

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

TO-L'DOT 5785

The Biblical episode of Eisav selling his birthright to Yaakov is preceded by the scene which finds Yaakov preparing a pot of lentils, later to be consumed by Eisav in exchange for the B'CHORA (firstborn entitlement) (25:29-30). The Talmud (Bava Batra 16b) records the reason Yaakov engaged in such an activity. "On that day Avraham, our forefather passed away, and Yaakov, our forefather, prepared a lentil stew to comfort Yitzchak, his father." This Chazal is probably the earliest source of the custom for others to prepare a special mourner's meal - a S'UDAT HAVRA'A, the first meal which mourners eat upon returning from the cemetery.

As to why Yaakov prepared this specific type of food, the Talmud continues (ibid), "And what is different about lentils [that they, in particular, are the fare customarily offered to mourners]? They say in the West, [Eretz Yisrael], in the name of Rabba bar Mari: Just as this lentil has no mouth, [i.e., it does not have a crack like other legumes], so too a mourner has no mouth, [that is, his anguish prevents him from speaking]. Alternatively, just as this lentil is completely round, so too mourning

comes around to the inhabitants of the world." Based upon this Chazal, the Talmud (Mo'ed Katan 21b) rules: [The analogy of a mourner to lentils yields the halacha that] "A mourner, for the entire first three days [of his mourning], does not respond with a greeting to any man [when another has greeted him first], and all the more so it is true that he does not initiate inquiry [after another's welfare during that period]" The Gemara continues (ibid): "From the third day to the seventh day, he may respond [if people address him], but he may not extend greetings [to them]. From this point forward, he may extend greetings and respond in his usual manner."

The wisdom behind this ruling contains a fundamental insight into what it means to console a grieving individual. The initial question is clear: If we are enjoined not to address the mourner during the initial shiva period, what then is the purpose of paying a shiva call at all? One possible answer may be found in the Talmudic observation (Mo'ed Katan 27b) that the first three days of shiva are days of weeping, with the remaining four days set aside for eulogies, but without any conversation with the mourners. In the aftermath of the funeral and in light of the intensity of the trauma experienced by the mourner, we should respect this private grieving

and not intrude with any verbal consolation.

However, there is a far more instructive approach - a theological and psychological truth - which underlies the entire mitzva of NICHUM AVEILIM (consoling mourners) which according to Rambam (Hilchot Avel 14:1,14) is one of the highest expressions of chesed.

Let us begin to unpack this principle with the Chazal (B'rachot 7a) which recounts how Moshe made three requests of HaShem while atop Har Sinai. According to R. Meir, only the first two questions were answered. The third: "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?" remained unanswered. This imponderable theodicy, which cannot find any rational/psychological relief for us humans, speaks to the Almighty's inscrutable will. When the grisly reality of death assails us with its tragic horror and devastating black despair, what answer can be forthcoming to comfort the grieving mourner? Can even the wisest of men explain the sudden death of a spouse to his/her life-long partner, the bottomless anguish of a parent who loses a child? To even try will not only be wholly inadequate, but the attempt itself, sincere though it may be, unwittingly mocks the hideous darkness enveloping the mourner. The avel (mourner), without saying a

word, shoots an angry look which remonstrates and scolds: "How dare you offer any reason to explain the "why" of the death I am suffering - reeling - from!"

Thus, the wisdom of not addressing the mourner with any consoling words during the shiva, unless, of course, the mourner invites discussion and may welcome hearing about the righteous deeds of the deceased. But other than such sharing of warm memories, what, in point of fact, is the essential purpose of showing up at the shiva? Another Talmudic story can help (B'rachot 5b): "[R. Yochanan's student], R. Chiya bar Abba, fell ill. [R. Yochanan] entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? [Do you desire to be ill and afflicted? R. Chiya] said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. [R. Yochanan] said to him: Give me your hand. [R. Chiya bar Abba] gave him his hand, and [R. Yochanan] stood him up and restored him to health."

In this poignant encounter, R. Chiya was clearly suffering and for no apparent reason. R. Yochanan makes no attempt to resolve R. Chiya's torment. Rather, the comfort R. Yochanan demonstrates is simply showing up, offering his hand in shared empathic companionship, with the result that R. Chiya's health improves. How may this be understood?

When a person is suffering and grieving, he/she experiences a profound loneliness. Internally, racked by their all-consuming misery, they feel abandoned, forsaken. Here's how Rav Soloveitchik describes this terrible passional state: "[The mourner] starts by downgrading, denouncing himself... He arrives at the conclusion that man is not human, that he is just a living creature like the beasts in the field... He tells himself: If death is the final destiny of all men, if everything human terminates in the narrow dark grave, then why be man at all? ... Then why be committed, why carry the human-moral load? Are we not ... just a band of conceited and inflated daydreamers who somehow manage to convince themselves of some imaginary superiority over the brutes in the jungle?" (Out of the Whirlwind, pp. 1-2)

And then, into this grieving blackness and suffering loneliness of the avel, arrives a comforter - a menachem. All he/she does is quietly sit with the mourner. No words pass between them. There may be a silent embrace, perhaps hands are held. Minutes pass which seem like an eternity. The comforter eventually rises and emotionally recites: HAMAKOM Y'NACHEIM..., May the Omnipresent [Gd] comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. And

in this very gesture lies the secret of NICHUM AVEILIM, true comfort. By your very presence, you have declared to the avelim - with a deafening silence - that they are not alone, that notwithstanding their terrible bereavement, they matter, that there is a community very close by which genuinely cares about them and will never leave them!

Metaphorically, as with R. Yochanan, you offer your hand and you help the mourner stand up, for alone, he cannot. And in so doing, you enable the aveilim to rise and continue to live on, not in spite of the loss, but because of it! You tell them, HAMAKOM, the Gd who is everywhere, has nevertheless chosen to intimately join them - like a dear friend - in their grief. IMO ANOCHI B'TZARA, "I [Gd] will be with him in times of distress... " (T'hilim 81:15). And you softly reassure them that, "He [Gd] will destroy death for ever; and the Lord Gd will wipe away tears from off all faces... (Yeshayahu 25:8)

And this is the ultimate comfort!

I was moved to compose this chizuk after seeing pictures of young soldiers - smiling, beautiful and kind faces - day after day, cut down in the prime of their lives while courageously fighting to keep us all safe here in Israel. I would think of the bereaved parents and siblings, the many widows and the countless

orphans. Heart wrenching! How in the world can we comfort them?! Perhaps, the above is one possible answer. And here in Israel, whenever such a funeral takes place, multitudes of people show up, mostly and often complete strangers to the grieving family. And yet they come as if to broadcast and proclaim to the mourners: "You are not alone. We are with you in your grief. We are you and you are us! One nation, one people, bound together in common destiny and purpose as Gd's Chosen! 🙌"