

OF LIFE AND LEGACY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her (v'livkosah). (Bereishis 23:2)

My uncle, the elderly GR"A from Vilna said, the reason why the "chof" is written small in "v'livkosah" (vav-lamed-bais-CHOF-tav-heh), is because Avraham knew that she had perfected herself as much as she need to, and therefore, he didn't cry for her soul, just her body (Penimim M'Shulchan HaGr"a, p. 49)

In the Torah, the letter "chof" in the word "v'livkosah" is written smaller than the rest of the letters, making it stand out. For this reason, the rabbis use it to teach various different lessons, one of the main ones being that Avraham contained his mourning for his beloved wife and did not cry for her excessively.

Why is this so important in Judaism? Because, as we pronounce at the time of burial, G-d is 100% just and all of His decisions are fair and timely -- according to His plan for creation. We humans, not knowing the future, are often caught off guard when a loved is taken from our midst, and, we are made to feel the loss quite suddenly. Nevertheless, we must rise above our feelings of pain and of being "robbed" of a relationship that we cherished, and proclaim to the world that life is not out of control or random, but, carefully and precisely orchestrated by a fair and loving G-d who knows what's best for all more than we do.

However, the Vilna Gaon is extracting another very crucial lesson about life and death from the small "chof" in this week's parshah. It has to do with tikun neshamos -- rectification of the soul. Because Avraham understood that his wife Sarah had completed her tikun, he could let go of his wife while, at the same time, mourn the loss to his life.

We, for the most part, are absorbed with the physical world. With the exception of a few very righteous individuals, the rest of us -- even those of us who believe in a soul and the World-to-Come -- have made the physical world the main event. If this wasn't true, then, materialism and physical comfort would not be such priorities to us, nor stumbling blocks in our lives. But they are, and, therefore, the small "chof" comes along to teach us to reduce their importance in our lives, and realize what is really going on in everyday life.

What IS going on in everyday life?

It goes something like this. The goal is to complete/perfect your soul -- first your Nefesh, then your Ruach, and, finally, your Neshamah. Of the five levels of soul that every Jew has, these are three lowest and the ones that our actions, words, and thoughts can directly impact.

The most effective and expedient way to achieve such rectification is through observing all the mitzvos that one can and to learn Torah. These "cleanse" the sparks of which are souls are made, and cause them to ascend to higher spiritual levels. Sin, on the other hand, does the opposite.

This is the main event in town, in life; everything else is just a side show. The yetzer hara wants to convince us otherwise, so that we will not focus on what counts most and instead cause us to get involved in non-eternal activities. This way we won't rectify our Nefesh, or, our Ruach, or, our Neshamah -- whatever level it is we are working on.

However, if we don't, and we leave This World with an incomplete soul, then, we have to come back again, and again, and again. For, once we don't get it right the first time, then, it is next to impossible to get it all done in one reincarnation the second or third, or fourth time. We'll just keep coming back until we get it right -- ALL OF IT right.

Unlike Sarah Immeinu, who perfected herself and left the world, as Rashi says, quite perfect. And, Avraham knew that, and therefore, could not fully mourn her knowing that she had truly earned her seat next to the Throne of Glory, forever.

Shabbos Day:

Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her (v'livkosah). (Bereishis 23:2)

The burial of Sarah Immeinu was a Biblical event with ramifications for all generations to come. This is not just because one of the foremost Foremothers of all history departed This World after achieving her share in the future development of the Jewish people, but, also because it is the first official burial of a human being spoken about in the Torah, at least with respect to the descendants of the Torah nation.

The Talmud discusses many concepts that are applicable to daily life, one of which is the concept of burial of the deceased. Aside from the technical and halachic aspects of the burial procedure, the Talmud wants to know whether or not burial, and all the honor accorded the deceased, is for the sake of the person who has died, or, for the sake of the family remaining behind (Sanhedrin 46b).

