

THE BOTTOM LINE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Question: Should we or should we not mourn for the death of a loved one? Allow me to explain.

Our belief and trust in G-d frames our lives in discipline and security. We believe in G-d, therefore we study His Torah and do His Mitzvos. G-d's Mitzvos direct our actions and thoughts in every arena of life and living. We believe in the G-d Who is creator and master of all things. We believe in the G-d Who created and does all things for reasons known fully only to Him. We believe that those reasons are by definition good and beneficial regardless of our limited comprehension or agreement. Therefore, illness and death must be good, not bad.

The myriads of questions that this line of impractical reasoning raises are obvious. If illness is good, why seek medical therapies and interventions? If all things are "by definition good," how about the Holocaust? Why work for an income? Why do anything except sit around praying and believing? However, regardless of the impractical nature of this line of reasoning, the question still remains.

Our belief in G-d extends way beyond the limits of our mortal time frame. Fundamental to our belief in G-d is our belief in reward and punishment in an afterlife of relative eternal duration. Therefore, why mourn the passing of our mortal beings from this world when the eternal qualities of our spiritual existence and potential in the World To Come are limitless? Why mourn the passing of limited comprehension, physical pain, mental deterioration, hatred, jealousy, war, conflict, and selfishness? In fact, we should rejoice the passing of mortality with song, gladness, and good wishes!

However, the Rambam in the Laws of Mourning 13:12 states, " Anyone who does not mourn in the manner commanded by the Rabbis is an Achzari - a person without compassion or conscience." It is important to note that there is a specific Mitzvah in the Torah to mourn for one day. Moshe Rabbeinu was the "Rabbi" who added the additional days constituting the Shivah period. This makes the laws of Aveylus - mourning among the oldest of our traditions. Clearly, G-d and the Rabbis expected us to mourn the death of our loved ones and not rejoice!

The beginning of this week's Parsha seems to say differently. After stating that the regular Kohain - priest is allowed to attend the burials of his seven closest relatives, the Torah turns its attention to the restrictions placed upon the Kohain Gadol - High Priest. "The Kohain who is exalted above his brethrenâ€¦ shall not leave his head unshorn and shall not rend his garmentsâ€¦ He shall not contaminate himself to his father or his motherâ€¦ he shall not desecrate the sanctuary of his G-

דאָס" (21:10-12) The regular Kohain is not permitted to "contaminate" himself by participating in burials and funerals except with his seven closest relatives: father, mother, brother, unmarried sister, son and daughter. However, the Kohain Gadol is restricted from participating in the burials of his seven closest relatives as well.

At first glance this appears to be somewhat cruel and insensitive. Why should the Torah restrict a son from participating in the burial of a parent or G-d forbid child? Why restrict a regular Kohain from ever visiting the graves of his family? More so, the Kohanim and the Kohain Gadol are the quintessential paradigms of who we are supposed to be as G-d's kingdom of priests. It suggests that not mourning is a higher form of service than mourning. It suggests that the Torah made allowances for our human emotional needs and limitations. However, as represented by the restrictions imposed upon the Kohain Gadol, we should aim to be above the natural emotional demands and practices of mourning. Yet, the Rambam says that to not mourn is to be an Achzari?

Rav Hirsch explained why the Kohain and the Kohain Gadol are set apart from the rest of the nation when it comes to burial and mourning. "Pagans, both ancient and modern, have a predilection for associating religion and religious matters with death and thoughts of death. For them the kingdom of G-d begins only where man ends. They view death and dying as the true manifestation of their deity, whom they see as a god of death, not of life." Not so the priests in Judaism! Judaism teaches us not how to die but how to live so that, even in life, we may overcome death, lack of freedom, the enslavement to physical things and moral weakness. Judaism teaches us how to spend every moment of a life marked by moral freedom, thought, aspirations, creativity and achievement, along with the enjoyment of physical pleasures, as one more moment in life's constant service to the everlasting G-d.

