

WITH A KISS

by Rabbi Label Lam

They journeyed from Kadesh and encamped in Mount Hor, at the edge of the land of Edom. Then Aaron the Kohen went up to Mount Hor at the word of (literally "by the mouth of") HASHEM and died there, in the fortieth year after the Children of Israel went forth from the Land of Egypt, in the fifth month on the first day of the month. Aaron was one hundred and twenty-three years old at his death on Mount Hor. (Bamidbar 33:37-39)

At the word of (by the mouth of) HASHEM: We learn that he died with a kiss. (Rashi)

Here we learn that Aaron died by the "kiss of death"! Why should it matter to us how he died? What is this "kiss of death"?

The Talmud tells us: "903 forms of death were created in the world, as it says, (Tehillim 68:21) "The Lord has many avenues toward death". The Numerical value of the word "totza'os" - "many avenues" is equal to 903. The harshest of them all is "Askara", the mildest of them is Neshika - "the kiss of death". Askara is similar to thorns that are entangled in a ball of wool sheerings and they are yanked back (in order to remove them). There are those that say that "Askara" is similar to ropes that are squeezed through tiny holes. "Neshika" - the "Kiss" is comparable to removing a hair from milk. (Brochos 8A)

What is the Talmud explaining to us with these odd metaphors? It seems that the degree of difficulty of death is dependent upon the extent of entanglement and acuteness of "identity crisis" between body and soul. As the old song says, "Breaking up is hard to do!" I ask, "Is it always?"

I have etched in my memory a scene I witnessed many years ago while traversing the bustling streets of New York City. A delivery van had stopped briefly by the curb to drop a package and when he emerged from the building he saw that his vehicle was already being lifted to be towed by the Department of Transportation. The officer heartlessly presiding over operation remained deaf to pleadings of the owner. The desperate fellow even threw himself onto the front windshield of his van refusing to let go until he was forcibly peeled off.

The tantrum he exhibited could only be compared to the separation anxiety that little children experience the moment they detect that mommy intends to drop them off or leave them with a baby sitter. It was quite a drama and my mind was reflecting all the while on the description in the Talmud of "Askara".

What about "Neshika"? I heard from my Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Yisrael Rokowsky 29 years ago a question and an answer he had on the metaphor employed when describing "Neshika" - that supernal kiss. Now, the Talmud had said that it is as easy as removing a hair from milk. He asked, "Since when is the soul compared to hair and the body compared to milk? It should be just the opposite!" We find that Essau was a physical specimen and earthy in all his ways. Therefore, he was born hairy. He even settled at Har Seir- literally a Mountain of Hair". In the language of symbolism hair represents materialism. Milk is white and pure and nourishing. The soul should rather be identified with milk. Why then is that lightest of all forms of death like removing a hair from milk? It should be the other way around.

The answer is that hair is the body and milk is the soul and the experience of "Neshika" merited by Aaron, Moshe, and Miriam is like the removing of a slight interposition. The body of the great one is almost nothing, compared to the soul. It's like a single hair. In one painless move like taking off a shoe they are enveloped in a Soul World, close again to the One who came to pick them up with the lure of a kiss.

This is more like the experience of that infant when the mother returns to retrieve the child from the school, camp, or baby sitter. He or she is drawn instinctively and runs out willingly to rejoin his loving parent.

Perhaps it is no mistake that we find no other exact date explicitly stated in Torah to mark the day of departure from this world except Aaron the Kohen, who died on the 1st of Av-(Literally-"Father") which falls out at the beginning of this week. He left a place called Kadesh- which means holy and by the boundary of but not quite entangled with Edom, where the descendants of Essau settled, there a loving Father greeted him **with a kiss**. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.