As a proof to say that burial is to honor those who remain to mourn for the deceased relative, the Talmud marshals the above quoted verse. Says the Talmud, the fact that the verse says that

"Avraham came" implies that the entire burial procedure had been delayed until Avraham's arrival, implying that whatever was to occur was for his honor, and not for Sarah's.

However, concludes the Talmud, this is no proof either way. For, it would have been Sarah Immeinu's wish and pleasure that her death be a way to honor her beloved and surviving husband. And thus, waiting for Avraham to return before proceeding with burial was in fact honor Sarah Immeinu.

In fact, this is a trait, says the Talmud, that applies equally to living tzaddikim as it does deceased ones. Says the Talmud: It is pleasant to tzaddikim when others are honored because of them. That's the way tzaddikim are: they exist to help others to achieve fulfillment, and feel successful and meaningful when they do exactly that.

On another note, but part of the same discussion, the Talmud wants to understand whether the purpose of "hiding" the decomposing body in the ground is to merely avoid a disgraceful situation for the departed person, or, to affect an atonement process. As Tosfos points out, there is no question that atonement is also achieved through burial in the ground, and, as the Talmud points out elsewhere, the decomposition process itself is a large part of that atonement.

In fact, according to Kabbalah, the whole point of decomposition, ultimately, is to provide the opportunity to rebuild the body in the period of resurrection free of the spiritual "filth" inflicted upon the Jewish people by the Original Snake in the Garden of Eden, which, resulted in the inclusion of a yetzer hara into mankind. This is something that is next to impossible to do in a lifetime, and, requires decomposition to full achieve.

In fact, part of the Gehinnom for a person's soul is to watch the body decompose. If the soul identified with the body to the point that it came to mistake its (the soul's) existence for being physical, it will assume it is dying, to its utter horror, right there as it decomposes in the ground. Depending upon how much that was true in a person's lifetime, that is how much "horror" it will provide in the grave -- until the person's soul realizes that it is still "there" even though the body is not.

This, perhaps, is also part of Avraham's reason not to mourn excessively over the death of his wife, Sarah. For, Avraham knew full well that Sarah's life had been a spiritual one, and that, as a result, her body would remain intact for the eventual resurrection of the dead in the future, her soul free in the meantime to soar in Heaven amongst the angels of G-d.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Avraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (Hevron) in the land of Canaan. (Bereishis 23:19)

Rav Ban'ah used to demarcate burial caves, and, when he approached Avraham's, he found Eliezer servant of Avraham at the gate. He said to him, "What is Avraham doing?" He answered him, "His head is in Sarah's arms and she is looking at his head." (Bava Basra 58a)

Did Rav Ban'ah, who lived at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, really see Avraham's trusted servant mentioned in this week's parshah, as well as in the previous two? How could Eliezer have lived so long?

So, Rashi explains that the Talmud, elsewhere teaches that Eliezer was one of seven righteous people in the history of mankind who did not die. And what better place to bump into him than by the burial place of his master to whom he was loyal to all of his life?

However, what is, perhaps, more interesting that what Rav Ban'ah finds outside the cave, is what he finds inside the cave. As the Maharshah points out, Eliezer expected to hear that Avraham was busying praying to G-d to spare his descendants from the darkness and suffering of exile, not to hear that Avraham was reclining in the arms of his wife, and, that his wife was looking affectionately toward the head of her beloved husband.

However, if you think about it, and you consider how exile became possible in the first place, you will recall that it was because Chava, who was meant to help Adam HaRishon bring creation to fulfillment, ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and then gave to her husband, Adam, to eat. She was created to be an "aizer" -- a "help" for Adam -- but, instead, ended up working "k'negdo" -- "against him."

In fact, when Chava had to make the all-crucial decision to accept the snake's explanation for the prohibition, and, eat as a result, or, to disregard his words and avoid eventual expulsion from the Garden, she didn't even consider consulting with Adam. She neither "cradled" nor "looked" at his head for direction, but rather, acted without concern for his opinion. Obviously he had failed to make the relationship such that she would feel compelled to, which is why he is the one, ultimately, held responsible for the sin.

