

THE GOOD THAT MEN DO

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The old Jewish bon mot is that acharei mot - after the death of a person - then kedoshim - the person is suddenly remembered only as being noble and holy. This attitude stems directly from the ancient Jewish tradition not to speak ill of those that have passed on. Naturally we are all aware that not everyone is deserving of the glowing eulogy bestowed upon the deceased but nevertheless Jewish protocol holds sway in these matters.

The Shulchan Aruch explicitly allows "some exaggeration" in the funeral orations over a deceased person. The measure of "some exaggeration" is purposely left vague and undefined and the good judgment of the eulogizer in the matter is encouraged. My father, of blessed memory, told me that once when he was a rabbi in Chicago, a noted Jewish mobster died. The family of the gangster was affiliated with the synagogue where my father served as rabbi and they insisted that my father eulogize their mobster relative at the funeral service.

In order to guarantee that there would be a respectable turnout of people at the funeral chapel for the service, the family engaged the services of a very famous cantor to sing the memorial prayers. They posted notices in the neighborhood about this cantor's funeral-concert and naturally a large crowd turned out for the event. My poor father who was hard pressed to be able to say anything positive about the deceased finally declared in his necessarily brief eulogy: "The man must have done many good deeds and favors privately that we are unaware of, for look at the large crowd that has come here to the funeral chapel to pay him their last respects!"

The Torah itself confirms this attitude and behavior towards the dead. The two sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, whose deaths are the subject of the first verse of the parsha of this week, were described in the Torah as causing their own deaths by "offering up a strange fire [of incense]" upon God's altar. The rabbis of the Talmud noted other failings in these two sons of Aharon - they refused to marry, they were intoxicated when entering the holy precincts of the Mishap, they had a rebellious attitude towards their elders, Moshe and Aharon, among other failings.

Yet we find that in discussing the matter with his bereaved brother Aharon, Moshe tells him that this is what God must have meant, so to speak, when He told Moshe b'krovai akadesh - through the death of those who are nearest and dearest to Heaven will God's name be sanctified in the world. The Torah after pointing out their sin of the "strange fire" nevertheless continues to describe the deceased as krovai - My nearest and beloved ones.

From this it is apparent that we are not to dwell upon the faults and shortcomings of others, certainly not after their deaths. Judgment is God's province and muckraking people after they are gone is not within Jewish tradition. The prohibition of lashon hara - negative bad speech - applies to speaking about the dead as well as the living.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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