

The Meaning of a Life Tragically Cut Short – JewishClarity.com – Part 2

Addressing the tragedy of those who pass away young

A poignant *Medrash* (*Medrash Raba* — *Shir HaShirim*) addresses the tragedy of those who pass away young:

Hashem comes down to take the *shoshanim* (literally roses, but understood here as *tzadikim*) from His orchard (*beit kneset* and *beit medrash* — shul and study hall), every single one at the right time, when they have [each] completed [their task]. What is the difference between the death of elders and young people?.

A group was learning Torah under a fig tree. Every morning, before the group arrived to begin their learning, the owner of the fig trees was already harvesting the figs that had ripened and were ready to be picked.

When they saw that he made sure to get to the orchard before them every morning, they said to one another — “Let’s change our place [of learning]. Perhaps he suspects us of eating his figs and that is why he [always] makes sure to get to the orchard before we do.” They, therefore, went and sat down [to learn] in a different place.

The next day the owner of the fig trees got up and didn’t see them. He searched after them until he finally found them. He said to them — “*Rabosai* (Gentlemen), there was one mitzvah that you were doing for me, since your Torah was being learned in the shade of my fig tree, and now you want to remove it from me?”

They said to him — “*Chas v’shalom* (G-d forbid)!” He then asked them — “Why [then] did you leave your place to go to a new place?” They answered — “Perhaps you suspected us.”

He replied to them — “*Chas v’shalom* (G-d forbid)!” He then explained — “So why do I get up every morning so early to pick my figs? Because once the sun shines on the [ripe] figs, they become wormy.”

They immediately returned to learn under his fig tree. The following day he did not get up early to pick his figs. He rather waited until they had finished their learning, but [by then] the [ripe] figs were indeed found to be wormy.

At that moment they said — “The owner of the fig trees spoke well. He knows the seasons of his figs, when they are ready to be picked, and he picks them at the proper time, neither early nor late.”

And if he knows the seasons of his figs, and he picks them at the exact proper time, [certainly] *HaKadosh Boruch Hu* (the Holy One, blessed be He) knows the seasons of the *tzadikim*, and when to take them from the world. Every single one of them is taken at the proper time and season, according to when its *nefesh* (soul) has completed its task in this world, neither early nor late. They are not taken according to the number of years of their lives, but rather according to the fulfillment of their task in this world. And this is beneficial for the generation, either to chastise them or to arouse them to do *teshuva*, since this special one was taken from them that had previously shielded and protected them.

Medrash Tanchuma

In *Medrash Tanchuma* on *Parshat Ki Tissa* (*Gimmel*) it says:

Rabbi Tanchum bar Abba began to discuss the *possuk* in *Kohelet* — “The sleep of the worker is sweet, whether one eats little or much.” They said to Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) — If anyone else had said this verse, we would have laughed at him. It is actually just the opposite! Whoever is hungry and eats a little will **not** sleep well, while one who eats well will have a sweet sleep!

He answered them — “I am speaking only of the *tzadikim* and those who toil in Torah... One person lived for only 30 years and was involved in Torah and *mitzvot* from the age of 10 until his death, while someone else lived for 80 years and similarly began with Torah and *mitzvot* from the age of 10 until he passed away. One might think that since the first one toiled in Torah [and *mitzvot*] for only 20 years and the second one toiled for 70 years, Hashem would give the second one more *s’char*. Therefore, I say — “whether one eats (i.e., accomplishes) little or much.”

Because the one of 20 years can say to Hashem — “If You had not removed me from the world in half of my days, I would have lived longer and accomplished much more in Torah and *mitzvot*.” Therefore, I say — “whether one eats little or much” — because the *s’char* of one is equal to the *s’char* of the other.

Rebbe Levi said — What is this comparable to? To a king who hired laborers to do his work. While they were working, the King took one of them for a walk with him. In the evening the workers came to collect their wages along with the worker who had walked with the king. Could the king then tell this worker — “You worked for only two hours, so take only according to how much you worked?” He could then answer the king — “If You had not taken me away from my work to walk with you, my wage would have been much greater!” The king [in the *masha*] is Hashem and the workers are those who toil in Torah [and *mitzvot*]. Some toil in Torah [and *mitzvot*] for 50 years, while others toil for 20 or 30 years. They could claim — “Had You not removed me, I would have continued to toil in Torah [and *mitzvot*]!” Therefore, Shlomo HaMelech says — “whether one eats little or much” — their *s’char* can actually be equal.