Thus, finding Avraham and Sarah in this way represented a major tikun for what Adam and Chava had failed to accomplish. Their relationship and the process by which they made decisions that affected not just their own lives, but, the lives of all mankind, symbolized the ultimate unity of a husband and wife: they were "one flesh."

For this reason, they only had one son, but, what a son they had! The result of their relationship was a Yitzchak, a perfect offering before G-d, a person so righteous as to be able to build a holy nation from. No doubt Avraham and Sarah, like all tzaddikim who have left this world, pray constantly on behalf of their suffering children. However, the fact that they live on in a position of oneness and mutual respect is indicative of the ongoing effect of their tikun to the sin of Adam and Chava.

MELAVE MALKAH:

A Song of Ascents. "Much have they distressed me since my youth," let Israel declare now. "Much have they distressed me since my youth, but they never conquered me. On my back the plowers plowed, they lengthened their furrow. G-d is righteous, He cut the ropes of the wicked." (Tehillim 129:1-4)

As part of a research project, I studied Jewish history from the Jewish year 5000 (1240 C E) until Present Day, some 761 years of time and events. I have done it before, but, each time I do, I learn things I never knew before which usually astound me. Not always positive, but astounding.

In fact, this time very not positive at all, for, I never really knew the full extent that Jews suffered at the turn of the millennium onward, until a few weeks ago. For, all that seemed to have been lacking from 5000 onward (and before then as well) to turn the hatred and virulent anti-Semitism of the Church into a pre-Holocaust holocaust for centuries was German technical know-how. The will to do so, was obviously there.

Yet, here we are in the Twenty-First century, having survived the pogroms and the holocausts, with the greatest danger facing the Jewish people today being inter-marriage and assimilation, until G-d decides otherwise. Nevertheless, it does not hide the fact that, in spite of the fact that the Jewish people should be long gone, especially given our inherent ability to self-destruct, we are still QUITE here.

In fact, a convert to Judaism told me personally that she is Jewish today because she accidentally "stumbled" onto Jewish history. Now, one would ask, "Is not Jewish history, which is often painted in hues of black and red, the best reason in the world NOT to convert?" She would answer, "Just the contrary! No people could suffer so and remain sufficiently intact to survive if the hand of G-d wasn't directly involved, as it obviously was." That is the only reason why Dovid HaMelech could write with confidence what he has above.

Let them be ashamed and turned back, all who hate Tzion. (5)

That is, all those who hate the nation that lives in Eretz Yisroel according to the Torah and the laws of G-d, for, that is the concept of Tzion in Tanach.

Let them be like the grass on the rooftops, which, even before it is plucked, withers; with which the reaper cannot fill his hand, nor the binder of sheaves his arm; and, of which passersby have never said, "G-d's bless to you; we bless you in the Name of G-d." (6-8)

In other words, no one can deny that the nations have grown and "blossomed" into mighty empires, and, have accomplished much in the secular world. No one can deny that there are billions of "them" that cover the earth like the grass of the land or wheat in the field.

However, as we have seen countless times throughout history, when G-d wills it, a massive and green piece of land can become dry, parched, and barren, when G-d wills it. We have witnessed first-hand how an instant storm can take out a whole field of wheat, and leave people hungry for years to come, at a moment's notice.

So, too, says Dovid HaMelech, can Israel's enemies, so numerous and so powerful can be reduced to nothing at a moment's notice, when G-d wills it. Nature rarely reduces greatness to nothingness at a moment's notice, and, when does so, seems to do so indiscriminately. However, when G-d gives the word, then, Israel's enemies -- all of them -- can be neutralized forever in a single, fateful moment, and will be, when history comes to an end and the goals of creation are finally achieved.

Dovid HaMelech, like all of us, yearned for that moment. However, unlike Dovid HaMelech, may we merit to witness it.

Have a great Shabbos,
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