



# A Safe Place for Pain

How do we interpret the painful, unpleasant or difficult events in our lives? What happens to the body's energy field when faced with an unresolved conflict?

Miriam Millhauser Castle, founder of the Inner Torah process, teaches that our lives, including all the disappointments and unfulfilled dreams, are holy texts through which Hashem communicates with each of us individually

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After reading *Walking Mom Home*, I felt a sense of devastation. Irrevocable loss. And the acute pain of missed opportunity. In this stirring account, Miriam Millhauser Castle records how she shared the last year of her mother's life, meriting a profound level of intimacy and giving, transforming a time that could have been fraught with emotional entanglements, confusion, and even hysteria into an opportunity for blessing, meaning, and direction as the two of them stood at the door of transition into the Next World.

When my own mother, *a"n*, died thirteen years ago, I was neither at her side in her last moments, nor in an emotional place where I could give to her unconditionally. There were still resentments, there were still unresolved barriers. Would I ever be able to feel whole, or would there always be that looming pain that comes with the realization of no second chances?

"Actually, there's an enormous opportunity in the missed opportunities," says Miriam soothingly. "All of us have things in life we wished we'd done differently. They are some of the inevitable losses that are part of living in this world."

This step, grieving for a loss of what could have been — "if only ... [fill in the blank]" — is one of the basic emotional growth skills she teaches as part of what she calls "Inner Torah" work. Inner Torah is the name of a system Rebbetzin Castle created to help women come into loving and forgiving relationships with themselves, with others, and with Hashem.

In her three Inner Torah books — *Inner Torah*, *Practical Inner Torah*, and *The Breath and Body of Inner Torah* (Targum Press) — she teaches that our lives, including all the disappointments and unfulfilled dreams, are really holy texts through which Hashem communicates with each of us individually. When we learn to interpret the messages hidden in our life experiences, we see that our circumstances, painful or disappointing as they might be, are exactly as they need to be for our souls to evolve and reach their potential in this lifetime.

“Grief can be overwhelming, or at least it feels that way,” she explains, “but the key is to trust that you can stretch enough to contain the pain without breaking. There are two things that need to happen here.

“Allow yourself to acknowledge that there was a loss, and at the same time to be able to make peace with the part of you that did what you did at the time, because that’s what you were capable of doing then. Looking back now, and wishing you — or that younger version of you — would have been different leaves you outside of a place of wholeness and acceptance of yourself. This is part of your Inner Torah. It might be a painful part, but grieving is one of the most important skills you can learn. It’s intended to move us from whatever the loss was to whatever opening is created by having experienced it. So by facing all that pain and learning more about yourself from it — why you were so blocked, why you couldn’t be more forthcoming or loving — you can remove some of that armor around your heart and learn to move forward. The loss you feel in your relationship with your mother can actually influence how you go forward in the world now.” That, she says, essentially redeems the relationship.

#### Is there a way to rectify the guilt?

“Guilt is a feeling intended to lead us to something in our inner world and help us grow. But it becomes a dead end if we stay stuck in it, taking us around in circles and not getting us anywhere. Emotions are meant to alert us to something real; they are supposed to get us to move forward, not grip us indefinitely. We can move out of our guilt by feeling the loss, feeling the regret, and relating to the part of the self that wasn’t able to do otherwise at the time. You can tell yourself, ‘I understand that you (younger self) were limited then, so now I’m going to help you grow. What is it that needs to change and mature, so that we won’t be in that place if such a situation arises again?’ You might not be totally free of pain, which is bearable, but you will be free of guilt, which is debilitating.”

Miriam Millhauser Castle is no stranger to loss herself.

She is the only surviving member of her immediate family. Her only sister died of a misdiagnosed illness; her father passed away after a long and painful bout with cancer when he was in his sixties; and her mother, Gusti Millhauser, *a’h* — the true heroine of *Walking Mom Home* — was eighty-eight when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer of the esophagus.

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*“Who would I reminisce with when she was gone?” Miriam writes. “There wasn’t anyone else left alive who had these memories. I would be holding them alone. What if I forgot? I felt like I was not only about to lose her, but also my one remaining connection with my father and sister... When she died, they would die for me all over again. The loss that was about to occur felt so enormous. I wondered if my vessel was strong enough to hold all the pain.”*

The pain of loss, says Miriam, is a pain we were built to bear, a pain that’s intended to expand us. “We are sparks of Hashem. We are infinite. We are vast. Our capacities have no end. So if we’re willing to feel these pains, they expand our heart capacity. If we bury them, a part of our heart closes and we create armor.

