



CONSIDER
THIS...

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

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THE TRAGEDY of losing a spouse midlife, having bonded and built a family over years and decades, is difficult to describe. The Talmud pronounces poignantly: A woman doesn't die but to her husband; a man doesn't die but to his wife (*Sanhedrin 22b*). The Torah recognizes that outsiders cannot fully grasp what the surviving spouse experiences. All of us, after comforting the family, return to our regular lives while the spouse lives with the emptiness.

And then what? In ancient India widows practiced *Sati*, the rite of immolating themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands, or she committed suicide in another fashion, shortly after her husband's death.

This Hindu rite is clearly antithetical to Judaism, which commands us, Choose Life. In the abstract, this sounds sublime; in the concrete, it's easier said than done.

The topic is sensitive and personal. Based on my own experience, having taken the course, paid the tuition and gotten the education, I would like to share my findings. I will tread gingerly.

The adjustments of being a widow or widower are enormous. New responsibilities are suddenly thrust on the survivor which seem, and often are, overwhelming. Adjusting to new realities takes time and emotional energy. But if the widow or widower continues living — with the life sucked out of them — is that consistent

with Jewish values?

Rashi tells the story of a gentile who asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah, "Do you not admit that the Holy One, blessed be He, foresees the future?"

Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "Yes."

The gentile retorted, "But it is written [before He brought on the flood], and 'He regretted that He made man on earth and He became grieved in His heart!'"

Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "Did you ever give birth to a son?"

"Yes," he replied.

"And what did you do?" Rabbi Yehoshua asked.

He replied, "I rejoiced and made everyone rejoice."

"But did you not know that he was destined to die?" Rabbi Yehoshua asked.

The gentile replied, "At the time of joy, joy; at the time of mourning, mourning."

Rabbi Yehoshua said to him, "So is it with the work of the Holy One, blessed be He; even though it was revealed to Him that they would ultimately sin and He would destroy them, He did not refrain from creating them." (Bereishis 6:6; Bereishis Rabbah 27:4).

The same is just as true in the obverse. Though one must mourn at the time of mourning, it must end and give way again to a life of joy.

The *Shulchan Aruch* in the Laws of Mourning (*Yoreh De'ah 394*) begins: One must not mourn excessively (beyond what our sages have instructed us); one who does (mourn excessively)...a harsh rebuke follows.

The definition of "excessively" is beyond the scope of this missive but, axiomatically, there is some point defined as excessive.

When the esteemed *chassidim* Reb Mendel Futeras and his wife Leah came to New York for *Tishrei*, 5732, shortly after the tragic accident in which their daughter lost her life, they were understandably distraught, especially the bereaved mother. Shortly after their arrival, they went in to *yechidus* during



aseres yimei teshuvah and the Rebbe said that the month of Tishrei has arrived with its joyous holidays, and that the Torah guidelines are, “The first three days of mourning are for crying, the first seven days for grieving, etc.,” indicating that there needs to be a gradual end to the grieving. Mrs. Leah Futerfas, who was crying softly, said, “It’s difficult!” The Rebbe said to her, uncharacteristically raising his voice, “There is a *Shulchan Aruch!*” The Rebbe was saying to a grieving mother that when the Torah says that one must

cease grieving, one must listen to the Torah and cease grieving!

A person is not to be governed by his heart but by his mind. That is what distinguishes the human being from lower animals. Holding on to one’s grief beyond the appropriate time is setting oneself up for seeing oneself as a victim (of chance, of circumstances or of, *l’havdil*, G-d Himself). The victim is, in effect, saying that in this instance, the One who runs the world is not running it correctly. Recognizing that G-d is always in charge, although we

might not understand His ways, provides support and enables one to find the necessary strength to prevail and heal. Reaffirming one’s faith does not necessarily ease the aching heart, but it infuses one’s endurance with meaning and hope.

People are hesitant to encourage one who lost a spouse by saying that there might be a time to move on and — yes, let’s say it! — remarry. First there’s the Mind-Your-Own-Business attitude. Then, not everyone is authorized to enter another’s *sanctum sanctorum*. But there are those close enough for whom this would be appropriate.

