



Victor or Victim? The Choice is Yours

In this week's Parsha, we encounter the directive, "And you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The prevalent interpretation of this verse posits that the Jewish people, having once been strangers and subjected to oppression in Egypt, possess an inherent understanding of such experiences, thereby fostering empathy towards others. This perspective aligns with Rashi's interpretation. However, Rabbi Reuben Poupko of Montreal offers a fresh perspective on this verse. He articulates that, as a nation that has endured oppression and subsequently achieved redemption, G-d urges Klal Yisrael to exemplify resilience in the face of adversity. The message is clear: We need to avoid succumbing to feelings of despair or adopting a mindset of victimhood. Those who have faced oppression often resort to their victim status as a rationale for causing harm to others. Instead, demonstrate to others the possibility of rising, recovering, and rebuilding. Throughout Jewish history, we have faced numerous national calamities, from our origins as a people to the present day, including slavery, expulsions, inquisitions, the Holocaust, and persistent threats from hostile nations. Nevertheless, we have consistently shown resilience and growth. We have never resigned ourselves to victimhood, declaring, "We cannot rebuild!" In the aftermath of every catastrophe, we have demonstrated our ability to rise again and rebuild our lives anew. This verse articulated shortly after the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Mount Sinai, is a fundamental aspect of our mission among the nations: to overcome adversity and embody the spirit of victory rather than victimhood.

Life is characterized by a multitude of challenges, many of which are profoundly personal in nature. Routine difficulties, such as experiencing a flat tire or facing an unforeseen financial obligation, may occur. Nevertheless, some issues are of greater significance, encompassing health emergencies, the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, or job loss. These adversities can affect individuals or ripple through entire families, and they may also resonate on a broader national or ethnic scale.

Challenges are an inevitable aspect of human experience, affecting individuals universally. Each person needs to engage in self-reflection by asking, "In what manner will I navigate a difficult situation?" and "What will my response be once the challenge has been overcome?" The responses to these inquiries will significantly influence whether the individual adopts a victim mentality or emerges as a victor and conqueror.

Self-awareness and the conscious choice to pursue a fulfilling life are often at the core of personal development. When confronted with difficult situations, it is all too easy to surrender to despair and assert, "There is nothing I can do." We may attribute our circumstances to divine will, fate, or the actions of others, and there may be some truth to these assertions. Interpersonal relationships can indeed be fraught with difficulties. For instance, individuals who have suffered from abuse or illness are often blameless in their



plight. Society does not typically cast judgment on those who have endured harm at the hands of a parent, partner, or other figures of authority who were meant to provide safety but instead inflicted pain. Nevertheless, we encounter remarkable individuals who, despite facing significant adversities, emerge as champions and role models. What distinguishes these individuals from others?

Let us examine various reactions to trauma or adversity and determine whether these reactions can be classified as “victim” or “victor” responses.

Consider an individual who experiences a serious health issue, such as a heart attack. This person is swiftly taken for emergency bypass surgery. After nearly a week in the hospital, they are released and advised to participate in Cardiac Rehabilitation. After completing a 12-week program, the individual may still require up to six months or more for full recovery. Throughout this period, it is common for individuals to experience a surge of emotions as they confront their own mortality. In what ways might they choose to respond to this challenging circumstance?

VICTIM	
Response	Internal Message
Life as I knew it is over	I am a victim that cannot have a normal life
I may die at any moment	I am afraid and need to freeze
Why did this happen to me?	Life is not fair, and I have no control over my future

VS

VICTOR	
Response	Internal Message
Life will be different	Life will be different, but I can make the changes that I need to make.
I need to make the most of every moment	I may be afraid, but I can live life to the fullest
What is the reason that I survived this ordeal?	Yes, this is a big challenge, but how can I gain or be better because of this?

The process of analyzing our responses can be applied to any form of adversity. Each reaction to a particular circumstance leaves a mark on our cognitive framework, often influencing our future behaviors. For instance, an individual who has endured an abusive relationship may internalize a belief suggesting that they deserved such treatment.



Unfortunately, this belief can lead them to engage in actions that compromise their safety and well-being. However, if they can resist the urge to internalize this damaging message and instead adopt a perspective of, “I did not deserve this treatment; how can I use this experience for my personal growth and empowerment?” they can transition from a state of victimhood to one of triumph.

Many of the most compassionate and nurturing parents come from dysfunctional backgrounds, yet they consciously strive to avoid repeating the mistakes and abuses they faced in their upbringing. The key element here is the phrase “consciously strive to avoid perpetuating the mistakes,” which highlights their success. The distinction between being a victim and a victor lies in the intentional pursuit of success. While we cannot change the past, we can govern our thoughts and shape our future behaviors.

To alter the internal dialogue that occurs within an individual’s mind, the initial step involves identifying the existing messages that reside within the depths of the subconscious. Throughout the day, individuals make numerous decisions, encompassing choices related to their attire, dietary preferences, social interactions, and how they engage with others. As adults, we determine our professional conduct, as well as the levels of honesty and integrity we uphold in our work. In our roles as partners and parents, we are continually confronted with decisions about how to treat our spouses and children.

Individuals primarily determine how to interpret the behaviors and words of others. The initial step involves closely observing these actions. Maintaining a daily journal can prove invaluable for documenting various events throughout the day. It is essential to begin this process without forming judgments. The subsequent step entails reviewing the day to identify which actions and interactions contributed positively to personal fulfillment and which were detrimental or unhelpful to one's life objectives. To facilitate this analysis, take a sheet of paper and divide it into two columns. Label one side as “action” or “interaction” and the other as “the internal message behind the action or interaction.” For each positive action and its corresponding internal message, mark it with a check, a smiley face, or any other positive symbol of your choice. Conversely, for each unhelpful or negative action and internal message, use a “~” symbol. Opting for a symbol other than an “x” can be more constructive, as it emphasizes the potential for improvement rather than labeling the action as inherently bad or wrong. After identifying the responses that would be beneficial to change, rephrase the “internal message behind the action or interaction” with a positive message that will help the next time the situation arises.



For example:

Action	The internal message behind the action/interaction
I ate a donut for breakfast	I don't care about my health~
I arrived at work on time	I am punctual and responsible ☒
I yelled at my child for spilling at the dinner table	I am just an angry person / My child is irresponsible~

The REPHRASED internal message behind the action/interaction

I am eating healthy food because I care about my health.

I can control my anger. / My child made a mistake because we all make mistakes.

Reformulating a message before an event allows an individual to mentally equip themselves for the forthcoming situation, thereby fostering a positive impact on their subsequent actions. It is important to acknowledge that significant transformations do not occur instantaneously. Modifying a deeply embedded subconscious message necessitates considerable time and dedication. As individuals strive for personal development and change, they will inevitably encounter both achievements and obstacles. This duality is an inherent aspect of the growth journey and should be anticipated and embraced. It is essential to recognize and celebrate each success, as each accomplishment contributes to making future challenges more manageable as you strive to be a VICTOR!

Have a wonderful Shabbos,

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