“I don’t teach anything I don’t do myself,” she continues. “I live Inner Torah all the time. I’ve had many losses and opportunities for grieving in my life. My sense is that the most profound place of loneliness is being cut off from your own self and from Hashem. I’ve done enormous amounts of work in my own life to be connected to both those places, and that’s where I fill my own well.”

#### THE EVOLUTION

Miriam was just a little four-year-old sitting on her family’s porch in Baltimore when she had her first spiritual experience. Looking at a tree in the yard, she formulated the idea that the tree was going to be there long after she, her sister, and her parents were gone. The sense of infinity enveloped her, and she instinctively knew that that vast world of infinity was all here before as well. It was an experience she couldn’t put into words, but that would incubate inside until she had the language sophisticated enough to express it.

Her parents, however, lived life in another, more grounded dimension. They were German-Jewish refugees who had fled to America in 1938, plagued with the trauma of not being able to rescue their own parents, who perished in the Holocaust. In the US, they were on their own, and made up their minds to become ful-



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ly integrated Americans. Still, there was the punctuality, discipline, precision, and formality, together with a refinement and dignity, that left the imprint of Europe, especially Germany, on their existence. In Baltimore, the family affiliated with

the Conservative movement; Miriam’s mother was raised in an Orthodox home in Germany, and their home life — as well as her unwavering Jewish commitment — was formed by the Torah she grew up with. Miriam, however, was confused by what she was exposed to in the Conservative movement and subsequently found her way to a fully Torah-observant life.

As an adult, Miriam entered the field of law, “which I naively thought was about truth and justice, about my idealistic way of looking at the world.” She eventually made partner in a large Washington firm. The exposure to the inner workings of government and industry didn’t let her be naive for long.

“I came to understand that the adversary system used to resolve legal disputes was not really a path to truth, and sometimes anything but. All the manipulation, the distorting of the truth to achieve an end, was not at all where I wanted to be. So I stepped back and concentrated on alternate means of resolving disputes, and made a valiant effort to introduce it into the traditional law firm structure.”

This type of conflict resolution — actually a precursor to the internal resolution work Miriam would later do with Jewish women — employed the use of a neutral third party in various capacities to work with both sides and devise a constructive, creative solution that would meet the needs of both sides.

Miriam worked with federal courts to devise programs to encourage litigants to take such a track, and with companies to help them restructure in a way that this approach to resolving disputes would be acceptable.

“What became clear to me was that the inner world of people in the dispute had as much to do with how the dispute would unfold as the facts themselves. So you could have one CEO who could handle a situation without going to court, and then there could be another CEO in the same situation stuck in a lawsuit for ten years. I realized that their inner worlds were having a huge effect on what was going on in the courts.”

Miriam developed a method called Conscious Conflict, whose goal was to bring litigants and adversaries to an awareness of

how their inner worlds were getting in the way of finding solutions. She ultimately left her law firm to open Conflict Consulting, a company dedicated to helping individuals, organizations, courts and government agencies resolve conflict in these more constructive, creative ways. By the time she came to Israel, in service of her own spiritual growth, the Israeli Justice Ministry sought out her expertise.

“The courts here were so backlogged. They were happy because dispute resolution was a way to clear the docket; and I was happy because I felt I was promoting a higher truth.”

And then ... she opened a healing clinic for women.

“It sounds so strange, making that shift,” laughs Miriam, who at that point had become fully Torah-observant. “But it was all part of the same bigger picture.”

Her approach always emphasized the need for awareness and self-knowledge to effect genuine change. And so, harnessing her aptitude for and experience with energy healing, in 1995 she opened Miriam’s Well, a Torah-based healing clinic for women who were interested in embarking on their own inner journey. That work was the basis for her first book, *Inner Torah*.

“Through my energy healing work, I came to understand that everything that happens in our lives is imprinted in our bodies and in our energy fields,” Miriam explains the basic premise of her work. “Some of those things naturally move through and along with us, and some things that we haven’t dealt with get stuck and block the flow of energy. They’re sitting right inside of us, ‘clogging up’ the works. So that means that something that happened when you were ten or twelve, or at any stage of life before the present, and never really dealt with will influence how you react today. That ten-or-whatever-year-old is still there and needs to be related to.”

