

(Adapted from a Sheloshim Eulogy by
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TOPIC:

SITTING SHIVA IS DOING
TESHUVA

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The observance of shiva, sheloshim, and yud beit chodesh (for parents) are not only catharsis of sorrow but also experiences of self-judgment and penitence. Avelut is intrinsically an expression of teshuva. The aching heart is a contrite heart and a contrite heart seeks atonement. Enlightened and sensitive avelut is saturated with deep feelings of guilt. Quite a few of the injunctions governing the observance of shiva, prohibitions against washing, use of cosmetics, ointments, wearing shoes and sexual intimacy are reminiscent of Yom Kippur, a day when the Jew quests for forgiveness.

What are the sins for which the mourner seeks expiation? These are in two areas, vis-a-vis man (the departed) and vis-a-vis God.

Teshuva Vis-a-Vis Man

Man is usually late in value judgments. His appreciation of persons, things and events is a product of hindsight. In retrospection, man discovers the precise value of someone who was but is no longer with him. This delayed understanding and appreciation is painfully tragic. While the departed was near and we could communicate, we were only partially perceptive of his (her) identity. Our awareness of his specialness, as someone vital and precious to us, comes at the very instant he departs and withdraws into a mist of remoteness. Only then do we inquire with painful longing, "Who was he who brightened my days? What did he mean to me? Why do I feel so bereft and disoriented?"

These and similar questions which descend in droves upon the grieving, expiating mourner, are extremely soul-searing since they are saturated with guilt feelings. "Why didn't I ask these questions yesterday or yesteryear? Why wasn't I more expressive, more helpful, more appreciative?" Their image sparkles teasingly from afar. We extend our arms to embrace them, but a widening gap stretches between us. What exertions or treasures we would now readily expend for only five minutes with them, to open our hearts and minds to them, to make amends, to say what was left unsaid, to do what had been neglected. If only we could.....but, alas, it is too late. Eulogists and mourners try to build bridges across the gap but, frustratingly, in vain. The disciples of Elijah went out to seek their master after his ascension in the tempest. Three days they sought him upon the mountains and in the valleys. They sought but could not find him. (II Kings 2:17,18)(1)

In speaking of guilt, we are not referring to those who were neglectful or callous; such people will rarely look back with remorse. Our analysis is directed at those who were seemingly exemplary in their filial performance, yet they are

1. מלכים ב, כ:יז - וישלחו חמשים איש ויבקשו שלשה ימים ולא מצאנו...
ויאמר אליהם, הלוא אמרתי אליכם אל תלכו.

plagued with feelings of insufficiency in their hearts. They realize how fragmentary was their relationship. They bemoan opportunities lost forever. He who aches not with such emotions is lacking in the experiential essence of avelut.

The Talmud in Ber. 42b (2) tells us a strange story: "When Rav died (Founder of Babylonian Academy of Sura), his disciples walked after his bier in the funeral procession. On their return trip, they stopped to eat bread by the Danak River. Completing their meal, they discussed the halachic question whether the requirement of zimun (invitation), to recite grace as a cohesive unit, applies in this case since they had joined each other haphazardly. They were unable to resolve the problem. Whereupon, Rav Ada bar Ahava rose and made another rent in his garment which he had rent previously in grief and said, 'Rav is dead and we haven't even learned from him the elementary rules of saying grace!' They discovered the greatness of their master and their dependence on him on the day they buried him. Sensing anew the depth of their loss, they were ready to give their lives for even the briefest opportunity to speak to him again.

How sad and ironic! They had studied under his tutelage for many long years and had been with him daily. He had trained their minds, fashioned their outlook and had opened up to them vast vistas of thought. And yet, they now realized that he was only partially known to them. They had paid homage to him as the great master of the Diaspora, but even they did not discern Rav's stature and status. Now, he had vanished from their midst and they tore their garments anew, reflecting an additional dimension of loss. Such ex post facto judgments are the saddest of life's experiences. How tragically elusive are even those who are close to us!

