

# Perseverance: Putting Suffering in Perspective

I recently bought a stationary bike, high quality but used, a great deal on Craigslist. It seems like such an easy thing to do. You're not going to crash into anything. It doesn't matter what the weather is. Overall, great choice. My brother-in-law, a licensed physical trainer, explained that people tend to get the most out of this kind of exercise with a higher intensity workout for only about 10-15 minutes.

So I hopped on the bike for the first time and set the timer for 10 minutes. I start, and I think to myself, this is a cinch. It's going to be so easy. But as time went on, I hit a point where my body was saying, "Stop! I can't do this anymore!" I looked at my timer and only 38 seconds had passed since I started.

The perception of time is so strange. When you're suffering, time seems to stand still. I can only imagine what Yosef felt like for those two years in prison. Remember how he told the butler to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh? I imagine that for the first few days, maybe the first week after Pharaoh's birthday, Yosef thought that this would be the day he would finally be released. But it went on and on, and those two years had to have felt like an eternity. On the other hand, when Ya'akov served Lavan for seven years, expecting to marry Rachel at the end of it, the Torah tells us that it felt like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

## Review

Since last April, I have been working through a set of middot, character traits, found in 2 Peter chapter 1. He tells us that if we practice these qualities, we will never fall, and there will be richly provided for us an entrance into the eternal kingdom of Mashiach. Count me in. So let's quickly review the character traits we have covered so far:

The starting point is faith, or emunah. We defined faith as awareness of God's direct involvement in the universe and your life. He is not a distant and detached entity, but intervenes in creation and in your personal life and redeems. Knowing and accepting that truth is faith.

The first step on our journey from the starting point of faith, is virtue or excellence. We learned that virtue is better understood as having a good heart, a lev tov. This means that you use your rational human mind to calculate the benefit of serving God and to calibrate your moral compass.

Then we moved on to knowledge or da'at. Knowledge is more than study. First you take raw information, then you process and analyze it to give it meaning. Finally when that wisdom and understanding take root in your heart, leading to fear of Hashem and proper action, you have achieved a piece of knowledge.

The last trait we looked at was self-control, which in Hebrew is *kibbush hayetzer*, or conquering the inclination. We learned how the snake in the garden tempts us even today to descend to the animal kingdom, to give into animal instincts and desires. Our goal is not to eliminate it, but to conquer it.

This brings us to the fourth characteristic, which the ESV translates as "steadfastness." Other versions translate it as, "endurance," "patience," or "perseverance."

## What We All Want

Just like with exercise, we want to experience progress in our lives. Spiritual growth and personal redemption. We want to contribute to what our community is doing to change the world. And on the grandest of scales, we want to see this long exile come to an end.

But how long is it going to take? Two years? Two thousand years? Like Joseph in prison, we feel like it could be any moment, but it could also go on and on. Every day, every year, every new challenge that piles on, the unrelenting waves of problems we face, can lead us to a feeling of despair. Despair beckons us with hopelessness and the temptation to give up in the face of suffering and adversity.

To make matters worse, the challenges we face are often so mundane and meaningless. Work deadlines. Piles of laundry. Car breakdowns. Family drama. It would be one thing if we were suffering for some noble cause, but instead we find ourselves derailed and diverted by unnecessary burdens. And even when we are doing something meaningful, so often we find ourselves getting nowhere, or the process seems to drag on much longer than it should. Is this what God put us on this planet to do?

## Defining Perseverance

This is where our new middah comes in: perseverance.

Perseverance sounds like a positive thing, and it is, but take note that perseverance implies two things: suffering and time. Perseverance means pushing through the suffering as long as it takes until you reach a goal.

Patience is a related quality, but patience and perseverance are two different things. Patience means remaining passive until the time elapses. Perseverance means remaining active until the goal is achieved.

Perseverance is a very Jewish quality; we find it described at length in the Tanach and other Jewish sources. And yet, it's strangely difficult to find the exact word for perseverance in Hebrew, although there are a few that are in the general orbit. סבילנות is a good word for patience or endurance—it captures the essence of bearing a burden. Another good word is התמדה, which implies persistence and consistency.