Every moment of a short life is precious and worthy of thanks

As painful as any death is, there is a much greater sense of tragedy when a young child passes away. However, **Rabbi Avrohom Stone** explained that this is really a question of our perspective. He wrote:

“It was a house of mourning, like so many I had been in before. On a table in the corner, the flame of a lone candle flickered. People spoke in hushed tones, afraid that their voices might carry. Grief and sadness were everywhere, and an air of sorrow filled the room. It was like every other house of mourning; yet, for me, this time it was different. This time, it was my house that was filled with sadness. And it was I who was in mourning.

My family sat in the living room on small chairs, low to the ground. In the same spot where we had celebrated her birth with a festive *kiddush*, just three and a half months earlier, we now sat *shiva* for my baby daughter Shoshana Devora, may she rest in peace. The “sweetest little baby in the world,” as I had often called her; a perfectly normal, healthy baby had died suddenly, for no apparent reason, and our family had been cast into indescribable sadness and unbearable pain.

If a person lived 70, 80 or 100 years, and everyone who knew them found them to be a source of only love and happiness; and if they themselves knew no suffering, only the adoration and love of others; when such a person would die, how would we feel? Certainly, there would be the hurt and pain of losing such a wonderful human being, and they would be missed dearly. But, reflecting on their life, would you feel sorry for them? Would you feel an ounce of regret for the beautiful, perfect world they had known and created? I ask you, then: does it really make a difference whether it’s 135 years or 135 days?

There is a story in the Talmud which I had taught in my daily class a few days before Shoshana died, that keeps running through my head. It tells of how the Sages, for various reasons, decided to remove Rabban Gamliel as the Prince and Head of the *yeshiva*. Looking for a replacement, they settled on

Rebbe Elazar ben Azariya. When they offered him the position, he consulted with his wife, who asked him a pointed question. "What do you need this for? How do you know that they won't replace you tomorrow, just as they replaced Rabban Gamliel today?"

I had explained Rabbi Elazar ben Azariya's reply as follows. "And if they do remove me? So what if I occupy the position for only one day. Does it mean that it has no value? Absolutely not! From that day on, my whole outlook on life will be different and improved. Everything will take on new meaning. From that one day, I'll have memories that will last a lifetime. Everything I look at will be from a different perspective, a more meaningful one, because of the moments I served in that capacity. Are you saying that, just because an experience won't last forever, it means that it has no value? That, since I might have to give it up, I should never know the experience in the first place? That it won't be worth every second because it will have to end? G-d forbid!" I feel exactly the same way about my baby.

G-d gives us many gifts in life. Some are long-term; others are short-term. Each child is a precious gift from Him. I sincerely hope and pray that the seven gifts he has given us will be long-term ones, for 120 years. But the eighth gift he gave us was a short-term one. So, what should I do? Should I sit here and be angry, and complain to G-d because He cheated us? Or should I sit and be grateful for every single day of the free, short-term gift He bestowed upon us? The first day we had her was wonderful, and it didn't necessarily ever have to have happened. So, too, the second. And the third. And the 135th. They were all wonderful, special days. The challenge for us is not whether we will be angry with G-d or harbor complaints against Him. The challenge is whether we have the capacity and ability to appreciate every special moment He gave us. And the fact is that we do.

This is not to say that we aren't hurting. Believe me, we are. For my wife, the evenings are hardest. For me, the mornings are my time to cry. Strangely, as the days pass, the pain seems only to intensify and I miss her more and more. If your heart goes out to us, if you want to share our hurt, if you want to take a part of our sorrow over how much we miss her, we won't object.