The Rosh HaYeshiva was preparing his annual kinus teshuva shiur which regularly drew thousands of listeners. He was totally immersed in his material over the course of many hours, when he felt the hovering presence of his father and life-long Rebbe, the Gaon Reb Moshe, Z.T.L. "Oh my father," he said, "I have arrived at some fine insights about the laws of Yom Kippur and the mitzvah of Shofar. Some of these ideas may please you while others you will reject." He spoke to him beseechingly, even as the visitation was receding, leaving him with painful longing and emptiness. The days of yesteryear could not be recaptured. Oh, if only he could have several minutes of Talmudic discourse with him.

Teshuva Vis-a-Vis God

The mourner also feels guilty as regards his own religious identity. Our sages had varied opinions about death. Was man originally intended upon creation to be mortal, (Ex. R. 2:4) (3) or did he become mortal as a result of his demonstrated

2. ברכות מב: - כי נח נפשיה דרב, אזלו תלמידיו בתריה (רש"י - דקברוהו בעיר אחרת). כי הדדי, אמרי, ביזיל וניכול לחמא אנהר דנק. בחר דרכי יתבי וקא מיבעיא להו, הסבו דוקא תנן אבל ישבו לא או דילמא כיון דאמר ביזיל וניכול ריפתא בדוכתא פלגינא כי הסבו דמי. (רש"י - דקתני, היו יושבים בלא הזמנת מקום הוא דלא הוי קביעות אבל אנו שהזמנינוו לכך, הוי קביעות ואחד מברך לכולן.) לא הוי בידיהו. קם רב אדא בר אבהו, אהדר קרעיה לאחוריה וקרע קרעיה אחרינא. אמר: נח נפשיה דרב וברכת מזונא לא גמרינן (רש"י) אבל עכשיו כיום המיתה על שהיו צריכין להוראה ואין יודעין להורות).

3. שמו"ר ב:ד - כל מי שכתוב בו "היה", מתוקן לכך. "הן אדם היה כאחד ממנו (בראשית ג:כב)", מתוקנת היתה המיתה לבא לעולם שנא' (שם אג) "וחושך על פני תהום", זו מיתה שמחשיך בני הבריות... מתחלת ברייתם נתקנו לכך.

vulnerability to sin, by Adam and Eve and their descendants? (Shab. 58b) (4)
(BB 75b) (5) Are not all men susceptible to sin, "for there is not a righteous man upon the earth who does (only) good and sins not." (Ecc. 7:20) (6)

The all pervasive judgment is that death per se reflects the moral imperfection which is indigenous to all mankind and that if man were perfect, if he would not inevitably fall short, man could elude death or assuage its sting. The prophet Isaiah projected a vision of the eschatological world when men will attain perfection and death will be finally defeated. "He will destroy death forever. And the Lord God will wipe the tears away from all faces." (Isa. 25:8) (7) In the end of days, man will overcome his mortality.

In avelut, we ponder the relatedness of death to sin and we reflect on the moral tenor of our lives, noting its shortcomings and repenting of its failures. We think of our mortality and of our accountability and of the pressing need for religious reorientation. Kohelet counselled, "It is better (beneficial) to visit a house of mourning than a house of feasting; for that is the end of all men and the living will reflect thoughtfully." (Ecc. 7:2) (8)

The Sefer Hachinuch explicitly equates teshuva with avelut. "When he suffers the death of a near kin to whom he is emotionally bound, the Torah requires certain acts which concentrate his thoughts on his grief and he will realize that his grief relates to sinfulness. "For the Eternal does not afflict or grieve the children of men." (Lam. 3:33) When one reflects upon this, he will set his mind to Teshuva and will mend his ways as he could but the wicked ascribe death to chance, saying, "that what befalls man and beast is alike; that the same fate is for both; as one dies so does the other." (Ecc. 3:19) (9) Shiva, sheloshim and the kaddish reject this nihilistic pessimism but affirm that the world is governed by a righteous God, whose ways are often inscrutable. (Tzidduk Hadin)

