

Religious pain

Posted by bright - 28 May 2025 03:20

Between Therapists and Rabbanim: The Missing Middle We Desperately Need

There's a pain that doesn't always have words.

A type of hurt that hides under the surface, even in the most beautiful places.

People sometimes talk about religious trauma.

But what I went through wasn't really about religion itself.

It was about emotional wounds twisting the religion into a prison.

What I went through isn't just about one person's pain — it's about what I see as an unfortunate gap in our system.

And more importantly, it's about what we can start doing to fix it. Let me share my story with you.

I grew up as a serious bochur.

I pushed myself hard.

I learned day and night.

I was a masmid.

I was successful in yeshiva.

People respected me.

I was looked at as someone who was "doing everything right."

But on the inside?

I never felt like I was good enough.

Let me explain.

Before I got married I had already spent years in therapy. I had worked through a lot - including the terribly trauma I had experienced. I made real progress. I grew. I healed. But there was an aspect to my emotional wounds that I didn't even begin to understand. Although I was accomplishing and successful, no matter how much I learned, how much I accomplished

there was a quiet voice always telling me:

“You’re a disappointment.”

“You’re faking it.”

“You’re not really wanted by Hashem.”

Every word of Torah I learned, every tefillah I said, every bracha I made —

I wasn’t doing it because I wanted to.

I was doing it because if I didn’t, I was worthless.

Not just “bad,” not just “slacking” — worthless.

If I skipped a bracha — I was garbage.

If I zoned out during Shemoneh Esrei — Hashem hated me.

I was a faker, a hypocrite, a walking Chillul Hashem.

Judaism wasn’t inspiring.

Judaism was oxygen — but oxygen mixed with poison.

Shabbos was terror.

Every halacha, every minute, was a test I was set up to fail.

One wrong move, and I was trash forever.

Learning wasn't something I loved — it was a burden I was chained to.

If I stopped learning, I was screaming inside:

“You're disgusting. You don't deserve anything good. Hashem hates you.”

I remember learning a schmooze about bitul Torah.

A healthy person might hear, “Try to make your time more meaningful.”

I heard, “You're a rasha who is killing yourself spiritually with every second you're not learning.”

The worst part?

Inside of me, buried under all the fake smiles, there was a rage building.

I would never have admitted it.

I didn't even let myself know it was there.

But deep inside, there was a part of me that hated God.

Hated Him for what He was doing to me.

For setting up a world where no matter how hard I tried, I would always lose.

For making me live in terror.

or killing me slowly, invisibly, with expectations I could never meet. And hating God made me hate myself even more.

Because who hates God? Only a monster.

Only a piece of garbage.

Only someone beyond hope.

And although I had already spent years in therapy, and had worked through my abuse and much more,

There was an aspect to my emotional wounds that I didn't even begin to understand.

I had plumbed the depths of my psyche. I worked through years of suffering with the help of top therapists and explored numerous innovative modalities. Yet I still had not touched the religious part of the pain.

I hadn't even realized it was there.

At the time when everything broke open again,

I was married.

I had beautiful children.

I was learning full-time in a prestigious kollel —

doing well, respected, trusted, admired.

On the outside, my life was a success story.

Inside, I didn't even realize there was still a volcano waiting to erupt.

But then a life-shattering event tore through everything I thought I had built.

It ripped away the thin layer of safety I had been standing on.

And underneath it, all the old wounds, all the buried rage, came flooding back.

Except now it wasn't just emotional pain.

It was spiritual pain.

It was a soul-deep scream.

I couldn't hide from it anymore.

I was furious.

I was broken.

And the truth is — I didn't want to stay anymore.

If I hadn't had a family depending on me,

I would have left Yiddishkeit completely.

Without hesitation.

Without looking back.

I wasn't held by love.

I wasn't held by faith.

I was held by responsibility.

By the brutal knowledge that if I left, I would destroy more than myself.

The pain was so deep.

Way beyond anything I had ever thought I could survive.

I was trapped in a religion I hated.

Trapped in a relationship with God that felt more like a prison sentence than a covenant.

And every step of the way, every prayer, every halacha, every mitzvah —
instead of drawing me closer to Hashem, only made me feel more rage.

