

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

VAYCHI - 10 TEVET 5785

In our Parsha, we read that upon the funeral for Yaakov, Yosef ordained a seven-day mourning period for his father (50:10). From this verse, the Yerushalmi (Mo'ed Katan 3:5) derives the obligation of sitting shiva for seven days. Rambam, in the beginning of his discussion of the laws of mourning (Hilchot Avel 1:1), references another source for this custom which mentions another seven-day period. He states that Moshe took the initiative to re-institute seven days of shiva upon the death of a family member and, at the same time, he instituted the seven days of rejoicing after a marriage. The question is plain: Why did Moshe include both in the same edict? What is the conceptual link between mourning and rejoicing after the wedding?

Rav Soloveitchik, in a tour de force lecture on Parshat Vaychi addresses this question and offers this insightful response: "The seven days of rejoicing... is part of the same ruling because both marriage and death connect to the tragic experience of loneliness. If man did not experience loneliness, he would neither mourn the passing of a relative, nor rejoice much at his marriage. 'It is not good that man is alone (L'VADO); I shall make him a helpmate opposite him'

(B'reishit 2:18). L'VADO is man's worst existential tragedy. It is both the reason behind man's desire to marry, as well as the experience of mourning. The period of rejoicing following marriage is related to man's desire to join someone else, for he is mortal and lonely. For the same reason, the vacuum created by death is cruel, the pain excruciating. Gd introduced the laws of mourning so man could find himself again; so, he would not be completely overwhelmed by that which cannot be changed... This idea describes how Judaism, in worldview as well as in practice, relates to the tensions and stormy emotions of the person experiencing either joy or mourning." (Divrei Hashkafa, pp. 37-39)

Perhaps we may expand upon the Rav's answer and suggest that just as marriage rescues man/woman from their loneliness by providing a caring and loving companionship, so too, when during the shiva period, a community of people enters the home of the mourner to offer their condolences, their simple presence, their oftentimes silent embrace of the grieving mourner, also rescues him/her from their desolate bereaving solitude.

In the Rav's discussion of the various topics mentioned in Parshat Vaychi, he emphasizes that the Torah's intention in recounting these events had one common underlying purpose: to

prepare the family and descendants of Yaakov to survive the Egyptian exile and merit their redemption. And chief among them: the critical importance of community togetherness to help its members withstand and endure what would turn out to be the harshest of enslavement, torture and death. This Yaakov accomplished with his special blessings to his sons, and Yosef - with his family reconciliation and the funeral and shiva - a unifying, bonding kinship of brothers - for his father.

There is, however, another dimension to this linkage of the days of mourning with the days of the post-wedding celebration. It finds expression in the few terse comments of Radbaz (R. Dovid ibn Zimra, Spain/ Tzfat, 15-16th c.) on the above mentioned Rambam. He asserts that the coupling of both seven-day events comes to advise a wedding celebrant that even during the marriage festivities, one should contemplate the day of death. Definitely quite a strange and perplexing bit of advice. As his proof text, he quotes the verse from Kohelet (7:14): "On a day of goodness [prosperity] be in good spirits, and on a day of adversity, reflect [that]: the one was set up against the other by Gd, in order that man should not find anything after Him." What important lesson is Radbaz attempting to teach?

On the phrase in that pasuk in Koheles, "the one was set up against the other by Gd", Chazal explain (Chagiga 15a., Kohelet Rabba, ad loc.) that with everything HaShem created, He created its opposite. In the physical realm, there are mountains and valleys, oceans and rivers; in the spiritual cosmos, there is Heaven and Hell; in the world of man, there is wealth and poverty, good and evil, the righteous and the wicked. Indeed, the list of opposites are interminable. Why HaShem chose to establish creation as such can be a fascinating and important theological inquiry. However, for our limited purposes, let us suggest a rather simple explanation: The reality of life is a mix of enormous contradictions and paradoxes. One day, the sun shines brightly and the next, dark clouds fill the horizon. One moment, love is in the air, the next, hate-filled rhetoric poisons the room. One instant - smiles and laughter, the next - gloom and depression. The incongruities of life are inescapable; like it or not, they are a permanent fixture of our life. "Into every life, a little rain must fall", and sometimes, it's a downpour, a storm! What then are we to make of it?

Two lessons: One, in navigating between these opposites, one must never surrender to the extremes of either. Enjoy the marriage celebration, but do not become intoxicated and succumb to bacchanalian feast-

ing. The Talmud records (B'rachot 30b) that a glass was shattered at a wedding to sober up the attendees lest frivolity ruin the occasion. In a word, "break a glass" and "remember the day of death". And the reverse: In the wake of the death of a loved one, when the mourner is assailed by the grisly blackness of loss, do not crash into a pit of bottomless despair and hopelessness. Heed the words of Rambam (Hilchot Avel 13:11): "A person should not become excessively broken hearted because of a person's death... That means not to weep excessively, for death is the 'way of the world'. And a person who causes himself [undue] grief because of the 'way of the world' is a fool." In a word, even in mourning, remember "tomorrow is also the wedding of your child".

Indeed, as the wisest of all men declared: "Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under the sun: A time to be born and a time to die... a time to laugh and a time to weep..." (Kohelet 3:1-8) The clashing vicissitudes of life must first be apprehended in all of its enigmatic, tension-filled contradictions, and then judiciously experienced with balance and wisdom, behaving carefully never to veer to the extremes.

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The second lesson is no less important and is inextricably bound up with the first. The very contrast between

the positives and negatives of life compels us to appreciate the worth of each and incorporate their teachings into our lives. The Rav would often point out that had the Jewish people not suffered through the bitter enslavement in Egypt, the precious values of brotherhood, family, chesed and compassion would never have etched themselves into our collective DNA. Only when confronted with the horrors of evil, does man fight for the good. Only in the shadow of death does the moment of marriage assume infinite value. Only in the wake of a wedding celebration does the fragility of life, the stark awareness of our finite future, come into cold focus. Consider: In the midst of the simcha of a Yom Tov, we recite Yizkor!

Our Parsha is invariably read in and around the 10th of Tevet, that day which marks the event ultimately leading to the destruction of the First Temple and for the first time, casting the Jewish people into exile. And still, we are in exile. How is it possible that we've managed to survive over these millennia?! The answer:

Moshe taught us the strange and eternal secret of the "sevens"!

And so, as we conclude Sefer B'reishit, heartened with this wise legacy of the "sevens", let us forever be assured that CHAZAK, CHAZAK, V'NITCHAZEIK. 🙌