

Laws of Mourning

Surprisingly there are no actual laws in the Torah about mourning. There are references to death, burial and periods of mourning. But none specified in the lists of laws. Our forefathers and mothers died, were buried and in an ambiguous and difficult phrase that might have been referring either to an afterlife or an ossuary "were gathered to their people." When Moses dies, the people mourn him for thirty days but there are no instructions about individual mourning. Similarly, in the case of Aharon. But there's no commandment to keep Shiva or mourn for a year for parents as we do.

This week's reading describes how Avraham came to mourn Sarah and to cry over her death. And then he sets about finding a burial cave. Three separate features emerge, the obligation to bury, the emotional need to cry and the obligation to mourn. But why did the Torah leave such issues so vague? No mention of mourning procedures when Aaron or Miriam die.

Perhaps in the way it avoids dealing directly with the issue of life after death, the Torah is preoccupied with life, now, not death. The souls of the dead might move on to a higher world of spirit but the living have to get on with the reality of life on earth.

Parents are in a unique position. Respect for them comes in the first five of the Ten Commandments which are devoted to the relationship between God and humanity. So, in a way parents are a link between us and God. They are the representatives of God in taking care of us and their responsibility to educate and inculcate religious values.

Mourning of parents comes under the category of Zachor, 'remembering.' The Torah is very concerned with remembering, the good and the bad; slavery in Egypt, Amalek the archetypal enemy of the Jews, the Shabbat, remembering the Covenant with God, remembering Avraham, Isaac and Yaakov, to mention only the main ones.

When we remember our parents we are supposed to remember the positive values they taught us, the impact they had on our lives. While they live we accept their guidance but in death their message must remain with us. According to the Talmud it takes a year before one can detach oneself emotionally. Crying is a response of our personal loss, but remembering is a positive way of continuing to pay respect to them.

Avraham suffered a personal loss. He cried. He recognized Sarah's contribution, he remembers her, that is what mourning achieves. He buried her. That was his obligation. But her spirit lived on in the way the way her values continued in her son's life. That's what the Torah really wants of us. How we 'translate' that into action, was left to later generations, and us.