

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The loss of one's beloved spouse, especially after many years and decades of marriage and shared life, is always a traumatic and shattering blow. Those of us, who unfortunately have also experienced this occurrence of Avraham's life in our own lives can testify as to the emotional damage and even physical harm that this sad experience can occasion.

We see from the life of our father Jacob that even decades later he reminds his children and himself of the pain and suffering caused by the death of his beloved wife, Rachel. In essence, it seems that Jacob never again was the same person after the death of Rachel. However, Avraham apparently dealt with the death of Sarah in a more stoic fashion. The Torah itself indicates this by inference, when it wrote concerning Avraham's reaction to the tragedy by using a small letter kaf in its description of the grief and weeping of Avraham over the death of Sarah.

It is not that Avraham is less grieved at the loss of Sarah than Jacob was at the death of Rachel, it is rather that after all of the challenges and trials that Avraham had already endured, his attitude towards life and its vicissitudes was now always one of looking forward and never dwelling on the past.

Those who live exclusively in the past are doomed to self-pity and great emotional angst. This only causes a sense of victimhood and hopelessness. It reflects itself in every aspect of later life and stunts any further spiritual, social, personal or societal growth. The greatness of Avraham, as taught us by the Mishnah, was his resilience and continued spiritual and personal growth. Avraham constantly looked forward – ahead - and never dwelled on past misfortune.

I heard an outstanding speech delivered by George Deek, a Christian Arab who is a member of the Israeli Foreign Office. In telling the story of his life he describes how his family lived in Jaffa for many generations and how they fled to Lebanon during the 1948 War of Independence. Sensing the squalor and political manipulation of the refugees by the Arab powers, whose sole goal was the destruction of Israel and not in saving and resettling the refugees, his grandfather escaped Lebanon and somehow brought the family back to Jaffa and Israel, regained his job with the Israel Electric Company. He raised generations of successful professionals, all citizens of Israel.

He said that the Jewish refugees from Europe and the Moslem world attempted to forget their past and build a new future for themselves and their descendants when they arrived in Israel. The Palestinian Arab refugees, under the misguided leadership of their spiritual and temporal heads,

reveled instead in their past defeats, in their legend of nakba and, in the main, devoted themselves to attempting to destroy Israel rather than rehabilitating themselves.

That attitude and mindset has served them badly and cost them dearly. The past needs to be remembered and recalled, treasured and instructive to us. However, it is the future and what we make of it that ultimately determines our worth and our fate. That is one of the great lessons to be derived from the story of the life of our father Avraham.

Shabbat shalom,
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