That mourning is equated with teshuva is implicit in the practice in Talmudic days of avelim being required to overturn their couches (beds), Kefiyas Hamita. Bar Karpura explained the symbolism: God said, I have set my image upon them but because of their sins, I have upset it. Let (therefore) your couches be

4. שכת נה: - אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה: רכוננו של עולם, מפני מה קנסת מיתה על אדם הראשון? אמר להם: מצוה קלה צויתיו ועבר עליה. א"ל, והלא משה ואהרן שקיימו כל החורה כולה ומתו. א"ל מקרא אחד לצדיק ולרשע לטוב ולרשע (קהלת ט:כ). הוא דאמר כי האני תנא, דתניא. ר"ש בן אלעזר אומר, אף משה ואהרן בחטאם מתו שנאמר "יען לא האמנתם בי" (במדבר כ:יב), האתאמנתם בי, עדיין לא הגיע זמנכם ליפטר מן העולם.
5. כ"ב עה - אמר לו הקב"ה לחירם מלך צור, כך נסתכלתי (פ' רש"י - כשכראתי עולמי שאתה עתיד למרוד ולעשות אותך אלוה). ... וקנסתי מיתה על אדם הראשון (משמע שאדם וחוה מתו מפני חטאי הדורות הבאים).
6. קהלת ז:כ - כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא.
7. ישעיהו כה:ח - בלע המות לנצח ומחה ה' אלקים דמעה מעל כל פנים.
8. קהלת ז:כ - טוב ללכת אל בית אבל מלכת אל בית משתה, כאשר הוא סוף כל האדם, והחי יתן אל לבו.
9. ספר החנוך - רסד - על כן בכוא אליו עונש מקרה מות כאחד מקרוביו אשר הטבע מחייב האהבה להם, תחיבנו החורה לעשות מעשים בעצמו אשר יעוררוהו לקבוע מחשבתו על הצער שהגיע אליו, ואז ידע ויחבונן בנפשו, כי עונותיו גרמו לו להגיע אליו הצער ההוא. כי השם לא יענה מלכו ויגע בני איש (איכה ג:לג), כי אם מצד חטאים... ובתת האדם אל לבו ענין זה במעשה האכלות, ישיח דעתו לעשות חשוכה ויכשיר מעשיו כפי כחו. והמתכמים הכופרים... יתלו מות בני איש למקרה הזמן, כי מקרה האדם והכהמה אחד להם, כמות זה, כן מות זה (קהלת ג:יט).

overturned." (M.K. 15b) (10) Rashi explains that the image refers to God's spiritual image, tzelem elokim which is bestowed upon all mankind but is tarnished through sin.

Bar Kapara's explanation becomes intelligible if we note that in Talmudic and Midrashic semantics, the word mita (bed, couch) represents one's progeny and, more specifically, man's role as a father and teacher, as a progenitor and as a pedagogue. (i.e. Shemma Yesh Psul B'mitusi Pes. 5b) (11) He is the link between the past and the future on both the biological and spiritual levels, in the transmission of the tradition, Mesorah. The mita is the "agent" in the procreative process and the seat from which learning is imparted. If man (or woman) has failed to discharge this two-fold duty, he has diminished the image and punishment, possibly sorrow may follow. The overturned mita represents the avel's humble confession of unrealized potentiality or outright failure and a plea for forgiveness.

