

Harry Potter, Suffering and Finding Meaning

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How many of us are Harry Potter fans? I am!
I love the series. It tells of a young man who is able to overcome obstacles, become a hero and save the world as we know it.

Sure...it is easy to stop there. It is easy to get excited by the Quidditch matches, the dragons and the fun. But have you ever looked deeper into the series?

It is a series which describes extreme suffering.

Harry Potter lost both of his parents when he was 1 year old. He was raised by his aunt and uncle who were emotionally and physically abusive. When Hagrid sees him again at age 10, he is already at an emotional deficit, with no friends and no trust of authority - because they have largely ignored him.

When he joins the wizarding world - everyone knows him by his trauma. He, himself still has flashbacks recalling a green light of what we now understand to be a visual side effect of delivering a death curse.

While in school, Harry is confronted by a boggart, a creature which shows his biggest fears to his classmates. He fears dementors, who suck the happiness out of someone and also is a sign that what Harry fears is fear itself.

Harry watches one of his classmates die in front of him. His world is doubted by the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. He lives in constant fear of the past events repeating themselves.

He undergoes occlumency training by Professor Snape, a teacher who he feels threatened by. This demonstrates a truth, that sometimes therapy intended to help does not always help or even heal. Sometimes it simply makes things worse.

Then the worst thing happens to him. Sirius Black, his godfather and someone who he has bonded with dies.

Then Harry asks the questions - why - in Book 5. Knowing this Professor Dumbledore tells Harry that his biggest strength is his ability to deal with great hardships.

Then Harry says in all CAPS:

“THEN — I — DON’T — WANT — TO — BE — HUMAN!” ... “I DON’T CARE!” Harry yelled ... “I’VE HAD ENOUGH, I’VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON’T CARE ANYMORE —”

Dumbledore stands stoically and says:

“You do care,” said Dumbledore...“You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it.”

Even reading this out of context brings tears to my eyes and breaks my heart.

An interesting discussion on suffering, comes from within our sacred tradition. Here we find a story of two rabbis, both famous in their own right, dealing with suffering. At first, we see Rabbi Yochanan laying in bed for three and a half years with a fever. His friend approaches him and asks

why this is happening to him? What sins did Rabbi Yochanan commit? Rabbi Yochanan complains that the pain is too great to bare. Rabbi Hanina says back to him - Rabbi you need to accept this with love.¹ Rabbi Hanina used traditional biblical and rabbinic theology to say to him that God imposes human suffering as punishment for sin and uses it as a motivation toward repentance. Punishment is therefore a Divine warning bell ringing sounds of encouragement to us so that we begin to search our lives our own moral failures leading to painful situations and stop those failings to prevent punishment.

But what is fascinating is that while the theology is present in the background of the Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yochanan story, when the rubber hits the road and it is Rabbi Hanina who is now suffering - the reason as to why he is suffering and the location of God is less important.

He, just like Harry Potter, wants the pain to end.

Neither individual cares about reward or punishment - they simply desire an end to the pain.

Neither can accept that God would send punishment to meet out justice or use it to teach us something.

What is amazing in the arc of the Harry Potter story, is that we see Harry mature. With that maturity, Harry also develops the ability to process his pain and start the difficult task of making meaning of his suffering.

¹ Rabbi Yochanan became afflicted and endured fevers for three and a half years. Rabbi Hanina went up to visit him. He said to him, "What has come upon you?" He said to him, "My burden is too great to bear." He said to him, "You should not say that. Rather you should say, 'The faithful God. . .'" After some time Rabbi Hanina became sick. Rabbi Yochanan went up to visit him. He said to him, "What has come upon you?" He said to him, "How difficult are sufferings!" He said to him, "But how great is their reward!" He said to him, "I want neither them nor their reward." (Shir haShirim Rabbah 2: 16) (From The Land of Truth: Talmud Tales, Timeless Teachings by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein p.75)

One of the reasons we struggle today with religion, is the theology found in the dominant readings of Judaism - If we observe the covenant, do good things then God will protect us. The problem is that bad things happen to good people. The story we tell ourselves is that suffering will occur to you if you deserve it. The truth is that suffering is a part of the human condition.