When I tried cross referencing the Greek word we have here (ὑπομονή) using the Septuagint, the result was kind of surprising: it typically pointed to the word תקווה or the verb קווה, which means “hope”

And while that itself is not a synonym for perseverance, it helps us understand the key to perseverance. Expectant and hopeful focus on the goal is what strengthens us as we endure pain. So a key verse that can help us conceptualize this quality of perseverance is the last verse of Psalm 27. Since this is the Psalm we recite over and over again throughout the period of Elul and the holidays, this is likely to be somewhat familiar:

קוֹה אֱלֹהִים הַזֶּקֶן וַיֵּאֱמַץ לְבָבוֹ וַיִּקְוֶה אֱלֹהִים.

Wait for Hashem; be strong and let your heart take courage; and wait for Hashem.

There are three components to this verse: wait, be strong, and wait. This suggests that perseverance is an interactive partnership where God initiates, we respond with action, and then God comes through at the end.

Perseverance and endurance in the midst of suffering gives context and meaning to that suffering. This is how it counteracts the temptation of despair. Suffering is not meaningless; to persevere you have to understand the purpose and benefit of suffering.

## Suffering: A Test

The first benefit of suffering is its function as a test. In fact, the New Testament frequently uses the word “test” or “trial” rather than “suffering.” When Yeshua tells us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” he’s talking about suffering. When Ya’akov instructs us in James chapter 1, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,” by “trials” he means “suffering.” And he continues by telling us, “for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1:3). “Steadfastness” in this verse is the same word I’m preferring to translate as perseverance.

This must be a teaching of the Master, since it was repeated by Paul in Romans 5:3 “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.”

Let’s stop and think about this logically. What is a test? It is an evaluation. In school, you endure day after day of lessons. You practice and study and review. At the end of the year, perhaps you learned, and perhaps you failed to learn. But the only way to know is to put you through a test. This test gives you the opportunity to prove that you have achieved something.

In the classic mussar work Mesillat Yesharim, or Path of the Just, the Ramchal explains that the reason man was created was simply to delight in God and derive pleasure in the radiance of the Shechina. However, that does not happen in this world, but in the world to come. But the only way from here to there, from being created to ultimately basking in God’s light, is through the corridor known as “this world.” This requires us to exert ourselves and strive with all our effort to fulfill our responsibilities in the Torah. And so the Ramchal says,

Thus, we see that man is truly placed in the midst of a raging battlefield. For all matters of this world, whether for the good or for the bad, are trials for a man. Poverty from one side versus wealth from the other. This is as Shlomo said: "Lest I be satiated, and deny You, and say, Who is G-d? or lest I be poor, and steal..." (Prov.30:9). Tranquility on one hand versus suffering on the other, until the battle is waged against him from the front and from the rear.

But why put us through all this? Can’t God just bring us right into the World to Come? The Kabbalists have an explanation for this mystery known as nahama d’kisufa: an Aramaic term meaning “bread of shame.” This idea is that as a created entity our neshamah feels its connection to the creator, and at the same time, its complete inadequacy. God created the world with symmetry. When someone receives something they did not earn, they gain along with it a sense of shame. And so in 1 Thessalonians, Paul instructed his readers “to aspire to work with your hands so that you may...be dependent on no one” (1 Thes. 4:11-12). Likewise Psalm 128 says, “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you” (Ps. 128:2 ESV).

So in another of Ramchal’s works called Da’at Tevunot, he explains that God’s intention is to give us perfect good. And then he elaborates:

And indeed, in order that the giving of good be complete, He knew in his sublime wisdom that it is appropriate that those who receive the good receive it with the work of their hands, because

then they will have ownership of this good, and they will not have residual embarrassment in the receipt of the good, like one who receives charity from another. Regarding this the Jerusalem Talmud states, "One who eats not from his own, is ashamed to look at his [benefactor's] face".

It is a fundamental belief of the Bible that God rewards acts of righteousness. If you don't believe this, then you are denying one of the most central messages of the Bible. If God bestows perfect bliss on everyone regardless of their achievement, then reward for righteousness is meaningless. Righteousness cannot exist without the potential for wickedness. Thus, we need a testing ground. That is the entire purpose of this world and the suffering in it.

This helps us understand the difficult words in the letter of James: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). More trials means more merit.

