

REEH (DEUTERONOMY 11:26-16:17)

Terrible or Tear-able? – The Living Talk about Dying

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

ELUL

Next Wednesday will be the first day of the Jewish month of Elul. The month of Elul is traditionally a time of introspection and preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. After services every weekday morning, we sound the Shofar as a reminder that Rosh Hashanah is a mere month away. Our prayers get a little longer and become a little more sincere. We use this time to get our spiritual act together in time for the New Year when G-d will decide our fates for the coming year.

“Terrible or Tear-able? – The Living Talk about Dying”

As an orthodox rabbi with many non-orthodox friends and contacts, I often find myself in unorthodox situations.

There was the lady who asked me about what to serve at the Seder. She had heard that there is a custom not to eat roasted meat. (This is in memory of the Passover Offering of roasted lamb that we are currently unable to eat due to the destruction of the Temple.) Her question was whether it would be okay to serve pot roast. She neglected to mention that neither the pot nor the roast would be kosher!

Then there's the call I received from the fiancée of a lady I know. The fiancée told me that he heard from his bride that I'm a very nice fellow, and that they would be honored to have me officiate at the wedding. He understood that there might be a problem because the wedding was taking place on Shabbos. In a non-Kosher restaurant. Oh, by the way, he's Jewish. She isn't.

And of course there's the Passover Bris where the grandmother explained to me that she wouldn't serve bread. “It doesn't have to be strictly Kosher,” she explained. “I just don't want to do anything that's not traditional.” (The cold cuts and cheese at the Bris weren't kosher.)

I try as much as possible not to be judgmental. But when people choose to be non-observant of key areas of Jewish Law, and incorporate other, often less significant areas of Jewish practice, it makes my job as a teacher of Torah quite challenging.

I once went to visit a friend who was sitting Shiva for his father. He and his mother were both wearing black ribbons pinned to their shirts. Now this black ribbon, as I will explain, has no significance whatsoever in traditional Jewish practice. It was the last day of Shiva. My friend, taking advantage of the fact that a rabbi was visiting, decided to call upon the vast wealth of Torah knowledge that his friend the rabbi could provide.

“So tell me, Rabbi,” he asked. “How long am I supposed to wear this ribbon?”

The Torah tells us that it is important to maintain perspective in everything we do. We should never allow ourselves to lose control.

You are children of G-d; do not lacerate yourselves nor make a bald spot between your eyes for a dead person. For you are a holy nation to G-d... (Deuteronomy, 14:1-2)

This prohibition of laceration is a reference to the self-mutilation that some cultures see as an expression of mourning. I recall seeing pictures of the funeral for Ayatollah Khomeini. Mourners took rocks and hit themselves in the head to make themselves bleed.

This is not an appropriate way to articulate grief. Man is created in G-d's image. **YOU ARE CHILDREN OF G-D; do not lacerate yourselves...** We do not have a right to harm our bodies in any way. Our bodies belong to G-d. (Which, by the way, puts the lie to the pro-abortion claim that a woman has a right to make decisions about her own body. It's not her body. It's G-d's.)

The Torah shows us the paradigm for Jewish expression of bereavement. Jacob was presented with apparent evidence of Joseph's death:

... “It is my son's coat,” he cried. “A wild beast must have eaten him! Joseph has been torn to pieces!” He tore his robes in grief... He kept himself in mourning for many days. (Genesis, 37:33)

We find several places in the Torah where grief is expressed in this fashion.

The explanation that I've usually heard for the tearing of a garment is that it gives the mourner the opportunity to tangibly express his anguish through a RELATIVELY destructive action. It provides some emotional release without resorting to the sinful and counterproductive self-injury prohibited by the Torah.

At the same time, it puts a loss into perspective. When a loved one passes away, we see, in contrast, how unimportant our material possessions are. The mourner takes a shirt and/or a suit jacket, something of value, and tears it. The mourner thereby demonstrates that our possessions -- our money -- our THINGS, are so insignificant in the real scheme of things.

Kri'ah, this traditional expression of Jewish mourning, is performed before or during the funeral for parents, children, siblings, and spouses. A fist-sized (3½-4 inch) vertical tear is made, over the heart for a parent, on the right side for other relatives. The tear is made on a garment that would be worn at home in normal room temperatures, such as a jacket, vest, sweater, shirt, or blouse. (Most authorities do not allow the tearing of a tie.) The torn garment should be worn for the entire week of Shiva.

When called upon to officiate at funerals, I am often met with resistance to the practice of *Kri'ah*. Why can't we just cut a ribbon, Rabbi?

The problem is that many years ago, American funeral directors came up with a way (in their minds) to circumvent the requirement of *Kri'ah*. Why tear a perfectly good shirt? Simply pin on a ribbon -- black, of course -- it is, after all, the traditional mourning color (at least for Christians) and then cut it. It's easier and cheaper too!

Isn't that sad? Here we have an age-old Jewish practice that expresses, among other things, that our material possessions are unimportant. Then we turn around and reject that practice in order to save a few dollars on a shirt!

Some rabbis will refuse to officiate at a funeral unless the mourners agree to perform *kri'ah* in accordance with Jewish Law. I advise the mourners to wear clothes that they don't mind tearing. I explain to them what Jewish Law requires. If they choose to express mourning in a traditional fashion, they do so. If not, they don't. But I make it clear to the mourners that I will not cut a black ribbon. While I can't force a Jew to follow Jewish Law, I won't participate in a farce.

Ironically, families often respond angrily to this position. After all, they maintain, black ribbons are also a Jewish tradition. "We did it when my ____ died, and we did it when my ____ died! Why are you so opposed to a Jewish custom?!"

(So how, you may wonder, did I respond to my friend's question as to how long he should wear the ribbon? If I would have told him to take it off after Shiva, that would imply my agreement that it was appropriate to wear it until that point. I could have told him what I really think of *Kri'ah* ribbons, but that was neither the time nor the place for such a discussion. I ended up giving him a non-answer: "I don't know what to tell you. We don't do ribbons.")

I have had people decide to find someone else to officiate at a funeral when I told them that the deceased must be buried in a shroud. ("But what about Grandpa's favorite suit? He married Grandma in that tuxedo!") While in life, some of us are wealthier or more respected than others, in the end, we are all equal. Everyone gets the same simple white burial garments.

I have had people who wanted me to officiate at the cremation of their loved ones. Sometimes I managed to convince them to opt for traditional burial. Other times I failed, and they found someone else. (One of them, a Holocaust survivor, went up in smoke the way her relatives in Europe had. How tragic!)

One of the difficulties of planning a funeral is that it is hard to think logically when overcome with the emotional trauma of losing a loved one. Where should the service take place? Where should the burial take place? How much should we spend for a casket? Who should officiate?

For this reason, many experts advise pre-planning. Some people are reluctant to discuss funeral plans. As an unfortunate consequence, all too often their desires are never known. Even if you don't plan every step of the funeral, it is good to figure these things out in advance, when one can be rational, rather than emotional.

I have often felt that if I could explain to families, in advance, what to expect at a traditional funeral, they would be more open to trying to understand the significance and importance of maintaining Jewish practices. If I could speak to them when they are not emotional, they'd be more likely to understand. If only I could communicate with them at a time when they are more likely to be receptive.

And that, hopefully, is what I just did!

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

© 2005 Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.