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IDEA: CONSOLATION; GUILT; וישב ראש השנה

It occurs to me that people who resist consolation, and prefer to remain disconsolate, betray some element of guilt. Where people live together beautifully in a lovely manner, and without any excessive complications in their relationship, then consolation comes normally, even if slowly. The wounds heal clean, and the scars become covered up. But if there were difficulties in their relationships, and if the survivor nurses genuine guilt, then usually there is difficulty in submitting to the healing process of consolation.

Consider Jacob. He refused to be consoled over the loss of Joseph -- וימאן להתנחם. Yet, we are not told the same about his feelings concerning Rachel. Did he not love Rachel dearly even as he loved Joseph?

Yes, he loved them both. But with Rachel, we know of no reason why Jacob should have felt guilty. He was good to her, in the best way possible, with no apparent slip-up. Hence, he mourned her, but he accepted consolation.

However, with Joseph the relations were more complicated. Indeed, he loved him most dearly, but he probably always felt guilty about sending him to Shechem in the first place. He also probably felt guilty because he dismissed his dreams so offhandedly. And that is why he refused to be consoled.

In the same vein, that may be the meaning of the Prophet Jeremiah that Rachel herself refuses to be consoled because of the exile of her children. Remember that Rachel on her deathbed called her child Ben-Oni, בני און not בנימין...

But this does not mean that a genuine feeling of guilt makes consolation permanently inaccessible. Eventually it may come if there is some attempt to rectify matters in future relationships.

This may explain why the Torah goes out of its way to inform us that after mourning Rebecca, Isaac was consoled over his mother's death: ויצחק אחרי אמו. Why bother to tell us this? Rashi too was apparently bothered by this question, for which reason he offered the thesis that because a son is close to his mother he is disconsolate over her death until he marries. However, if this is so, why not mention this with regard to Jacob who no doubt mourned the death of his mother Rebecca?

The answer is a profound psychological truth. Isaac always felt deep guilt over his mother's death. Sarah died, the Rabbis tells, when she was informed of the Akidah, Abraham's (attempted) sacrifice of her only son, Isaac. The shock is what caused her death; she was, in the final analysis, the only real victim of the entire Akedah episode!

Undoubtedly, Isaac carried a burden of guilt; was it proper for me to offer my life at the Akedah so willingly -- without considering what it would do to my mother? Was it morally permissible for me to achieve my place in history -- at her expense? Having done all this, is there any way to atone for this, to repay her somehow in my own life?

When he met Rebecca and noticed her exemplary behavior -- both her treatment of Eliezer who chose Rebecca for Isaac on behalf of Abraham, and (according to the Midrashic tradition cited by Rashi) in the way she conducted her household, intuitively doing what was characteristic of Sarah's conduct in her home -- he felt that in some way he had restored Sarah to life.

And do -- **וַיִּנָּחֵם יצחק אֶת־אִמּוֹ**, Isaac was consoled over his mother's death.