

YOU ARE WITH ME

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In the face of overwhelming tragedy, the death of his two sons, Aharon is nevertheless reprimanded by Moshe for a seeming infraction of the halacha regarding the eating from a sacrifice while one is yet grief-stricken over the personal loss of near relatives. Aharon responds by defending his position as being halachically correct and proving the point to Moshe. Thereafter, Moshe, upon reflection, admits that Aharon is correct and that he fulfilled the Torah's law in this matter completely. The question that begs answering in this situation is the obvious one. At a black moment such as this one, where is there room for discussion of an arcane halachic rule? Is this not a moment for emotion, for compassion, for sympathy, not for law and legalisms? Is it not almost cruel of Moshe to raise any sort of halachic issue whatsoever with his brother at a time of such sadness and tragedy?

As usual, the Torah uses this all too human situation to grant us an insight into God's view, so to speak, of life and human behavior. For any sort of mental stability to be present in one's life, one must live by a set of values and rules. Without such norms and standards, one is constantly blind-sided and buffeted by the never-ending problems of life. And one is a prisoner of one's emotions and personal conflicts. There are so many times in life that one asks one's self, "Now what am I supposed to do? How am I to react to this event?" It is because of this recurring and never-ending human question that halacha takes on such a central role in the life of a Jew. It is precisely for this reason that halacha is so all-pervasive, covering every act and situation of a Jew's existence. It is the halacha that rules our lives and sets our standards of behavior under all circumstances of life and all human conditions.

In today's society, God and religion have to somehow conform to the human being's comfort and pleasure zone. Religion cannot be too demanding. Three days of mourning is sufficient, not seven. Restrictions on behavior and entertainment on the part of the mourner are to be discarded. Religion cannot make one feel uncomfortable or make too many demands on time or life-style. God should have no say in the way human beings should express their emotions. In a society as self-centered as is ours, religion is defined by and for me alone. There is no room for communal or generational considerations. It is only me - here and now - that counts. Thus the positive psychological benefits of an halachically endorsed grieving period and process is ignored and eventually forgotten. The Torah and Jewish tradition have carefully and minutely described the laws, attitudes and customs that should govern one who is in the process of confronting tragedy and loss. The Torah in this instance, as in all other affairs of life, is on the side of humans. It attempts to give us perspective and balance, strength and inner fortitude in order that we be better equipped to deal with the inevitable blows of

life. Therefore, Moshe correctly calls Aharon to task for apparently not following the Torah's law when tragedy overwhelmed him and his family. But it is the very steadfastness of Aharon in observing the Torah's laws, as expressed in his response to Moshe's criticism, that allows him to revive himself and rise from his grief and pain and become the great High Priest of Israel, beloved by God and all of the Jewish people.

Death is always an unwelcome visitor. Nevertheless, our mortality makes its appearance at our doorstep unavoidable. Yet there lies within our souls and us deep resources that enable human beings to deal with this final act of the life cycle. The Torah, and its accompanying halachic rules and norms, lights the way through the darkness of sad events and moments of grief. "Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me," says King David. In Jewish tradition and history "You are with me" is reflected in the laws and customs that the halacha has created for those trying and searing moments. And in so doing, "You are with me" becomes the cry of our ultimate triumph over death and darkness.

Shabat Shalom.
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