

## **“In cases of hardship, they allowed one to comfort the mourner on Shabbat”**

*Sermon delivered on January 16, 2016 at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun*

### **1. Grief is not a Shabbat topic**

Grief and mourning are not Shabbat topics. Shabbat is meant to be a day of tranquility, peace, and joy.

But there are times when an exception must be made. The Talmud (Shabbat 12a-b) records a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel about whether one should visit mourners on Shabbat.

אין מנחמין אבלים, ואין מבקרין חולין בשבת, דברי בית שמאי, ובית הלל מתירין.

"One does not comfort mourners...on Shabbat, this is the opinion of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel allows it."

Rashi explains that one who attends a shiva house will be pained by the visit; the mourner's pain is shared and transferred to the visitor, and the visitor's enjoyment of Shabbat will be diminished. Beit Shammai forbids shiva visits for this reason. Yet Beit Hillel allows visitors, because helping others is too important. The Talmud concludes the discussion by saying:

ואמר רבי חנינא: בקושי התירו לנחם אבלים ולבקר חולים בשבת.

"Rabbi Chanina said: it is in cases of hardship that they allowed...one to visit mourners on Shabbat."

The allowance to disrupt the tranquility of Shabbat for a shiva visit is a reluctant one, and not meant to become ordinary. It is only allowed "b'koshi", a difficult permission left for difficult times.

However, this Shabbat for our congregation is a day of true "koshi", difficulty. The Moffson family mourns the tragic passing of Daniella; and all of us, the entire congregation, are mourning with the Moffson family. And so, today, in this time of difficulty, grief must be the topic for a Shabbat sermon.

### **2. Grief is complicated**

The word “b’koshi’ also describes the topic of grief. We don’t understand grief, because we can’t understand tragedies. How can it be that a young woman who was the first to help everyone and the last to finish her prayers should pass away at such a young age?

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot(4:15) says:

רבי ינאי אומר, אין בידינו לא משלות הרשעים ואף לא מיסורי הצדיקים

"Neither the security of the wicked nor the suffering of the righteous are within the grasp of our understanding."

We think Rav Yannai is simply telling us he has no answer for why bad things happen to good people. But this is a superficial reading of the Mishnah. Rav Yannai isn’t just saying that we are ignorant regarding a certain theological question; that would not merit being enshrined in Pirkei Avot. Instead he is making a profound ethical point: if you insist on finding an answer to why bad things happen to good people, you are doing something wrong.

Rav Yannai is stating an ethical imperative: it’s wrong to search for answers, because any so-called “answer” will diminish the enormity of the tragedy. Our responsibility is to see a tragic loss for what it is: tragic. Any attempt to explain away tragedy would be morally wrong, because the Jewish tradition sees mourning as an ethical responsibility.

The Talmud (Shabbat 105b) says:

רבי שמעון בן פזי אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי משום בר קפרא: כל המוריד דמעות על אדם כשר - הקדוש ברוך הוא סופרן, ומניחן בבית גגזיו, שנאמר +תהילים נו+ נדי ספרתה אתה שימה דמעתי בנאדך הלא בספרתך

“Anyone who sheds tears over the death of a good person, God counts them and puts them in His storehouse”. The tears of tragedy are precious, because they are tears of love; and it is the love of man, rather than explanations for God, that is our first responsibility.

Years ago, I officiated at a funeral for a Holocaust survivor who had intermarried. At the funeral, it turned out that not only had he intermarried, but actually, he had attended church for many years. The family asked a “friend” to speak; as it turned out, it was his pastor. The pastor (along with the man’s son) gave speeches about how the deceased was in a better place, how leaving this world was good for the deceased. Indeed, we should be happy for the deceased, they declared.

Luckily, I had left the final remarks to myself. I responded by explaining that in the Jewish tradition, we grieve by sitting on the floor and tearing our garments. Our Shiva is an expression of loss and love, a week of heartbroken yearning and anguished mourning. Jews are not accepting of death or tragedy.

It is because of moments like this Christian eulogy that we need Rav Yannai's lesson. We cannot allow faith to diminish our grief in any way.

**This is why grieving is uniquely complicated. We believe that we must accept two opposing thoughts:**

**We must embrace God.**

**And we must howl at injustice.**

We must do both at the same time. I remember the shiva for my mother; there were moments in the afternoon when the hurt was starting to bubble up in me, and then, all of a sudden, it was time for Mincha. Sometimes the Mincha wasn't much of a Mincha. But sometimes it was a Mincha, despite the pain and anger I felt.

As mourners we follow the road of "koshi", the difficult path in which we both howl at injustice and embrace God at the same time.

