

CONSOLATION REPRISÉ

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Tragedies happen. Unfortunately, we can't control them, and we have to learn to live with their consequences, as we try to continue our lives. Tragedy does not discriminate. It touches the lives of the wealthy and the poor, the wicked and the righteous. The Torah does not avoid telling us about the greatest of tragedies that happened to the most righteous of men. This week it describes the tragedy that occurred to one of our greatest leaders, Ahron the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). His two children, Nadav and Avihu, were tragically consumed by fire while bringing an undesignated offering to Hashem. Moshe is faced with the most difficult of challenges, consoling his bereaved brother who just lost two of his beloved children. The challenge is great and the words of consolation that Moshe used should serve as a precedent for all consolation for generations.

Moshe consoles Ahron by telling him, "This is what Hashem has previously said: By those who are close to me I shall be sanctified and thus I will be honored by the entire congregation" (Leviticus 10:3). Powerful words. Deep and mystical. We are in this world by G-d's command, and our mission is to maintain and promote His glory. Those are words that may not console simple folk, but they were enough for Ahron who after hearing the words went from weeping to silence. But Moshe did not just quote the Torah, he prefaced his remarks: "This is what Hashem has previously said." Only after that premise does he continue with the words of consolation. Why was it necessary to preface those powerful words by saying that they were once stated? After all, the entire Torah was once stated. Could Moshe not just as easily have stated, "My dear brother Ahron. Hashem is glorified by judgment of his dear ones."

It seems that the familiarity of the statements was part and parcel of its consoling theme. Why?

The sudden death of Reb Yosef could not have come at a more untimely time - a few days before Passover. A Holocaust survivor, he had rebuilt his life in Canada and left this world a successful businessman, with a wonderful wife, children, and grandchildren. It was difficult, however, for them all to leave their families for the first days of Passover to accompany his body, and thus his widow traveled with her son to bury her husband in Israel. After the funeral the two mourners sat in their apartment in the Shaarei Chesed section of Jerusalem. Passover was fast approaching, and they were planning to spend the Seder at the home of relatives. As they were about to end the brief Shiva period and leave their apartment, a soft knock interrupted their thoughts. At the door to her apartment stood none other than one of Israel's most revered Torah sages, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

"I live nearby," he said, "and I heard that there was a funeral today. I came to offer my condolences."

The sage then heard a brief history of Reb Yosef's difficult, yet remarkably triumphant life.

Then Reb Shlomo Zalman turned to the widow and asked a very strange question. "Did you say the blessing Boruch Dayan HaEmes? Blessed are You, Hashem, the true Judge." (This blessing acknowledges the acceptance of Hashem as the Master Planner of all events acknowledging that all that happens is for the best.) "Why? Yes," answered the elderly lady. "I said it right as the funeral ended. But it is very difficult to understand and accept."

Reb Shlomo Zalman, a man who lived through dire poverty and illness, four wars, and the murder of a relative by Arab terrorists, nodded. "I understand your questions. That blessing is very difficult to understand and to accept. You must, however, say it again and again. As difficult as it may be, believe me, if you repeat it enough you will understand it."

Moshe understood that as difficult as it may be, the words he used to console Ahron were the precise ones that encompassed the essence of the meaning of life and death. They would be understood by Ahron. But he had to preface it by saying that this not a new form of condolence. It has been said before. It was already taught. Now it must be repeated.

Difficult questions have no simple answers, but it is the faith of generations that must be constantly repeated and repeated. There are no new condolences; there are no fast answers. The only answers we can give are those that have been said for generations. Perhaps that is why we console our loved ones today with the same consolation that has been said for centuries. "May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." And it shall be repeated - again and again -- until there is no more mourning.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordecai Kamenetzky

Dedicated by the Tau Family in memory of Sam Tau

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