

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

How to Respond in Times of Sorrow and Celebration

Parshat Hayyei Sarah, Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Parshat Hayyei Sarah deals with transitions; in it are moments of sorrow, celebration and solace. At the beginning of the Torah portion, Abraham mourns the death of his wife, Sarah. While still mourning her death, our forefather must deal with the practical details of her burial. On a deeper level, however, this becomes a seminal moment for his offspring – Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah makes him an official resident of the land of Canaan rather than a resident alien.

Having buried his wife, Abraham now turns to the future. Still grieving the loss of Sarah, he must help find a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham has his trusty servant and the head of his household swear that he will find a proper wife of his son in his ancestral home, in the land of Haran. This servant (later tradition suggests it was Eliezer) faithfully fulfills his master's request and shows an admirable sense of faith in Abraham's God. When Isaac marries Rebecca, he finds solace in the face of his own loss of his dear mother. Interestingly, Isaac never shows up at the time of his mother's death. We are left to ponder his absence.

Having lived as a faithful servant of God, Abraham spends the rest of his life in relative quiet. He remarries and has several more children but arranges for Isaac to be the primary beneficiary of his inheritance. Abraham passes away at the age of 175 and is buried along side Sarah by Ishmael and Isaac who apparently put their disagreements aside to properly honor their father.

Pirke Avot 4:18 Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar taught: Do not pacify a friend when his anger is raging. Do not comfort him when his dead lies before him. Do not question him when he makes his vow. Do not intrude upon him at the time of his disgrace.

Sources

Genesis 23:1-3

Sarah's lifetime – the span of Sarah's life came to one hundred and twenty seven years. Sarah died in Kiryat-arba – now Hebron – in the land of Canaan; And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham arose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites' saying, I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you.

Genesis 24: 2-3

Abraham said to the senior servant of his household who had charge of everything he owned, "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth that you will not take a wife for my son from among the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell..."

Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Magriso, Me'am Loez

Do not console your friend while his dead is before him. Consoling the bereaved (*menachem avelim*) is a very great act of virtue. But like other such deeds, it must be done at the proper time. You should not try to comfort your friend when one dear to him and the body has not yet been buried. If you comfort him then, it will seem like you do not sympathize with the anguish of your friend. Here the dead body is still in his presence and you are trying to give him consolation. Rather, you should wait until the body has been removed and buried.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Bereavement

The *onen* [mourner during aninut] is a person in deep distress, a person yanked out of normal life and abruptly catapulted into the midst of inexpressible grief. He is disoriented, his attitudes are disarrayed, his emotions [are] out of gear. The shock of death paralyzes his consciousness and blocks out all regular patterns of orderly thinking.

Commentary

Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar understood the psychological and social needs of the human being: there are certain times when it does not help to talk to another person no matter how close one may be. Reason does not help at such times; just the opposite. To reason with a person when they are grieving a loss or when they feel the need to make an oath often exacerbates the difficulty of the situation and only aggravates the person. We find both situations in *Parshat Hayyei Sarah*.

It seems somewhat surprising that Abraham is all alone at the time of his Sarah's death. Where are the members of his household and the friends he made while living in the land of Canaan? Where is Isaac for that matter? Rashi and the sages suggest that Sarah's death occurred upon learning that Abraham had taken their only son to Mount Moriah in order to offer him as a sacrifice to God. Overcome with sorrow and grief, she immediately expired. When we look back in the previous chapter of the Torah we see that Abraham came down from the mountain all by himself; we are never told where Isaac was, or why it was necessary for Abraham to first 'come' to Sarah when she passed away? Could it be that this terrifying ordeal managed to fracture the family, dividing father and son, as well as husband and wife? We are left to ponder this situation.

A person who has just experienced a loss is called an *onen*, someone in the deepest stages of grief. Jewish law codified Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar's saying by suggesting that we do not begin comforting or visiting with the mourner until after the funeral has taken place. If one is present, however, one can assist him in making the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

The Torah goes on to tell us that Abraham came to mourn (*lispod*) and to bewail (*livkota*) his wife. In contemporary Hebrew, the word *lispod* comes from the same root as *hespaid*, the word for eulogizing someone. We find in this *parshah* the basic elements of the process of mourning and bereavement in Judaism: to honor the memory of a loved one and to honestly confront one's grief.

The question of making oaths is more complicated. All of us can think of a time when we were confronted by crisis or pain and wanted to bargain with God or the universe. Often the promises we make at such times are unrealistic. Rabbi Shimon suggests that when confronted by such a statement, we hold our tongue and not argue with the person in crisis. Sometimes the best thing we can do for others is to be a sympathetic but silent presence. The greatest gift we can give others is simply to listen and to be at their side.

Questions to Ponder

1. Why do most people find it hard to remain silent in the face of strong emotions such as grief or anger? How can we help others who are in crisis?
2. Have you ever found yourself in these situations? What did you expect from the people around you? Who was most helpful to you and how?
3. We do not have the same attitude about making oaths that our ancestors did. For them, making an oath was a serious matter, not to be undertaken lightly. What would you say (or not say) to a dear friend who has just learned that they have a terminal illness and they promise to give a lot of money to charity if God will just 'heal them.'
4. How are anger and grief similar to one another? Is there a common denominator that ties together the four statements of Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar?
5. Why does Abraham insist on making his servant swear? Have you ever been in the position where someone asked you to make a promise that you weren't sure you could keep? Have you ever asked others to make such a promise?

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