My grandfather was the *shamash* in the *chassidische shul* in Zhlobin, the *shtetl* my father Reb Mottel Schusterman *a”h* grew up in. As an effective *shamash*, he was also the community’s *kochlefel* — in a positive way, the mover-and-shaker to get things done when they needed to be done. My father told me:

There was a widower who, though time went by, was struggling to cope with raising his children alone while providing for them, and the strain was very evident in his demeanor. My grandfather recognized this and said to him privately: “Sarah was, now Sarah isn’t; you need to think about *shtelen chupah* [setting up a *chupah*, a *Yiddische* euphemism for remarriage].”

These words may ring simplistic to the sophisticated 21st-century ear, but the point was well-taken and the gentleman followed through shortly thereafter.

I once received a call from a woman I knew with a very intense, “I need to speak to you now” message. She told me she was recently examined by her doctor who found an undesirable lump. She feels her time on earth is limited. After chewing on this indigestible morsel, I asked, “And what is it that you want from me?”

“I want you to promise me that you

Mrs. Leah Futerfas, who was crying softly, said, “It’s difficult!”

will see to it that my husband should remarry. After an appropriate time, I want you to not just suggest it, but to see that it actually happens. And you can tell him that we had this conversation, which I initiated.”

This happened 25 years ago. I’m pleased to report that her hasty self-prognosis was the result of shock and panic and entirely inaccurate, and she’s been well all along. But this blessed fact does not change the reality of her generosity of spirit to her husband.

I knew a *rov* and *rosh yeshivah* who was in his 60s when his wife, who had been bedridden for many years and for whom he was the daily caregiver, passed away. They had no children of their own, but they had raised her three orphaned nephews from childhood through marriage. He was a warm and loving teacher and leader to his students and his community, and certainly a warm and loving husband to his wife of almost 40 years.

He went in to *yechidus* with the Rebbe at the end of the *shloshim* and the Rebbe said to him: “One needs to consider *shtelen chupah*.” It’s the term used to denote the remarriage ceremony (when it’s a remarriage for both

partners), which is without the customary fanfare, and only with a *chupah* erected *indoors*, often in the officiating rabbi’s study, with only a *minyan*. The thought of remarriage was so far from his mind that he was rendered utterly speechless. In the moments of silence following the Rebbe’s words, he blurted out, “But... but... the *Shulchan Aruch* says a man must wait for three *Yamim Tovim* to pass...”

The Rebbe replied, “I didn’t mean to *shtel chupah* tomorrow; I mean you should begin considering it now, so that after three *Yamim Tovim* pass, you will be ready.” Then the Rebbe added, addressing an unasked question, “When a *neshamah* goes to heaven, it rises above all personal and self-centered considerations and wants only what is good for the surviving spouse.”

Meanwhile, there was a Rebbetzin who had been previously married, first, for a few short years, to a *rov* in Russia (with whom she had two sons) who was then drafted and killed on the Russian front in World War II. She remarried to a widowed *rosh yeshivah* who had four children from a previous marriage whom she raised. After being married for just a few years, her husband contracted Parkinson’s disease

and she lavished her care and attention on him for over a decade until he passed away, by which time she was only in her 50s.

After a few years of widowhood, a mutual friend from the *alter heim* suggested that she consider the prospect of marrying a widower, the *rov* and *rosh yeshivah*. She dismissed the proposition out of hand. Having lost two husbands, to her remarriage was out of the question. A while later, in *yechidus*, the Rebbe brought up this prospect, and said: “I suggest to you, as a good friend, that you accept this proposal. And if you don’t accept my suggestion,” the Rebbe added with a twinkle in his eye, “then I will instruct you to do so.” The Rebbe concluded, “I promise you that you will have *glicklachen leben* [a fortunate life].” Hearing such words from the Rebbe, she acquiesced.

And that’s what happened. They married and cared for each other with love and respect for the next 10 years, until he passed away.

Unlike when a marriage ends in divorce, where there is often anger and acrimony, when a marriage ends by the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse retains the ability and experience of how to give and receive the unique spousal love, which remains unfulfilled and unrequited. But when it remains dormant and unexpressed, it can shrivel up and die, and with it part of the person’s vitality.

It is wrong to think that the ability to love is specific to one person only, and having loved and lost, it’s over. It isn’t so. Love is not parceled out in small, finite portions. Love is dynamic. It grows and expands, just as a parent’s love can accommodate many children. It is clear that the past relationship cannot and should not be ignored or deliberately jettisoned, but rather laid to rest gently and lovingly, giving one the ability to move on.