Think about the suffering of Joseph. Every one of the hardships he endured with grace granted him higher levels of merit and proved the worthiness of his faith. This is a New Testament concept. Take a look 1 Peter 1:7:

Even gold is tested for genuineness by fire. The purpose of these trials is so that your trust's genuineness, which is far more valuable than perishable gold, will be judged worthy of praise, glory and honor at the revealing of Yeshua the Messiah. (1 Pet. 1:7 CJB)

So as you go through hard times don't despair. Each trial is an opportunity for you to triumph by overcoming in that situation.

## Suffering: Brings about Perfection

This brings us to a second benefit of perseverance through suffering: it brings about perfection of the neshamah (soul). This idea may be hard to understand through the lens of Christian theology, but it is right at home in Judaism.

After telling us that the testing of our faith produces perseverance or steadfastness, the letter of James goes on to say in verse 4: "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas. 1:4 ESV).

I've said it before, but I'll say it again: Perfection in this sense does not mean never having made a mistake. It is the culmination of the process of refinement and sanctification that you are going through right now. Think of a potter molding a pot, which becomes more and more perfect as it is being shaped by his skilled hands. The purpose of your life is for your soul to be perfected, as God told Abraham in Genesis 17:1, "Walk before me and be perfect." Our Master Yeshua taught us, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

And so this is why Ya'akov tells us "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

And likewise in Path of the Just, after explaining that this world is like a raging battlefield, the Ramchal explains,

If he will be a man of valor, emerging from the battle victorious on all fronts - he will be the "Adam HaShalem" (whole/perfect man) who will merit to cling to his Creator and will emerge from this corridor to enter into the palace to enlighten in the Light of (eternal) Life.

The Ramchal may be alluding to our father Jacob in Parashat Vayishlach. After all he went through, and after finally reconciling with Esav, it says in Genesis 33:18 that Ya'akov arrived *shalem*, that is, perfect, in the city of Shechem.

The Ramchal continues:

According to the extent that he conquered his inclination and lusts, and distanced from the factors which distance him from the good, and exerted himself to cling to G-d, to that extent will he attain it and rejoice in it.

And this accords with again the letter of James, which explains in 1:12:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Perseverance is the key to achieving perfection. Keep pushing. Keep progressing. Banish despair. Fight through suffering. Keep your eye on the end goal.

The Didache speaks to this when it says in Chapter 16,

Be vigilant for your life—do not let your lamps be snuffed out, and do not let your loins be ungirded—but be ready, for you do not know the hour in which our Lord is coming. Gather together often, seeking what is appropriate for your lives, because your entire time of faithfulness will be of no benefit to you if you will not have been made complete (i.e., perfect) at the end of time.

It tells us a few verses later:

Then the entire human race will enter the trial by fire, and many will be caused to stumble and will perish, but those who endure in their faithfulness will be saved by the very one who is cursed.

So we can see how essential endurance is for the achieving of perfection, and how essential perfection is in the mission of your life.

## What to Persevere In

Suffering is going to happen in life. And the choice is yours: do you want your suffering to be meaningful and worth something or not? Obviously, we would not want to suffer, but if we have to, it's better for the suffering to have a purpose. And when we persevere in the midst of suffering and do not despair, the suffering serves both to perfect us and to test us, showing us to be suitable for the reward in store.

Perseverance is important in multiple spheres. First, you have to persevere in your personal life. Hashem has you on a journey that is fraught with dangers. Don't give up on becoming a godly person, sometimes falling but always rising again, as many times as needed.

Don't stop persevering in your personal relationships. Your perseverance in the command "Love your fellow as yourself" will be tested again and again. This is especially true with your spouse. Let me tell you, I have an excellent marriage. Is it tested? Yes, unrelentingly. It is constantly being challenged by internal and external factors, and the only thing that holds it together is perseverance. Never allow yourself to think that testing is a sign that your marriage is a failure. In fact, it's the only way to prove it to be a success.

