

PART 14: CHAPTER 2, VERSES 11 - 13

by Rabbi Yitzchak Schwartz

11. Now when Iyov's three friends heard of all this evil that was upon him, they came every one from his own place; Elifaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zofar the Na'amite: for they had made an appointment together to come to mourn with him and to comfort him.

12. And when they lifted their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice and wept; and they rent every one his coat, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven.

13. And they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and none spoke a word to him; for they saw that his suffering was great.

Commentary

The story of Iyov and his three friends is a remarkable one in and of itself. The Talmud tells us that they were all in different parts of the world and arrived together at the exact same time to comfort Iyov. This was not the era of telecommunications. How did they all receive the tragic news about Iyov at the same time?

According to one of the opinions mentioned in the Talmud, tractate Bava Bathra p. 16b, Iyov and his three friends had crowns upon which their faces were engraved. If any of them fell into trouble or sorrow the image of that person's face would sadden on all of their crowns. This was a signal that they should come to his help.

As with many mysterious stories in the Talmud this too may be interpreted symbolically. Wisdom is the crown jewel of humanity. Wisdom is the vehicle by which we understand G-d and communicate with Him. It is only through wisdom that we can create an everlasting bond with our Creator. The capacity for wisdom is the greatest spiritual gift that we possess. The crowns that these four friends possessed is a metaphor for wisdom.

The remarkable relationship that these four people shared was no ordinary one. They were attached to each other through the bounds of wisdom. Only a sensitive, wise and understanding individual can be a good friend. Their friendship was totally void of ulterior and selfish motives. This type of bond

can transcend the physical limitations of time and space and so they were able to converge simultaneously to help their troubled friend.

According to another opinion mentioned in the Talmud each of these four friends had three trees that represented each one of them. If any of them fell into trouble or distress the leaves of that particular tree would wilt as a signal to all of them to come to his aid.

The tree symbolizes the strength, depth and beauty of the heart and soul of man. Both the Torah and man are likened to trees. Trees are the most time enduring of all of G-d's living creations. They are permanent fixtures of grandeur and beauty. Trees are deeply and firmly rooted to solid ground. They grow straight and tall from their roots. Likewise man towers above all of G-d's creations. He has the capacity to attain exquisite levels of character refinement and spiritual grandeur. He is the zenith of G-d's creation. It is our task to become towering pillars of Divine beauty in deed and thought. With every act of moral and ethical perfection we grow taller and implant our roots deeper into the absolute reality of G-d. Success in this endeavor is to transcend the temporal and cling to the eternal.

The relationship between Iyov and his friends may also be likened to a tree. The depth and strength of their friendship enabled them to immediately feel his pain and distress despite their geographic separation. In reference to this the Talmud makes the following comment. "Or friends like the ones that Iyov had or death". Rashi explains this in the following way. If a person does not have the quality of friendships that Iyov shared with his friends he/she would be better off dead than alive.

We all go through difficulties in life. Often they can be intense, threatening or even devastating. The help and support of others is crucial at these times. Friendships enrich and strengthen our wisdom and character. The beauty of the human experience manifests itself best within the framework of human relationships. Genesis 2:18 says it all with simple eloquence. "And G-d said it is not good for man to be alone....".

It is interesting to note that the Maharsha (in his commentary on Bava Bathra p.16b) draws our attention to the fact that the Talmud, in tractate Bava Bathra p.15a, interprets the following verse as alluding to Iyov. The verse deals with the spies that were sent to check out the land of Israel prior to the entry of the Jewish people. One of the many ways that Moses gave them to check the quality of the land included the following....(Numbers 13:20) "Is the land fat or thin, does it have a tree or not; be strong and take from the fruits of the land, and these were the days of the ripening of the grapes." The obvious difficulty in understanding this verse is the instruction to determine if the land has a tree. Clearly there was at least one tree in the land. Therefore the Talmud interprets this as a metaphor for Iyov. Like a tree, Iyov lived a very long life and the merit of his righteousness protected the inhabitants of the land like a tree gives shade from a hostile sun. If he was still alive the Jewish people might not have such an easy time conquering the land. Therefore Moses instructed the spies to find out if this old righteous man was still alive. The trees of Iyov's friends is a metaphor for the

beauty and strength that only friendship can provide.

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