The purpose of religion is to help us make meaning in our lives and derive an understanding about the events which occur to us and around us. Religion is the place to ask BIG probing questions and perhaps find an answer.

What is comforting for me, is that Judaism offers more than one answer regarding suffering.

The reason why Rabbi Kushner based the answer to “Why do bad things happen to good people?” In his book by the same title on the Book of Job is that book offers a competing theology.

The Book of Job argues with the Book of Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy says God rewards righteousness and punishes sin. The Book of Job says that we cannot understand the ways of God, we can only understand the ways of humans.² While the book does not offer a definitive reason for suffering, it says something perhaps even more powerful - suffering exists just as we exist. God, who created the world, created all parts of the world including the parts where suffering is a reality.

When we go back and think about Harry Potter, we realize that suffering is impermanent. Harry suffers, but does not suffer in that extreme for the entirety of his life.

² “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have the understanding. . . . Have you commanded the morning since thy days began, and caused the dayspring to know its place? . . . Have you surveyed unto the breadths of the earth? Declare, if you know it all . . .” (Job 38: 1–14)

Book 5, The Order of the Phoenix is important for more than Harry ask WHY? When Harry first returns to Hogwarts from summer break, he sees that the carriage which had always carried him from the train station to the castle is pulled by thestrals. These are skeleton winged horses which one can only see if they have witnessed death. Luna Lovegood enters the picture and she reassures Harry that he is not crazy and that those creatures exist, while Harry's other friends can't see them.

At several other points Harry felt as if he was alone in this world, as slowly his friends distanced themselves from him because of his anger outbursts from the stress of the trauma. Luna stays with Harry, Harry who is exhausted from the nightmares and flashbacks he had all summer long, who doesn't know how to handle the pain and isolation of the extreme loss he has undergone.

The answer to Harry's needs at that moment, as demonstrated by Luna, was the need for connection. We read in the book of Exodus, when Moses asks God how he will accomplish the huge task of speaking to Pharaoh and requesting freedom for the Israelites: God says:

"I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." (Exodus 3:12)

God sends Moses on THE task of the ages, but does not send Moses to do it solo. Moses has the ultimate partner - God.

Harry had a partner - Luna.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his most recent book "Nine Essential Things I Learned About Life" shares a story about visiting a cancer patient. He

states that it is not God who is causing the suffering in life.³ Rather God gives us the ability to deal with the problems we experience.

He shares that he realized in communicating with his congregant who was suffering. Her questions out loud was: "...“Why is God doing this to me?” was not really a question about God. It was a cry of pain, and the person asking the question didn’t need my theological wisdom. She needed a hug.”

We are not meant to face suffering on our own. We need each other to make it through. We need to lean on each other.

Over the arc of the series, we see that Harry slowly starts to open up to his friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. We see that he starts to rely on the Weasleys as his adopted family. By the time we reach the end of the last book in the series - Harry still has his scar, the people who died are sadly still dead and still has some sadness around him. But we also see that he is married, has children and is living a more full life with joy and acceptance.

The series teaches us that suffering is a part of life. It tells us that it is difficult to believe that we are suffering for the sake of GOD - a statement resonating with the Book of Job. It helps us understand that the path through suffering involves holding onto hope on one hand and our community, friends and family with the other hand.

In the words of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev who famously prayed: “Master of the Universe! I do not ask you to reveal to me the mysteries of your ways. I could not understand them. I do not even want to know why I

³ “God does not send the problem, the illness, the accident, the hurricane, and God does not take them away when we find the right words and rituals with which to beseech Him. Rather, God sends us strength and determination of which we did not believe ourselves capable, so that we can deal with, or live with, problems that no one can make go away.”

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In the words of Harry Potter as he and his wife Ginny watched his son go off in the train:

“He’ll be all right,” murmured Ginny.

As Harry looked at her, he lowered his hand absentmindedly and touched the lightning scar on his forehead.

“I know he will.”