I saw Him in everything that went wrong —
every little frustration, every delay, every disappointment.

It all felt like proof that Hashem was out to get me.

I could have written a reverse hashgacha pratis sefer —
not about miracles, but about all the ways I thought Hashem was trying to destroy me.

And I had no one to turn to.

Not because I didn't try.

I spoke to rabbanim — open-minded, compassionate, very chashuv rabbanim.

I reached out to organizations — big, respected ones.

They listened. They cared. But no one knew how to help.

There was no one who really dealt with this kind of pain, an emotional issue with Hashem Himself.

No one was able to get to the root of what I was going through.

And I started to feel completely hopeless.

Like maybe no one ever could help.

I didn't believe therapy could help me.

I had already tried.

So many times.

But thankfully I did.

Because this therapist was different.

He challenged me.

He pointed out how extreme my beliefs about Hashem were —

how black-and-white, how childish, how full of fear and self-hatred. And even more importantly, he introduced me to a unique Rav who is able to portray Yiddeshkeit in a beautiful, yet simple way.

At first, I doubted him completely.

He wasn't just challenging a few ideas.

He was shaking my entire identity.

Of course Hashem demands perfection.

Of course if you sin, you're a rasha.

Of course Hashem criticizes you if you fail.

But he didn't just argue with me.

He gently pushed me toward a different perspective, one that changed my life.

Through conversations, through reading, through listening —

I was exposed to a totally different picture of Hashem.

Not a distant, perfectionistic, judge.

Not a punisher or a relentless impossible--to-please master.

but an unconditional source of love.

and i began to learn how to build an entirely different kind of relationship with him and with His

Torah. A genuine connection, not one built on a divine score card, red tallies and brownie points.

These new ways of thinking and living certainly weren't easy to accept.

They didn't match what I had internalized from my years in yeshiva. (Though I now fully understand that they are in perfect harmony)

It didn't match what the fear in me believed

I fought it.

It sounded too soft, too fluffy, too fake. But over time, I realized:

The God I had hated wasn't real.

He was a projection of my pain — not the truth of Torah.

And the real Hashem — the One who had been hidden behind all that fear —

was waiting for me with love. With more love than I loved myself. Love not for some perfect version of me, but for the real broken, fighting one.

I had to rebuild everything.

My entire Yiddishkeit.

But as difficult as this was, it was the most rewarding thing I experienced. I became alive! I started understanding concepts I had always struggled with. My neurons started firing on all cylinders and I made connections and understood new deep meanings in everything I learned and did.

I stopped learning because I had to.

I started learning because I wanted to.

Because I wanted to understand and connect.

And even though I still sometimes struggle with fear and guilt —
now I know how to handle it.

The rule is that Hashem loves me.

No one dies from a question —
as long as there's a healthy foundation of emunah.

I realized how deep and beautiful the Torah really was. Simcha jumps out at me from every area of religious life. Today, my Yiddishkeit is different.

When I daven, I think:

Hashem just wants to spend time with me.

He wants a small, quiet meeting — just me and Him.

Even if I can't concentrate.

Even if my mind drifts.

He just wants me to show up.

He treasures my effort.

He treasures the fact that I'm there.

Not my performance.

Me.

Before I bench, I don't think, "I have to."

I think:

Hashem moved the entire world to get me this piece of bread.

He loves me that much.

Before every mitzvah, I try to find one point of meaning —
one spark of connection.

And slowly, I also started seeing Hashem inside the world.

When I feel a moment of love —
that's not random.
That's Hashem sending His love to me.

When I experience compassion —
that's a small reflection of Hashem's own compassion toward me.

When someone does a kindness —
that's a little glimpse of Hashem's kindness shining into the world.

The more I open my eyes,
the more I see that Hashem isn't hiding.

He's everywhere.

In the good.

In the beauty.

In the acts of love and mercy that fill this world when we're willing to look for them.

Maybe it sounds fluffy.

Maybe it sounds too soft for some people.

But this is the truth.

This is what saved me.

Not through fear.

Not through guilt.

But through love.

Real love.

Hashem's love.

