THE TRAUMA OF DEALING WITH A GRIEF-STRICKEN PERSON

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

After the death of his beloved wife Sarah, Avraham Avinu approached the Children of Ches and asked for a burial plot for his wife. This is of course the prelude to the story of the purchase of the Mearas HaMachpelah where four Biblical couples are buried (Adam and Chava; Avraham and Sarah; Yitzchak and Rivkah; Yakov and Leah).

In introducing the beginning of the negotiating process the pasuk [verse] uses what might be considered a strange expression: "vaYakam Avraham [And Avraham got up] from the presence of his deceased" [Bereshis 23:3].

The commentaries explore the special nuance of the expression "he got up." What is hinted at by this unique expression?

The Baal HaTurim says that this teaches that one is not allowed to talk in front of a dead body. Avraham had to get up and walk away before discussing business matters with the Children of Ches.

The Sforno learns that "he arose" teaches that the laws of mourning did not apply to Avraham yet (before burial).

Rav Yeruchem Levovitz offers the following interpretation: the pasuk is trying to convey that Avraham Avinu arose and separated from his personal grief before beginning to interact with other people. Many times, when people are grief stricken, it is very difficult for them to control their emotions. When people experience terrible periods of grief, they often wear their emotions on their sleeves. When they deal with other people, the other people are unfortunately subjected to their grief as well.

The pasuk is teaching that Avraham was a total master of himself and his emotions. He was able to wipe away his tears and not burden others with his own grief. "My grief is my grief, but now I have to deal with people and in my dealings with people, they don't have to be subject to my emotional
distress. “He got up” - means he internalized his personal emotions and dealt with the Children of Ches as though nothing had happened.

Even at the most grief-stricken moment in his life, after losing his wife, Avraham Avinu was able to act with composure and respect for his fellow man. He was thereby able to spare them the trauma of dealing with a grief-stricken person.

**Eliezer Was Fully Trusted - In Financial Matters Only**

The Parsha describes Avraham Avinu sending his trusted servant to find a proper mate for his son Yitzchak. Eliezer is called Avraham’s servant as well as the “elder member of his household.” He is described as one “who ruled over everything that belonged to Avraham” (haMoshe bechol asher lo) [Bereshis 24:2]

In effect, Eliezer was not only Avraham’s slave and servant -- Eliezer was Avraham’s attorney. Avraham Avinu gave over the responsibility for running his entire household to him. Avraham, as we know from earlier Parshiyot, was a very wealthy man. Eliezer was the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Avraham Avinu’s entire estate. He was a trusted person whose integrity was beyond reproach. He was in charge of everything! He signed the checks. He decided when to buy and when to sell.

Why then, at the end of this very same pasuk, did Avraham request “place you hand under my thigh” (an expression requesting that Eliezer take an oath)? At this point, Avraham was suddenly no longer prepared to trust Eliezer. Avraham demanded that Eliezer swear -- in the name of the G-d of Heaven and Earth that he would not take a wife for Yitzchak from the daughters of Cannan, who lived in their midst.

This doesn't seem to make any sense. The beginning of the pasuk gives Eliezer the highest accolades possible -- "zekan beiso, haMoshe bechol asher lo". Then the end of the pasuk turns around and says: "I want you to swear to me that you will follow my instructions." Which is it? Is Eliezer to be trusted or is he not to be trusted?

The Be’er Mayim Chayim writes that we learn from here that regarding stocks, flocks, real estate, and the whole financial portfolio, Eliezer was in charge. But regarding the spirituality of his son and his descendants, Avraham did not trust anyone. Regarding money and financial matters, Eliezer is trustworthy. But regarding the spiritual future of Klal Yisrael, an oath must be demanded!

It is told that Rav Yisrael Salanter was once traveling and he had to stay overnight at an inn. The inn was full. The inn keeper ran out of meat. The inn keeper did not personally know Rav Yisrael Salanter, but based on appearances, judged him to be a knowledgeable Jew. He approached Rav Yisrael and asked “Perhaps you can slaughter a chicken for me in my back yard?” Rav Yisrael, however excused himself, telling the innkeeper that he was not a certified shochet [ritual slaughterer] and could not help him.
The next morning Rav Yisrael proposed to the innkeeper that he invest in a financial investment that he felt would yield tremendous profit for the innkeeper. "Give me X amount of rubles and I will give you a great return on your money."

The innkeeper responded, "I should give you my money? You are a complete stranger to me. I don't know you in the least."

Rav Yisrael admonished, "Last night you did not know me any better. Based only on my looks and my dress you assumed that you could trust my shechitah. But today when I asked you to invest money with me, you suddenly need to check me out!"

The innkeeper obviously had his priorities wrong. Regarding spiritual matters, if the person "looked religious", he could be trusted. Regarding money, he needed "facts and data" to corroborate the person's integrity. Avraham was just the opposite. Regarding material matters, Eliezer had full authority. "Spare me the details." However, regarding his son, Yitzchak: "Place your hand beneath my thigh."

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 Chaye Sarah are provided below:

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