

Mourning

This week I had three Houses of Mourning to attend. There was a sad symmetry to the three shivas. One was for a ninety-year-old man. The second was for a middle-aged woman who died of cancer. The third was for a young man, whose life was tragically cut short, to the incredible pain of his parents and siblings.

For the benefit of the uninitiated, the institution of shiva, which literally means “seven”, requires a mourner to spend the seven days after the burial at home surrounded by relatives and visited by a constant stream of friends, well-wishers, do-gooders and clergy. Then after returning to normal activity there is a year of mourning for parents and a month for all other close relatives. I often wonder why it is only a month for a child but I guess in days of massive infant mortality it made sense.

Some argue that the intense shiva is therapeutic. The constant presence helps create an artificial atmosphere that helps carry one through from the unreality and tragedy of loss to the adjustment required to re-enter mundane society and pick up where one left off. Others suggest that it imposes a process of mourning that we need to go through as a way of learning to cope with loss.

I do not adhere to Jewish custom and Law because of any utilitarian or practical benefits. I am delighted to know that Divine Wisdom might on occasion coincide with ours, if only because it isn't fun being the butt of skeptical agnostics who spend an inordinate amount of time and energy attacking the iniquities of religion instead of giving it some credit for helping the human condition. However, even if no benefits could be seen I'd still follow the rules.

But I must confess that I find the shiva incredibly difficult to handle. First, as a rabbi, a clergyman, it is so difficult to know how to respond. Instinctively, I want to show my feelings by hugging or touching. One wants to connect, to find some tangible way of expressing one's concern or friendship, whether it is to a male or a female. Of course, Jewish Law does not encourage such free physical expression of feelings, especially with people with whom one is forbidden to have sexual relations. Not touching is regarded as a “fence around the law”. I remember in my youth how much people used to make fun of such religious sensitivity. But nowadays civil law in the West has caught up. With so many cases of sexual molestation, harassment and perversion, very often on the part of clergymen of many religions, a teacher who touches a pupil or a doctor who examines a patient alone in his surgery or someone who offers a comforting arm around a co-worker risks prosecution.

So when touching is not possible, what are you left with? Words. Words. Words! The trouble is that very few people have the skills to use words felicitously. Even those of us who live by the word often find it very difficult when faced by tragedy and human pain. Just think of the usual clichés. “Our hearts go out to you.” “We extend our sincerest condolences.”

"They have passed on to a far better place." I once heard a rabbi in Glasgow declare, "The community's loss is the cemetery's gain!"

And then you have all those well-meaning explanations of untimely death. "Everyone is given an allotted task in life and some of us accomplish it earlier and others later." This was to explain to me why my father died at the age of 49 and then, years later, why I lost a son aged two months. In neither case did it achieve anything except make me want them to stop digging their own graves. I suppose someone in a coma for years is fulfilling a useful function. Oh, yes, I will be told they are giving something to the family if only indirectly, even in their comatose or premature state. I know these people meant well. But one of the less satisfactory aspects of a shiva is having to sit and listen to these endless inanities and ridiculous nonsenses.

When my father died there was a veritable procession of people who assured me they were my father's best friends and fervent supporters, but I know how much he suffered because he was not supported in his great work and how few people who claimed to be his friends really were. Did they think I didn't know? If anything, for me, the shiva hindered the process of grieving, made me very angry and resentful and long all the more for solitude.

One of the beauties of Judaism is that there is a tradition of berating God. Yes, we are expected to give thanks for the bad as well as the good, because in one way or another everything comes from the same source and is for the best. Both King David and Job were stoic in their sufferings and never raised a word against the Divine decree. But, on the other hand, the Chassidic masters were not at all inhibited in their complaints against the way God treated His creatures.

The fact is that a true believer takes what comes and bears it without any acrimony directed to God. What happens to us on earth is part of the natural way of things. Some bodies are more prone to diseases than others. Some situations are more risky and some peoples' genetic make-up makes them more likely than others to end up in a mess.

Belief in God does not change the natural order neither does it answer why things happen that we humans call "bad". When someone dies and we ask "Why?", we do not want the rational, medical explanation. We want to be comforted and, as with a crying child, a hug is often better than a word.

The dead person must be better off, whether you believe in an Afterlife or not, having left the troubles of the physical world behind. We are mourning for **our** loss, for **our** pain. And that is why comforting is so important.

Once upon a time every word counted. Nowadays words are cheap. So we babble to cover up our awkwardness and our words get us into trouble. Job's comforters sat in silence and in that silence there was no reproach. It was when they started talking they got into trouble.

The law is that we should remain silent until the mourner starts speaking. But I've often seen silent comforters sit awkwardly waiting for the word that

never came and most people who throw words around carelessly look askance at them. This is one of the sicknesses of our times—that we need to speak, speak, speak.

To be fair, sometimes words can help and a sensitive speaker can comfort. But it happens so rarely. As we say three times a day at the end of the Amidah prayer “Oh Lord protect me from saying the wrong thing” (my translation).

It has been a sobering week. It reminded me of all my pain. Strangely I was never angry, just sad at the loss of human life, a brilliant life cut short and a waste of potential that had not properly began. As far as we are concerned it is the living who count, and the living are the only ones we can do anything about. The shiva forces us to focus on the living, rather than on those who have gone.

submit feedback