

ON DEATH AND DYING

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Most people are afraid of death and dying, and almost none of them ask themselves, "Why?" Why are we afraid of death and dying? It seems to me that something that must happen to everyone should have gained a degree of acceptance that mitigates the fear. Yet, we are afraid.

I am far from being an expert of death and dying and I have not conducted a proper study to ascertain why we fear death; however, I can guess at a few of the reasons. Some will explain that the fear of death is the fear of pain. Granted that is true for those who unfortunately die in pain; however, there are many who peacefully pass away in their sleep, seemingly in painless journey to the next stage of their existence.

There are those who will explain the fear of death as the fear of the unknown. In general we fear change and we fear the untried or untested; yet, there are many who thrive on adventure and exploration, and it seems that the after-life is the greatest adventure possible.

Others will explain the fear of death as the fear of not living. Life is filled with opportunities for accomplishment and love. Who wouldn't wish to be present at their grandchild or hopefully great-grandchild's wedding and beyond? Who wouldn't wish the added time to learn one more page of Talmud, do one more Chesed (kindness), hear one more symphony or nigun (tune), read one more classic, or admire one more majestic display of G-d's natural grandeur?

Many know the last moment of my Grandfather Ztl's life. As the ambulance rushed him to the hospital he was fully conscious. G-d blessed our generation that until the very last moment of his monumental life my Grandfather was able to share his prodigious wisdom and knowledge. As they neared the hospital my Grandfather turned to his son, Rav Reuven Shlit'a, and said in Yiddish, "I have no more strength." He closed his eyes and left us.

For my Grandfather Zt'l, life and time were synonymous with one more Mitzvah, one more Shaylah (legal query) to answer, one more Chesed to perform, and one more moment to study G-d's word. It was only when G-d no longer granted him the gift of strength that he was forced to leave.

The story is told of the Vilna Gaon who on his deathbed began to cry. His students, each a Torah giant in his own right, asked the Gaon why he was crying. The Gaon of Vilna picked up his Tzitzis and held them close to his heart. He explained that in this world he purchased his Tzitzis for a few kopecks and every moment he wore them he willfully served his Master. However, in heaven no matter how much money he would spend he would never be able to willfully serve G-d! That is why

the Gaon cried.

A few weeks ago Harav Avigdor Miller Zt'l passed away. Rav Miller had been the Mashgiach (spiritual mentor) of Yeshivas Chaim Berlin. After leaving that position he opened a Bais Medresh (place of study and prayer) on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, New York and became a legend. He became a towering figure of Musar (the study of ethical behavior) and uncompromised truth. His many books (in English - he was American born) on philosophy and history are standards in every Torah library. Rabbi Bess Shlit'a (of LA) eulogized Rav Miller at the conclusion of Shiva and related the way that Rav Miller prepared for death. Rav Miller Ztl's son was in attendance and described the scene.

Rav Miller was on his bed surrounded by his many papers and books. Everything was neatly organized in a manner that reflected deliberate consideration and intent. He appeared to be mumbling to himself. Rav Miller also merited to be fully engaged in every aspect of life as he neared his final days so it was unusual to see him "talking to himself." Rav Miller's son asked his illustrious father what he was doing. Rav Miller answered, "I am preparing the shiur (Torah lesson) that I will certainly have to give in the Yeshiva Shel Maalah (heavenly court) when I arrive." He lived his life fearing only G-d and greeted death as just another stage in his relationship with G-d. His papers were in order and so were the 90+ years of his life. If he had any regret it was that he had no more time to do more than he had. It is not surprising that such great personalities feared (or regretted) death.

Yet, there are those who live uninspired lives, content to muddle through life engaged in the mundane and the repetitive without thoughts of great accomplishments, nachas (joy and contentment), or desire. They too fear death.

Then there are those who fear death because of what awaits them in final judgment. Some fear the awesomeness of absolute revelation and truth. Among these are the greatest of our Tzadikim whose fear was for the self-delusions of life that engage us all. However, the evildoers of the world who are plagued by moments of consciousness and truth equally fear the absolute revelation of their evil and its punishment. In the end, "Know before Whom you are destined to stand in judgment and give an accounting."

