

Parashat Chayeh Sarah 5770, 2009:

Understanding Nichum Aveilim (Comforting the Mourners)

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *alehah hashalom* and to the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and HaRav Shimon ben Chaya Hakohen.

And Abraham expired and died in a good old age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people. And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the Cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which faces Mamre. The field that Abraham had bought from the sons of Heth there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried. Now it came to pass after Abraham's death, that G-d blessed his son Isaac, and Isaac dwelt near Be'er Lachai Ro'i. (*Sefer Bereishit* 25: 8-11, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

The above-stated Torah selection appears toward the end of our *parasha*. It recounts the death of Avraham and his burial by his two sons, Yitzhak and Yishmael in *Maarat Hamachpelah* (the Cave of Machpelah), in Hebron. The Torah describes their actions. Yet, we may well ask: “How did they feel when their father died?” One of the most poignant descriptions of the depth-level feelings that accompany “the spontaneous human reaction to death” was offered by my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993):

It is an outcry, a shout, or a howl of grisly horror and disgust. Man responds to his defeat at the hands of death with total resignation and with an all-consuming, masochistic, self-devastating black despair. Beaten by the fiend, his prayers rejected, enveloped by a hideous darkness, forsaken and lonely, man begins to question his own human singular reality. Doubt develops quickly into a cruel conviction, and doubting man turns into mocking man... In a word, man's initial response to death is saturated with malice and ridicule toward himself. He tells himself: If death is the final destiny of all men, if everything human terminates in the narrow, dark grave, then why be a man at all? (Out of the Whirlwind: *Essays on Mourning, Suffering, and the Human Condition*, pages 1-2.)

Within this pathos-filled context, the Torah states: “that G-d blessed his son Isaac.” The Torah, however, neither tells us the content of Yitzhak's blessing nor exactly why

Hashem chose to bless him at this time. In fact, at first blush, this undefined *bracha* (blessing) appears to be mysterious and difficult to understand.

One approach to understanding Yitzhak's blessing is offered by *Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a*:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners as it states; "... Now it came to pass after Abraham's death, that G-d blessed his son Isaac... so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead. (Translation and underlining my own)

According to this passage, G-d came to Yitzhak while he was sitting *shiva* for Avraham. His goal was to console Yitzhak on the loss of his beloved father, and to reach out to him in his moment of consummate sorrow and anguish. G-d, promised Yitzhak that he was not alone and that He, too, felt his pain and the depth of his bereavement. Moreover, G-d wanted to assure Yitzhak that all was not lost and that there was still hope within the frightening and seemingly never-ending darkness that enveloped him. After all, this is, the essence of *birkat nichum aveilim*, the *bracha* that we recite before the mourner in the house of mourning: "*Hamakom yinachem etchem betoch shaar aveilei Tzion v'Yerushalayim*" ("May the Omnipresent comfort you amongst the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.") In effect, we ask our Creator to join our friends in their most desperate hour of psychological and existential need and console them in the innermost recesses of their souls. In a word, we ask G-d to manifest His *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) before our friends and comfort them as only He truly can.

According to the Rambam (1135-1204), *Nichum Aveilim* (Comforting the Mourners) is one of the Rabbinic commandments that enables us to fulfill the Torah commandment of

“*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocho*” (“...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” *Sefer Vayikra* 19:18):

It is a positive Rabbinic Commandment to visit the sick, to comfort the mourners, to “bring out” (*l’hotzi*) the deceased, to provide for the needs of the bride, and to escort guests. [In addition, one] must involve himself in all aspects of the burial and carry the deceased on his shoulder, walk before him, eulogize him, dig his grave, and bury him. So, too, [one is obligated] to rejoice with the bride and groom, and to provide for all their needs [at the festive feast.] All of the aforementioned are in the category of physically demonstrated acts of kindness (*gemilut chasadim she’b’gufo*) and, as such, have no upward limit. Even though all of these mitzvot are Rabbinic in nature, they are in the category of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [In general,] all of those things that you would like others to do for you; you should do for your brother in Torah and Mitzvot. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel* 14:1, translation and underlining my own)

Comforting the mourner may now be seen in a new and clearer light. Quite simply, it is not enough to “pay a *shiva* call,” and utter a formulaic rendition of *birkat nichum aveilim*, or to disingenuously say: “I am sorry about your loss.” Instead, the entire purpose of our being present at the *beit shiva* (house of mourning) is to express our deeply felt care and concern for the mourner and to console him or her in a truly meaningful manner. Thus, there is no “one way” to fulfill this commandment. Instead, we must take our cues from the bereaved and respond to them in such a fashion as to provide them with true solace, i.e. with what they really need. When we do this, we are engaged in authentically loving our fellow Jew. Moreover, when we reach out and touch the heart of the mourner with our true selves, we imitate the actions of our Creator (*imitatio Dei*), and help bring peace to our fractious and fractured world. May the Almighty grant us the wisdom and understanding to do so. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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Dovid