As we mature, Miriam explains, we don’t need all those layers of protection that we developed when we were younger. Children, teenagers, and even young adults can only let in so much pain because they don’t have the capacity to hold it or reference it, so they build protective barriers. At the time, they needed those barriers; they serviced the person’s ability to navigate and

survive his/her environment. But those very survival mechanisms that helped us now become our difficulty. For example, a girl might have become a neat-freak because it was the only way she knew to get approval from her mother. Or a child became an overeater because that was the way she got through rough social spots.

We need to find those blockages, address that younger, vulnerable self, embrace her, help her understand what was happening then and that today we don’t want those protections anymore. We have to trust that as adults it is safe for us to feel things that were too difficult or complicated before.

“When *Inner Torah* came out, women wanted to know how to do the work themselves,” says Miriam, who put the material into book form after working with women individually. “I also realized that it was not productive for me to be the one to go into other people’s energy fields and discover what was there. I needed to help people learn how to do that for themselves. So I then wrote *Practical Inner Torah* [shared territory for men and women], which is the real *tachlis* of how to start getting to know yourself, with steps and a worksheet to follow.”

#### THE PROCESS

Miriam is not talking about deep on-the-couch analysis or years of therapy. The goal, she says, is not to dredge up the past for its own sake, but to see where we’re not function-

ing in the present because our responses are being controlled and manipulated by some previous pattern. How do we know when this is happening?

“Pay attention to whether or not your response to a particular situation is disproportionate. Is the nervous system registering some distress signal? Has some small event or comment brought on tightening of the chest or a knot in the stomach? Anything that engenders difficult feelings can be a vehicle for healing and growth.”

The Inner Torah work, which offers tools that are useful throughout life, considers four different levels of self-development. The first level is what is called “existence.” Of course every woman exists, but is there some wiring inside that tells her she really doesn’t? For example, a mother might ask her child to do some chore and the child, preoccupied, ignores her. The mother explodes with some angry response that is way out of proportion to what the moment actually calls for.

“Typically, in those situations, if you follow the thread back to see what was go-

“Those very survival mechanisms that helped us now become our difficulty”

ing on in the younger vulnerable self, there’s a part of the mother that feels like she really doesn’t exist. At some level she’s relying on her child to acknowledge and validate her existence. So when she’s being ignored, by a child or by her husband, her anger arises from a place deep inside her that she may never have even connected to or had a label for. This especially manifests itself in women who grew up in homes where they felt no one paid attention to them or related to who they really were.”

The next level is connected to self-respect. How do you treat yourself? How do you talk to yourself? For example, if you cooked an elaborate Shabbos meal for a dozen guests and forgot to serve one dish, do you spend the rest of the night berating yourself for your carelessness, as opposed to taking pride and appreciating everything you *did* do?

“It’s up to the adult in you to make the change,” Miriam explains. “There are so many habits and behaviors that are embedded in our brains and nervous systems. This woman can acknowledge the younger vulnerable self, who perhaps grew up in a home where she was punished or criticized for making a mistake. She’s internalized the default reaction.”

Today however, her adult self can ‘meet’ that younger self, help her see where these reactions are coming from, and send a new message in the present that accepts the human, vulnerable part of herself and appreciates her true value.”

The third level is “empowerment.” The definition of this is very subtle, because people confuse empowerment with having to be powerful and in control, which actually wreaks havoc with relationships.

“Empowerment does not mean I’m going to stand up for my rights, I’m not going to let anyone cut in front of me in line or take advantage of me. It means being able to appreciate one’s own capacity to have an impact in the world.”

Miriam explains further: “Someone criticizes you. Likely responses are becoming defensive and lashing out, withdrawing and closing down in passive anger, or completely taking in what that person said and crumbling.

“What is an ‘empowered’ response? To be able to hear that the other person has an opinion, to name and validate the other person’s reality so he or she feels understood, *and* to hold your own center. Ask yourself: Does the criticism have a grain of truth, even though you’ve chosen to do things another way? This is the ability to hold the tension of opposites and not be threatened by things that aren’t black and white.

“But in order to be at this stage, you need the foundation of existence and self-respect. A woman was in touch with me recently. She was upset with herself because she couldn’t take any advice from her mother-in-law, even if it was legitimate. Her mother-in-law told her that she should drain the gefilte fish before putting it away in order for it to stay fresher. ‘I couldn’t accept her advice, even if she was right,’ she said. This might seem silly, but it’s an excellent, and typical example of someone still stuck in an earlier stage.

