

Avraham Avinu and the Invention of Mourning

Avraham Avinu is credited with many important spiritual accomplishments, from rediscovering monotheism in an era of idolatry, to perfecting the art of hospitality, together with his wife Sarah and their household, with too many others in between to name them all here this morning. However, I think perhaps the most underrated of all Avraham's spiritual accomplishments and innovations is the invention of mourning.

After the death of Sarah, the Torah relates:

וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכָּתָהּ

Avraham came to lament Sarah and to weep for her.

The Torah has not previously described any form of mourning. This is the first appearance of the verb לִסְפֹּד which means to lament or bewail. Similarly, although the verb לְבַכָּת to weep, has appeared, when Hagar wept, thinking her son was about to die, this is the first time that it is employed to describe mourning for someone after their death.

We might imagine that people had been mourning their departed loved ones from the beginning, without it being recorded in the Torah, but I am not so sure. Grief is a feeling, or an emotional state but mourning is an act, a process. As Joan Didion puts it in her masterful memoir of grief, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, "Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention." And while grief is natural, something which merely happens to us, and presumably had been happening to human beings ever since the death of Hevel, mourning is something we do, and is in a sense, a technology no less than plowing or making musical instruments or weapons, all technologies, whose advent the Torah records.

It seems reasonable then, to imagine that with the death of Sarah, we are witnessing the invention of mourning, and that it took someone with Avraham's vision, faith and courage to teach the

world how to deal with grief, how to mourn. Whether I am correct that this verse is a description of the first act of mourning or whether it's merely the first description of an act of mourning, either way, it bears close examination as a prototype for how to mourn.

The two verbs of mourning in the verse, speak of two different facets of the mourning process. *Lispod*, which meaning to “wail or lament” is often translated as eulogize in English, but this is a very imperfect translation. While both the English word eulogy and the Hebrew word *hesped* refer to a speech delivered at a funeral, the similarity ends there. Eulogy comes from a Greek root meaning praise, and a eulogy is just that: words of praise for the dead. A *hesped* by contrast is something much rawer, much more emotional. Our Sages of Blessed Memory defined a *hesped* as “*devarim hameshaberim et halev*”—words which shatter the heart. A *hesped* might involve praise for the dead, but the praise is secondary to the purpose of the *hesped*, which is to bring its audience to tears. Often when I am speaking to someone about whether they would like to speak at a loved one's funeral, they will say they can't speak because if they were to speak, they would end up crying. And I always think to myself, who told you that a person isn't allowed to cry at a funeral? The whole point of the *hesped* is to get people, including the speaker, to cry. This is why we don't do *hespedim* during festive seasons of the year, because such public flaunting of grief, to say nothing of the idea of deliberately provoking sadness in others, isn't appropriate during a festive season.

I think it's no accident that as American Jews, we are more inclined to deliver eulogies than *hespedim*, regardless of the season. As Americans we tend to regard grief and sadness as pathologies, rather than the natural parts of life that they are, and treat happiness as the only acceptable state of mind. In her book, Didion points out that we are so afraid of grief and of mourning that more and more Americans choose not hold a funeral or a memorial services for a departed loved one, opting instead for a “celebration of life.”

In this we are probably not so different from Avraham's contemporaries, and like them,

we would do well to learn from his example to give full expression to our grief.

But Avraham didn't just lament Sarah, according to the verse, he also wept for her. This would seem to be redundant. I think, however that the Gemara hints at why they might not be redundant. The Gemara engages in a lengthy debate about whether hesped, lamenting the dead, is for the honor of the dead or the honor of the living—in other words is the purpose of the mourning rituals of the funeral to give honor to the departed soul, or does it primarily for the benefit of those who are mourning. In the end the Gemara concludes that hesped is for the honor of the dead, and not the living.

This idea, that a hesped, mourning is for the honor of the dead, then those of us who would prefer not to have a traditional funeral or even a memorial service but gather instead for one of those increasingly popular “celebrations of life” are doing a disservice not only to ourselves, by denying our grief, but also to the deceased, by depriving them of the honor of being mourned properly. No amount of praise at a so-called “celebration of life” can match the honor of being simply and honestly mourned.

It's only after Avraham mourning Sarah as a means of honoring her (לְסַפֵּדָהּ), that he weeps for her (וַיִּבְכֶּהָ). This weeping, perhaps is an act of mourning Sarah, not for her honor but out of Avraham's own need to express his grief. And it's only after both of these verses, that we read that Avraham gets up to buy a plot of land in which to bury Sarah. On the surface we might think this is just a continuation of bewailing her and weeping for her. But this is something different.

After all, our custom is to attend to the needs of burial and the funeral first and only then begin mourning. Shiva doesn't begin until after the funeral. Why, then, should the description of the preparations for Sarah's burial here come after Avraham mourns her? I believe it's because in this case, Avraham wasn't just buying a burial plot, he was buying the first land acquisition of his descendents in what would become their homeland. By buying a piece of land to bury Sarah, he wasn't just showing

her kavod, honor, but he was furthering the mission they had both been partners in, of building a home for their family in the land of Israel. Sarah has been Avraham's companion and partner in all the years of journeying from their ancestral homeland to the land of K'na'an. She was his partner in establishing a community of faith, of people who believed in One G-d. She was his partner in raising their family, and in the mitzvah of showing hospitality to guests. And by buying a piece of land to bury her in, the first piece of land to belong to our people in that land, Avraham was not just making sure Sarah's body had a proper resting place, he was carrying Sarah's life's work in her memory.

Doing acts that further someone's life's work, in their name after they are gone is a fitting way to honor them. However, perhaps the reason the Torah describes the burial seemingly out of order, is in order to let us know that honoring someone through mitzvot, through good deeds, is a fitting way to honor them, only after we have properly mourned. Avraham first lamented Sarah and wept for her, mourning her both as an expression of honor for her and of his own grief, and only after this did he set about honoring Sarah by furthering her values and purpose in her memory.

Often we try to bypass those first two stages of mourning, and go straight into honoring someone's memory through praiseworthy acts in their memory. Perhaps we do this because we believe grief and mourning are self-indulgent. Perhaps we do it because we want to cling to some sense of meaning in a moment when everything can feel meaningless. Or perhaps we are simply afraid of our own grief and sadness. We would do well, to learn from Avraham's example, and give grief and mourning their due, before we rush to get to work.

We live in a time in which there is much mourning to be done, and yet in which we have very few social structures and norms to support proper mourning. Our modern Orthodox community is grieving the loss last week of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, whose writings helped inspire and guide countless people, and served as a model of Modern Orthodoxy as the project of engaging with the non-Jewish world, not as an act of compromise with the Torah, but as an act of deepening our understanding

and fulfillment of the principles of the Torah. During this pandemic, so many of us are grieving friends, relatives who have been lost to this pandemic, and at the same time we are deprived of the usual familiar rituals of gathering to mourn the dead and comfort the living.. There is so much to mourn for, and there is so much work to be done to honor those we have lost and continue their legacies. Before we can properly do that work, we have to allow ourselves to mourn properly, first of all as a means of honoring them through our grief, and second because we need to mourn in order to deal with our own grief. Only when we have done that, will we, like Avraham Avinu, find the strength to do the noble, necessary work that carries on the memory of those we have lost.

Shabbat Shalom!