

Parashat Vayishlach Dealing with Death

Living Every Day as the Last Day of our Life

I have always been afraid of death. Since early childhood, it was hard for me to fall asleep, as I was afraid that I would never wake up. To this day, I cannot sleep with ticking clocks in the room. They remind me that our life clock is ticking away and that we have a finite amount of years in this world to accomplish an infinite amount of tasks. Lately, we have witnessed a lot of untimely deaths in the world and it's hard to make sense of it all. Some people take tranquilizers; others lock their door with double locks, but life goes on, and part of life is death. As we grow older, death plays a greater role in our lives. When we lose friends and family members, we recognize that eventually we too will be called to face our own death. This awareness of our own inevitable death is a maturing experience. It forces us to think deeply about what is most important in life, and to put energy into meaningful endeavors.

ספר קהלת פרק ז (ב)

טוֹב לָלֶקֶת אֶל בַּיִת אֲבֵל מִלָּקֶת אֶל בַּיִת מִשְׂתֵּה בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא סוֹף כָּל הָאָדָם וְהָיָה יָתֵן אֶל לְבוֹ:

“It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men, and the living should take it to heart” (*Kohelet* 7:2).

Taking to heart “the end of all people” helps us do *teshuva* (repent) as it reminds us that one day we too will be held accountable for all our deeds in the heavenly court. All the tears I have cried for all the lost lives during funerals and *shiva*-calls lately ingrain within me the true value of life. Since life is short, we need to make the most of it by nurturing the loved people in our lives. It is not worthwhile to have expectations of others, which may cause us to experience disappointments. Rather we are put in this world to give and show love, no matter how others behave. In the face of death, we need to live to our fullest, living and let live every day, as if it was the last day in our life. How could we ever forgive ourselves for cutting off close relationships due to petty or even not so petty disagreements? What if one of us had to leave this world before we got a chance to reconcile?

Mourning our Losses

As our parents age, we realize that the opportunities to honor them are counted for, and that “if not now when?” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14). Now is the time to put past arguments behind us while focusing on spending quality time and show appreciation for everything our parents have done for us all these years. This Chanukah it will be 12 years since my grandmother's passing and I miss her love and compassion that she had in her heart for all of us. I remember when my grandmother was in her nineties feeling so lonely because all of her siblings and most of her friends had passed away. Sadly, she passed away when I was on one of my North America tours, and it was very traumatic to miss being with my grandmother in her last hours. Likewise, in this week's *parasha* Ya'acov is informed of the death of his dear mother Rivkah with whom he did not experience closure.

ספר בראשית פרק לה (ח)

וַתָּמָת דְּבִרָה מִיַּנְקוּת רִבְקָה וַתִּקָּבֵר מִתַּחַת לְבֵית אֵל תַּחַת הָאֵלון וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ אֵלון בְּכוֹת:

“But Devorah, Rivkah’s nurse died, and she was buried beneath Beit El, under the oak, and he called the name Alon Bachut (Weeping Oak)” (*Bereishit* 35:8).

“Here he received news of another mourning, for he was informed that his mother had died” (Rashi). Ya’acov cried and mourned the loss of his righteous mother that he loved, who didn’t merit to see him on his return home after being away for 36 years. Therefore, Hashem revealed Himself to Ya’acov to console him (Ramban). Soon after the completion of this prophesy, Ya’acov suffered another very great loss. His dear beloved favorite wife died tragically in childbirth.

ספר בראשית פרק לה (ט) וַתָּמָת רָחֵל וַתִּקָּבֵר בְּדַרְךְ אֶפְרַתָּה הוּא בֵּית לְחֶם:

“Then Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Efrat, which is Beit Lechem” (*Bereishit* 35:19).

Finally Ya’acov returns back home to his father in Chevron soon after which the Torah describes his death:

ספר בראשית פרק לה (כט)

וַיָּגַע יִצְחָק וַיָּמָת וַיֵּאָסֵף אֶל עַמּוּיוֹ זָקֵן וְשֹׁבַע יָמִים וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ עֵשָׂו וַיַּעֲקֹב בְּנָיו:

“Yitzchak then expired and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days and his sons Esau and Ya’acov buried him” (*Bereishit* 35:29).

