

KINDNESS TOWARDS THE DEAD

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Vayechi

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 311, Funerals In Halacha. Good Shabbos!

Kindness Towards The Dead: The Kindness of Truth

Yaakov asked his son Yosef to "do for me a kindness and a truth. Do not bury me in Egypt." [Bereishis 47: 29]. Rash"i on this verse cites a very famous statement of our Sages: "Kindness that is done with the deceased is called 'a kindness of truth,' because one clearly does not look for a return of the favor from the deceased." All other acts of kindness can always be viewed as somewhat tainted by ulterior motives, but, apparently, this kindness cannot.

Rav Yaakov Neiman asks a question on this Rash"i (in his work Darkei Mussar) from the Talmud. The Gemara states "The one who eulogizes, will be eulogized; the one who buries will be buried" [Kesuvos 72a]. This seems to indicate that one can expect something back when occupying himself with the dead. This contradicts the above quoted statement of the Sages.

Therefore, Rav Yaakov Neiman offers a new twist on this concept. When our Sages say that one does not expect payment for his participation with the dead, it does not mean that payment will not be forthcoming. It means that the person does not care if he will be paid back or not. When a person occupies himself with the dead, he gains a different perspective on life.

In other words, a person does not act the same upon returning from a funeral. Think about it. When a person attends a tragic funeral and returns home, the person is not the same -- even if only for 15 minutes or a half an hour or an hour. Attending a funeral causes us to look at life differently. Often, that which had previously seemed to be very important, now takes on its true perspective. Honor

and recognition become meaningless.

That is the meaning of the statement of our Sages. Performing kindness for the dead -- be it doing a 'Taharah' (final preparation of the body before burial), being a 'Shomer' (watching the body continuously before burial) or attending a funeral -- puts a person in a totally different frame of mind than when performing any other type of kindness. Under such circumstances, a person is not looking for a "return on his investment". He is not thinking "Will they say such nice eulogies about me?" Who could think about such a trivial matter? A person does not look for payment - because he does not care about payment anymore. Psychologically, such payment becomes petty and meaningless.

Performing kindness for the dead is called a Kindness of Truth because it gives a person a true picture of what is important and what is trivial in life, albeit, perhaps unfortunately, only for a short time.

The Tranquility Of Hard Labor

When Yaakov Avinu blessed his son Yissocher he said, "He saw tranquility that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant, yet he bent his shoulder to bear, and became an indentured laborer" [49:15]. On a simple level, this pasuk [verse] makes no sense at all. Why would the fact that Yissocher "saw that Menucha [tranquility] was good" cause him to "bend his shoulder to bear"? On the contrary, if tranquility was so good, he should not want to bend his shoulder and become a laborer! This is equivalent to saying, "Joe saw that vacations were good, therefore he started working 365 days a year".

What is the meaning of this verse? Rav Nissan Alpert suggested that the problem is that we do not understand the meaning of the word 'Menucha'.

There are two types of 'Menucha' in this world. One type of 'Menucha' is as follows: A person is on vacation, sitting under a palm tree, with a breeze wafting over him. He is sipping a drink and everything is beautiful. This is one type of 'Menucha'. This 'Menucha' may be good for a week, two weeks, or a month. However, after a while, a person will realize that this type of 'Menucha' does not provide peace of mind.

That is a myth of our society - work until age 65. Then, no more! So what does a person do when he is 65? He reads the paper once. He reads the paper twice. He needs to find things to do. This type of 'Menucha' does not satisfy a soul.

However, Yissocher saw the other type of 'Menucha'. Yissocher saw the serenity and the peace of mind that comes with accomplishment, with realizing one's potential and trying to reach that potential. That is serenity. Think about it. When do we really feel good? Clearly we feel good when we feel that we have done something that has 'made a dent' and made a difference. 'Menucha' in this pasuk refers to that kind of inner serenity. People are not designed to feel content from sitting

under palm trees.

Dr. Abraham Twerski from Pittsburgh once commented about a ludicrous commercial that revealed the thinking on Madison Avenue. The commercial promoted "milk from contented cows". What is a "contented cow"? A "contented cow" is a cow that goes out in the morning into the pasture and finds plenty of grass and eats and then eats more. Then the cow comes home at night. This is a "contented cow". Cows are supposed to be content.

People are not supposed to be content. Human beings are supposed to have battles. There is supposed to be turmoil within a human being -- the constant tension of "am I doing what I am supposed to be doing -- am I accomplishing or am I not accomplishing?" That is what a human being is supposed to be all about. The idea that a human being is supposed to be 'content' is a myth.

The 'Menucha' that Yissocher saw as wonderful was the 'Menucha' that can come from the sense that "I am using my strengths to accomplish that which I am supposed to be accomplishing." Yissocher's reaction to that 'Menucha' was "Let me bend down my shoulders and accept the yoke" - to achieve even more. In that way, a person achieves the true tranquility that can only be achieved by realizing the vast potential that G-d has given to all of us.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas VaYechi are provided below:

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