

What Are We To Do When a Friend's Loved One Dies? A Lesson of Torah from 'Ask Amy'

Our Jewish sages taught that the one who is wise is the one who learns from everyone (Mishneh *Pirkei Avot* 4.1). So it is without embarrassment that I read every morning the Ask Amy column by Amy Dickinson in the Denver Post. Indeed, for most of my adult life I've been reading either Dear Abby (Abigail Van Buren née Pauline Esther Friedman) or Dear Ann (Ann Landers née Esther Pauline Lederer) or Dear Miss Manners (Judith Martin née Perlman). As an aside, note that all but Amy Dickinson are Jewish and that Abby and Ann Landers were twin sisters.

In a recent column, Amy responded to a letter from one who had recently lost a parent and was "absolutely heartbroken" when friends did not respond personally. Yes, there were texts and Facebook messages but nothing personal, "not even a phone call."

Amy's advice was wise and to the point: "And I'd like to state unequivocally, that showing up as a witness to someone else's loss is a vital expression of our own humanity. Yes, you probably appreciate a text from your local friends. No, it is not enough for you to feel comforted.... Unfortunately, modern life has removed many of us from the important rituals surrounding death. We are emotionally estranged."

One of the most meaningful roles of community is to rally around a friend or neighbor during times of need. I am deeply moved when I witness the outpouring of loving support for a Temple Sinai member after a loved one's death. The mourner's home is crowded with those expressing sympathy, providing food, sharing loving memories or simply making a minyan for the Kaddish during *shiva*. I note that those who are most diligent about attending the funeral services and *shiva* minyans are also those whose homes are most packed with condolence visitors when they have a loss or are going through a time of need.

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayechi*, which concludes the Book of Genesis, we read about the death and burial of Jacob. While Abraham and

Isaac died and were buried in the Land of Israel, Jacob died in Egypt. He so desperately wanted to be buried in the family tomb in Hebron, just south of Jerusalem. So after he died, Joseph and the other sons of Jacob/Israel prepared his body for the long journey and buried him in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron--- a site you can still visit. They mourned him there for seven days and the Canaanite locals were so impressed by the outpouring of grief and respect that they renamed the place of mourning *Avel Mitzraim*, "Mourning of Egypt" (Genesis 50:7-14).

It is interesting to note that the name of the Torah portion, *Vayechi*, means "He lived." Yes, the passage tells about Jacob's final days and then his death, but the ultimate message is best expressed by that which lives on. We all are mortal. Our days come to an end. But the values we cherish and teach can live on. Our children, our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors and our community will continue to remember us and honor the legacy of a life well lived. These acts of remembrance bring blessed comfort to those who are struggling through their final days. Indeed, the mourners see that they are not alone. Rather, their grief is eased through friendship and community.

Blessed are you who comfort the mourner. Blessed are you who honor the dead. Blessed are you who uplift the living. Blessed are you who reaffirm the legacy and values that keep us alive.

B'vrakhah,

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