“The younger part of herself says, ‘Leave me alone, I know how to run my own kitchen.’ So first she has to address that younger self and say, ‘Of course you do,



you've been running a beautiful home for so many years. AND maybe there is something offered here that we might want to use. Let's examine it.' But you can't leapfrog. First you need to build a sense that you exist and are of value. Then you can stand in a quiet place of 'and,' where opposites can survive together. I hear you *and* I'm doing it my way, and we can still love each other."

The fourth level is coming into a rectified relationship with Hashem. That's the more advanced level of the work, the movement beyond our personal story, and acknowledging that the reason our souls are here is in order to be vessels for Hashem's light.

"Intellectually, you can get to these levels very quickly, but the problem is that our energy systems are affected by the accumulation of our past experiences. We can make the shift in our minds, but don't be surprised to still feel those triggers in our guts. Then we can tell ourselves we're fine, we can hear the other person, we're not going to break."

There was no better training ground for holding this 'tension of opposites' than the time Miriam left her Jerusalem practice and spent the year back in Baltimore with her mother before her death. When all the cobwebs of resentment were cleared away, the two of them forged a heroic alliance of unconditional love and acceptance.

It was after that closure, and back in Jerusalem, that Miriam married Rabbi Dovid Castle, an educator and former *menahel ruchani* of Yeshivas ITRI, has authored several of his own books, including *To Live Among Friends: Laws and Ethics of Everyday Interactions* (Feldheim). From their home in Jerusalem's Ramot neighborhood, Miriam sees women and couples privately and leads local and international workshops, connecting women from around the world in the knowledge that they are not alone with their issues.

"I see so many women laboring in their own vineyards, each woman alone in her own constellation of difficulties, without the *chizuk* of knowing she's part of something bigger. I want to give women the sense that they are part of something much greater than their own individual struggles."

#### A WORK IN PROGRESS

Generations ago, did our grandmothers need to do this work? They were busy making sure there was a little flour and some onions and potatoes in the house, making sure the windows were boarded

up against the Cossacks, and praying that their sons should be scholars, their daughters *nshei chayil*, and that they would survive the next pogrom.

Are we more emotionally complicated than our grandmothers, or do we just have too much time on our hands?

"On one level, perhaps we don't have the same internal fortitude of the previous generations, and Chazal tell us that the generations get weaker. This is true on one hand, but on the other hand, every generation has its *tafkid*, its own work to do. And

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the other thing Chazal tell us is that as we get closer to the coming of Mashiach, more of the *sod*, the inner level of Torah, will be revealed and studied.

"Our generation has a different assignment, to reveal more inner dimensions and come to the deeper places that we're able to reach. We don't have those same physical and unbelievably awesome challenges on the physical plane that earlier generations had, which actually frees us up to do this work. Today, I see so many women who are adults on the outside and are carrying huge adult loads, yet inside they haven't grown up. The more we are clear about who we are, the more we are able to be vessels for Hashem's light, then the more Klal Yisrael can take its rightful place in the world.

"I felt this with my own parents. The generation of the Holocaust was busy surviving and doing the miraculous work of rebuilding lives on the ashes. That was incredible. But from a young age, I felt that the work of dealing with the impact of that experience was bequeathed to the next generation who didn't have to struggle with the actual event."

Realizing that we got "faulty wiring" despite our loving parents, can be frightening for a mother. How are we wiring the emotions of our own children? Maybe we're unwittingly ruining their lives?

"We are a work in progress and there is no such thing as perfection. That has to be our starting point. We live in a world of perfecting, not perfection. There is always a limit to what a parent can give a child. No matter how loving and attentive you are as a mother, there are going to be parts of your children that you cannot see or know, and you can't take excessive responsibility for their happiness. All you can do is continue with your work, grow yourself, know yourself, and give them the best of what you have. Hashem sent them into the world through particular parents and He knew what that channel looked like — dealing with that becomes their work."

As a woman makes a decision to enter her inner world, as she comes to realize that no amount of change in another person can resolve her internal issues, as she takes tentative steps to enter a place that might touch on pain she'd rather not deal with, she is embarking on a journey to a higher place. "There are no exceptions," says Miriam. "Every circumstance Hashem brings into our lives has within it the seeds of our own growth." ■