“The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well” (p.759)

All was well with family there to support each other and love one another. So please go give each other a hug as we strive to continue to support each other through life’s ups and downs.

“But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?”

12 And He said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” Exodus 3:11-12

The Harry of The Deathly Hallows is shouting much less. The emotional scars are still there, but they haven't destroyed him. This, more than anything else, is what makes the series so important: It shows a young man who locates strength in the terrible things that have happened to him. It's what all survivors strive for. The final book shows our hero battling evil, losing more people he loves, and facing Lord Voldemort—once and for all. Near the end of the novel, he willingly walks to his death; at no point does the series pretend that children can ever be protected from heartache, or that they can't grow from it.

The books also teach readers that finding people who understand us, and searching out shared experiences, helps. I don't think it's a coincidence that it's in The Order of the Phoenix, when things turn especially dark, that Harry meets Luna Lovegood, an eccentric fellow Hogwarts classmate mocked by some other students as “Loony” Lovegood. They meet at the start of their fifth year, when Harry is ostracized from his closest friends. He's just spent the summer tortured with flashbacks and nightmares, and he's feeling disoriented because the one place that's always been a refuge—Hogwarts—feels unwelcoming.

For the last four years, Harry has believed that incoming Hogwarts students were transported from the train station to the doors of the school by magical horseless carriages. In his fifth year, he learns this isn't the case. The carriages are in fact pulled by skeletal-looking, winged black horses called thestrals, which can only be seen by those who have witnessed death. Luna is one of the only other students able to see them. Harry is frightened by their appearance, but Luna reassures him, “You're not going mad or anything. I can see them, too.” Harry's relief is palpable. “Can you?” he says. It's no surprise that for a while, Luna—who becomes one of

Harry's most loyal friends—seems to be the only person in his orbit who doesn't question his strange new behavior.

These days, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other manifestations of psychological trauma are widely recognized as normal. Any traumatic event, from war to assault to natural disaster, can trigger it. To put it in words a muggle can understand: people who experience really hard stuff tend to carry the impact of it around with them for a long time.

When you read Harry Potter through the lens of trauma psychology, what you start to realize is that these books explore the aftermath of trauma in a surprisingly deep and compelling way. To explain this, it is necessary to get quite heavy about books you may have previously associated with cozy childhood reading.

So as not to make reading the story a traumatic experience in itself, there will be some emergency cute animals sprinkled throughout to help get you through it. Like this little guy:

Book 1: Being Identified by Your Trauma Is Terrible

There's a reason many survivors, myself included, prefer not to discuss the details of their trauma: They don't want to be identified by it. When strangers know about your trauma, life gets weird.

When strangers know about your trauma and it involves a dark wizard killing your family while you inexplicably survived, life gets weirder still — especially if those strangers start identifying you as "the boy who lived."

This, of course, is what happens to Harry in the first book in the series, Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone.

Harry is already working at an emotional deficit. His abusive foster family, the Dursleys, have left him with the scars of long-term emotional and physical abuse, rendering him malnourished in every possible sense of the word. He doesn't trust authority; he's never had friends before.

Then he gets his letter to Hogwarts, and suddenly, everyone who sees his scar — the physical marker of his trauma — treats him differently. They mean well, but they also ask him probing questions; they touch him without permission; they take his photograph and call him names. They think they know his life because they know what he's been through.

This is a trauma survivor's nightmare. Imagine if everyone you met knew all about the worst thing that ever happened to you. That's what Harry Potter's life is like, all the time, once Hogwarts summons him.

It's almost enough to make you want to hide in a cupboard under the Dursleys' stairs.

Book 2: Trauma and Self-Blame

Let's move away from Harry for a moment to look at his friend (and later girlfriend) Ginny Weasley. In Book 2, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Ginny befriends a sentient diary controlled by Very Dark Magic. It possesses Ginny, making her hurt people.

After she's rescued, Ginny is terrified she'll get in trouble. Let that sink in: her body has been invaded, her free will dismantled, and her power used to harm people she cares about, and she thinks she's the one in trouble.