Pain shared is pain lessened. But if you wish to help us deal with the seeming injustice of it all, the apparent unfairness of it all, please don't bother. For while we will always grieve and there will always be pain, there will also always be gratitude and appreciation. For a lifetime of happy memories condensed into three and a half months. And for having merited to receive the most special short-term gift we could ever have hoped for — Shoshana Devora, the sweetest little baby in the world." (*Reb Yochanan's Bone*, pg. 174–7).

Miscarriage will merit to both *Olam Haba* and *techiat hameitim*

Rav Zilberstein (*Torat HaYoledet*) wrote a beautiful message of *Divrei Chizuk I'Mapelet* (Words of support and strengthening for a woman who had miscarried) which is also relevant for a parent who lost a child at any age:

The mother of the child that died young, should not say — "My pregnancy was pointless and my birth accomplished nothing," since there were eternal benefits to her actions. In the *Gemara Sanhedrin* (110b) there are differing opinions as to when a child achieves *Olam Haba* — From the time of **birth**, from when they can **speak**, and from the time of **conception**. Rashi explains that the opinion which holds — "the time of conception," would include a case where a woman suffered a miscarriage; her child would also have a portion in *Olam Haba*. In fact, the *Gemara Ketubot* (111a) says explicitly that a child which was miscarried will also come back to life once there is *techiat hameitim* (the revival of the dead).

Rav Moshe Feinstein writes in *Igrot Moshe* (*Yoreh Deah*, 3:138):

Ravina [who held the opinion that a child achieves *Olam Haba* from the time of **conception**] was the final arbiter of the *halacha*, and the *halacha* follows him. The definitive *halacha* is [therefore] that from

the moment of conception, even in the case of a miscarriage afterwards, the child has a portion in *Olam Haba*, and will come back to life once there is *techiat hameitim* (revival of the dead), like a *tzadik gamur* [completely righteous person], untainted from any transgressions.

Rav Zilberstein continued:[And] the mother [was the one who] merited to establish this great *chesed* with the *neshama* by facilitating the fulfillment of its true potential here.

The *Gemara Sotah* 12a says that Miriam the prophetess told Amram [her father]: “Your decree [that all of the men in Egypt should divorce their wives, to avoid having any boys that would be drowned in the Nile] is worse than that of Pharaoh, because Pharaoh decreed only in this world, while your decree applies even to *Olam Haba*.”

Rashi explains that since these children [that Amram is preventing from being conceived] will never exist, they will not be able to get to *Olam Haba*. We see from this that it is worthwhile for a *neshama* to be brought down into this world and afflicted with the pain of being drowned in the Nile, and also for the parents to have to endure this pain, to see their precious offspring thrown into the Nile, in order that through this, the *neshama* will be able to get to *Olam Haba*.

If even a baby that is never born will be *zocheh* to both *Olam Haba* and *techiat hameitim*, then this is certainly true of an infant who dies shortly after birth. When it comes to children that pass away young, we need to remember this critically important lesson taught by Miriam — All of the pain that these children went through, and all of the pain that their parents went through, was all worthwhile for the precious moments of their life, as well as the *Olam Haba* that they are now enjoying.

The statement of “*sh'echad hamarbeh v'echad hamamit* — Whether a lot or whether a little” is a principle in *nigleh* (the revealed Torah), not *nistar* (the hidden secrets of Torah). It is a simple logical idea, built upon the reality that every single person has their own unique *chelek* and *tafkid* (portion and purpose) in this world, and that is how they are evaluated. And the *yissurim* (painful difficulties) that they endured were also meaningful for them, because they had the effect of being a *kaporah* (atonement) and purification for them, as well as serving as a *limud* (lesson) for the rest of the Jewish people.

Misfortune should cause *teshuva*, not depression or guilt

The **Manchester Rosh HaYeshiva** once spoke to a group of fathers and mothers who had lost children, *Rachmana litzlan* (G-d should protect us):

In truth, it is impossible for anyone of intelligence to believe that man was created merely to exist in this world. Who in this world is happy and tranquil in the fullest sense? [Our lives are filled] with all sorts of suffering and sicknesses, pains and preoccupations.

