



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

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IN THE PARSHA

## Discovering our Mortality

It was at a house of mourning, and she was saying something that I had heard many times before. In fact, I had said it myself when I was sitting *shiva* for my own mother.

She is a friend of long-standing, and a member of my former congregation. I hope that I am not being unchivalrous by describing her as late middle-aged. She had just lost her own mother, having lost her father several years ago.

“It is not just that I feel orphaned,” she said. “It is that I feel vulnerable. As long as even one of my parents was alive, it was as if there was a kind of buffer between me and death. Now that they are both gone, it begins to feel that it is my turn. No one to protect me. I face the *malach hamavet* (angel of death) directly, face to face, head on.”

We all deny our mortality, and as long as the older generation is around we feel that they, and not we, are the ones on death’s frontlines. We are insulated from death’s claws by them. It is their turn and not yet ours. But once we lose our own parents, we can no longer deny our mortality. It is our turn.

There is an excellent book by my esteemed colleague, Rabbi Marc Angel, entitled *The Orphaned Adult*. I often recommend this

book to mourners, particularly those who are fortunate to have entered adulthood, even late middle age, with both parents alive, and experience their deaths only after having long ago reached adulthood. Their feelings are unique and very different from those who experienced the trauma of a parent’s death at an earlier stage of life. Rabbi Angel also describes this sudden sense of mortality, of vulnerability. With the death of parents, these older people finally must surrender their comfortable denial of their own inevitable demise.

In this week’s portion, *Chukat*, we read of the death of two beloved leaders of the Jewish people, Miriam and Aaron. Both of them were parent figures, albeit not actual parents, of the Jews in the years of their wandering in the wilderness. Instructively, a period of vulnerability ensues immediately upon their respective deaths.

We read first of Miriam’s death. “The Israelites arrived at the wilderness of Zin... Miriam died there and was buried there.” And then, immediately, “The community was without water.” (*Numbers* 20:1-2)

As long as Miriam was alive, she was a source of water, a source of life. While she was alive, the *be’er* Miriam (well of Miriam)

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provided water for the people. With her death, and in her case, the well immediately dried up, the water ceased, and the people were vulnerable. Without “mother” Miriam, death by thirst threatened the people.

Soon afterwards, we read, “...and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain.” And then, this time not immediately but after thirty days of mourning, “When the Canaanite king of Arad heard... he engaged Israel in battle and took some of them captive...” (*Numbers 20:28-29 and 21:1*) “Father” Aaron died, and peace and security were shattered. War and that worst of fates, captivity, reared their ugly heads.

It seems that it is more than mere psychological reality that with the passing of its leaders, a nation faces calamity. With the death of ones parents, one’s own well being is threatened. No wonder that when the young sister-in-law of the 18th century sage Rabbi Yonasan Eybeshitz lost her husband, the Rabbi cautioned her, in a letter which has come down to us, to take special care of her own physical well being and the health of her young children. As our sages put it in the Talmud, “When one member of a group perishes, the entire group needs to be anxious.”

How apt are the words of the Psalmist, “When my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in” (*Psalms 27:10*). When our parents “abandon” us and leave this world, we are bereft in many ways, and our positions in life become precarious. We need God at those moments, and turn to Him, confident that He will “take us in”. ■

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