Ginny's fear is not unfamiliar to survivors of prolonged emotional abuse. It's easy to anticipate and internalize blame for trauma and abuse, even if nobody explicitly says the words "it's your fault". You expect them to blame you, and to get ahead of the pain that will cause, you blame yourself.

IMAGE: SHAINA FISHMAN Book 3: Remembering Can Hurt

In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, we meet perhaps the most traumatic characters in the entire series. We speak, of course, about dementors. These dark creatures force Harry to relive the moment his parents died.

In real life, flashbacks can be anywhere from little (a scar hurting) to big (a screaming, crying blackout). The dementors trigger the latter in Harry.

The book also introduces boggarts: creatures that take the form of whatever their victims fear most. Harry's boggart takes the form of a dementor, meaning Harry is most afraid of fear itself.

From the perspective of a survivor, this has another, sharper facet: the fear of being forced to relive your trauma. Part of trauma survival — and part of Harry's arc in Book 3 — is learning to manage not just the fear that the Awful Thing will happen again, but fear of having to remember it for the rest of your life.

IMAGE: FLICKR, ISTOLETHETV

Book 4: People Would Rather Doubt Than Believe You

Few survivors of serious trauma will read the excerpt above — from Book 4, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, page 707 — and find it far-fetched that an authority figure would prefer to deny a problem rather than face terrible things happening in their jurisdiction.

If Harry's story of Voldemort's return is true, then Cornelius Fudge must risk his own security and comfort. He is required by his position as Minister of Magic to fight those who would inflict the same trauma on others.

That's a scary prospect, and it's easy to understand why Fudge would rather insist that nothing happened. It's harder to understand when this happening to you in the immediate aftermath of trauma — but then, what is fiction for, if not to help us come to this kind of understanding?

Book 5: Flashbacks

Every so often a friend will ask me what it feels like as a trauma survivor when you get triggered. To explain better, I should just carry around Book 5, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

In chapter 1, a post-traumatic Harry exhibits all these symptoms:

He hears a loud bang and immediately prepares to fight.

He recovers, and shifts rapidly into a feeling of isolation, wondering if his friends care about him.

He cycles through self-doubt — did he actually hear a bang at all? Is he overreacting?

He distracts himself by instigating a fight with his bigger, tougher cousin.

That's what it's like. It's going from heart-pounding fear to loneliness to self-doubt to anger to outrage, all within a few minutes.

After it is over, I'm left asking: what just happened? Why am I angry? Do I even have a right to feel this way? Why can't I just get over it?

Book 6: The Things That Help Don't Always Help

In Book 5, Harry takes occlumency lessons with Professor Snape in order to build up his mental defenses against Voldemort. The sessions leave Harry exhausted, emotionally vulnerable — and susceptible to the very mental intrusions the lessons should prevent.

This is a fantastic description of trauma therapy. It's like breaking bones in order to reset them; the pain is immense, and you hope that when you have recovered from the treatment the result is less painful than before.

But it's not always effective. Sometimes the therapy just doesn't help.

In book 6, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, we discover that occlumency training hasn't fixed Harry's problem. He keeps hoping that on the other side of the suffering, things might be better.

In fact, he is even more vulnerable than he was before — it's easier than ever for Voldemort to get into his head, influencing his thoughts and actions.

For many people, trauma therapy works brilliantly. But the processes involved in that therapy are taxing, and it can be hard to even imagine that reopening wounds and exposing vulnerabilities could possibly lead to healing.

Book 7: Support Systems Matter

Throughout Harry Potter's pre-Hogwarts childhood, he lives with an abusive family, the Dursleys. Via Hogwarts, he finds a surrogate family in the Weasleys, who themselves

experience significant trauma throughout the books. The way they handle it starkly contrasts to how Harry handles his own:

[George Weasley, upon learning he's lost an ear. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p. 74]

[*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, p. 501]

When the Weasleys endure trauma, they recover in ways that reflect and strengthen their support network. A subplot throughout the books is how Harry learns to let the Weasleys support him, too.

In Book 5, he's constantly trying to hide his pain and fear; but in Book 7, he talks to his best friend Ron about it whenever he can.