Brothers and sisters, we need to keep persevering as a community. Beth Immanuel is such a unicorn, a one-of-a-kind community in the Messianic Jewish world. We have persevered and endured now for 21 years, a testament to the hand of God on our leadership and the special calling he has for us. If you've been here for any length of time, you know that we don't stay the same; we are here to accomplish something, which means we are always developing and hopefully improving. There are three types of people who have come through Beth Immanuel. Two of these types don't remain with us very long. There is the person who wants things to stay the same; they don't see us as being on a journey together. And as things develop, they despair and jump ship. The second type is the idealist who cannot deal with the intermediate phase; they can only accept what is already perfect in their eyes. We have had many people of this type; they, too, despair and don't last with us very long, and they never seem to find what they are looking for. But to persevere at Beth Immanuel means to be a visionary. To accept where we are as a starting point, but to have the courage to take steady steps to help us accomplish our overall mission and vision. So persevere with us as a community.

And let's persevere on a global level. Keep pushing for the revelation of the Kingdom. Keep pushing for the world to see who Yeshua is and how his teachings will bring us to redemption.

## How to Persevere

Perseverance means pushing through the suffering as long as it takes until you reach a goal, and the key to perseverance is hope. So, in practical terms, how do you persevere?

The list of middot we have already studied in 2 Peter 1 provides an excellent roadmap for perseverance. If you are struggling with despair, walk through each of the previous steps until this point.

1. Have faith. Recognize that God is present and watching and interested in what you are doing right now. He is noticing what you are going through and is ready to intervene if he deems it necessary. This awareness will help you persevere.
2. Fortify yourself with a good heart, to help you gain a sense of perspective. A good heart will help you see that this life is short, but what you do in this life is of resounding importance. Even your daily activities resound in the heavens. A good heart will give you a long-term view, helping you persevere.
3. Equip yourself with knowledge. Don't let your learning remain in your head, but let it descend into your heart where it begins to impact your will. This will give you the tools to know what your next step should be, a necessary ingredient in perseverance.
4. Seek to conquer your yetzer hara. The evil inclination would like nothing more than for you to desist from your calling and descend into despair. By strengthening your good inclination, you will be better able to resist the constant pressure to give in.

Don't be confused. Perseverance does not mean allowing others to abuse you. It doesn't mean making the same mistake over and over again, hoping the result will one day be different. Perseverance is encapsulated in the verse "Wait for Hashem; be strong and let your heart take courage; and wait for Hashem." It means fixing your eyes on the goal, and doing your part in what it takes to get there, trusting in Hashem. Yosef remained in prison for two years, and he did not let despair swallow him alive. The Maccabees fought the Seleucids for two years, until a freak chariot accident took Antiochus out of the picture. Be strong and wait for Hashem.

Right now, I want you to think of areas in your life where perseverance is needed. Commit in your heart to taking on those challenges. This is the meaning of the candles you've been lighting for the last eight nights. Dispel the darkness of despair.

## Embrace Perseverance

Despite my body telling me to stop pedaling after 38 seconds, I pushed through. I completed ten minutes that day. And I'm still working on building the habit of putting in some regular exercise, but I now know that my lazy body is lying. I can do it, and it's getting easier every time.

We all feel overwhelmed at times. Hopelessness sometimes sets in. Sometimes you feel disconnected from a deeper sense of purpose. But without persevering, you can expect continued feelings of despair and isolation. You are going to miss opportunities for personal and spiritual and relational growth. And most importantly, you will fall short of the potential you have to bring about the revelation of this world.

We are disciples of Yeshua, who tried to give us perspective by saying, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt. 5:11-12 ESV)

This is who we are. Like our Master, we persevere in the face of real suffering. Through him, we are empowered, spiritually enriched, and connected to a community. We embrace challenges as opportunities for growth and redemption.

His example of self-sacrifice strengthens our resolve and resilience in trying times. It provides us with a spiritual worldview and deeper understanding of the context behind our personal struggles. And in his name, we unite with a sense of belonging in a community sharing our values, our vision for kingdom, and our mission to serve him here in Hudson, Wisconsin and around the world.

I want to bless each one of you today, and I would ask you to bless me as well, that Hashem would fill us with hope and strength, enabling each one of us to persevere in the mission that are neshamot were sent into this world to accomplish; that we would rise together to meet every challenge as a community of disciples, and that by the Spirit of God working through us, we would see the redemption quickly and in our days.