

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 15(C): WRITING OUR OBITUARY

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

They (each of the five students of R. Yochanan listed earlier) said three things. R. Eliezer said: May the honor of your fellow be as dear to you as your own. Do not anger easily. Repent one day before you die. Warm yourself before the fire of the Sages. But be wary with their coals that you not get burnt, for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals.

Last week we discussed R. Eliezer's second statement -- that we repent before our deaths. We made the obvious observation (as do most of the commentators): Nobody knows exactly when his day of death will be. Therefore, our mishna's advice must be taken to mean that we live our entire lives with the realization that our days are numbered. Death is a reality we may never ignore. And so we must live out our days with a sense of our mortality -- and a drive to earn our immortality.

I believe there is an additional nuance contained in R. Eliezer's words. He does not simply state that we live in a constant state of penitence. He focuses more directly on death itself. We must repent because we know our deaths are pending. Death is a fact of life(?) we cannot ignore. And we must live our lives with this in mind -- not in a macabre sense, but with an understanding of the significance of our accomplishments while we are here. Speak and act today as if you will not be here tomorrow -- and that today's acts may very well be your last legacy.

Again, this does not have to be a morbid thought, but should put our lives in the proper perspective. There is a chance, even if not very likely, that this is the last memory others will have of us. And we really ought to jolt ourselves now and then and imagine it. Wrest yourself from the daily daze in which most of us live our lives. Imagine that this is it: You are saying something to your friends, your spouse, or your parents. You are then going to walk out to your car, drive off, and have a fatal, head-on collision. What were the final words with which you will be remembered? What was your final will and testament? Were you talking to your friends about how your ball team is doing? Your wife's final memory is how you griped about what's going on at the office? You're busy on the phone bickering with your parents about stupidities, and **then** you drive off?

Wouldn't it be much nicer -- so much more what you really wanted to say -- to end off with "I love you, Mom. Thank you for everything."? One day your words will be your last -- your final message to your loved ones -- and the way you will best be remembered. Can't at least some of the time we talk as if our words had such significance? Whether or not they will actually will be our last, can't we at least now and then recognize that everything we say and do contributes to the "we" we've

created for ourselves during our lifetimes, and that every act is a part of the overall drama of our lives?

Many years ago I read the following story in one of R. Berel Wein's books. (I think it was entitled Buy Green Bananas -- which in itself gives a pretty good indication of the wisdom contained within.) There was a well-known attorney who had a meeting with a local news reporter. At the end of the meeting, the reporter asked him: "By the way, would you like to read your obituary?"

"Huh?!"

It turns out that news agencies used to carry biographical sketches of important local residents, for - in case they die suddenly one night -- the paper will be ready the next morning with their complete life story. (It was a great idea in its time -- before Wikipedia began containing much more than everything you would possibly care to know about everyone and everything.) So, I'm sure with a little uneasiness, the attorney read his life story -- and the announcement of his death. And lo and behold: he didn't like it. He was known professionally as a ruthless and hard-nosed dealer. This was how he went about his career -- and this is how he would have been remembered.

Anyway, this turned out to be a real shock for this fellow. This is the reputation he had created for himself, and viewing it momentarily from the outside (as in, from above...), he didn't like it. And so, continues the story, he cleaned up his act -- and actually became a gentler and more benign individual -- both professionally and personally. For he was fortunate: He was able to read his "obituary" while still alive -- and he was able to do something about it.

And this is an attitude we would certainly stand to gain from. Our obituaries are being written and rewritten for us every day -- not only after we die. And we control the script. As R. Eliezer tells us, the more we see death as a reality, the more we recognize that our few words and accomplishments here are all we will truly have after it is all over. And the better we see the true significance of our actions, the more likely we will repent one day before we die.

I guess we'll call it with this. We still have R. Eliezer's final point before us -- to be wary of the "fiery coals" of the Sages -- which most certainly requires our attention. But I guess enough preaching for one week!

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