And for the first time in my life,

I'm not just surviving.

I'm alive.

This is the part nobody talks about.

There are thousands of people carrying this kind of pain —

people who feel trapped inside a broken relationship with Hashem.

But there seems to be nowhere to turn.

Therapists, even the best ones, often don't have the background to fix religious wounds.

And even when they do, the pain is so tangled up with Torah and mitzvos that it's hard for a person to trust them fully — especially someone coming from years in yeshiva.

Rebbeim, on the other hand, may know Torah deeply —

but most aren't trained in emotional trauma.

Even when they recognize pain, they don't always have the tools to address what's really going on underneath.

This isn't a criticism of rabbanim.

And it's not a criticism of therapists.

It's just a reality:

There's a gap between the two.

And for someone stuck in the middle —

emotionally hurting, spiritually drowning —

that gap can feel like a black hole.

Even when someone in this situation asks an emunah question, the answer they need isn't just intellectual.

Because usually, what's underneath the question isn't just doubt —

it's fear. Shame. A belief in a terrifying, angry, impossible-to-please God.

Its not enough to answer, "Why did Hashem bring tzadikim through the camps?" with "svivav nissru meod"

The real question he is asking is:

"How can I possibly love a God who kills even His best children?"

"How will I ever be enough for Him?"

If no one helps the person rebuild their whole picture of Hashem,
then no brilliant answer will help.

This kind of healing takes time, Torah, and deep emotional insight.

And the people who can truly offer that —

who understand the Torah world and the emotional world —

are few and far between, and are so busy they don't have the time for the back and forth that is needed.

We need people who can bridge the two worlds —

people fluent in Torah and fluent in emotional healing.

People who understand what a sugya feels like,

and what trauma feels like.

Not instead of rabbanim. Not instead of therapists.

But a new middle.

Someone who knows the Torah — and also knows the wound.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach either as different individuals have different needs and different emotional challenges.

I don't know exactly how and what needs to change.

But I do know this: awareness is the first step.

I've spoken to well-known organizations and rabbanim.

But even they didn't have a concrete thing to do.

That's why I'm writing this.

Because until we start talking about it —
until we recognize this silent struggle —
nothing can change.

But something has to.

P.S. A special hakaras hatov to Rabbi Dovid Aaron who shared with me so much of his time, clarity, and insight which helped me get to where I am today.

If you're struggling with this kind of pain, or if you're trying to help someone who is —
and you want to talk, share, or explore ideas —
you can reach out at haragra14@gmail.com.

You're not alone.

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Re: Religious pain
Posted by bright - 27 Jul 2025 04:08

[youknowwho wrote on 25 Jul 2025 13:55:](#)

[captain wrote on 25 Jul 2025 12:41:](#)

I decided that it is too dangerous to post the stuff about European yeshivas in a public setting, as it could be misunderstood. But if anyone suffers with religious pain and feels like this might be relevant for their healing, they should PM me and I will send them my original post on this.

For some reason, my entire PM option is gone. Would love to hear more
- youknowwho300@proton.me

Same. haragra14@gmail.com. Unless the fear is I will be disparaging towards them:)

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Re: Religious pain
Posted by markz - 27 Jul 2025 04:20

I don't like negativity about any group

Hasidic

Yeshivish

Nanach

Habad

Etc Etc

Please

Can we agree that bad people can be found in all those groups, and generally worse people outside the orthodox world.

Unless someone wants to keep their head in the sand for the sake of shemirat einayim...

So my 2cents?

If someone has issue with certain elements of any of the mentioned beautiful groups, please keep them to yourself.

There is zero benefit in raising it here.

On the other hand, if someone suffered in a religious setting which seems to be the case from the title of this thread, there is benefit in sharing that and working on healing which can definitely be painful...