### 3. Grief is demanding

There is another "koshi": the difficulty of mourning. In our tradition, mourning places demands upon us; not just halachic ones of what to say and do during the week of mourning, but theological demands.

Rav Joseph Ber Soloveitchik reflected at great length on the themes of suffering and tragedy; indeed, this entire sermon is indebted to his insights. Soloveitchik's reflections were not merely theoretical; in 1967, Rav Soloveitchik lost his brother, mother, and wife.

Rabbi Lookstein related that when he visited the shiva at the Soloveitchik home that year, he sat there for 45 minutes of silence until the Rav spoke; such was the Rav's pain during that difficult time. So the ideas I am about to relate are not the theoretical speculations of a philosopher, but the considered reflections of an authentic mourner.

Soloveitchik sees tragedy as a revelation. He call this a "Jobian revelation", after the moment in Chapter 38 when God speaks to Job "out of the whirlwind".

It is not easy to feel any revelation or inspiration when mourning. CS Lewis, in his essay “A Grief Observed” writes:

*“There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting..”*

Yet Soloveitchik reminds us that we must somehow hear the voice of obligation. As we stand before the abyss of painful emptiness, we are called on to hear God’s voice through all the pain. In times of “koshi”, tragedy, we must listen for the divine voice calling upon us to repair this broken world.

And that voice demands of us to love, support, and care.

As neighbors, it is our obligation to serve a meal to mourners on the first day of shiva. The Beit Yoseph (**Joseph Karo**, 1488–1575) cites the Yerushalmi regarding this meal:

תבוא מארה לשכניו שהצריכוהו לאכול משלו

“May a curse come to the neighbors who leave the mourner to eat his own meal.”

The neighbors must hear the call to support the mourners. And here that has been done, and more. I am new to this community, and I’ve been overwhelmed by the response of our Kehilla, that has heeded this call, a call out of the whirlwind, asking for compassion and caring.

#### 4. The call for life

There is another call, one that is quite uncomfortable to listen to, which is a call to live. We know that life is our greatest obligation; it is the first lesson of the Torah, right in the first chapter of Bereishit. Even when we grieve we are called to grab hold of life, and if there is a simcha, called to celebrate.

Rav Yehuda Amital z”l describes his thoughts during the tragic times surrounding the Yom Kippur War. He tells of how a comment in Rashi (Genesis 6:6) had it profound impact on him.

Rashi says: בשעת חדותא חדותא, בשעת אבלא אבלא

“when it is time to mourn, mourn, when it is time to rejoice, rejoice”

Rav Amital explains how these words resonated with him:

*“When I read these comments of Rashi, I cannot help but recall the wedding of my eldest daughter, which took place in the yeshiva immediately after the Yom Kippur*

*War. After all the pain resulting from that war – both the pain of the nation and the pain of our yeshiva, which lost eight students – I found it very difficult to listen to the band, and I almost did not join in the dancing. But then I was approached by Justice Zvi Tal, whose son's wedding I had performed on Rosh Chodesh Elul, right before the war. His son went out to battle and never returned. Justice Tal mentioned to me these words of Rashi – "In a time of joy – there shall be joy, and in a time of grief – there shall be grief."*

Rav Amital's lesson is one we all need to understand. Yes, as an individual, Halacha tries to separate celebration and grief. Yet even that doesn't always work; babies are not born on a schedule that observes the laws of mourning. But as a community, it is impossible to separate celebration and grief. We have no choice but to do both, to mourn and to celebrate at the same time.

Today we have so many wonderful smachot. Five babies, including 2 sets of twins were born this week. And we have just heard our wonderful Bar Mitzvah boy. Truth is, while this is difficult day to have a bar mitzvah, it is also a fitting one. A Bar Mitzvah is a celebration of maturity and responsibility. A day like today, where one watches a community fulfill all of its obligations no matter how difficult or complicated, is a fitting day to for one to become bar mitzvah.

Rav Amital's lesson is one that underpins contemporary Jewish life, in an era of history still overshadowed by a chaotic mix of great tragedies and great triumphs. As Rav Amital explains, each year Israel mourns and then celebrates in this characteristically complicated way. Yom Ha-Zikaron (Memorial Day for fallen soldiers) and Yom Ha-Atzmaut (Independence Day) occur one right after the other. A country mourns thousands of young soldiers who perished in battle one day, and minutes later rejoices in independence. There is a moment at the end of Yom Hazikaron, when the flag, flying at half mast, is raised in honor of Yom Haatzmaut. I have been there for the raising the flag, when everyone breaks out in song and dance; but many who dance do so with tears in their eyes. They are celebrating with tears, because that is what the call from the whirlwind asks of us.

So it is for us. We must mourn, we must mourn when we must, yet we must celebrate each and every celebration each and every day.

Shabbat shalom