Overturning the mita was later replaced by the practice of turning mirrors to the wall or covering them. The symbolism is the same, as with the overturned mita namely, that our image is not as lustrous as it should be. The period of mourning suggests human failure and covering the mirror is a form of vidui. (12)

"From Afar the Lord Appeared to Me"

The act of repentance partakes of the same nostalgic yearnings as experienced by the mourner for his departed. For the penitent also mourns the loss of a precious comradeship, the departure of Divine closeness. "From afar the Lord appeared to me; and with an everlasting love I have loved him." (Jer. 31:2) (13) The penitent sees God far away, at an immeasurable distance. Once God was close but he was blind and unappreciative. When he was devout, life was meaningful and comforting; there were intermittent moments of holiness. But then he became bored, distracted and subverted, straying almost absentmindedly. He immersed himself in the here and now, with its immediate gratifications. He squandered God's comradeship; he relinquished what was most precious.

10. מועד קטן טו - אבל חייב בכפית המטה. דתני בר קפרא: דמות דיוקי נחתי כהן ובעונותיהם הפכתיה. כפו מטותיהם עליה. (פ' רש"י - "דמות דיוקני" כצלם אלקים עשה את האדם.)
11. פסחים נו. - בקש יעקב לגלות את קץ הימים ונסתלקה ממנו שכינה. אמר: "שמא חס ושלום יש במטתי (בכני) פסול?" אמרו לו בניו: "שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד. כשם שאין כלכך אלא אחד, כך כלכינו אלא אחד." (ראה ויק"ר לו:ד, "אבל יעקב מטתו שלמה, כל בניו צדיקים".)
12. ש"ע יו"ד שפז:ב - עכשיו לא נהגו בכפית המטה; כתוב בשו"ת 'לודאי השדה' (ס' עח) בשם חתם סופר, דעכשיו נוהגין לכסות המראה, דזהו במקום כפית המטה. ובירושלמי (מו"ק פ"ג) מפורש, הפכו הסרסר (agent), דהיינו המטה שהוא הסרסר בין איש לאשתו לצורך יצירת הולד. והמראות הצובאות ג"כ סרסדים הם ולכן מבסין אותן. (גם נראה בהם דמות דיוקנן, ע"כ מהפכין - גנזי יוסף קמח).

The mirror, too, is the "agent" facilitating the procreative role since it enhances marital attractiveness.

13. ירמיהו לא:ב - מרחוק ה' נראה לי, ואהבת עולם אהבתיך.

At first, the alienation was hardly perceived, its effects only vaguely discerned, as with mourners who only feel the finality of their loss after shiva and sheloshim. Gradually, it dawned upon him that he had lost the central pillar which provided stability and meaning to his life. "I feel banished. I have nobody to plead with, no one to cry to from the depths. The gates of heaven are closed to me. My path is twisted." But suddenly, the wonder takes place. "From afar the Lord appeared to me." From an infinite distance, he hears the soft whisper, "an everlasting love I have loved you." God, too, bemoans the separation. He, too, is lonely. He is waiting patiently. We are spiritual mourners when we sin but the road to reconciliation is open to us, however distant and formidable.

The departed cannot come back, though we partially assuage the pain through the rites of avelut. But in teshuva vis-a-vis God, the Torah assures us, "If you search there for the Lord your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul." (Deut. 4:20) (14)

On the Next Day-Mimocheros

Many a time, the Torah while telling us about sin, adds, "And it came to pass on the morrow," va-yehi m'imocheros (Ex. 32:30) (15) or "They rose up in the morning," Va-yashkimu baboker (Num. 14:40), (16) informing us that the next day they did repent. Yesterday, they were insensitive and hard, shameful and rebellious but today there is renewed openness and heightened receptivity. There is a mimocheros, a next day for building bridges of reconciliation. This is the great chesed of teshuva.

14. דברים ד:כט - ובקשתם משם את האלקיך ומצאת כי תדרשנו ככל לבבך וככל נפשך.
15. כמדבר יד:מ - וישכימו בבקר, ויעלו על ראש ההר לאמר, הננו, ועלינו אל המקום אשר אמר ה', כי חטאנו.
16. שמות לב:ל - ויהי ממחרת ויאמר משה אל העם, אתם חטאתם חטאה גדולה... וישמע העם את הדבר הרע הזה ויתאבלו (עשו תשובה).