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by yitzy148 - 27 Jul 2025 04:24

[youknowwho wrote on 25 Jul 2025 13:55:](#)

[captain wrote on 25 Jul 2025 12:41:](#)

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- youknowwho300@proton.me

Ditto.

yitzy148@gmail.com

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - 27 Jul 2025 04:28

There are a few basic differences between European yeshivos and now. Ill just say three obvious ones. The simplest one is that if you went to Yeshiva you felt special because you were the only one doing it. Even if you had detractors, you were able to build your identity around your learning and feel even better about your mesiras nefesh. Nowadays, everyone goes to Yeshiva. We cant identify as a unique person because we go to yeshiva, all we can do is

compare ourselves to others and if I are the king of the hill, maybe, I can make that part of my identity. The second is in the same vein, only the most motivated people went to Yeshiva, Yeshiva was by nature for metzuyanim. The curriculum certainly was geared towards that. Bezmaneinu, we have the fortune of nearly everyone receiving a Torah education in a yeshiva, and most of them are at fairly high levels. Whats good for the yachid isn't good for everyone. Im not saying we have to sacrifice the budding gadol, assuming you can identify him. But you certainly cant push everyone to be at his level. That sacrifices the 999 for the (maybe) one.

Number three is the abundance of emotional problems. In my class, I knew of three out of twenty and there certainly was more. Thats over ten percent. The number is certainly higher... As far as we know these problems were not prevalent in Europe. (There is a certain lackadaisical attitude some have (hopefully not most) when they think, well he is just crazy, its not my problem. I don't think that's hashkafas hatorah, adam muad leolam, we have no right to be mazik these students. If a yasom was in our class wouldn't we think a hundred times before saying a kibud av class? A child from a divorced home would definitely give us pause to think about a shalom bayis vort. So why should someone suffering from depression, anxiety or severe lack of self image be different? The only reason I can think of is either because the mechanech doesn't believe, or he totally has no intimate understanding of such pain, which is very typical, but this causes him to not be able to properly bring it to the forefront of his mind.)

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by eerie - 27 Jul 2025 20:23

@ bright, Just for the record, I'd like to share a point about something you said

I wasn't in the Yeshivois in Europe, so I don't know what it was like

I had the zechus of having a conversation with Reb Shaul Bruss Zatzal, Rosh Yeshivas Beis HaTalmud a person who learned in Kaminetz by Reb Baruch Ber. He shared a point that by now I'm sure many of you know, how anti-Yeshiva the prevalent culture in many parts of Europe was. He told me that it was so bad, that when a Yeshiva bachur was redt a shidduch the first question was "what's wrong with her that she is maskim to marry a yeshiva bachur?". He told me of bachurim that wouldn't leave their homes the whole bein Hazmanim because they would be so denigrated by the general populace in their hometown. He said that the Mirrer Mashgiach worked very hard to build up the concept of shtultz for this reason, because otherwise the bachurim would think of themselves like a lot of the people around them did, as nebechs, etc.

So, perhaps the bachurim worked hard and achieved the feeling of being special, but it definitely didn't come easy.

Another point.

He told me that they learned maseches kesubos in the winter zman, and they were a few months into the zman, and they were holding somewhere in the ?s, and Reb Reuven was upset why they are learning so slow. I heard this with my own ears from Reb Brus, who learned probably slower than anyone out there, k'yedua the jokes about beis hatalmud. I didn't dare ask him the obvious question, but my theory is that the Yeshivas in Europe were takeh catering to metzuyonim, so they learned like they did, and learned whole masechtas, while our yeshivois are not styled to teach only metzuyonim

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - Yesterday 00:50

Agreed. that was also why the Alter stopped the idea of esen teg... I once asked a talmid of Reb Ahron, why is it that so many of your friends became such great talmidei chachamim? I went to a very good yeshiva and their track record is nowhere near BMGs from the talmidei Rav Ahron? He told me that it was because the only reason someone went to BMG was to learn. He went even though the whole world was going to college, or best-case scenario, taking Rabbinic courses. He did it because all he wanted was to learn. Such an environment fosters talmidei chachamim of the highest caliber. I apologize if I ever inferred it was easy. My point simply is that that being the case, what was good for BMG in the 40s lav davka is good for the modern-day bachur. If you disagree with that or anything about the way I said what I said, please lmk.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by altehmirrerr - Yesterday 01:42

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In my days that meant that they were the few that actually went to yeshiva, in todays days it means they are the few from within the yeshiva.....

