

Confronting Loss – Makkot 24b

שוב פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם כיון שהגיעו להר הבית ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע מצחק אמרו לו מפני מה אתה מצחק אמר להם מפני מה אתם בוכים אמרו לו מקום שכתוב בו (במדבר א, נא) והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה אמר להן לכך אני מצחק דכתיב (ישעיהו ח, ב) ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בן יברכיהו וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה אוריה במקדש ראשון וזכריה במקדש שני אלא תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של אוריה באוריה כתיב (מיכה ג, יב) לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש [וגו'] בזכריה כתיב (זכריה ח, ד) עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות ברחובות ירושלים עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת בלשון הזה אמרו לו עקיבא ניחמתנו עקיבא ניחמתנו

On another occasion they were ascending to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus and saw the site of the Temple, they tore their garments in mourning. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from the site of the Holy of Holies. They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva was laughing. They said to him: For what reason are you laughing? Rabbi Akiva said to them: For what reason are you weeping? They said to him: This is the place concerning which it is written: “And the non-priest who approaches shall die” (Numbers 1:51), and now foxes walk in it; and shall we not weep? Rabbi Akiva said to them: That is why I am laughing, as it is written, when God revealed the future to the prophet Isaiah: “And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah” (Isaiah 8:2). Now what is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? He clarifies the difficulty: Uriah prophesied during the First Temple period, and Zechariah prophesied during the Second Temple period! Rather, the verse established that fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah is dependent on fulfilment of the prophecy of Uriah. In the prophecy of Uriah it is written: “Therefore, for your sake Zion shall be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest” (Micah 3:12), where foxes are found. In the prophecy of Zechariah it is written: “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem” (Zechariah 8:4). Until the prophecy of Uriah with regard to the destruction of the city was fulfilled I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled, as the two prophecies are linked. Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid. The Sages said to him, employing this language: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.

A discussion on **Confronting Loss** based on Makkot 24b

Some Textual Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Why does Rabbi Akiva only trust the prophecy of Zechariah once it has been connected to the prophecy of Uriah? What does this tell us about the nature of prophecy?
- What do you think the fox represents? What other stories do you know with foxes?
- Why the double statement of comfort at the end?
- This is the last gemara in Masechet Makkot. Why do you think it ends a tractate about courts of law and punishment?

Some General Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What is the key method that Rabbi Akiva uses to comfort the other Rabbis?
- Can you think of other characters in the torah that have to deal with tremendous loss? What do they do? (e.g. Yov, Avraham, Naomi...etc)
- Do you know any of the halachot of mourning? What do you think their purpose is?
- What else do you know about Rabbi Akiva? Is this characteristic of him?
- What can we say about this story with hindsight in light of the modern state of Israel?
- Are mourning customs to help the living or the dead or both?

Some Personal Questions to ask Chanichim:

- How have you seen different people deal with tragedy and loss? Do you think there is a right way?
- Have you ever helped someone deal with tragedy or loss?
- Do you feel anything nowadays for the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash?
- How do you think fasting is supposed to help us mourn? What does it do for you?
- How do you find Tisha B'av on camp compared to at home?

Other sources and quotes to bring into discussion:

Eichah: The Third Perek of Megillat Eichah has been called a characteristic step by step guide for dealing with loss. Can you see why? (see Dr Yael Ziegler on Eichah).

Rambam:

There are days which are observed by all of Israel as fasts because tragic events happened on them, **the object being to stir hearts** and open the way to repentance and **to remind us of our own evil deeds**, and of our fathers deeds which were like ours, as a consequence of which these tragic afflictions came upon them and upon us. For as we remember these things we ought to repent and do good.

C.S Lewis: "No one ever told me that grief feels so like fear."

+ Story about R'Meir and the loss of his two sons – Midrash Mishlei 31:2

Halacha: Jewish law forbids leaving an uncovered knife on the table during Birkat Hamazon ("Grace After Meals") for fear that the despair one feels during the paragraph dedicated to Jerusalem may drive a person to take his life.

Story:

In June 1967, the Israeli paratroopers who captured the Old City of Jerusalem were amongst the first to visit the Western Wall. Many of the soldiers, overcome with great emotion, stood weeping at the Wall. One non-religious soldier stood far back and was weeping, too. "Why are you crying?" asked his friend. "I am crying because I don't know why I should be crying."



A Related Story:

I grew up in a traditional United Synagogue family (if there is such a thing now — there was then), and remember vividly that my late father was a good person, involved with his shul and a doer in every sense of the word. He was always at funerals, shivahs and making up a minyan. I seem to have become him in some ways, although as a woman I cannot do all these mitzvot. In the last few years I have sat shiva for my husband and sister and feel that his generation somehow behaved more appropriately than I have found today.

Let me explain what I mean. Of course it is appreciated that visitors come to pay their respects, but I have sat with my family and watched as my (or their) visitors have long conversations with their own friends, in front of us, without consideration. I have also watched as the noise, the greeting, the reminiscences (gossip, catching up) shared are generally totally inappropriate.

Mourners are generally not comforted by hearing lengthy details about others — friends or unknown — most especially about their illnesses, subsequent death and so on. I have sat both on my low seat, or at other people's shivahs listening to people on their mobile phones, both answering and making calls, and recall with some anger a recent occasion when one visitor had three calls, made no apology to the mourners but to the caller and continued speaking in the first line of seating. I was so incensed that I, a visitor, left the room.

Whilst sadly sitting shivah for my sister, we had a large amount of visitors from morning to night and I became so aware of those who have no idea what to say. For these people, I have sympathy and understanding. It is the others I found difficult.

Having just been bereaved, I did not want to spend an hour hearing about plans to go to Glyndebourne and the price of tickets. Nor did I need to be told about the horrors of parking nearby which meant that these visitors could not come into the shivah house, and I certainly did not feel obliged to offer lunch or supper to those visitors who arrived at 10am and left at 10pm, although of course we did.

There was disappointment from some — and I could hear them asking — that refreshments were not being served. I find it inexplicable that our caterers now have a new sideline in post-funeral and shivah catering. I think we all need to look at ourselves and see how we behave on such occasions. The bereaved are not there to entertain their visitors, and people who are not close to the family are most appreciated for a short time at an appropriate time of the day (not mealtimes or at 11pm when the mourners are desperately tired and need to sleep).

Returning to my wonderful late father, I now can do a special trip through Bushey cemetery with a story about nearly everyone, as I walk to my parents' graves. I have such poignant and also happy memories of so many who have passed through my 70 year life to date. And with the sincerity with which I have written this I hope that sharing my shivah experiences will help visitors behave in a more appropriate manner. *Written anonymously to the JC*

Some Interactive Resources:

Article – Find similar anonymous shivah stories at "Stories from the shivah house" – JC article.

Video – Brene Brown on Empathy youtube.

Movie – What do these scenes from "Inside Out" show us about dealing with loss?

Poem - **Life is real! Life is Earnest! And the grave is not its goal,**
Dust thou art, to dust returnest, Was not spoken of the soul.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Story – "Yisroel" a moving story on death and mourning on Chabad website.

Image – Where is the picture taken? What is the pasuk in the background and how does it connect to the text above?

