

Trauma

Category: Shemos, Shemos

What is the Jewish approach to traumatic childhood experiences?

What Happened to You?

“What Happened to You” is the name of a recently-released book written by two famous people, Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Bruce Perry. The basic claim of the book is that when you treat someone with issues, such as convicts in prison and so on, instead of asking them, “What is wrong with you,” you should ask them, “What happened to you?”

In other words, people fall into crime because they experienced traumatic events in their youth. These events caused them to continue to experience pain and trauma and fears, and they lose control over their anger, and therefore, they react as they do.

They write in the book that the earlier in life one experiences this trauma, the deeper the impression. Therefore, they conclude that the person is not at fault for the life he lived; it is a result of the trauma that he experienced in his early childhood.

Oprah shares a personal story of her own: As a young girl, she lived in her grandmother’s home and slept with her in the same room. One night, she woke up to the sight of her grandfather coming into the room and trying to choke her grandmother. Her grandmother overpowered him and managed to chase him out, but from that night onward, before going to sleep, they would lock the door and put chairs under the doorknob to ensure that he was locked out. Each night, her grandmother would ask her if the door was properly locked.

This fear accompanied her throughout her successful adulthood. She lived in a multi-story building in Chicago which was secured by video cameras and security guards, but occasionally she was struck by such intense, irrational fear that she would leave her home and spend the night in a hotel. That is the extent to which the trauma of her early childhood affected her.

The Big, Scary Man

By Divine Providence, this week I heard a story about Rabbi Nachman Sudak o.b.m, the Rebbe's shliach to England.

Rabbi Sudak was sent to England in 1960, and in the 50 years that followed he built an empire of Chabad institutions; Queen Elizabeth actually awarded him with the highest honor that England bestows on its citizens.

He was once asked: What is the secret to your success? Where do you get the wherewithal to withstand the financial pressures and the other difficulties which are the bread and butter of someone who leads so many institutions?

In response, he told a story about his early childhood.

When he was nine years old, living in Samarkand, he studied in a secret cheder located in a cellar with two or three other students. They would head to school early in the morning before dawn and leave after dark so that the school wouldn't be noticed. But on Fridays, they had no choice but to leave before sunset.

One Friday afternoon, as he headed home with a chumash tucked under his arm, he felt a massive hand land on his shoulder. Without looking up, he knew that it was bad news. He turned around, and the large, intimidating man asked, "Kid, where are you coming from?"

"From grandma," he replied.

"What's that book?"

"It's crossword puzzles."

The brilliant fellow couldn't read Hebrew, so he couldn't prove that he was lying.

"Where do you go to school?"

Nachman replied with the name of a faraway school, which would make it difficult for the fellow to ascertain if he was telling the truth.

At that point, the man decided to end the conversation, and he told Nachman to continue on his way.

As Nachman proceeded to walk on, he noticed in the corner of his eye that this fellow was following him. He realized that the man planned to follow him home to interrogate his mother.

He was terrified. In his mind's eye, he saw his parents being arrested and sent off to Siberia, and him being sent to an orphanage. Who knows where things could end up...

He knew that he needed to do everything to lose the man. He began to run, and the fellow began to chase after him. He ran into a park, and the man followed him there; he continued to run in all directions until the sun finally set and the large man lost his trail. Finally, he was able to return home.

That hour and a half, he said, was the worst hour and a half of his life. But that hour and a half created him. It was like he was born anew. The next Sunday morning, he knew who he was, he knew his life's mission, and he knew that nobody would be able to stop him (told by Rabbi Schneur Ashkenazi).

The Trauma of Moses

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the birth of Moses. Moses was born at a time when pharaoh had decreed that all baby boys be thrown into the Nile. The Midrash relates that his father did not want to bring children to the world at all. What was the point of bringing children who would then be killed? Instead, he divorced his wife. But his daughter Miriam convinced him to remarry Yocheved. The little girl told him a prophecy: "My mother is going to give birth to the savior of the Jewish people."

Amram remarried his wife, she became pregnant, and when the baby was born, "The home was filled with light." Everyone saw that it was a special child.

His mother hid him for three months, but then she feared that the Egyptian intelligence would discover him. She placed him in a small box and left him at the edge of the Nile — a massive river filled with deadly animals. The little baby was suddenly left alone to his fate.

But then a miracle happened. Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in the river and discovered the crying baby. She knew that he was a Hebrew, but her compassion

overcame her and she decided to adopt him.

Just imagine the trauma that Moses experienced — a child abandoned by his loving mother. But let's see how he turned out. How did the trauma affect him, knowingly or unknowingly?

What's the first story about Moses?

When he reached adulthood, he went out to see his brethren and he saw their suffering. He saw an Egyptian hit a Hebrew, "and he looked here and there and saw that there was no man." He saw that nobody stood up for the poor Hebrew that was being beaten to death. He saw that Jewish blood was cheap. He decided to take action. He immediately killed the Egyptian.

The Rebbe takes a closer look at the story.

What exactly happened here?

Moses was raised as a Prince in Pharaoh's home. He had access to everything Egypt had to offer. "Nevertheless, he didn't remain in the palace; he went out to see the suffering of his brethren, the Jewish people and to look for ways to help them. When he saw an Egyptian beating a Jew, he was unafraid to risk his life to save him" (Biurei Hachumash pg. 73).

The danger indeed materialized. Moses was sentenced to death, and he was forced to flee to Midian.

Now, Moses didn't really know his brethren. He grew up as an Egyptian; he spoke the Egyptian language and lived in the home of the most powerful person in the world. The Jews were slaves, they spoke a foreign language, and they lived in the ghettos. But he not only helped them but actually risked his life to save a Jew. Then he was forced to flee to Midian, where he was the only Hebrew, but even there he wasn't identified as such. The daughters of Jethro identified him as an Egyptian.

On March 30, 1981, John Hinkley tried to assassinate President Ronald Reagan. Thank G-d he was not successful. Two weeks later, at a gathering in honor of his birthday, the Rebbe spoke about the event, but first sent his best wishes for a speedy recovery and long life. The Rebbe pointed out that John Hinkley was raised in a very wealthy home and was never disciplined. Therefore he reached

such a low level. On the other hand, Judaism believes that poor children who have a hard life, actually build resilience to achieve even higher goals than the regular child. As the Talmud says, "Respect poor children because from them will come great Torah Scholars."

This is one of the reasons why the Jewish people ended up in Egypt for many years of slavery; to build up their resilience so they can become the Chosen People. This gave the stamina to teach about G-d and not be intimidated by the pressures of the world around them.