

Mourning

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week's reading from the Torah starts off by recording Sarah's death and then goes on to say that "Avraham came to mourn her and to cry over her."

In general, there are two very different processes involved when someone dies. First comes the shock of the loss, the numbness. And then comes the adjustment. The integration of one's memory and love for the departed into one's own, ongoing life. Sometimes the shock is so great that the adjustment takes a very long time. Psychologically there are so many different levels of loss. Each one affects us differently. There is no single way or responding and no fixed time it takes to get over the shock and adjust.

In the Jewish tradition we have two very different processes, the private and the public. The first is the formal, the burial, the Shiva that lasts for seven days, the most intense ritual where the community gathers round to give moral support, to take care of the mourners as they try to come to terms with their loss. Then the Shiva forces us to formalizes the mourning and give it communal expression. This is followed by a thirty-day period of less strict mourning when we return to normal daily activity and this second degree of mourning lasts for a year in the case of our parents.

The public, formal, periods of mourning have a different function to the personal loss which cannot really be dealt with in a public way. Dealing with loss takes time. The Talmud implies that it takes a whole year before one's heart adjusts to loss.

In Avraham's case it seems he goes through the formal mourning, the hesped, first and then cries over his loss after that. This seems counter intuitive. Surely one cries first and then adjusts. It seems to me that the Torah is saying that one simply has to get a grip on oneself in order to arrange all the things necessary for burial and cope with the communal mourning and only then, perhaps when one is alone can one really begin the process of crying that leads to healing.