



What Do we Learn from Yitzchak About Finding Consolation from Grief?

Coping with Grief

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (*Tehillim* 147:3). I was desperately brokenhearted when my father passed on two and a half years ago. Yet, some of the well-meaning remarks, from people who came to comfort me, were anything but words of comfort. I'm referring to comments such as, "...He was almost 91, he was old... his time had come... you were able to have your father for more years than most..." These kinds of statements disregard the mourning process, which does not follow calculated logic. A loss is a loss, despite the awareness that no one lives forever. Although it is a greater tragedy when a young father passes away, leaving a widow and small orphan children, than when a grandmother loses her father, everyone goes through a difficult process of grief. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the "five stages of grief:" Denial: "This can't be happening to me." Anger: "Why is this happening? Who is to blame?" Bargaining: "Make this not happen, and in return I will..." Depression: "I'm too sad to do anything." Acceptance: "I'm at peace with what happened." "These stages were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is no typical response to loss, just as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is as individual as our lives" (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving*). My dear friend from NY – who happened to be in Israel to visit me during shiva – spoke the most comforting words: "Now that your father has left this world, he is still here – within your own heart." So, my greatest healing from grief was finding my father living on through me. After the shiva, I would look at myself in the mirror and recognize my father's lips. I acknowledged traits which I inherited from him, such as the ability to make contact with any stranger on the street; the flair for words and pictures; as well as intuition and creativity. Putting my heart into planting a garden in his memory, translating and publishing his Memoir were also ways of keeping my father's spirit alive. While the most intense grief is for the death of a loved one, even subtle losses in life can trigger a sense of grief. These may include but are not limited to: A loved one's serious illness; divorce or relationship breakup; a miscarriage; losing a job; and loss of a cherished dream. The first step in healing grief is to acknowledge and accept our pain. In *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, Yitzchak loses his dear mother, with whom he had an especially close relationship. We can only imagine Yitzchak's grief, yet, why is the Torah silent about his mourning? Why is Yitzchak completely absent at his mother's burial?

Where was Yitzchak?

Yitzchak is curiously missing from the time he walked with his father to his own near sacrifice (*Bereishit* 22:8), until he comes out to meditate in the field and sees Rivkah riding on the camel (*ibid.* 24:62-63). While the Torah records the eulogizing and weeping of Avraham, where is Yitzchak? Why is he not mentioned as joining Avraham in burying and eulogizing Sarah? In fact, his duty to do so is even greater than Avraham's. In addition, the love Sarah lavished on Yitzchak, whom she bore after waiting for 90 years must certainly have evoked reciprocal feelings in Yitzchak, so that he would surely have eulogized her. Perhaps, Yitzchak had not heard that his mother had died. Since Sarah's death had been attributed to the binding of Yitzchak, people might have tried to withhold the information from him as long as possible. This is most likely the reason we do not hear a single word about Yitzchak in the whole paragraph, neither during the eulogy and weeping nor

even during the burial ceremony (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Bereishit* 23:2). Perhaps, Yitzchak was in a state of emotional turmoil and too traumatized by the Akeida experience to mourn properly. According to halacha, one should not be informed of the death of a relative if such news may be too traumatic and physically or psychologically devastating. Perhaps, Yitzchak blamed himself or his father for Sarah's death and was too distraught to attend the funeral ([Rabbi Jay Kelman, Chayei Sarah](#)). According to the principle of the fight-flight-freeze response, perhaps the trauma of the Akeida caused Yitzchak to simply freeze into reactive immobility, unable to take any action, not even to seek his own wife. I believe that Yitzchak's near-death experience at the *Akeida* put him in a coma. This view can be supported by the following midrash: "Avraham returned to the youths" (*Bereishit* 22:19). But where was Yitzchak? Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat said that, although, Yitzchak did not die, the text regards it as if he died, and his ashes were sprinkled over the altar. Another interpretation: Where was Yitzchak? G-d brought him into the Garden of Eden, where he remained for three years (*Midrash Hagadol, Bereishit* 22:19). It makes sense that Yitzchak, having just been raised up on the altar as a burnt offering, might go on to pursue further religious experience in Paradise – the place of ultimate spiritual perfection.

Healing Grief through Eternalizing the Legacy of the Deceased

It was only upon his marriage to Rivkah that Yitzchak could begin the healing process of his grief.

ספר בראשית פרק כד פסוק טז

וַיְבִאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבָהּ וַיִּנָּחֶם יִצְחָק אֶחָד אֲחֵרִי אָמֹ:

"Then Yitzchak brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother, and he took Rivkah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. And Yitzchak was comforted for [the loss of] his mother" (*Bereishit* 24:67).

This verse, describing Yitzchak's consolation – the only biblical reference to the fact that he had been mourning for his mother – teaches us about the process of healing from grief. When Yitzchak brought Rivkah into Sarah's tent, she revived the legacy of Sarah, as Rashi explains: "He brought her to the tent, and behold, she was Sarah, his mother; i.e., she became the likeness of Sarah his mother. For as long as Sarah was alive, a candle burned from one Shabbat eve to the next, a blessing was found in the dough, and a cloud was attached to the tent. When she died, these things ceased. However, when Rivkah arrived, they returned (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 60:16; Rashi, *Bereishit* 24:67).

The spiritual greatness that was present in Sarah's tent and disappeared when she passed away, reappeared when Rivkah entered into her tent. From this, we learn that maintaining the legacy of the deceased, and eternalizing their values bring the greatest consolation. Rivkah was the next link on the chain of Jewish womanhood, established by Sarah. Although, she was very different and did not replace Sarah, she carried on Sarah's legacy to all future generations. This is one important aspect of "The righteous are called alive even after their death ..." (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 18a). This concept is alluded to by the fact that the *parasha* dealing with the death of Sarah is called *Chayei Sarah* – 'the life of Sarah.' Through her daughter-in-law, Sarah continues to live on even after her death.

Living on Within Our Heart and Through Our Actions

I recall the terrible tragedy of the murder of the two 13-year-old boys – Koby Mandell and Yosef Ishran – near their home in Tekoa, in 2001. Koby's parents, Sherri & Seth, responded to their grief by establishing [The Koby Mandel Foundation](#) to continue the spirit of kindness of their deceased son, by providing comfort for the bereaved. Today, the Koby Mandell Foundation is the largest provider of emotional support services for thousands of bereaved Israelis who have lost an

immediate family member due to terror or tragedy. The Ashkenazi *minhag* (custom) to name a newborn after a deceased ancestor is another way of not only honoring but also reviving the legacy of the deceased. I clearly remember my grandmother being moved to tears at the brit (circumcision) of my oldest son, when we named him Meir, after her husband, my grandfather. Likewise, I long for the day when I will, G-d-willing, have a grandson, named Shlomo after my dear father Salomon! Meanwhile, I feel consolation from the planting of a memorial garden, [Salomon's Song Garden](#) for my father. Also, I threw my heart and soul into the work of translating and publicizing his Memoir [My Memoir: The Story of a Danish Jew who Fled the Nazis](#). These two ways of preserving my father's legacy for generations to come – as he loved nature and also left a part of himself and his legacy behind through his memoir – brought me great consolation. They are constant reminders of the comforting words of my friend, that even when someone has left this world, he or she can still be here – within our own heart.