Allow me a brief sermonette:

When Yosef's brothers sold him into slavery, they wanted to deceive Yaakov into thinking that Yosef had been killed by a wild animal. They took his coat of many colors—a source of their jealousy of him—dipped it in the blood of a goat and brought it to Yaakov. Yaakov stated, "A vicious animal has eaten him!" The Torah goes on to say that Yaakov's family tried to comfort him but "he refused to be consoled." Rashi, commenting on these words, states, "There is a decree regarding the dead that they be forgotten from the heart; but since Yosef was alive, the decree did not apply." Therefore "he refused to be consoled" (*Bereishis 37:35*).

Now a few questions regarding this "decree": It seems unfair and downright cruel that after people are gone they must be forgotten. Why? Haven't they put so much of themselves into their family, their friends and their community? Furthermore, it's just not so! Those close to the person do not forget their dear departed one; they cherish their loved one's memory—forever! And a technical question: Rashi's phrase is "forgotten from the heart," but isn't memory a matter of the mind, not the heart?

Upon reflection, Rashi's words are clear—and instructive.

During the period of mourning we remember intensely in our hearts. We mourn and we grieve, and we are mired in our feelings of loss, loneliness, confusion, ambivalence, doubt, and more. The Al-mighty gives us this period to work out our grief, after which the decree that the dead must be forgotten is enacted. But they are "forgotten" from the heart only, namely, from that intensity that gets in the way of our ability to continue functioning as productive people in the context of family life, and as contributing members of society. Certainly, we will always remember the person in our mind.

The Torah is *Toras Chaim*, a living

Torah and a Torah for life, a Torah which guides us through life and sets standards which enable us to deal with life in a productive, integrated manner. Anyone who had sat through a challenging week of *shivah* and might have felt that they would have rather been left alone and been allowed to curl up in a ball all by their lonely selves, after regaining their equilibrium recognizes what a blessing the Torah's *shivah* and mourning laws are.

The Torah, by forcing us out of our comfort zones, enables us to grow and adjust to a new stage in life.

The same is true about remarriage. When the Torah says, "It is not good for man to be alone (*Bereishis 2:18*)," and "It is better to live two together rather than to sit widowed (*Kiddushin, 7a*)," it is instructing us to go beyond our comfort zones and expand our horizons — to live again. Uncomfortable as the initial considerations might be, these clear guidelines are for the person's own benefit.

In addition to the concern for the person's self, there are often children, young and old, who enter the equation. When the bereaved has dependent children, the *Shulchan Aruch* waives the three-*Yamim-Tovim* restriction. The Torah sets guidelines for 21st century lives as well, in what it restricts and what it permits and what it encourages. This should remove any scintilla of stigma or perceived weakness associated with what might be considered a hasty remarriage. Children do best when the home is balanced, with the presence of those in the role of a father and a mother. It will never be the same as "before," because the new spouse-parent is a different person, which changes the family dynamic. The parental authority also changes as it now all flows through the original parent, and there will certainly be changes, challenges and adjustments, sometimes excruciating ones.

Nevertheless, one should broaden one's vision beyond the immediate and consider the long-term benefit for all.

At times, grown children might feel that remarriage is disrespectful to their deceased parent and they are callous to the surviving parent's feelings and needs. Sometimes self-interest or inheritance considerations cloud clear thinking about the surviving parent's welfare. I'm aware of remarriages that failed due to the persistent pressures from the grown children and the inability of the remarried spouse to stand up to them. If the parent is of sound mind and able body, it is selfish and sad that children would attempt to deter their parent from enjoying Torah-ordained wholesome companionship that can enliven their lives throughout their later years. The surviving parent should be clear that this is a life-affirming choice, and move forward.

Life is relentless. We have choices to make, and not making a choice is a choice too.

When a person experiences misfortune, he must deal with the here-and-now, to do what he can to ameliorate his circumstances. A person grows from overcoming challenges. Submitting to the One behind it all suffuses his endurance with meaning and hope. Then it's easier to be forward-looking and alert to new blessings and opportunities for growth, and again to enjoy life to its fullest, with joy and peace of mind. ■

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