

RESPECT FOR THE DEAD

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Moses commanded the people on that day, saying, 'These will stand to bless the people on Mt. Gerizim... and these will stand for the curses on Mt. Eyval... Cursed is he who denigrates his father and mother, and the entire people will answer, "Amen."'" [Dev. 27:11-13, 16]

Among the curses which were read on Mt. Eyval, this one is notable for how "light" we might feel the transgression to be. While "denigrates" is somewhat accurate translation, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki and Rabbi Shamshon Raphael Hirsch both understand the word to mean "cheapen" - merely to fail to hold one's parents in high esteem is cursed!

Why is it so important to value one's parents? The Baal HaTurim quotes the Talmud: "Three partners [create] each person" - the father, the mother, and G-d. By failing to respect one's parents, respect for G-d can also fall by the wayside. On the opposite side, honoring one's parents is also honoring G-d - and indeed our Sages tell us that each curse on Mt. Eyval was accompanied by a corresponding blessing on Mt. Gerizim, so a person is blessed just for holding his or her parents in high esteem. There are times when one should not obey one's parents - if, for example, they command their child to act contrary to the Torah.

Even so, the child must continue to respect them for who they are. Perhaps we could stop here, with a short Dvar Torah about the extent to which we must respect our parents. Instead, I'm going to call something to your attention which I feel is directly relevant to all of this, and ask you to become involved. We know that we must honor our parents, and they must honor theirs... so it is an obvious conclusion that we must respect our grandparents and their ancestors back to Adam & Eve. We also know that our obligations do not end when someone dies - to the contrary, we learned last week that even a person who was killed by the courts must be buried that day! Affording each person a proper burial is called "chesed shel emes" - true kindness - because it is a great kindness that will not be repaid. So too, respect for our ancestors by no means ends when they pass away - or after 1000 years.

It is then another obvious conclusion that each and every one of us is obligated to protest when an ancient Jewish cemetery is in danger of being desecrated or destroyed. Why? Because the chances are quite high that one of your ancestors is buried there! Again, obviously, that's only one reason. The fact is that when a Jewish person dies, and is buried in a Jewish cemetery, he or she should

remain there until the resurrection of the dead. Our obligations to the dead include a prohibition on deriving any benefit from a cemetery, praying there, or even walking by a grave wearing Tefillin and with one's Tzitzis showing - because it is disrespectful to show the dead how "I can do Mitzvos and you can't!" This goes beyond religion - and certainly has nothing to do with politics.

Someone will say that I've violated the open principles of Project Genesis, and talked politics - and I say it's not so. It's simple human decency to leave a dead body in the place where it was buried, especially when we know that this was the explicit wish of the deceased. Unfortunately, some people find "simple human decency" to be not so simple. In recent years, religious organizations and other Jewish groups have been called upon to protect ancient sites across Europe and in the Middle East as well - a current case, for example, involves a cemetery in Egypt.

One country in particular has been accused of failing to cooperate in even the most obvious cases, desecrating the gravesites of Sages of the Talmud and other eras. One might think that this country is Germany, or Russia, or Iraq, or Syria, but it is not... it is the State of Israel. The Israeli governments, past and present, have been singled out by those working to protect Jewish gravesites as literally the least cooperative, the least accommodating, the least considerate - of the basic human dignities of their own ancestors! Appeals have fallen upon deaf ears.

Currently, the Israelis have unveiled a plan to build a new highway that will run the full length of the country - and plow through tens of Jewish cemeteries in the process. Each traveller on this road will be offered a great opportunity to participate in the denigration of his grandparents (putting aside, for the moment, the religious prohibition against Kohanim entering a cemetery)! While a highway is surely of great benefit, one wonders if every traveller on this one will risk acquiring a curse... The honor of our ancestors demands that we protest.

I know that Congressman Ben Gilman sent an aide on a fact-finding mission, and the results disturbed him greatly. Even so, the Jewish papers seem to be ignoring this issue. Why? Perhaps because we haven't said anything yet... but shame on us if we remain silent!

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