

VAYEITZEI (GENESIS 28:10-32:3)

Feeling the Void -- Filling the Void

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Jacob left Beer-Sheba and he went to Haran. (Genesis, 28:10)

The Torah doesn't waste words. Rashi points out that the Torah only had to write *Jacob went to Haran*. The point of the story is that he was now on his way to Haran to find a wife. Obviously, he had to leave his home in Beer-Sheba in order to get there. What is the point of telling us that Jacob left Beer-Sheba?

The answer, says Rashi, is that Jacob's departure from Beer-Sheba was a significant event. Rashi tells us: "The departure of a *Tzaddik* (pious person) from a city makes an imprint. While the *Tzaddik* is in town, he is its (source of) pride, splendor, and beauty. When he leaves, its pride, splendor, and beauty leaves." Beer-Sheba without Jacob was going to become a very different Beer-Sheba.

[This concept is borne out by the fact that to this day the city of Vilnius (Vilna) and the entire country of Lithuania take great pride in having been the home of the great Vilna Gaon. In 1997, Lithuania officially commemorated the 200th anniversary of his death. There is a Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono Zydu Muziejus (Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum) at 12 Pamenkalnio, Vilnius 2001, Lithuania.]

The family of the Chofetz Chaim (Brief biographies of the Chofetz Chaim can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Read his obituaries in the New York Times and Time magazine [here](#)) has brought their great-grandfather's simple wooden house from Radin (Belarus) to Monsey, New York. (It will serve as a monument and museum.) There were editorials in the local (there) press, complaining that the Chofetz Chaim belongs to Belarus, and his home should not be sent to the U.S. The city of Radin plans to build a monument at the site to mark the spot where the Chofetz Chaim once lived.

The amazing thing is that Lithuania and Belarus have no clue whatsoever as to who and what these great Torah giants were. Yet, they revere them . . . just as Beer-Sheba would miss Jacob.]

In my work as a chaplain for senior citizens, it is often my lot that I administer to the needs of a family in mourning. (L"A) Rashi's point about the departure of a distinguished person is illustrated when one sees a family that has lost a loved one. Like Beer-Sheba, the family without their mother/father, etc., is not the same family that it was before. There is a void that cannot be filled.

As sad as it is to see a loved one pass away, it is sadder still to see someone die with no one to miss them.

Several years ago, I was substituting in a nursing home for a rabbi who was on vacation. One of the residents, a man with no children, passed away. I spoke with his stepdaughter in California, who had kind words for the gentleman who had been married to her mother in the couple's later years. No, she would not be coming for the funeral, but she called several friends of the family to tell them when and where it would be.

The next morning, the funeral director picked me up in his minivan. The casket was in the back. (No, there would be no shiny hearse; there was no one to impress.) We arrived at the cemetery. The cemetery workers – no, there were no pall bearers – carried the casket to the grave. The cemetery workers stepped away to allow me to conduct the service. The funeral director went back to his minivan. There I stood, alone with the casket. A eulogy to say, and no one to hear it!

The purpose of a eulogy is to arouse the assembled to feelings of grief. A eulogy is supposed to bring the listeners to tears as they confront the community's loss. Under the circumstances, there was no need to recite a eulogy. I could go straight to the few prayers and go back to my office.

I couldn't do it. I just couldn't see allowing a man to spend eighty-something years on this planet without a few words of tribute to accompany him to the next world. I stood there, probably to the annoyance of the "busy" cemetery workers and funeral director. I spoke to the air and to the departed (and to G-d) about the life of this simple, but distinguished gentleman. Maybe no one else felt the void of his death. But I was able to make sure that, at least for the moment, I felt it.

The one nice thing, if I can use such an expression, about mourning, is that it shows that the person was appreciated. It shows that he was missed.

There are several important lessons we can learn:

1. If you love someone, don't wait for a funeral to show it.
2. Live your life in a manner that insures that when your time comes, after 120 years, people will miss you.
3. You know that person who has no friends? You know who I mean. Yeah, him, the "nudnik." He's a bit . . . different. That's okay. We all are. Why don't you go over to him and say hello? He's special, you know. He's created in the Image of G-d. (See Genesis, 1:26-27)

Don't wait to wring your hands at his funeral and complain that there is no one to feel the void left by his departure. Go fill the void in his life now!

Every person is special; everyone is significant. It's our job to find that greatness and bring it out. And in so doing, we bring out our own greatness as well.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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