

Parasha Chukat

Why did My Brother Have to Die so Young?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

Last week my brother, Sam, died. He was young and in the peak of his academic career. He had struggled with cancer for a while, but in the end, it just got him. I can't express how devastating all this is to our entire family. Seeing Sam suffer, getting weaker and weaker until his system just shut down was unbearable. I can't stop crying and crying, feeling this is so unfair. Sam was a good person, brother, husband and father, why did he have to get sick and die at his prime? Why does his wife have to be widowed and his teenage children orphans? I normally would not contact a Rebbetzin, since I am not religious, but a friend told me that you are a healer and that you may be able to help comfort me.

Susan Avila (name changed)

Dear Susan,

My heartfelt condolences go out to you and your entire family. Illness and death are the hardest part of life. There are no words. There is only trying to share your pain. When, in the Bible, Aharon lost his two sons, Nadav and Avihu, he suffered in silence, as it states, "...they died before Hashem... and Aharon was silent" (*Vayikra* 10:2-3). I wish I could just give you a big hug and cry with you. I also wish I could answer your questions of why your brother had to die young. Even those of us who are religious do not understand Hashem's ways. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares Hashem. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (*Yesha'yahu* 55:8-9). We just accept the incomprehensible as Hashem's will, as He is the true judge.

Death is the Bridge of Life

As hard as it is when someone dies, believing that death is the end and this world is all there is to life makes it even harder. In the Jewish tradition, as mentioned in numerous Talmudic passages, Midrash etc., this world is only a small part of our eternal spiritual existence. We enter this world in order to fulfill a specific G-d given mission. When we have achieved what we came here to accomplish, then our time in this world is up. Therefore, rather than saying that someone died, we use the expression 'departed,' which indicates that the person is only departing from this world, while his or her soul lives forever. [Rabbi Tucainsky](#) in his book, *Gesher Hachaim* (the Bridge of Life), gives a parable of twins in the womb. One believes that departing the womb is the end of life, whereas the other believes that it is just the beginning. "Rabbi Ya'akov says, This World is the antechamber that leads to the Next World. Prepare yourself in the antechamber so that you can enter the banquet hall" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:16). We cannot prove absolutely that there is life after death. That's where emunah (belief) comes in. However, many stories of near death experiences by both Jews and non-Jews confirm the Torah descriptions of the afterlife.

Perceiving the Hidden Good in Every Hardship

Originally, Adam and Eve were supposed to have been immortal. However, when they ate from the Tree and brought evil into the world and into themselves, their bodies were no longer pure enough to enjoy eternal life. Death and decomposition of the physical became necessary as the purification process that allows the recharged soul to re-enter the renewed body at the end of days. Due to the

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impurity that we ingested by eating from the Tree, we now suffer negative emotions such as jealousy, power-greed and cravings. When we work on our character and our cravings, we purify our body and enable the soul to dominate the body. This can also be accomplished through suffering and sickness (May we be able to avoid it!). Illness causes the body to disintegrate, thus allowing the soul to dominate. Consequently, the purpose of illness and suffering is to act as purifying agents, as it states, "Just as salt rectifies meat, so does suffering clean the sins of a person" (*Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 5a*). When we believe in the Almighty, Who is ultimate good, we have faith that even though we cannot understand why good people have to suffer, there is a deeper reason that actually is for the benefit of each person. One day, in another lifetime, when we reach a different level of consciousness, it will all make sense, and we will be able to perceive the hidden good of every hardship.

Dying through a Divine Kiss

In this week's parasha both Miriam and Aharon pass away:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר אֶן בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקֹדֶשׁ וַתָּמֶת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם:
(ספר במדבר פרק כ כסוק א)

"Then the children of Israel and the whole congregation came into the desert of Zin, in the first month and the people abode in Kadesh. Then Miriam died there, and was buried there" (*Bamidbar 20:1*).

The Talmud teaches that both of them died by a Divine kiss (*Baba Batra 17a*). What does it mean to die through a Supernal kiss? Rambam explains that when a person who has perfected himself to a high degree is about to die, his understanding of the higher worlds, which are usually far beyond our grasp, becomes clearer. Thus, the soul is happy to leave the body and get closer to Hashem. This happiness results from Hashem's kindness which makes death so much easier. In such a case, the moment of death is not even noticed (*Moreh Nevuchim 3:51*). Death through a Divine kiss is compared to the ease with which a hair can be removed from milk. In the case of the wicked, death is compared to a ball of wool entangled in thorns which need to be yanked away in order to remove them (*Berachot 8a*). Since hair represents materialism and milk is spiritual in its white purity, why is the lightest of all forms of death compared to removing a hair from milk and not the other way around? In truth, hair represents the body and milk the soul. However, spiritual giants such as Moshe, Aharon and Miriam were almost all soul. The part of their body which was not illuminated by their soul was like a tiny, thin, little peel-like a minute hair that could easily be removed in order to allow their souls to bask in the rays of the Divine spiritual realms (Rabbi Label Lam, Torah.org). Thus, the degree of difficulty of death corresponds to the extent of the soul's entanglement within the coarseness of the body.

Reunited with the Divine

How do we know that Miriam indeed died through a Divine kiss? It states about both Moshe and Aharon that they died *על פי ה' Hashem* – by Hashem's mouth. This expression is not used in regards to Miriam. Rabbi Abahu said, Miriam also died through a [Divine] kiss, as it states, "there," which is the same word used to describe Moshe's death. "Moshe died *there*, the servant of Hashem in the Land of Moav by the mouth of Hashem" (*Baba Batra 17a*). "The righteous are alive even when they die" (*Berachot 18a*). They don't die in this world only *there* – in the-World-to-Come. Hashem shows them the greatness of the light, which is their portion in the afterlife. Then because of their great love and desire to be reunited with the light of Hashem, they do not want to return to this world. "There" – in the World-to-Come they are gathered to their people and reunited with the Divine (*Kedushat Halevi, Rebbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdizchov 1898*).