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a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

A Tearful Question

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH 5778

(The following is based in large part on a dissertation of R’ Yitzchak Zilberstein, as recorded in the sefer V’ha’arev Na, parshas Chayei Sarah.)

Yitzchak’s first appearance in this week’s *parshah* takes place in a field, as the *passuk* states: וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק בָּא מְבוֹא בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי... וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לַפְּנוֹת עֶרֶב – “And Yitzchak came from having gone to Be’er La’chai Ro’i... and Yitzchak went out to ‘converse’ in the field as evening approached” (*Bereishis* 24:62,63). Chazal understand this as a reference to prayer and explain that his behavior here was pioneering; that is, the Torah here alludes to the fact that Yitzchak established the Minchah service (which takes place before the advent of evening).

But it seems that through this action, Yitzchak was a pioneer in another aspect of prayer. Throughout the centuries, there have been many devout individuals who followed his example and found the field to be an optimal setting for meditation and communing with Hashem.

In fact, as we shall see, in one instance such activity gave rise to a technical but intriguing question in the realm of *halachah*.

Unintended Consequences

Even in our times there exist individuals whose sense of spirituality is highly developed. In any event, one such elevated soul utilized the exalted atmosphere of Shabbos to traverse the field and conduct his devotions. At one point, this pious individual placed his head between his knees and poured out his heart in prayer to Hashem. His level of *deveikus* (attachment to Hashem) was so profound that in the course of his supplications, the tears began rolling off his cheeks.

He was suddenly awakened from his reverie by the approach of another Jew. The newcomer, apparently, had something to tell him. While quite impressed by his level of devotion, the visitor proceeded to note that the situation was potentially problematic from a *halachic* standpoint – in a most severe way. As evidenced by the wet area on the ground beneath where he sat, it seemed that the shedding of the supplicant’s tears might have constituted a desecration of Shabbos! Specifically, either of the very first two *melachos* (forbidden labors) listed in the Mishnah were involved; as the Mishnah states (*Shabbos* 7:2):

אַבוֹת מְלָאכוֹת אַרְבָּעִים חִסַּר אַחַת. הַיֹּרֵעַ, וְהַחוֹרֵשׁ...

“There are one less than forty principal forms of (forbidden) labor; (They are:) Planting, plowing...”

Now, the Gemara (*Mo’ed Katan* 2b) records a dispute regarding the activity of watering the ground on Shabbos. One opinion places it in the category of “*zorei’a* – planting,” as it furthers

the development and growth of the seed; the other considers it a form of “*choreish* – plowing,” as it serves to soften up the earth. Either way, watering the ground (in an area of [potential] growth) constitutes prohibited *melachah*. Thus, the visitor tried to gently convey to his colleague that he might actually be desecrating Shabbos with his tearful devotions in the field.

One angle to consider in addressing this issue is the matter of *kavanah* – that is, intent (or lack thereof). Clearly, the supplicant was not *intending* to water the plants; it is simply that the water that fell from his eyes from his devotions happened to make their way to the grass below.

A related scenario appears in *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 336:3)*, whereby someone is eating in a garden on Shabbos. The *Shulchan Aruch* prohibits him from washing his hands for bread, as the water will fall upon and give sustenance to the grass. Here, too, the diner does not necessarily intend to practice fertilization; but the act remains prohibited, nonetheless. It would seem, then, that the matter of intent would not be a cause for leniency for the tearful supplicant of our scenario, either.

Saved by Salt

This question was actually addressed by the Tchebiner Rav in his volume of responsa, *Doveiv Meisharim (vol. IV, § 44)*. He rules leniently, based on some interesting grounds:

There is a teaching of Chazal that discusses the various fluids associated with a person’s facial organs: “The face that Hashem has created in a person contains numerous ‘streams’... Eye fluid is salty, the fluid from the ear is thick, nasal fluid is putrid and oral fluid is flavorful” (*Bamidbar Rabbah 18:22*). Now, this quote is taken somewhat out of context, as the Medrash had its own point to make in broaching this particular topic. For our purposes, however, we do see that Chazal deem tears to be “*meluchim* – salty,” which is the same term they apply elsewhere. The Gemara (*Ta’anis 9b*) refers to oceanic waters as “*meluchim*,” and Rashi there supplies some pertinent comments: “*Ein tevu’ah gedeilah mei’hen* – Produce cannot grow from (such waters).”

And so the *Tchebiner Rav* ruled in favor of the supplicant on this basis. He need not be concerned with his tears watering the ground on Shabbos, for, as we have seen, fluid that is “*meluchim*” does not cause vegetation to grow.

As an aside, another potential issue with the supplicant’s behavior involves the mere act of crying on Shabbos, which might be considered inconsistent with the atmosphere of the day. However, the Mishnah Berurah (286:4) cites the Taz, who is lenient with regard to one who sheds tears as a result of *kavanah* (intense concentration) during prayer.

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