I realize that no one reason for the fear of death is exclusive. Any and all of the above plus a myriad of others that I have not thought of contribute to this fundamental human fear. However, the Torah and the Halacha present us with a philosophy and a process for confronting death and dying that demands our study.

Exclusive to the Halacha is the process of Shiva. Following the death of one of the seven relatives (parent, sibling, child, or spouse), the Halacha mandates a week of mourning. During that week the focus is to immerse oneself in the feelings of emptiness, loneliness, loss, and memories. Tears are encouraged and shared. Memories that bring both laughter and tears are revisited. Friends and family come to listen, talk, or just be. In the end, in most cases, the Shiva gently nudges the mourners into a

more functional mode of moving-on with the business of life and living.

It is often pointed out that in the past death and dying was more accepted because most people died at home. Set within a setting of home and hearth death was woven into the rich tapestry of life's experiences. Surrounded by children and grandchildren the elderly and the critically ill shared an ongoing engagement with life's ups and downs while the young and the healthy shared the unfolding mystery of life's end. However, in our antiseptic society of hospitals few people die in their own beds. Therefore, death is far more mysterious. The process of Shiva, although first beginning after burial, brings the reality of death back into the setting of home and family.

This week's Parsha discusses the unique restrictions placed upon the Kohain Gadol in relation to mourning one of his seven relatives. Whereas a regular Kohain is restricted from participating in the burial of any one other than his seven relatives, the Kohain Gadol is even restricted from participating in the burial of his seven relatives. The Pasuk states, (21:10) "...hee shall not leave his hair uncut and shall not rend his garments."

In past issues of the Rabbi's Notebook I shared Rav Hirsch's insights into the symbolic association of the Priesthood with life and disassociation with death. The Priesthood was to represent the beauty of life and its infinite opportunities for serving G-d rather than death and the fear of dying. It therefore makes sense that the Kohain Gadol should be even more removed from death than the other Kohanim. However, it seems a bit much to forbid the Kohain Gadol the healing benefits of Shiva and mourning.

There is another instance when mourners must forgo the obvious benefits of Shiva. If a relative passes away before Yom Tov and there is even a single moment for the mourners to "sit Shiva" (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succos, Pesach, and Shavuoth) Shiva is cancelled. That too seems to be somewhat unfair to the mourners. Why shouldn't they share in the healing week of tears, support, and memories?

Rav Hirsch wrote,

"Such a man (the Kohain Gadol) 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. But while he feels in his heart the pain that death has brought him, in the midst of these thoughts of death, he must demonstrate all the more eloquently the power and joy of life that emanate from G-d even amidst life's bitterness - a concept taught by that sanctuary whose first servant he is."

Just as the Kohain Gadol represented more than himself and therefore had to forgo "personal mood or emotion", so too does Yom Tov catapult each individual beyond the limits of self into the realm of nationhood. On Yom Tov the job of each individual was to immerse themselves in the joy and elation of being a member of the Chosen People.

The Yomim Tovim (holidays) commemorate occasions in the history of Am Yisroel and the lifecycle of the nation that connect all of us to each other. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur place the individual within the context of nation to effect forgiveness for one and for all. Davening and Teshuvah are intended to be far more than individual supplications and concerns. Most every statement in the Machzor is couched in the plural. It is intended to be a communal experience because no one person can stand alone before G-d and hope to be forgiven. However, the nation always survives. The community will always be forgiven.

On Succos, besides the Mitzvah of joining the rest of the nation in Yerushalayim, we take the four species representing the components of the nation and bind them together.

On Pesach we commemorate becoming a nation and begin our Seders by welcoming to our table any and all who need a place to celebrate the birthday of our nation.

Finally, on Shavuoth we commemorate that extraordinary one-time historic revelation when the entire nation stood at the foot of Har Sinai "as one person with one heart." Total Achdus (unity) was the prerequisite for G-d giving His Torah to His Nation. G-d did not give it to any one person. He only gave it to the nation.

Therefore, although we recognize the pain and the loss of a loved one and extend our compassion and support to those who mourn, nevertheless, the mourners may not express their loss in the usual manner. Like the Kohain Gadol and like Aharon Hakohain the first Kohain Gadol, their mourning must be done in silence.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, North Hollywood, CA and Assistant Principal, YULA.
