralbag, as well, writes in his commentary on Iyov, that all the troubles that befall a person only cause worry and ruin when he is focused on and locked into materialism. If, however, one's world is spiritual, then troubles cannot harm him, for a person's spiritual world is always under his control. In every situation, one has the free choice to do good, whether one is healthy or sick, rich or poor, married with children or alone and childless. Circumstances change, but for every situation there is an appropriate way to serve G-d. If someone's joy derives from serving Gd, it will never be possible to take it away from him!

Therefore, Rambam writes, "If your thoughts are focused only on this physical world, then there is no solution for your problem, because this world is no paradise."

The righteous person who finds pleasure in mitzvot and good deeds, stands strong and erect in every situation, facing up to all problems. He does not take to heart difficulties arising from the problems in this world. He has a correct perspective on reality.

Even if someone possesses wealth and health, that is not a guarantee of contentment, says Rambam, because it will all be gone when the person dies. "When he dies, he shall carry nothing away. His glory shall not descend with him." (Tehillim 49:18)

Rambam states that when a righteous person suffers, he takes solace in the fact that even such a life is better than death. The main thing is that he is alive. Even at his death he delivers his soul back to G-d joyfully, knowing that even death is all for the best, because it leads one to eternal life in the World to Come. Death is the door which leads to a better world without pain and suffering.

Rambam comments regarding the Mishnah, "A person is obligated to bless Gd for evil that occurs, just as much as for the good". (Brachot 54a) The Rambam in Perush Hamishnayot explains this teaching as meaning that one can never know if the evil isn't really a concealed good, and the good isn't really a concealed evil.

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Well known are the Talmudic teachings, "This too, is for the best" as well as, "Whatever Gd does, He does for the best". There can be a person who loses his wealth and paradoxically this becomes the cause of his contentment. In losing all his wealth and status, he might gain a tranquil life, and even dedicate it to serving Gd, thereby meriting the World to Come.

The Midrash tells about a man walking along the road to the seaport to catch a ship for an important journey. A thorn got stuck in his foot. Because he now limped, he missed his ship's departure. The man cursed, but the ship sank. This is what Isaiah (12:1) means when he says, "I will thank G-d for being angry with me."

Rambam makes a fundamental point, that the bounties of this world are secondary and are not our main goal. He also reminds us that we do not know what tomorrow will bring. In this world, good and evil, can each be transformed into the other.

Rambam concluded that there are two possible causes of worry, the past and the future. A person worries about what was and what will be. Rambam writes, "Worrying about the past, has no benefit and someone who sighs and frets over something that has already passed, is senseless and foolish. Bad enough that such a person once had a problem, but he makes things worse by worrying about it after it has passed and gone." (Guide for the Perplexed)

As for worrying about future troubles, that too, says Rambam is nonsense. It is possible that the trouble will come, and it is possible that the trouble will never come. One should gladden his heart with trust in Gd. Gd is all good, and whatever He sends a person is only for the best, even though we don't always understand why or how.

Rav Soloveitchik asks what the difference between a slave and a free person is. "A slave, the Rav says, thinks only of himself. A free person has the ability to think of others."

Our goal is to be sensitive to the needs of society and to be free means to be helpful and considerate of others. In this context, CORONA has caused us to show sensitivity to the elderly and vulnerable populations. All of us are self-isolating in our homes not just because we are afraid of being infected, but mainly because being outdoors endangers other people. This demonstrates incredible consideration and regard for the elderly and vulnerable populations and this is one of the signs of our being truly free, according to Rav Soloveitchik.

Just as the CORONA epidemic began with only one person and spread to the entire world, so too, the good we do has an effect on the entire world. CORONA demonstrates that individuals have tremendous influence over the whole world. This influence can be used for good, or it can be used for evil. All of us have a unique and special mission in life to change the world for the better, ONE good deed at a time! ■