

# EULOGIES

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

*And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba which is Hebron, in the Land of Canaan; Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her. (Bereshith 23:2)*

The events in this verse seem to be related in reverse order: When a close family member passes away, one generally weeps before the eulogy, for most eulogies are inspired by the mourners' weeping over their personal loss. Avraham's weeping was of a higher nature, for his weeping was motivated by his eulogy in which he dwelled upon Sarah's deeds and perfection of character.<sup>1</sup>

Even at times of tremendous emotional strain we must make sure that what we say is within the bounds of permissible speech. While an over inflated homage may be a source of momentary honor, in the long run both the deceased and the eulogizer stand to lose from it. One who makes a habit of exaggerating his praise of the departed may be punished for this practice after he leaves the world.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, when delivering a eulogy one may embellish the truth somewhat in praise of the departed.<sup>3</sup> This is halachic evidence of the Torah's extreme sensitivity toward the honor of one who has died, for had the Torah forbidden us to exaggerate slightly in our words of praise for the departed, we might unintentionally detract from the honor due him.<sup>4</sup> Since nobody knows everything another person does, it is fair to give a little extra praise, for this will probably represent the truth. An exaggeration may actually reflect the truth in another way too, for it is altogether plausible that given the chance, the departed might have acted in accordance with the exaggerated praise expressed in the eulogy, and for this reason it is permitted.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true of the righteous, who, out of humility, hide their noble deeds.<sup>6</sup>

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein once eulogized a young Torah scholar who had been murdered. Everyone was devastated by this tragedy, but Rav Chatzkel refused to exaggerate in describing his emotions. When he said, "This is a heartbreaking tragedy," he reflected on his own words for a moment and concluded that in fact his heart was not actually broken. He immediately corrected himself and said that the heart should break over tragedies such as this.<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion Rav Chatzkel delivered a eulogy without shedding a tear. Later, he explained that before he rose to speak he was informed that his grandson had just passed away. Had he cried, people would have thought that his tears were shed over the person he was eulogizing, when they would have been motivated by his grandson's death.<sup>8</sup>

1. *Malbim on Bereshith 23:2.*
  2. Anaf Yosef, Kesuboth 72a.
  3. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 344:1.
  4. Bach, ibid.
  5. Taz, ibid.
  6. Birkei Yosef, ibid.
  7. Heard from Rav Shlomo Brevda.
  8. MiDevar Sheker Tirschak p. 150
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