He learns — as many trauma survivors learn — to lean on others when he can't carry the weight of trauma alone.

By the epilogue of Book 7, he's not "all better". The people who died are still dead, and he still has the same scar he started with. But he's living a better, fuller, happier life, because of the support from people who love him. And that's a pretty damn good finish to a series about trauma.

If you're interested in learning more about trauma and PTSD, here are some links to excellent resources.

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The last three books of the series are a lesson in resisting, and in healing, which is just as important as facing the trauma itself. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the sixth novel, the tantrums are largely gone—but Harry's focus on rooting out evil in the school seems at times unhinged and his methods unreliable, which causes his friends to worry. In the final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry and his friends must navigate a world ravaged by war, without the aid of adults for the first time. Hogwarts has fallen to Voldemort's allies and the professors who had guided them for the last six years are no longer there. All the students are now fighting to survive, but Harry has been fighting since he was 11, if not earlier.

From Atlantic Magazine

“God does not send the problem; genetics, chance, and bad luck do that. And God cannot make the problem go away, no matter how many prayers and good deeds we offer. What God does is promise us, I will be with you; you will feel burdened but you will never feel abandoned.”

Kushner

HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX THEME OF SUFFERING

BACK NEXT

Harry Potter lost both his parents when he was a year old. He was raised by emotionally and sometimes physically abusive people who essentially used him as a servant until he was eleven. When he joined the wizarding world, Harry found out that a crazed maniac has an unexplained, personal grudge against him. And Harry has faced that crazed maniac and his followers four times in four years. What's more, on the most recent occasion, at the end of Book 4, Harry had to watch one of his fellow students – a boy he liked and respected – get murdered. So yeah, there has been plenty of suffering in Harry's life up until Book 5. But it's in Order of the Phoenix that all of this suffering seems to be hitting Harry: the Dursleys, Cedric, Voldemort, being mistrusted, being singled out by the Ministry of Magic. His suffering takes on a huge thematic importance in this novel.

Questions About Suffering

Harry makes it clear to everyone around him that he is suffering. How does J.K. Rowling represent the suffering of other characters like Neville or Sirius in this novel? How do they show their pain? How does their suffering compare to Harry's?

For much of Book 5, Harry appears almost competitive about his suffering. He reminds his friends, "WHO SAW HIM COME BACK? WHO HAD TO ESCAPE FROM HIM? ME!" (4.69). Why does Harry suddenly want acknowledgment of what he has gone through? Why is he so concerned that his friends will forget his suffering? What does this behavior tell you about Harry's character in Book 5?

At the end of the book, Dumbledore tells Voldemort, "Indeed, your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness —" (36.70).

What kinds of suffering might be worse than death? Does Rowling give any examples of such suffering in the Harry Potter series? What does Rowling suggest is worse? Why?

Harry, suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human —”

“THEN — I — DON’T — WANT — TO — BE — HUMAN!” Harry roared, and he seized one of the delicate silver instruments from the spindle-legged table beside him and flung it across the room. It shattered into a hundred tiny pieces against the wall. Several of the pictures let out yells of anger and fright, and the portrait of Armando Dippet said, “Really!”

“I DON’T CARE!” Harry yelled at them, snatching up a lunascope and throwing it into the fireplace. “I’VE HAD ENOUGH, I’VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON’T CARE ANYMORE —”

He seized the table on which the silver instrument had stood and threw that too. It broke apart on the floor and the legs rolled in different directions.

“You do care,” said Dumbledore. He had not flinched or made a single move to stop Harry demolishing his office. His expression was calm, almost detached. “You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it.”

— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

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“I realized that “Why is God doing this to me?” was not really a question about God. It was a cry of pain, and the person asking the question didn’t need my theological wisdom. She needed a hug.”

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What made JOB cool?

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev prayed: “Master of the Universe! I do not ask you to reveal to me the mysteries of your ways. I could not understand them. I do not even want to know why I suffer. But I do want to know that I suffer for Your sake.” (The Land of Truth; Talmud Tales, Timeless Teachings by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein p.91)