

# LBT's From Light to Liberation: *Suffering*

Week of January 17, 2021 / 4 Shevat 5781

These texts are designed to be engaged in chevruta (with a partner), with a larger group, or on your own as part of your journey from Light to Liberation. As you approach these texts, you are invited to let the discussions and thoughts they foster live with you and be part of you. If you are reading these on your own or with others, we encourage you to read aloud.

**Framing:** Rabbi Yohanan is one of the most remarkable figures in Rabbinic literature. As part of his biography, the Talmud relates that Rabbi Yohanan lost ten children over the course of his life. Despite these devastating personal experiences, Rabbi Yohanan drew strength from them and served as chaplain of sorts, helping other rabbis and figures of the rabbinic era as they experienced suffering of their own. The conversations that Rabbi Yohanan has with his colleagues regularly surround this question of suffering and its meaning in our world. The narrative below focuses on the power of relationships as a source of healing. (This is one text is not the definitive Jewish text on suffering. You are not being asked to accept or reject it, just encounter it.)

ברכות ה' ב:י"ג

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש. על לגבייה רבי יוחנן אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שקרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך. יהב ליה ידה, ואוקמיה. רבי יוחנן חלש. על לגבייה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שקרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך. יהב ליה ידה, ואוקמיה. אמאי, לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה? אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.

## Berakhot 5b:10-13

**Rabbi Yoḥanan's** student, **Rabbi Ḥiyya**, fell ill. **Rabbi Yoḥanan** entered to visit him, and said: "Is your suffering dear to you?" **Rabbi Ḥiyya** responded: "I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward." **Rabbi Yoḥanan** said to him: "Give me your hand." **Rabbi Ḥiyya** gave him his hand, and **Rabbi Yoḥanan** stood him up and restored him to health.

Then, **Rabbi Yoḥanan** fell ill.

**Rabbi Ḥanina** entered to visit him, and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" **Rabbi Yoḥanan** responded, "I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward." **Rabbi Ḥanina** said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand, and **Rabbi Ḥanina** stood him up and restored him to health.

**The Talmud then asks:** Why did **Rabbi Yoḥanan** need **Rabbi Ḥanina** to restore him to health? If he was able to heal his student, why didn't **Rabbi Yoḥanan** stand himself up and restore his own health?

**The Talmud answers:** It is like the saying: A prisoner cannot free himself from prison, but depends on others to release him from his shackles.

## Questions for Reflection:

1. At a surface level, why might the rabbis use the saying "a prisoner cannot free himself from prison, but depends on others to release him from his shackles?" If our minds can feel like they imprison our suffering, what has helped you set free that which pains you? Would you attribute your mental liberation to your own doing, help of others, or a confluence of the two?
2. When has a friend come to your aid and helped you move through a place of suffering? When has your mindfulness practice been that friend? When has the source of life, the divine energy of the universe, been the catalyzing force of liberation from the ties that bind you?
3. How have your own experiences with suffering enabled you to be a source of healing for others? Have you ever seen your ability to encounter and overcome suffering as a superpower? Why or why not? (Maybe try it on for a week! 😊)