

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yosef *ben* Nosson *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Looking Back

PARSHAS RE’EH 5778

One of the *mitzvos* in this week’s *parshah* provides some insight into the proper (and improper) way to relate to the most unfortunate of circumstances. The *passuk* states: לֹא תִתְגַּדְדוּ וְלֹא תִשְׂמִימוּ קַרְחָה בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם לְמַת – “Do not lacerate yourselves, nor shall you set a bald spot (in your hair in the area) between your eyes on (the occasion of) death” (*Devarim 14:1*). This was the practice of the gentiles; upon losing a loved one, they would vent their grief in a somewhat grisly manner –by engaging in self-mutilation. The Torah, however, warns Yisrael to avoid such conduct.

Differing Durations

There is, of course, a Torah way of responding to this circumstance: the institution of *aveilus* (mourning). As we know, the length of the mourning period varies, depending for which relative one is observing *aveilus*. For a parent, the child observes a period that lasts an entire year, while for all other relatives, the mourning period lasts only thirty days.

R’ Yitzchak Hutner (cited in *Peninim Mi’shulchan Gavohah, parshas Re’eh*) wonders about these timeframes; one would have imagined that the opposite would be more sensible. It is obviously a trying situation whenever a loss is suffered; but there would seem to be a difference here in terms of the magnitude of the sorrow. There is usually nothing completely out of the ordinary when a parent passes away; there is grief, of course, but what has occurred is the usual course of events. It is truly tragic, however, if one loses a child, *chas v’Shalom*. Thus, one might have thought that the latter instance would result in greater grief and a more extended period of *aveilus*. However, as stated, that is not the case. The technical period of *aveilus* for a child ends after thirty days, while for a parent it continues for the entire year. Why is that?

The answer, explains R’ Hutner, is that the passing of a parent is in fact a more impactful experience. This is because the loss transcends the departure of a beloved figure. In a sense, the loss is generational in scope – the bereft child is removed yet one more generation from the climactic event of Har Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

We see this idea manifest in another key mitzvah, as is stated in the following Mishnah (*Kiddushin 1:7*):

כָּל מִצְוֹת הַבֵּן עַל הָאָב, אֲנָשִׁים חַיְבִין וְנָשִׁים פְּטוּרוֹת.

“(Regarding) any mitzvah pertaining to a son that is incumbent on the parent – men are obligated, while women are exempted.”

The Gemara clarifies to what this rule refers. There are certain *mitzvos* (such as *bris milah* [circumcision]) that apply to a child but are the responsibility of the parent; and in such instances, the Mishnah informs us, it is specifically the father (and not the mother) who must discharge the obligation. In any event, the Gemara provides a list of the *mitzvos* included in

this heading, one of which is the overarching obligation of *talmud Torah* – Torah study. This, too, is the domain of the father, who must see to it that his son becomes Torah-educated.

While the obligation rests primarily upon the father, Chazal also greatly encourage the grandfather's role in teaching Torah to his grandchild (*Kiddushin 30a*). In fact, as the *Sefer Hamakneh* explains (*Kiddushin, ibid.*), there is a certain advantage of learning Torah from a grandfather even more than from the parent himself. This is because the grandfather is that much closer to Har Sinai, one step higher in the great chain of Torah transmission.

Evolution of Disrespect

This whole idea calls to mind a well-known anecdote involving R' Ya'akov Kamenetsky. On a flight from Eretz Yisrael to America, this great sage found himself seated next to a certain Yerucham Meshal, an Israeli politico and the head of the Histadrut (Labor Union). While the latter was an ardent secularist, he nevertheless accorded the sage with some deference and engaged him in scholarly conversation. For the duration of their talk, the powerful politician could not help but notice – and be impressed by – the conduct of R' Ya'akov's son and daughter who accompanied him on the flight. Every so often one or the other would approach their father/grandfather, inquire as to his welfare and ascertain if there was any way they could be of help.

At one point, Mr. Meshal brought this “phenomenon” to R' Ya'akov's attention. “Could you explain to me,” he asked, “how you accomplished this monumental feat? I hardly see my own children, and my grandchildren never bother to visit. Yours, on the other hand, wait on you hand and foot, with the utmost respect!”

R' Ya'akov proceeded to offer his famous reply, touching on the theme discussed above. “Let me explain. Torah Jews revere their past, hearkening all the way back to the great Revelation at Har Sinai, when Hashem gave us the Torah. As such, each previous generation is one step closer to that great event. And so, the younger generation looks up to the older one, for the latter is that much closer to Har Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

But you believe in and preach the notion that man descended from monkeys. As a result, the younger generation has no choice but to consider themselves more sophisticated than their elders; after all, you are one step closer to the apes, while they are more “developed.” Thus, the younger generation is essentially trained to look down at you; that is why they don't accord you the proper respect” (*The Torah Profile, p. 156*).

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