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by eerie - Yesterday 01:43

My dear, dear friend, you don't have to apologize for anything! And yes, that point is definitely true, when the whole world was anti-yeshivas, then a person who went to yeshiva anyway was somebody who was very dedicated and devoted to growing in it.

BTW, thanks for this whole thread. There's a lot of good stuff here

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bennyh - Yesterday 02:49

[bright wrote on 13 Jul 2025 19:44:](#)

Hi everyone, I'm curious what you think.

A big source of pain for me is *Selichos*. What really gets to me is the message that *everything*, all the suffering and tragedies we've been through, is supposedly our fault. That we must have done something so terribly wrong to deserve things like the Holocaust, the Crusades, pogroms, and more.

That's really hard for me to accept. It's hard to think that we, as a nation, are so bad that we somehow earned that kind of suffering. And it's even harder when it feels personal, like *I* am being told I'm that bad too.

Honestly, I don't really believe that. Most people I know are trying so hard to do their best in difficult situations, situations they never asked to be in. To say that tragedies happened because of our sins feels like it lacks empathy for the struggles people are already going through. And I can't believe that Hashem, Who is compassionate and loving, would see us and want us to see ourselves that way.

Maybe it's just the pain talking. But I wanted to share it, because this part of davening has always been very hard for me.

Thanks for listening.

(P.s. I know the Nesivos Shalom about this but it always seemed more)

I will go against my recent reputation here and post something positive for a change. I saw this in a new book I read over Shabbos.

It's kedai to read till the end:

There is a stunning scene near the beginning of the book of Exodus. (It is so familiar that we often miss just how remarkable it is.) God hears the moans of the Israelites suffering in Egyptian bondage, remembers God's covenant with their ancestors, and resolves to liberate them. God, it seems, is finally ready to charge into history and put an end to the horrific oppression of God's people. And then God reveals the concrete divine plan. Addressing Moses, God says: "Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). God intends to free the Israelites and radically alter the course of Jewish, and human, history. How will God accomplish God's goals? By summoning a homeless shepherd and enlisting him to be God's emissary. As a modern Bible scholar explains, "In one brief utterance, the grand intention of God has become a specific human responsibility, human obligation, and human vocation... After the massive intrusion of God, the exodus has suddenly become a human enterprise..."

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993) boldly insists that in this amazing encounter, Moses serves as a paradigm for what is true of every human being: to be created in the image of God is to be assigned a specific task by God. Playing with the Jewish legal idea that "an agent is likened to the sender," R. Soloveitchik argues that one who is similar to his sender thereby becomes his agent—in other words, being created in the image of God entails becoming God's agent and emissary.

According to R. Soloveitchik, each of us is given a distinctive mission, and the moment into which we are born is reflective of the assignment God has in mind for us: "The fact that someone lives in a particular time and a particular place, and not in some other time, under different circumstances, can only be understood if we accept the idea of the human being having a distinctive mission. Providence knows how and where each individual, with her capacities and weaknesses, can best fulfill her mission," and we are created accordingly. (A question I am not at all sure how to answer: Can one hold this as an existential orientation without affirming it as a metaphysical truth? I think so, but I am honestly not sure.) It is crucial to understand, R. Soloveitchik adds, that, normatively at least, we are not free to accept or decline our mission. Sometimes we are called to a task that is overwhelming or exhausting, or that seems like a fool's errand—and yet we are not free to walk away. This, I am suggesting, is the lesson Jonah found it so difficult to learn. We read his story because to some extent it is also our own.

But we are not prophets, and in some ways, that makes our task even harder: unlike Moses, we first have to discern our mission, and then decide whether to heed the call. And yet we do sometimes feel a call. If all this sounds too daunting or grandiose to contemplate, think about a moment in your life when you knew—we can bracket the question of precisely how you knew; sometimes you just know—you had to fulfill a particular task in the world. Perhaps you didn't want to—maybe it would have cost you socially, or professionally, or economically; or maybe you were just feeling lazy—and you ran away, pretending not to hear, obfuscating matters until you

rationalized your way out of performing the unwanted task. Reading Jonah on Yom Kippur, we remind ourselves that although we have the ability to turn away, religiously speaking we do not have the right to do so.

