

PARSHAT EMOR
APRIL 27, 2013
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Our Torah reading this morning begins with the laws concerning the Kohanim, the priests. In particular, they are instructed not to come into contact with a corpse, a dead body. The Torah instructs them: “None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin, except for the relatives that are closest to him.” In other words, a Kohen was to remain both physically and spiritually pure since he was to serve in the Tabernacle in the desert and the Temple in Jerusalem. Many Kohanim, in our day and age, don’t attend funerals or stand in cemeteries, following these rules.

The Kohen could defile himself only if one of the members of his family, those for whom he would sit Shiva in our day, passed away. However, the High Priest, the Kohen HaGadol, could not even come into contact with their corpses. He had the responsibility to remain even more vigilant of his physical and spiritual purity as he represented the Israelite people at some of the most sacred moments in their life, including entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

But there was one time when even the High Priest had the responsibility of becoming impure. He was obligated to perform the proper burial procedures for those that are unburied. This category is known as a Met Mitzvah. Our tradition teaches that it is a religious duty to arrange for the burial of a corpse lying unattended. In ancient times, this may have occurred as one was walking in the wilderness or on a public road. The duty of burying it devolves upon any person who discovers it. Even the High Priest had the responsibility of performing this act though he would become impure himself.

Robert Alter in his Biblical commentary suggests that many scholars have proposed that the notion of corpses as a source of defilement is linked with a polemic against the cult of the dead evidently widespread in Canaan among both Canaanites and Israelites. However, he also suggests that given the repeated affirmation through ritual in the Book of Leviticus of life against death, it is quite possible that dead bodies were thought of as intrinsically contaminating, even without reference to a cult of the dead. Therefore, for the Priests, and especially so for the High Priest, their purity status was placed above the responsibility of affording the respect due to the dead by attending their funeral or burying them at the cemetery. However, when there was no choice, as in the category of a Met Mitzvah, even the High Priest had to associate himself with that act.

In our day and age, we sanitize death in our country. Funeral homes become involved in the arrangements and family members pay for their services. In American culture there has been the widespread notion that even mourning rites should be sanitized. Men should not cry and all should uphold a stiff upper lip. Jewish tradition wisely suggested that death is part of life and we have to deal with it appropriately. Mourning rites are not only appropriate, but essential, as grief is a crucial element of an individual’s mourning a loss and getting on with life.

Two major concepts support this Jewish view. The first is Kovod HaMet, honor for the deceased and the second, Nichum Avelim, comforting the mourners. Both are essential in our

tradition, giving proper accord to those who have passed away and supporting the mourners in their grief.

Only a week ago I returned from Israel as a participant in the Chicago Jewish Federation's Israel at 65 Mission. We were there to show our support and to celebrate with Israel on its special anniversary. Two major days on the Jewish calendar occurred while we were present in Israel. The first is Yom HaZikron, Remembrance Day for Israel's fallen, and Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel Independence Day. If there is anything that separates living in Israel and living outside of Israel, it is the former date.

Those of us who live here, unless we have close family or friends in Israel who have experienced a loss in the defense of the State or in terrorist actions, do not feel the same intense emotions that Israelis feel on this particular date. Israel mourned over 25,000 individuals, who have lost their lives from the early days of the State to the present in war, in terrorist actions, and in defense of the Jewish people. On this date, no entertainment takes place as movie houses and bars are closed. There are ceremonies throughout the country at military cemeteries recalling those who gave the ultimate sacrifice to defend the land. Sunday evening began with a special ceremony at the Western Wall with President Shimon Peres and the IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz recalling those who gave their lives and offering to comfort those who experienced the losses. At 11:00 am the next day a siren was sounded throughout all of Israel. Everybody stood at attention for two minutes. All traffic stopped, all movement was curtailed as long as the siren wailed. It is a most meaningful day in Israel as there is almost no family that has not lost someone or knows someone who was killed over the past 65 years.

