

Grave Concerns

Shavuot 5782 – Yizkor

Rav Nota Greenblatt zt”l once received a call from a gentleman he knew well, a man who was the director of the Chevra Kadisha in a certain city in the South. The man was extraordinarily agitated.

“Rabbi Greenblatt, I have a serious issue and I don’t know what to do. There is a man here who died, and he wants to be buried in his jacket.”

Rav Nota was surprised that someone wanted to be buried in this manner; after all, it is well known that when a Jew dies, he or she is buried exclusively in *tachrichin*, or special burial shrouds, so he pressed further and asked why.

“Rabbi, it’s not just any jacket he wants to be buried in. He was a member of the Augusta National Golf Club.”

Rav Nota was nonplussed, so the man explained how prestigious membership in this club is; how the Master’s takes place at its venerable course; how membership is limited to men (that has since changed) and how every member receives a green blazer- a symbol of wealth, status and prestige. Rav Nota understood, and then the man continued. Referring to the community where this man lived, he said “Rabbi Ploni wants me to do it.”

Rav Nota didn’t miss a beat.

“You tell that Rabbi that you have been the director of the Chevra Kadisha in this city for decades, and if that man is buried in anything other than *tachrichin*, you will quit on the spot.

“If we spent a few minutes on the issue, I could probably find you a leniency to rely upon, in terms of the laws of Jewish burial. But there is another issue here. If you bury that man in his Augusta National Blazer, you are committing a serious *Choshen Mishpat* violation, a violation of Jewish monetary law. You see, everyone else who purchased burial plots in that cemetery, and is buried there, thought they were doing so in an Orthodox Jewish cemetery. And the moment you bury that man in his blazer, it stops being an Orthodox Jewish cemetery – and you will have stolen from all of them.”

Rav Nota was a man of iron will, unimpeachable integrity and a spine of steel, as we spoke about a few weeks ago. But his response acknowledges something we all know and feel- about the importance of a traditional burial. But why are we so concerned about burial in an Orthodox cemetery? Or with burial altogether? This Chevra Kadisha director, the community Rabbi and Rav Nota were certainly not the first to deal with this question. Indeed, one of the primary texts dealing with burial as a Jew is the one we read this morning.

After the untimely passing of her husband, Ruth the Moabite was encouraged by her mother in law to move on. She had her life ahead of her, she could marry

anyone she wanted, she was a member of an illustrious, aristocratic family- but Ruth refused. She had grown to love Judaism, and desperately wanted to join the Jewish people. In one of the most moving monologues in Tanach, she tells her mother in law

רות פרק א

(טז) וַתֹּאמֶר רֹוּת אֶל־תִּפְגַּעִי־בִי לְעִזְבֹּה לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ כִּי אֶל־אִשָּׁר תִּלְכִּי אֱלֹהֵי וּבְאִשָּׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלִּי עַמִּי וְאֱלֹהֵיךְ

אֱלֹהֵי:

(יז) בְּאִשָּׁר תִּמְוֹתֶי אֲמִוִּית וְשֵׁם אֲבִיכָה כֹה יַעֲשֶׂה יְקֻנֶּנּוּ לִי וְכֹה יִסִּיף בִּי הַמָּוֶת וַיִּפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ:

This passage is one of the paradigms for what we call *Kabbalat mitzvot*, or the acceptance by a convert that mitzvot are binding commandments from God that they are obligated to, and will, perform. But why is burial the final defining feature of her speech? In throwing her lot in with the Jewish people, she says nothing about a warm Jewish community, the joys of Shabbos, the beauty of a Jewish wedding or the sanctity of the mitzvah of *taharat hamishpacha*. In addressing the challenges of Judaism, which *kabbalas ol mitzvos* requires, she does not comment on things like keeping two sets of dishes, the logistical difficulties represented by a mid-week Yom Tov, the exorbitant cost of day school tuition or the terror of anti-Semitism. Most appallingly, she completely ignores other Jewish rites of passage, like lactose intolerance, driving a Honda Odyssey and, *lehavdil*, the obligatory family picture in

front of the Kotel. Why is burial so important to Ruth? Fixating on burial seems morbid and is among the least compelling arguments for embracing Judaism.

I'd like to suggest that Ruth recognized that by joining the Jewish people, she was forfeiting the kind of acceptance and recognition she would otherwise have been accorded as a non-Jew, and that it wouldn't necessarily be forthcoming in her community of choice, either. Indeed, she encounters hostility not long afterward, when *ploni almoni*, the man who isn't named, refuses to marry her because it might "taint" his lineage. The fact that Boaz took an interest in her is something she describes as an "act of kindness," because without Boaz's interest, she would be a *nebbach*, a person devoid of social prospects, with nothing of value to offer a spouse or a community. Ruth's concern- one echoed by righteous converts to this very day- was a valid one. Those who are studying the daf yomi recently learned that not only did Ruth see herself as an outsider, but her very status, and that of her descendant- King David- was called into question by Doeg haEdomi, one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation. He was of the view that, since the Torah prohibited any contact with members of the nations of Amon and Moav, Ruth's conversion was fraudulent and invalid- but other sages overruled him, and said that the restriction only applies to *males* from Amon and Moav, but not females. Ruth *did* want to belong to a group- deeply, even passionately. To some degree, it's what all of us want. It certainly is, *lehavdil*, what the man with the Augusta Green Blazer

wanted. In declaring her desire to be *buried* as a Jew, though, Ruth was showing that it was not the club she belonged to *in this world* that was of concern to her. It was where she belonged *in the next world* that was most important.

