

FEELING THE LOSS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Rashi quotes the well-known Rabbinic observation that the departure of a righteous person from a society is an indelible loss to the community. Now I do not want to sound like a heretic, God forbid, but for many years I was troubled by this statement. From my personal experience and observation of life, I did not always find this to be realistic and accurate.

I have lived in many communities and when a great man from that community passed away or left to live in a different area, life in that original community seemed to go on as usual. Everyone certainly missed the presence of that great person but after a few days no one's life seemed to be truly altered or affected by that person's absence. The bitter truth of life is that out of sight is out of mind. Therefore, I have always struggled to understand the deep meaning of what Rashi quotes.

As I have aged, hopefully gracefully, I am beginning to gain a glimmer of understanding into those words and an insight into that sublime message. A certain community had a distinct problem and for various reasons contacted me to hear my opinion as to how it should handle the situation. That community had a great and wise person whom I knew personally, living there for half a century. While that person was alive, the community had no need to call upon any outside person for advice or counsel.

But now that the person was no longer present and this problem had arisen and threatened to cause irreparable harm to the fabric of the community, they and I agreed that though this wise person would have been able to solve the problem equitably and peacefully, they needed to turn to outside sources for help. At that moment, they felt the absence of this great man and even though no one human being is indispensable, so too no human being is ever replaceable either.

When Yaakov left Be'er Sheva, I imagine that not everyone took notice of his absence. Everyone in Be'er Sheva got up the next morning and went about their usual daily tasks. However, it is obvious that in the twenty-two years of Yaakov's absence from that community, problems and issues arose that had he been present he would have been consulted on and would have helped solve. It was at these moments that the full realization of Yaakov's absence became apparent. As was observed by Rashi, about the absence of a good and wise person, it is at these times that it becomes real and evident to all.

Such is the nature of life, that much greatness and goodness is not appreciated until somehow it – in the form of a human being – is no longer present within that society. We always see things much

more clearly in retrospect than we do in the present. This is an important lesson that is worthy of our consideration.

Shabbat Shalom.

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