

# What Do You Say to Someone Who Just Received Really Bad News?

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BH

This week I was speaking with someone who had just received the news that she had cancer. There's no real way to describe the rush of fear, confusion, anger and resentment that roll over you at such a time. Either you've had the misfortune to have that experience or you haven't. Since I'm in the former category, I knew exactly what this person was feeling. So I listened and asked questions and then...

I said something that made me wince as soon as it passed my lips. I said, "This sucks." I should have said, "It'll be ok" or "I'll be praying for you." But it turned out that it was ok to state the bald truth: a diagnosis of cancer, especially when you first hear it, is a body blow and no fancy words from anyone are going to make it better. You're struggling just to frame the whole concept in your mind at that point. The sages understood that:

Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar says: Do not appease your fellow in the time of his anger; do not console him while his dead lies before him; do not question him about his vow at the time he makes it; and do not attempt to see him at the time of his disgrace. (M. Pirkei Avot 4:23)

Rabbi Shimon is saying: Don't try to tell people something they can't hear right now. Caring silence and presence can be enough.

So what can you say to someone who's just received shattering news? You let them make the meaning themselves:

Rabbi Abbahu was bereaved. One of his children had passed away from him. Rabbi Yonah and Rabbi Yose went up [to comfort him]. When they called on him, out of reverence for him, they did not express to him a word of Torah. He said to them: May the rabbis express a word of Torah. They said to him: Let our master teach us. He said to them: Now if in regard to the government below, in which there is no reliability, [but only] lying, deceit, favoritism and bribe-taking, which is here today and gone tomorrow, [if concerning that government] it is said, 'And the relatives [of the felon] come and inquire after the welfare of the judges and of the witnesses, as if to say "We have nothing in our hearts [against you], for you judged honestly (M. Sanhedrin 6:6)" in regard to the government above, in which there is reliability, but no lying, deceit, favoritism, or bribe-taking, and which endures forever and to all eternity, all the more so are we obligated to accept upon ourselves the just decree [of the heavenly government]. (Y. Sanhedrin 6:12, 23d-24a)

Rabbi Yonah and Rabbi Yose can serve as our role models. They allowed Rabbi Abbahu to say what they could not...they let him find meaning himself.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever stated a bald truth which turned out to be better than stating the "pretty/comfortable/conventional" thing? Tell us what happened.
2. Have you ever found yourself in a really bad place and made meaning out of it? What happened? What was your Rabbi Abbahu moment?
3. Rabbi Abbahu understands that everything on earth is an echo of heaven. The court here, on earth, is an echo of the court above and this is what comforts him. Do you accept this paradigm? Would it help you make meaning in the midst of a maelstrom?

As always, looking forward to your answers and insights!