How did Ya’acov recover from all his losses? How did he process all this mourning and continue to go about his life?

Life on Earth – A Prelude to a more Glorious Eternal Life

One of the most comforting concepts when it comes to death is the knowledge that death is not the final destination but only a release of the body and a rebirth of the soul.

ספר קהלת פרק יב (ז)

וַיָּשָׁב הָעֶפֶר עַל הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַנָּה:

“The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to G-d who gave it” (*Kohelet* 12:7).

Without the constraints of the body, our soul is liberated to bask in the light of the Divine splendor. Death is just a transcendence; it can be compared to changing our set of clothes, moving into a new home, or being born into this world. Rabbi Tucazinsky opens *The Bridge of Life – Life as a Bridge between Past and Future* with a parable about two twin brothers in their mother’s womb discussing whether there is life after gestation in the womb. One brother believes that the end of the time in the womb marks the end of their life, whereas his brother believes that they will be birthed into a new and freer life. He further explains that “just as the life of the embryo merely constitutes the transition to a broader and more exciting life – so, to an even greater extent is life on Earth merely the prelude to a more fascinating, glorious life which man, confined within his puny body and with limited perception, is incapable of conceiving.” Believing in the afterlife makes all the difference in how to live our current life. Hedonism is born out of a belief that this lifetime is all there is. In that case, there is no purpose in living other than getting the maximum enjoyment out of the here and now. The Talmud teaches otherwise: “Rabbi Ya’acov says, ‘This world is compared to an antechamber before the world to come. Prepare yourself in the antechamber in order to enter the banquet hall’” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:16).

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

Just as we fix our dress collar, put on lipstick and smooth out any leaking mascara at the mirror in the hallway before entering the ball, so do we stand in front of our mirror in this world, where we need to check whether our deeds measure up to our potential. When we leave this world, we will be shown two movies. One movie shows the life we lived, the other the life we could have lived according to our potential. The experience of Hell is when there is a great discrepancy between these two movies. With this perspective in mind, it is easier to understand that all difficulties and suffering in life are tests to help us perfect our character and reach our ultimate perfection.

The Greatness of a Person is only Known at Death

When a person's soul leaves the body, its greatness becomes known in the world. Recently, one of my neighbors died. Menashe ben Chaim had been confined to a wheelchair since he moved to Bat Ayin, perhaps seven years ago. I didn't know much about him except that he was handicapped due to being injured in the Yom Kippur war. I didn't think of him as a hero, in fact I didn't think of him at all, as I was busy with my own life. When told about Menashe's passing I decided to pay him his last respect by attending his funeral, since, after all, he was a neighbor. I expected a small funeral, and was surprised to see on the way to the graveyard that it was backed up with parked cars on every side. My realization of what a great person Menasha must have been was confirmed by the incredibly eulogies. Menashe had basically died from two bullets in his head but miraculously came back to life after being resuscitated by a close friend. This is when he changed his last name from Mizrachi to Ben Chaim. The injury wiped away his entire memory including the memory center connected to speech and it was only after a long retraining that Menashe was able to speak again, although by no means very fluently. Nevertheless, Menashe was invited to speak about his war-experience and amazing recovery at various schools and universities. Once at a girl's high-school, one student raised her hand and asked, "How come you go and give speeches when you are unable to speak well? Aren't you embarrassed?" The question has to be understood in relation to the girl who asked it. She obviously had a strong speech defect and stuttered all through her question. Menashe answered with such compassion and gentleness, "You and I are in good company, you and I are just as Moshe Rabbeinu who had a speech defect but that didn't stop him from being our greatest teacher!" As the girl heard these words, she immediately straightened up on her chair with renewed self-confidence. Later, Menashe received letters of thank you from both the principal and the girl's parents. Her newly gained self-confidence had done wonders for her ability to speak. During the last year of Menashe's life, he was incapacitated to a great degree. In the end, when he no longer could eat, the only mitzvah Menashe was able to do was to praise Hashem when uttering a blessing over his drink. Yet, he performed this mitzvah with all his heart and just for this one mitzvah was it worthwhile for him to live. May we be inspired to live each day of our lives to its fullest extent through whatever mitzvah we can do before our time is up!