In his biography “Listening to God”, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin tells an incredible story about his dear friend, the legendary Zalman Bernstein:

Chapter Forty

A Grave Business

As Zalman Bernstein was growing religiously, and was learning about the importance of the land of Israel, he once told me that he wanted to be buried in Israel. I told him that my family and I spend our summers in Israel, and I would gladly arrange a cemetery plot for him. He wanted to be buried on the Mount of Olives. I contacted a close friend of mine, whose father was a member of the *Hevra Kaddisha*, the burial society, and we arranged for a single grave for him.

Toward the end of the summer, Zalman called me, and said that he was in France and that he'd like to stop off in Israel to see his gravesite. All of us – Zalman, three members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* and I – met outside the Mount of Olives cemetery. As a Kohen, I could not go into the cemetery, so I brought along a book of Psalms, and stood a considerable distance from the graves. Zalman went with the *Hevra Kaddisha* to “check out” his gravesite.

From where I was standing, I could hear very loud shouting, and I realized that there was an altercation going on between Zalman and the *Hevra*. Then I saw Zalman running hither and thither and looking at this grave and that grave, and that grave and this grave. I must admit, I was very curious and more than a little concerned as to what was happening.

When they came back together, with angry faces, Zalman told me that the grave was absolutely unacceptable. From his proposed gravesite, he had no view of the Temple Mount, and so he refused to be buried there. "I found a plot that's empty and from it you can see the Temple Mount very clearly," he said. "That's the one I want. I want to be switched."

The members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*, who had understood his background and realized why he was taking only one plot, looked at me and said, "He picked the gravesite two graves away from Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook. We can't give it to him." I was both exasperated and ashamed. I angrily and embarrassedly said to Bernstein, "Listen, Zalman" (by this time he had changed his name from Sanford to Zalman officially). "Rav Kook is one of the holiest people who ever lived in this world, the first chief rabbi of Israel. You're just not on a sufficient spiritual level to be worthy of being buried next to him. And besides, when your time will come to use the grave, you will either be able to see everything or you will see nothing; but whatever you'll see or won't see will have nothing to do with the view from the grave itself." He looked at me in annoyance and then in fury. "Cancel the plot," he said summarily and, without contacting me again, he left Israel.

A short while later I received a letter from him. He began with an apology, writing that he had begun to do some research on Rav Kook. And then he explained that he understood very well that when the time came, the view from his grave wouldn't matter much. "But," he continued, "I pretty much messed up in this world, especially vis-à-vis my children. And it's too late now because they're on their own. I have only one opportunity left. There's a good chance that they will come to visit my grave from time to time. And the Temple Mount is the holiest place in the world. I want them to be able to see it; maybe they'll become inspired. Maybe I'll be able to do for them after death what I didn't do for them in life."

I went to the *Hevra Kaddisha* with the letter and translated it for them into Hebrew. I said to them, "I've been a rabbi now for many years. I guarantee you that this individual will be a complete Shabbat-observant Jew in very short order. He already puts on *tefillin* every day. Given where he came from and the direction in which he's going, I honestly don't believe that Rav Kook would be embarrassed to have him as

a neighbor.” They read the letter and they were moved. They gave him the gravesite without charging extra, and that’s where he’s buried today.

To the best of my knowledge, he only visited the grave one more time before he died. He wanted to “test it out,” to lie down in it to make sure it was big enough, that it would fit the contours of his body. He had a picture taken of himself lying down in the grave, and he proudly hung that picture on his study wall for all his visitors to see.

Zalman became a devotee of everything that Rav Kook wrote and stood for, even sponsoring a very successful colloquium in Jerusalem on Rav Kook’s writings. I suggested that a good friend and respected colleague of mine, Benny Ish Shalom, direct the colloquium, which featured many scholarly papers presented before a very wide audience. The event produced not only a fine volume dedicated to the life and thought of Rav Kook, but also Beit Morasha, the Robert M. Beren College, an important Torah institution in Jerusalem that combines serious Torah study with advanced university degrees. Zalman was inspired to give Benny and me the seed money for a unique Torah academy enterprise that would express the universalism of Rav Kook’s teachings.

One of the joys of the rabbinate was to have become friends with such an unforgettable person, a great character with great character.

As we are about to say Yizkor, and our thoughts turn to the purpose of life beyond the temporal, Ruth’s lesson represents an important challenge for us. Are the decisions we make designed to earn us social capital in this world, or real estate in the next? Is it the green jacket we care about, or the *tachrichin*? How will we earn our place in the world to come? What kind of education are we providing our children, and what kind of examples are we setting for them? Are the decisions we make in our lives primarily about this world, or about the next one? This was

expressed best by Hillel in the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos, who contrasted these two different types of pursuits:

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב משנה ז

[*] הוא היה אומר מרבה בשר מרבה רמה מרבה נכסים מרבה דאגה

מרבה תורה מרבה חיים מרבה ישיבה מרבה חכמה מרבה עצה מרבה תבונה מרבה צדקה מרבה שלום קנה שם טוב

קנה לעצמו קנה לו דברי תורה קנה לו חיי העולם הבא:

He used to say:

The more flesh- the more concerned we are about fancy food, a nice steak- the more worms, the more we

The more property- the more concerned we are about fancy houses, dream vacations, investment properties (or the ones others have that we don't), the more anxiety, stress and discomfort we will suffer. On the other hand, the more sitting [in the company of scholars], the more wisdom; The more counsel, the more understanding; The more charity, the more peace. If one acquires a good name, he has acquired something for himself; If one acquires for himself knowledge of Torah, he has acquired life in the world to come. I'd venture to guess that the things we remember most fondly about our loved ones fit in the second category, and not the first. May we aspire to these attributes ourselves.