R. Soloveitchik captures this insight beautifully by suggesting that this is why both human beings and angels can be referred to in biblical Hebrew as mal'akhim, which we usually take to mean "angels," but which in fact refers to messengers more broadly. What is the difference, according to classical Jewish sources, between an earthly messenger and a heavenly one? Whereas the latter has no choice but to fulfill the divine mission, the former is free to disobey. Again and again, we are asked:

Are you Jonah? And are you willing to start being something else?

IN WHAT SENSE WAS THE WORLD CREATED FOR ME?

I mentioned earlier that some of my students were troubled by the idea of declaring—of being required to declare—that the world was created for their sake. I confess that for years I shared their unease—the last thing the world needs, I thought, is for religion to bolster our already overdeveloped sense of entitlement—until one day it occurred to me that perhaps our unease said more about our culture than it does about the text itself. We hear the phrase “for my sake was the world created” and immediately assume that those words must be a statement of privilege, an affirmation of what we are entitled to. But what if the text means something else entirely? Our mishnah teaches that each of us is obligated to believe that the world was created for our sake because there is some distinct way that each of us is called upon to serve. The world being created for me isn't a statement of how much I'm entitled to, but rather a declaration of how much is asked and expected of me.

One of the many ways the kind of self-worth we have been exploring differs from many pop-psychological approaches is in its insistence that self-worth is bound up with expectation and obligation.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) weaves this idea—about each of us having a task (or tasks) that we all too often resist—into his interpretation of the Yom Kippur liturgy. At the end of the Amidah prayer on Yom Kippur, we declare, “My God, before I was formed, I was of no worth, and now that I have been formed, I am as if I had not been formed.” On the surface, the prayer reads like a declaration of our ongoing worthlessness. As it goes on to say, “I am but dust in my life, all the more so after I die.” But R. Kook spins the text around, yielding something radically different:

“Before I was created, I was of no worth.” Before I was born, in that unlimited expanse from the beginning of time until I was created, there was nothing in this world that needed me. Because if I had been needed for some purpose or completion, I would have been created then. But since I was not created until this time, that is a sign that at that time, I was “of no worth” [or: it would not have been worthwhile to create me]. There was no need of me. But now, at this very moment that I have been created, the time has come when I need to participate in some aspect of completing the world.

“Were I to dedicate my life toward fulfilling the purpose for which I was created, I would indeed

now be worthy. But since my actions are not in accordance with my true goal, I am not accomplishing my life's mission, and I am still not worthy. Things have changed; I am now needed. And yet I go on living as if nothing had changed and I were not needed."

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by bright - Yesterday 04:57

Can you please email me the book you saw this in?

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by captain - Yesterday 11:52

Wow my inbox has really been popping recently! After a lot of thought, there are some things that just don't belong in a public forum, only in private communication where I am able to make sure that the message accomplishes its intended benefits without causing any harm. So, if you have had religious pain and you associate some of that with the time you were in yeshiva, please email me Captaingye613@gmail.com. (You can email me even if you are reading this years from now.) I can send you the piece I have not posted here, and we can discuss, and you will be talking to someone who can understand- to someone who also felt doomed as if the negativity is the truth and there are no answers, and then went and found real ones. (Also **PLEASE read Appendix A of The Battle of the Generation. It's a gold-mine for this topic.**)

For everyone else, count your blessings that you don't face this pain, and don't need to deal with this. And if someone comes to you with this pain, even if he has anger at the system or whatever, please don't belittle him or send him flying. Instead, please get him help with someone who can understand him and who has real answers to his questions.

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Re: Religious pain

Posted by alex94 - Yesterday 15:01

[bennyh wrote on 28 Jul 2025 02:49:](#)

One of the many ways the kind of self-worth we have been exploring differs from many pop-psychological approaches is in its insistence that self-worth is bound up with expectation and obligation.

GOLD. A lot of my [attempted, slowly succeeding] re-chinuch by my incredible therapist, has been around this inyan.

Living with the feeling of ?????? ????? is a product of acting upon ??? ????? ????? ??? ??.

Please do tell us in what sefer this treasure is found.

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