

Chayyei Sarah: "A time for eulogy and a time for dancing (Eccl. 3:4)"

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The first reference to a funeral oration is found in this week's sidrah when Abraham came to bury his wife, Sarah: *And Abraham came to eulogise (lispod) Sarah and to weep for her* (Genesis 23:2).

Rabbinic law counsels us, however, not to offer comfort at a time 'when a person's deceased close relative still lies *before him*.'¹ At such a time, it is considered that the shock and raw emotions render mourners incapable of benefiting from the proffered comfort which may, in fact, be an unwelcome distraction for them.

In Abraham's situation, it would seem that the body of his beloved Sarah remained 'before him' and unburied for a considerable time after her death, during which he had to seek the help of the local Hittite landowners (see vv.3-7), to enlist their assistance in securing an audience with Ephron, their chieftain (vv.8-9), and then to haggle with him over the purchase of a burial plot (vv.10-16).

There is a vague verb which is repeated twice: ***Va-yakom*** *s'dei ephron* (lit. 'And the field of Ephron *arose*...to Abraham as a purchase in the presence of the Hittites, and among all who came to the gates of the city' (v.17), and, again, ***Va-yakom*** *ha-sadeh* ('And the field with its cave *arose* as Abraham's as an estate for a burial site, from the Hittites' (v.20)). This common verb, *kum*, 'to arise,' is clearly used here, however, in a specific sense of 'to ratify a legal ownership,' and is found again in this sense in Lev. 27:19. This deals with someone who dedicates a field as a gift to the sanctuary and then decides that he would like to redeem it back into his ownership. He may do so,

the Torah states, though he must then add a fifth of its value – *v'kom lo* – ‘after which it is legally (*re-*)registered to him.’

Unlike in our day, when the purchaser of a property secures the services of a licensed conveyancer (usually a lawyer) to attend to all the legal requirements and to register the purchase with the Land Registry, in early biblical times no such documentary registration existed. Then, for the transfer of ownership to a new purchaser to be publicly recognised and respected to avoid any subsequent dispute, the payment had to be made in the presence of a representative group of local citizens. Hence, the matter of Abraham’s purchase of the field and the Cave of Machpelah as a family burial place was done ‘in the hearing of the [local] Hittites’ (v.10); ‘in the sight of the children of my [Ephron’s] people’ (v.11); ‘in the presence of the local folk’ (vv.12-13); ‘confirmed as Abraham’s purchase in the sight of the local Hittites and of those who were passing through the gate of his city’ (v.18); ‘confirmed as Abraham’s as an estate for a burial site by the local Hittites (v.20). There could be absolutely no doubt therefore as to the identity and rights of its new owner!

We may assume, therefore, that it would also have taken quite some time for Abraham to have undertaken all the above procedures and negotiations, including the publicising of the impending oral sale and the summons of a representative gathering of leading locals to present themselves as witnesses. All that time, Sarah’s body remained ‘before him’ and unburied, and hence the reference to Abraham ‘arising from before his dead [wife]’ (*me'al p'nei meito*), a phrase repeated three-times (see vv.3, 4, 8).

So, to return to our rabbinic law, that one should not offer comfort while a person's deceased close relatives still lay unburied, it is clear that Abraham did, in fact, deliver his hesped for Sarah several days before laying her to rest, and while his emotions were still at their most raw!

This may be explained, however, when we consider the identity of the comforters. They would have been local Hittites – idolators and strangers – who would have had no idea of the moral and spiritual character of Sarah, of how she partnered Abraham in his mission, and of the many personal, domestic, and moral, challenges she had encountered and with fortitude overcome. Nor would they have been in any past relationship with Abraham that would have enabled them, on the one hand, to distract him with reminders of happy shared experiences, nor, on the other hand, would they have exacerbated his grief. They were present merely to offer official tokens of respect to 'the prince of God.' They were an audience, not emotional participants.

Our scribal tradition prescribes that the letter *kaf* of the word *velivkotah*, '[and Abraham came to eulogise Sarah] *and to cry for her*,' be written in miniature, indicative of that fact that his tears were suppressed and his emotions were kept in check when offering his eulogy on that public and formal occasion. He was fully aware that he was the only one present to truly mourn her passing and to appreciate the magnitude of his personal loss. Nothing they might say could possibly increase or decrease his grief. And hence his eulogy was delivered several days before he was able to bury Sarah, his wife.

This raises the issue of our widespread practice, to deliver a hesped (oration) in the cemetery hall while the departed is still ‘before us!’

One answer is that the rabbinic advice was directed, literally and exclusively, to the period immediately following the demise of one’s close relative when the overwhelming element of shock had just set in. Another view takes account of a Talmudic dispute over whether the objective of the hesped was to honour the dead (*yekarah dish’chiva*) or to show respect and give honour to the surviving immediate relatives (*yekarah dechaya*).² The latter objective was to be achieved by emphasizing the values and traditions that the departed passed down to his or her family.

The prevailing Talmudic view is that its purpose was to honour the dead and to speak primarily about his or her qualities, achievements and values. The ramification of this is that if the departed left an instruction that no eulogy should be made, that wish should be adhered to since a person has the right to forgo his or her honour. If the departed left an instruction, however, that his near relatives should not observe shivah or sheloshim, that should be disregarded, since mourning is an expression of duty, loss, and respect on the part of the bereaved, and no one – not even a departed parent – has any authority to cancel someone else’s duty.

Thus, the hesped is not meant as an expression of comfort or tribute to the family but exclusively to describe and honour the life and achievements of the departed. The comfort is reserved for when the mourners return from the interment, when the departed is no longer ‘before them.’ It is then that we offer our comforting blessing of *Ha-makom yenacheim*.

May we all be blessed to enjoy only semachot, good health, and family joys.

NOTES

1. M. *Avot* 4:23.

2. Tal. *San.* 46b.