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By
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"If it be so, wherefore do I live?" Bereishith 25:22

Rebecca was suffering with a very difficult pregnancy. She was so distraught that she questioned the value of her life. After reaching this point of deep despair, "she went to inquire of the Lord" i.e. she sought an explanation from God as to why she was enduring so much hardship. Once she was told that she was carrying twins who would be lifelong rivals, she ceased to complain. Even though the explanation of her suffering was not exactly wonderful, she seems to have been able to deal with it--as long as she felt she now had some control and understanding of the situation.

Researchers have found that when people feel helpless and hopeless, they are more prone to depression and physical illness. When they reach the point of questioning the very value of their lives, they not only suffer psychological stress but also a breakdown in their immune systems.

Stress and frustration are problematic features of life; but many people cope well and even thrive on stress. What separates those who are crushed by despair from those who overcome feelings of despair?

In his book, "Who Gets Sick", Blair Justice discusses "transformational coping". This involves thinking about things optimistically, acting decisively, changing the situation into a less stressful one. It means taking control--to the extent possible--and not falling prey to feelings of helplessness and despair. Whatever the problem or challenge, one needs to foster a mindset that gives one hope and offers some positive resolution. Blair Justice quotes the results of a survey of 52,000 readers of "Psychology Today", indicating that happiness "turns out to be more a matter of how you regard your circumstances than of what the circumstances are." It isn't the difficulties in themselves that can debilitate us, but our interpretation of the difficulties. If we feel overwhelmed and powerless, we are likely to surrender to depression and illness. If we feel that we can draw on our inner strengths to face our problems as optimistically and decisively as possible, then we can cope with the stresses and struggles that we face.

Researchers have found that people cope better when they have a network of loved ones who care for them, and who provide them with psychological support and encouragement. There is also much evidence that religious faith provides people with courage and optimism. When we pray, we come to a deeper spiritual inner peace that allows us to cope more effectively with the problems we face. By sharing our feelings with the Almighty, we link ourselves to the Eternal Source of all being.

We live in a stress-filled world, and face a constant stream of challenges. Optimisim, decisive action, and spiritual calmness can help us with our "transformational coping"--our ability to respond well and effectively to the crises and problems that confront us.

Angel for Shabbat