Moreover, if the purpose of creating man was [only his existence in] this world, it would not have been necessary to have breathed a soul into him so lofty and Heavenly...as the *Mesilat Yesharim* (first chapter) points out.

One comes to recognize the real purpose of the world merely by pondering creation itself... The wonders of creation proclaim the infinite wisdom of their Creator, and the higher purpose for which the world was intended.

Childbirth is surely one of this world's great wonders... Nevertheless, the advent of childbirth brings with it many real concerns. One hopes and prays that the child will be born healthy. When the child is born healthy, one prays that he or she will merit a long and healthy life, a life of Torah and *yirat Hashem* (fear of G-d) that will bring the child's parents *nachat* (satisfaction) both in this world and the next.

There are times when parents' hopes are not realized, *Rachmana litzlan* (G-d should protect us). A baby may be born with an illness, or some other health problem. Or a child may be born healthy only to be taken from this world at a young age. How does one cope at such times? There is but one answer. As the *Gemara Makkot* (24a) points out — “Chavakuk came and established [all of the *mitzvot*] upon one [principle], as it says — “*Tzadik b'emunato yich'ye* — A righteous person will live by his faith” (*Chavakuk* 2:4).

Only with *emunah* can one cope with the travails of this world. First, one must strengthen his *emunah* in *hashgacha pratit*, his belief that whatever occurs is a precise expression of G-d's will. Nothing at all is left to chance.

The *Gemara* (*Bava Batra* 10a) relates that Rav Pappa slipped while climbing a ladder and nearly fell off. Rav Pappa reflected upon his brush with death and searched for a spiritual lapse that might have been its cause. It was obvious to this great sage that what others might have called an “accident” was, in fact, Divinely ordained.

When a child departs this world, its parents must recognize that this could have happened only because *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He), Whose compassion is infinite, willed it to be. For what purpose was this child sent to this world and why did it have to depart so soon? No one can know for certain. However, our *emunah* that this world is merely a corridor leading to the World to Come [as we learn in *Pirkei Avot* 4:21] makes what has occurred comprehensible in general terms. The child was a pure and lofty soul that needed to achieve a certain goal so that it could attain perfection... Viewing such occurrences in this sort of light makes it possible to cope, and go on with one's life.

While misfortune should be a cause for *teshuvah*, one must not confuse introspection with depression or guilt. Fathers and mothers who have lost a child should never blame themselves for what has happened. It is G-d's will that we serve Him amid a spirit of joy; guilt feelings make such service impossible. Tragedy should make a person strengthen his belief in *hashgacha pratit*, that nothing is haphazard and that every deed, word and thought is significant. Such reflection will lead to strengthening one's service of G-d.

Introspection should focus not only on oneself, but on one's family as a whole... Whether in time of joy or sorrow, *emunah* in G-d and His Torah must be our guiding light. Only through *emunah* can a Jewish home become a *Mikdash Me'at*, a miniature sanctuary; and only through *emunah* can we overcome the vicissitudes of life, and fulfill our mission in this world amid a spirit of joy.

We should learn from the young who had less quantity of life to have much quality

While those who passed away young certainly had much less in the *kamut* (quantity) of their years, they often had a special degree of *eichut* (quality and values) in their lives as well. While it is difficult to say that they were fulfilling everything they were capable of, they often tried very hard, and under extremely difficult circumstances, to fulfill what they could. And this strong *eichut* (dedication and hard work) may actually have **transformed** whatever *mitzvot* they managed to do into a much larger amount. While they never had the opportunity to fulfill the entire lifetime of accomplishment which they longed for, they could certainly say to Hashem, in the words of the *Medrash Tanchuma*: “If You had not removed me from the world at such a young age, I would have [been able to] have lived much longer and accomplished [so] much more.” Their *s'char* (spiritual benefit) should, therefore, not be diminished.

To the degree that they were able to combine the more minimal *kamut* which was **decreed** upon them with a special *eichut* which they **chose**, they thereby merited an *Olam Haba* that was truly fitting for them. We should all learn from this to make the same types of choices with the quality of each of our own lives as well.

This should be *I'zechut ul'illuy nishmat* Ruchama Rivka, a”h, bat Asher Zevulun