

THE ETERNAL EMBRACE

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"...for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die" (2:17)

Adam is warned that on the day he eats from the Tree of Knowledge, he will die. The commentaries explain that the death to which Adam was subjected, was the loss of his immortal status; after Adam ate from the forbidden fruit, man became mortal^[1]. The punishment visited upon mankind for Adam's disobedience appears to be vastly disproportionate to the transgression. What is the correlation between the transgression and the punishment? The very notion that Hashem meted out such a severe punishment evokes images of the vengeful and punitive G-d. How do we reconcile this event with the description of Hashem being a loving and merciful G-d?

The thought of one's own mortality or the mortality of a loved one often leaves a person feeling depressed. Therefore, we frequently block out all thoughts of death because of the morbid feelings it evokes. How does a person view death with a healthy attitude?

Among the nations of the world respect to the deceased is shown by burying the body in a fancy casket. This also offers solace to the mourners. The most durable and impenetrable coffin is sought out. In some cases hermetically sealed containers are acquired to retard the decomposition process. In contrast, Halacha dictates that the coffin should be easily decomposable^[2]. The custom in Eretz Yisroel is to bury without a casket, placing the body directly into the soil. Seeing a loved one placed ignominiously into the earth is among the most excruciating experiences a person will endure in his lifetime. Why would the Halacha appear to be insensitive to these feelings?

The Midrash states that Hashem created the potential for death in the world even before Adam transgressed. Commenting on the verse describing the sixth day of creation "And Hashem saw that it was very good", the Midrash relates that "good" refers to the potential for life, while "very good" refers to the potential for death^[3]. How can death be described as "very good"?

The verse records that Hashem created man from the dust of the earth. Rashi cites two opinions as to the source of this dust. According to one interpretation, Hashem gathered dust from all the corners of the earth to ensure that "kol makom sheyamus sham tihiyeh koltaso lekevurah" - "wherever man dies, the earth will absorb his remains after burial^[4]." The simple reading of the text implies that had man not been formed in this manner, his corpse would be rejected by the earth. Decomposition is a function of the soil interacting with organic matter. All creatures decompose in the soil, irrespective of whether they were created from the dust of the four corners of the world.

What then does Rashi mean when he says "so the earth will absorb man's remains"? The second interpretation is that man was formed from earth which was taken from the place where the Altar would rest in the Temple. Axiomatic to the study of Rashi's commentary to the Torah is the rule that whenever Rashi offers more than one interpretation, the interpretations coalesce with each other; they are different perspectives of the same concept. How can these two interpretations be reconciled?

The Talmud records that Cleopatra asked Rabbi Meir whether man will emerge clothed after the resurrection. He answered her that if a simple seed of grain planted in the ground emerges layered with many husks, surely man will emerge well attired. Rabbi Meir was revealing to us the Jewish definition of burial^[5]. The purpose of burial is not to dispose of the corpse; rather, burial is the beginning of the recreation process. Just as a seed flourishes and blossoms after being planted, the burial process reconnects man to his source, allowing him to be recreated and emerge in a perfected manner determined by his actions when he was alive.

Soil in each part of the world reacts differently to various types of seeds. Hashem created man from all the types of soil to ensure that the planting of his body would not be inhibited by the soil of the place where he would be buried. Rashi's words are that man should be "niklat" in the soil. This term is used to describe the successful implanting of a seed or conception. Burial is not just a process that allows for the disintegration of the body; it is the process that allows the perfected body to sprout, ready to accept the soul at the resurrection.

The Hebrew word for grave is "kever", which is also the Talmudic term for the womb. The grave represents the beginning of eternal life in the same manner as the womb is the home for a new child. The two interpretations as to where the dust used to create man came from are offering the same insight. The Altar on the Temple Mount was the place through which man connected to his Creator. Man was formed from the same place through which he connects to his source. Similarly, man is created from the four corners of the earth in a manner which allows him to reconnect back to his source.

Adam was created with the perfect body and soul, allowing him to experience an unparalleled relationship with his Creator. The sin distanced him from Hashem and imbedded imperfection within both his body and soul. Death was not a punitive act by a vengeful G-d. On the contrary, death is the process by which we can once more reconnect to our Creator and remove the imperfections that hinder our relationship with Him. Allowing man to reconnect is the ultimate chesed. Hence, Hashem saw that it was "very good" for this process allows both our souls and our bodies to reconnect.

The burial is the process by which we recreate the body, divesting it of all impurities. Therefore, Halacha does not allow for the preservation of the body in its current state, for this would deprive a person of the great chesed that Hashem has given us. The nations of the world who view death as the final step in a person's life attempt to preserve the dead body, thereby maintaining the last

vestiges of his existence.

The Jewish perspective on death is comforting to a person for it diminishes the fear we have of the finality of death. Instead of being disconnected, we are actually reconnecting. The Torah appropriately refers to death as "asifa" - "ingathering".⁶ This sense of reconnection is borne out by those who have been present at the time of a person's death. It is common for a person to exclaim "I am coming father" or "I am coming mother" for the feeling of reconnection prevails upon the soul as it is departing.

1.Ramban 2:17

2.Rambam Hilchos Avel 4:4, Shach Y.D. 236:1

3.Zohar Parshas Bereishis

4.2:7

5.Sanhedrin 90a 2.25:8