When death summons the other members of his people to perform the final acts of loving-kindness, the priests of G-d must stay away in order to keep aloft the thought that man has been endowed with moral freedom, that he is g-dly and not subject to physical forces that seek to crush moral freedom. Only when the realities of life require even the priest to perform his final duty as a husband, son, father, or brother, does his priestly function yield to his calling as a human being and as a member of a family. (21:5)

In explaining the restrictions of the Kohain Gadol, Rav Hirsch adds the following. "He (the Kohain Gadol) has received his personal consecration with the anointing oil from the Sanhedrin, the supreme representative body of the nation, and he has been authorized to wear the high priestly garments so that he may represent the symbolic expression of the highest moral ideal which Israel is to translate into reality. Such a man has ceased to be an ordinary individual; he must now perceive and value also his personal relationships primarily from the standpoint of the ideals of the nation, ideals which should be in his mind so vividly that, if he must give personal expression to them, they will override any personal mood or emotion that could interfere with them." (21:10-12)

On a purely theoretical level the ideal would be to never feel loss or sadness with the passing of a loved one. However, as the Talmud in Brachos explains, we do not make the blessing of "G-d Who is Good and Does Good Things" on the occasion of a tragedy or loss. Instead, we acknowledge G-d with the blessing, "Blessed be the Truthful Judge." The ability to see the absolute goodness and benefit of G-d's actions is a function of timelessness and immortality. We hope and pray to witness the day when the panorama of history will be explained to us in all its complexities, contradictions and seeming injustices. However, the Torah was given to humans, not angels. Humans are time bound and limited. Humans have feelings of loss and sadness. Humans are obligated to mourn for their loved ones.

The restrictions regarding death and mourning that are imposed upon the Kohanim and specifically the Kohain Gadol is not the ideal. The Kohain Gadol is not restricted from feeling sadness or loss. In fact, just the opposite! It is inevitable and essential that the Kohain Gadol feels and emotes, if not he is an Achzari and unworthy of representing the nation. One of the defining characteristics of our people, the children of Avraham and Sarah is Rachmanim - merciful and compassionate. How much more compassionate must the paradigm of our people be as he stands before G-d in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur asking for G-d's compassion and mercy! However, as Aharon Hakohain modeled for all future generations when Nadav and Avihu died, the sadness and the loss must be borne in silence. The Kohain Gadol represents much more than himself. He represents the nation, and at all times, regardless of personal concerns, he must bear that designation upon his person.

Regarding the Torah's view of death I would like to make one more observation. We are told that death was introduced into this world with the sin of Adam and Chava eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. At the same time, clothing was also introduced into the equation of society. Clothing is the external representation of humanity's divine quality that was marred by Adam and Chava's sinning. Death is the ultimate triumph of the physical world over the spiritual. Just as Adam and Chava gave into their physical desires and ignored their divine, immortal calling, so too the physical limitations of the human ultimately triumph over the spiritual soul in this world.

Upon death we return the body to the earth "from which it was formed." However, we do not return the body unclothed, which would make perfect sense. Instead, considerable care is extended to the body of the deceased in cleaning and clothing it for burial.

The message is very clear. Our function in this world is to emulate G-d and proclaim His reality through our actions. The world of Adam and Chava is no more. We live in the post-sin world of death and clothing. However, the manner in which we treat our physical selves expresses the appreciation we have for the opportunities of living in a physical world and willfully serving G-d. The manner in which we treat the dead should be a mere shadow of the concern and compassion we extend to the living. The dead are cleaned and clothed because they were created in G-d's image. The dead are mourned and remembered because to do any less is to lose our compassion and mercy - to lose our humanity - to become an Achzari. However, as Rav Hirsch explained regarding the restrictions of

the Kohanim, we are a religion of life. The concern we show our deceased is reflective of the value we attribute to the living. We must always remember that death was never the ideal. Life was supposed to be eternal. As the Pasuk in Tehilim 118:17 states, "I will live, I will not die, so that I can relate the greatness of G-d!"

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