

# HOW TO REMEMBER ON A YAHRTZEIT

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

The "yahrtzeit," or anniversary of an individual's death, is marked by different communities in different ways. Notwithstanding the customs associated with this day, there is a general philosophical approach to remembering those who are no longer with us found in the Torah.

The T'az, on Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah (344:5) writes that it is not customary, nor is it proper respect, to make mention of one who has died once 12 months (after the death) has elapsed. The Aruch HaShulchan writes similarly that after 12 months, we are not to eulogize the deceased at all.

What is a eulogy? Of what type of mention is the Ta'z speaking? The Bais Yosef writes that a eulogy is when one raises his voice to say those things that break the heart, to increase weeping, and to recall the praises of the one that has died. Once 12 months after someone has died elapses, we are no longer supposed to bemoan the loss. We are not supposed to make ourselves sad. It is this sort of remembrance that the Ta'z and the Aruch HaShulchan say is inappropriate. Why is this so? Why are these sorts of remembrances not in proper respect?

In Vayikra (19:28) we find a commandment: "You should not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you; I am Hashem." This prohibition on making cuts and marks in the skin as a sign of mourning is explained by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch. The pasuk does not state the prohibition as "one may not make a cutting." Rather, the verse states that "one may not make a cutting in your flesh." The prohibition, Rav Hirsch explains, is not the actual action of cutting, or making the mark. Rather, the prohibition is having such a mark exist in one's flesh.

We know that, upon suffering the death of an immediate family member, there is a positive commandment to rend one's garment as a sign of mourning. This is an action of cutting as well. What is the difference between the two scenarios: on one hand, we have a commandment to make a tearing on our garments as a sign of mourning, yet we also have a prohibition forbidding us from making a cut in our flesh as a sign of mourning? What differentiates these two seemingly similar expressions of sadness and loss?

Rav Hirsch writes that we perform the action of rending one's garments with the intention of illustrating how the loss of a relative has impacted us. The fact that a loved one is no longer with us has caused a "rip," so to speak, in our surroundings, in our environ. Things are not as they once were. When we tear our garments, we are tearing that which surrounds us, that which is around us, to illustrate the immediate impact of the loss.

However, the act of cutting in to skin is very different. The intent underlying this action is to demonstrate that the individual in mourning will never be the same. The cut in the skin leaves a mark that never goes away. Causing that cut sends the message that the loss is something felt within the essence of the mourner, and that feeling will never go away. This belief, this philosophy Rav Hirsch writes, is absolutely wrong and therefore the act of doing such is forbidden.

Hashem has given to every individual in this world their own unique talents, attributes, and abilities. During our stay in this world, it is our obligation to make the most of that which Hashem has given us. We are to leave our mark on this world, in some small way. The successful completion of this task, a task which everyone has been commanded, is in no manner dependant on any one person. There are many people we may encounter in our lives that aid us in various fashions and enable us to accomplish different tasks at different times. But at the end of the day, no specific individual was the sole enabler, the only person upon whom successful achievement of our goals was dependant.

When we suffer the loss of a loved one, we definitely experience a world of different emotions and feelings. Someone with whom we shared a close relationship, familial bonds, and true love is gone. The loss of these ties that impacted our life clearly has an effect. Hence, we rend our garments. But this effect is not supposed to be permanent. The loss does not impair our ability to continue functioning in life. It does not impact our capacity to complete that most important task that Hashem has given us. Even after suffering a loss, we still have those same talents, attributes and abilities. We still have the same obligation to use them to the fullest. We cannot place a permanent scar on ourselves, as we have not been permanently scarred.

In fact, the loss of a loved one is supposed to inspire us to work even harder towards our goal. That loved one can no longer utilize his or her G-d given abilities to better the world. A void, therefore, has been created. The loss should be the catalyst for us to double our efforts, to use our talents to a greater degree, especially in those areas in which the departed excelled. By performing good deeds, by increasing our study of Torah, and utilizing to the fullest the unique heavenly endowment with which we have been blessed, we truly perpetuate the memory of those who are no longer with us.

On a Yahrzeit, we should follow that which the Ta'z and the Aruch HaShulchan stated. We are not to cry, nor are we to mourn. Rather, we are to be inspired. We should learn from a life that is no longer. We should take action, in the merit of the departed, which compliment those good deeds the departed did while alive. By doing so, we are not only perpetuating a memory, but we are keeping the good deeds alive as well.

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