We were present Sunday night at a special memorial service. It was held at Latrun, a place of many battles both in 1948 and in 1967, at the Amoured Brigade Museum. Present were over 5,000 people, most of them students from the Diaspora, studying in Israel as part of the MASA program of the Jewish Agency and the government of the State of Israel, spending six months to a year living in Israel participating in an educational program. It was the only major memorial service in the English language, but there was also simultaneous translations into Russian, Spanish and French as students were present from all over the world, including three of our own who are studying on the NATIV program and Gabi Gordon who made aliyah. It was a very moving ceremony as we recalled individuals who gave their lives in defense of the State of Israel. We recalled them not only collectively, but individually. Young people from France, Argentina, Israel, the Former Soviet Union and the United States were recalled as they lived. Many of the members of the family were present and laid wreaths in commemoration of their losses. Videos were prepared as their family and friends remembered them for their bravery and their courage. One of those recalled was an American who made aliyah and was a friend of Rabbi Schwab. Michael Levin who grew up in the Conservative Movement and was killed in the Lebanon war. The memorial service lasted 90 minutes. Not a word was uttered by those sitting in the crowd, no applause was offered and when it finished we simply filed out silently.

When the siren went off at 11:00 a.m. on Monday morning Yom HaZikaron, we happened to be in Tel Aviv standing outside Independence Hall, the place where David Ben Gurion announced to the world the independent State of Israel on May 14, 1948. It was a most

moving moment as we recognized the privilege of living in a world where a Jewish state exists, and the sacrifices needed to make it a reality.

Later in the evening with a special ceremony at Mount Herzl the mood of the country changed. With the lighting of twelve torches Yom Hazikaron ended and Yom Ha'Atzmaut began. The streets were filled with dancing and joy. Fireworks were heard throughout Jerusalem, and people spent the evening and the next day with their friends and family rejoicing on Israel's special anniversary.

Israel is the only country which remembers its dead and immediately celebrates its present and its future. This is a country which understands well the debt it owes to those who have given their lives so that others can celebrate modern day Israel. We learned that to rejoice on Yom Ha'Atzmaut we must show our appreciation for those who gave their lives so the state can exist.

How different this is from our customs here in the United States or, I might say as well, in Canada. What is Memorial Day here in this country? What has it become? It is a day off school and a day of sales so we can run to the mall and go shopping. How many of us feel touched by those who gave their lives for this country? Let us understand that it is not merely a day to recall the loss of life of the ancient past. In the last decade over 6,500 people have lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan as they assumed their responsibility to protect freedom and democracy in service of our country. Out of those there are 50 Jewish service people who made the ultimate sacrifice since 2003. Their families mourn their loss, most of us don't even know their names. This has been a war where the less we know about the individuals who were killed, the better. Yes, we must go on in life just as the Israelis do. And yet, we must also remember those who lost their lives.

While we were in Israel I listened intently to Hebrew news on the radio concerning what was happening in Boston. Here I was in Israel, a place where everyone thinks danger is a daily occurrence, worrying about those who were killed on Patriot's Day in Boston running the marathon. It was a horrible week, not merely for the people of Boston, but for the whole country as we all felt our own vulnerability and lack of security. I don't know whether there will ever be answers to this tragedy. But, there is one thing we do know. It is our task to remember those who were killed, to comfort their families, to show compassion to those who were injured and maimed and whose lives were changed drastically in the spur of a moment. At the same time, Boston and the rest of the country should get on with life to show the terrorists that they cannot disrupt our daily activities. When terrorist actions occur in Israel it takes but a few hours to resume a sense of normalcy. All need to understand that they cannot defeat the spirit of the country. The same must be true, and is true, for the people of Boston.

The Kohen had to insure that he was physically and spiritually pure in order to participate in the sacred rituals of our people. But at the same time even the High Priest, if he happened upon a Met Mitzvah, had to occupy himself with the burial of that individual. Whether we are Kohanim or not, we must shoulder the responsibility of remembering those who died and then we must get on with life. It is a remarkable experience to be in Israel for Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha'Atzmaut, two days like no other anywhere on the globe. One can only appreciate Israel

Independence Day when we understand the sacrifices that were made by those who insured the country's survival. At the same time, our memories must not so totally weigh us down that we cannot celebrate life and extol the goodness that is present in it. So it is, even with the tragedy in Boston.

I pray that the memories of those who have given the ultimate sacrifice may be remembered for good, that we will be cognizant and respectful of their lives. May those who loved them receive much comfort. I also pray that we shall have the privilege of celebrating good times in security, peace, and freedom in this country, in Israel, and throughout the world.