



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Mourning Sarah

Grief is the most powerful and most painful of human emotions. Yet, it is an emotion which few human beings can avoid in their lifetime. We all face loss, and we all grieve.

Interestingly, the first death of which we read in detail in the Bible is a murder. And the reaction of the murderer is one of denial and, ultimately, guilt. I speak, of course, of Cain's slaying of Abel. We do not read of Cain's grief, nor do we know at all of the reaction of Abel's parents, Adam and Eve, to his death.

In this week's Torah portion, for the first time, we learn in detail the reaction of a surviving relative to the death of a loved one. I speak, of course, of Abraham and his response to the death of his wife, Sarah.

Much has been written about the psychology of the emotion of grief. It is a complex emotion and is a very long, sometimes life-long, process.

It seems that there are at least two components to normal grief. There is an emotional component, consisting of feelings of great sadness and pervasive melancholy. There is also an intellectual component, as the mourner seeks to make some sense of his or her loss and to find purpose and

meaning in the death of the loved one, to thus be able to move on in life.

So it is not surprising that when Abraham learned of Sarah's death, and he apparently was not in the vicinity of where she died, he came rushing to make the arrangements for her burial.

We read that he "came to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her." Note the two components of his response. Crying, expressing feelings of loss through sobs and tears, *bechi*, was one component. The other component was much more cerebral and consisted of a well thought-out and carefully composed eulogy.

Abraham honored Sarah with his heart, his feelings, but also with his head, with his mind and intellect.

Both aspects of this dual response are necessary. Over the first, the emotional aspect, we have little control. Feelings burst forth even when we try to suppress them.

But the second aspect, the reasoned and verbally expressed eulogy, is one over which we have great control. We can plan intentionally what we will say and what we won't say in a eulogy, a *hesped*.

There is a beautiful eulogy in the homiletic writings of the great 18th century sage, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, author of the authoritative *halachic* work, *Noda B'Yehuda*. In that eulogy, Rabbi Landau speaks about his wife, Leeba, and compares her to the matriarch Sarah.

He notes that in our text, Abraham cries

“for her,” the pronoun “her” being used instead of the proper name. However, he “eulogizes Sarah. No pronoun here, but her personal name—the name by which she was known to him and to all of her acquaintances.

Rabbi Landau insists that Abraham was setting an example for all eulogies to follow, for all time and eternity. A eulogy must be specific and speak in detail about the particular and unique qualities of the deceased. One should not just eulogize “her,” one must eulogize “Sarah.” Those listening to the eulogy must come away with a better sense of who the deceased was, with some details about what made the deceased special.

Too often at funerals, we hear clergymen make very impersonal remarks about death and eternity, and they do not leave us with even an impression of the biographical details and significance of the life that was just lost.

Abraham set the tone for a proper eulogy. He eulogized the Sarah that he knew. Not some abstract description which could fit any woman, but an exquisitely detailed portrait of the real Sarah, from the perspective of one who shared his life with her.

There is so much that careful students of Torah have learned from the lives of Abraham and Sarah. One lesson that I personally cherish is the lesson of Abraham’s eulogy for his life’s companion. The actual words of this eulogy are not recorded, but the message is clear. It was not an anonymous “her” that he mourned, but a real, flesh and blood, deeply beloved life-long spouse, Sarah. ■

***note change of time**

Shabbat afternoon Parsha shiur with Rabbi Chanoch Yeres at **4:30pm** in the back garden of the OU Israel Center



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