

REDEFINING GRIEF

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"All his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to comfort himself..."(37:35)

After Yaakov is shown his son Yoseif's bloody tunic, he rends his garments and mourns his loss. Although his family members attempt to console him, the verse states "vayema'ein le'hisnacheim" - "he refused to comfort himself[1]." Why does the Torah use the word "le'hisnacheim" - "to comfort himself"? Would it not be more appropriate within the construct of the verse to use the word "le'hinacheim" - "to be comforted"?

Citing the Talmud, Rashi explains that a heavenly decree exists which assuages a person's grief by allowing him to forget the deceased after twelve months. However, this decree is effective only when a death occurs; since Yoseif is not actually dead, Yaakov could not be comforted[2].

A father who suffers the catastrophic loss of a child will carry this grief with him for the rest of his life. How can the Talmud state that a person will forget the deceased after twelve months? Furthermore, asks the Maharal, if Yaakov realizes that he cannot find solace, following the Talmudic dictum, should he not realize that Yoseif is still alive, and therefore not require consolation[3]?

In Parhas Toldos, the Torah relates that Rivka is told of Eisav's plotting to kill Yaakov for having usurped the blessings from him. Rivka summons Yaakov and tells him "hinei Eisav achicha misnachem lecha lehargecha" - "behold Eisav your brother is consoling himself by the thought of killing you[4]." Rashi cites the Midrashic interpretation which states that Eisav is so determined to murder Yaakov that he views him as already deceased and is drinking a "kos shel tanchumim" - "cup of consolation" over him[5]. If Eisav harbors such hatred for Yaakov, why does he require consolation for a death which he himself perpetrates?

The "cup of consolation" refers to a custom which is based upon the verse "tnu sheichar la'oveid v'yayin lemarei nefesh" - "give wine to the embittered"; a mourner is given a cup of wine to console him[6]. Generally, drinking wine is considered a celebration of life; why is this the appropriate behavior for consoling the bereaved?

Yoseif's brothers, considering his behavior to be undermining the integrity of Bnei Yisroel's future, agree that he must be eliminated. However, all twelve sons of Yaakov contribute unique talents and energies to the genetic formation of the Jewish people. Therefore, eliminating Yoseif would cause the Jewish nation a great loss and would forever alter its corporate structure. How do the brothers plan on compensating for this loss?

The parsha begins "Vayeishev Yaakov b'erez" - "Yaakov settled in the land[7]." The Midrash comments that Yaakov "wished to settle down in tranquility but the anguish over Yoseif sprung upon him[8]." It is inconceivable that the Midrash is stating that Yaakov plans to retire to the "good life". What then, is the meaning of "settling down in tranquility"?

If a person suffers the loss of a limb, his initial reaction is overwhelming despair. Redefining himself is the only manner in which he will be able to extricate himself from focusing upon his loss. After evaluating how his loss impairs his ability to reach the goals he had set for himself in life, the individual must refocus his energies upon seeking alternative methods to attain similar accomplishments, notwithstanding his handicap. In this manner, he can channel his grief into fulfillment.

The loss of a loved one is akin to the loss of a limb. Focusing upon the loss alone only results in grief. True solace can be achieved if the mourner evaluates the implication of his loss, and redefines himself in an attempt to fulfill those accomplishments which can no longer be performed by the deceased. Very often, a spouse takes it upon him or herself to complete the life endeavor of the deceased, and through doing so, brings themselves comfort. The word "vayenacheim" means "to reconsider" or "redefine" a new course of action. A person does not forget the deceased; rather, he stops focusing upon the loss which brings him grief, and instead attempts to complete the mission of the deceased, thereby allowing their memory to live on.

The Torah relates that Eisav is born with Yaakov grasping his heel, "v'yado ochezes ba'akeiv Eisav[9]." This reflects the notion that ideally the brothers would have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, working in tandem; Eisav would be grounded by Yaakov. Eisav is aware that by killing Yaakov he will no longer be complemented by him. Drinking the "kos shel tanchumim" does not mean that Eisav is grieving over Yaakov's death, rather that Eisav has redefined himself in order to incorporate those elements to which he will no longer be privy once Yaakov has been eliminated. The drinking of the cup is a celebration, for it indicates that the mourner has determined how to continue the life mission of the deceased.

The brothers are cognizant of the severe implications to the corporate structure of Bnei Yisroel which would occur as a result of the loss of Yoseif. However, there is one individual who can compensate for this loss and reintroduce those missing talents and energies. The Torah states "Eileh toldos Yaakov Yoseif" - "These are the offspring of Yaakov, Yoseif"; the verse lists only Yoseif as Yaakov's progeny[10]. Citing the Midrash, Rashi explains that Yoseif is the embodiment of his father Yaakov[11]. The brothers feel that Yaakov could act as a replacement for Yoseif.

Yaakov's role in the configuration of Bnei Yisroel is as an "Av" - "Patriarch". Once the tribes are in place Yaakov wishes to relinquish to his sons his role as the molder and formulator of the Jewish people. This is the meaning of "settling down in tranquility"; his role as a communal founder is over. However, as the Midrash states "the anguish over Yoseif sprung upon him", for the brothers want

Yaakov to replace Yoseif. Although doing so would serve as consolation for his loss, Yaakov refuses to console himself in this manner for he understands that his role as an Av is over and it is not possible for him to still be required to play a role in the formation of Bnei Yisroel as a tribe.

In reality, even if Yaakov would attempt to replace Yoseif in the tribal configuration, he could not be comforted, for a mourner cannot be consoled over the living. Yaakov's reluctance to fill that role masks his awareness that he cannot be comforted due to the fact that Yoseif is alive.

The correct word in the verse is "lehisnacheim" for this consolation is brought about through the actions of the mourner himself. It is the duty of the comforters to assist the mourner in determining the appropriate course of action, but it is only the mourner who can bring himself solace.

1.37:35

2.Ibid

3.Ibid

4.27:42

5.Ibid

6.Mishlei 31:6

7.37:1

8.Bereishis Rabbah 84:3

9.25:26

10.37:2

11.Ibid