

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

VAYCHI 5784

In the wake of Yaakov Avinu's death, the Torah relates (50:12) that "... they [Yaakov's family] held a very great and imposing eulogy; and he [Yosef] ordained a seven-day mourning period for his father." The Talmud (Yerushalmi Mo'ed Katan 3:5) sees this verse as the source for the seven-day shiva period which is observed today when a relative passes away.

However, for a deeper understanding of this custom, we turn to a Midrash (Pesikta Zutrata 50:10) which makes a curious association between two other seven-day periods. First, this Chazal associates the mourning shiva of seven to the seven festive days following a wedding - the SHIV'AT Y'MEI SIMCHA. And additionally, the Midrash sees a person's passing from this world - and the shiva - corresponding to the creation of our world in seven days.

The question is plain: Relative to the first comparison, what underlying concept can possibly connect a period of grief with the simcha of a wedding - two completely contrasting moods? The answer may be found in the second comparison where the Midrash compares the shiva period with the seven days of Creation.

To lose a loved one, especially when it occurs suddenly, is a shattering experience. Man is thrown into a place of "hideous darkness", and, forsaken and lonely, his prayers rejected, man begins to question his own human singular reality. He is consumed by the grief, plagued by doubt in his own existential worth. The sense of despair can be overwhelming. When, however, the mourner transitions from the halachic state of ANINUT to that of AVEILUT, from before and then after the funeral, a slow - albeit painful - transformation begins to take place. The experience of t'shuva commences. "The aching heart is a contrite heart, and a contrite heart is, of course, an atoning heart." Yes, a beloved relative is gone. But what am I to do going forward; how shall I live my life differently, better, to properly memorialize the life so cruelly snatched from me? Broadly speaking. I very much want to change, and I cannot allow the death to pass without impacting the us, the living.

True, we will never - nor can we ever - understand the sheer incomprehensibility of death, but that terrible unknown cannot relieve us of our responsibility to fashion a new life, not in spite of, but precisely because of the tragedy that has befallen us. And that said, we have now come to understand why the shiva period of seven is rooted in the days of

Creation. Gathering in the human debris of death, something new is fashioned. Perhaps not at the outset, by slowly over time, for the mourners, a certain realization sets in. Death did not spell the absolute end, as much as it heralded in another creation, a new beginning - a new "seven days of Creation". In the beckoning light of a new "creation" beginning, the living are ennobled by the inspiring memories of the departed, and life begins afresh, ever greater and more meaningful. A new creation has dawned!

And now, the connection between the shiva of seven and the wedding of seven should be clear. When two people marry, they are saying goodbye to their single, ego-laden lifestyle. By discarding their narrow, selfish perspective to welcome a wider, more compassionate outlook on life, the married couple is embarking upon a new start. Just as shiva can open up a world of new opportunities, so too does a wedding launch a couple into exciting vistas and adventures. Indeed, as the old popular song once put it, "We've only just begun!" Both the shiva and the chupa are buoyed and empowered by the wonderfully bright optimism of the seven days of Creation. Neither the grief and tragedy of shiva, nor the bounded-in, self-absorbed singlehood of man ought to define man's essential mission and purpose in life.

The great theme of creation - with man as creator, emulating Gd, the Creator - summons man to break free of his sadness and melancholy and embark upon new adventures even as it also encourages him to forgo the comfort of the single life and embrace the richness and challenges of partnering with another being not only for procreation, but to discover the mysteries of being that no single life can possibly reveal. And so, the great wisdom of the Midrash is clear. Seven: Shiva = Wedding = Creation!

This message, so powerfully true in general, is even more so today. The Torah states: "And Yaakov concluded commanding his sons, and he drew in his feet onto his bed and expired and was brought in to his people" (49:33). On this verse, the Talmud (Ta'anit 5b), noticing that the word "death" is not mentioned in conjunction with Yaakov's passing, declares that indeed, YAAKOV AVINU LO MEIT, Yaakov never died! ... Just as Yaakov's progeny are alive, so is he!" How true!

For so long as we cling to life and fight for life, notwithstanding the violent reality of war with its horrible casualties - so long as we never succumb to the fatalistic prognostications of those who would see us destroyed - so long as we remind ourselves that Yaakov still lives; that Avraham, Yitzchak, Yosef, Moshe ...

still live, how can we not feel the touch of their souls, the richness of their spirits, the faith and teachings of their lives to embolden and sustain us though these difficult times.

With HaShem's help, may we witness our ultimate vindication and victory over the forces of evil. And may that triumph be that "new creation" which will mark the beginning of our redemption. 🙏