

A Project of Chai Lifeline

HELPING STUDENTS COPE WITH LOSS OF A RABBI

Chazal (Sanhedrin 101a) tell us that when Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos was dying, all of his students, including Rabbi Akiva, went to say their goodbyes to this great sage. He spent time with them, addressing each one at a personal level, and acknowledging that his end was near. He compared himself to a *Sefer Torah*, his arms compared to the two wooden staves or *atzei chaim* around which the scrolls are wrapped, and how his life was now preparing for its '*gelilah*', its final binding. The students, great rabbis in their own right, humbly left.

Nonetheless, when word later reached Rabbi Akiva that his *rebbe* had passed, the Talmud says that he wailed and tore at his own skin all the way from Caesaria to Lod. He cried out that the students were now like orphans without a father (*Sanhedrin 68a; Avos D'Rebbi Nosson 25:3*). The commentaries struggle with this image of Rabbi Akiva causing such self-harm, which the Torah prohibits. Some explain that such is the depth of a student's anguish upon losing a *rebbe* – he mourns for the Torah that is now lost to the degree that he may feel as if he has detached from all of his own senses.

When a yeshiva student of any age is bereft of a dear *rebbe*, who indeed may have felt like a father and mentor, the blow to the heart, the mind and the spirit is going to be profound. Grief in any form is an intense struggle, and many students have been spared the ordeal of *aveilus*, in that they are still young. When one's first encounter with grieving involves the loss of a *rebbe*, a student generally has nothing to fall back on, no personal reference point within his memory with which to take perspective on what happens in grief, how grieving evolves, what to expect. In short, loss of a *rebbe* can bring a person to feeling that he does not actually know what grief is or how to grieve.

There are various practices - some *minhagim*, some actually cited in *halacha* - which pertain to loss of a *rebbe muvhak*. In most instances, however, students grieving the loss of a *rebbe* will not go through a formal ritual of *aveilus*. Unlike losing a relative or family member *r'l*, there is no *kriah*, no *kaddish*, no *shiva*. Ironically, the lack of having such formal structure can make the grief process more bewildering and more frustrating for a student.

The following pointers are intended to lend some psychological structure to the oftentimes awkward aftermath of coping with loss of a *rebbe*.

- It is normal to feel deeply saddened. This may be experienced as tearfulness, as loss of initiative, as low energy, fatigue, as loss of appetite. The mind and the soul in some ways almost “conspire” to react to loss of life by having the body experience other more concrete losses such as lack of interest in familiar and even necessary things
- It is normal to feel uneasy. Encountering death during one’s youth opens up a new vista on life, namely, that time in this existence is finite. Some young people are suddenly confronted with worries about losing others, nervous about those who are dear to us and who are aged
- It is normal to experience a sense of loneliness and isolation. It is difficult to open up and examine one’s feelings for this precious teacher who will no longer be with us. Some people rebound from death by withdrawing and not feeling comfortable opening up to others, even to friends, about their emotions
- It is normal to engage in existential contemplation, pondering the meaning of one’s own life, one’s values. At times students will throw themselves back into their learning with a great intensity, or will seek refuge in profound lengthy *davening*, or at times.....have the impulse to do the opposite, retreating from their studies and *tefillos* and feeling detached and unmotivated about getting back into their routine and lifestyle
- It is normal to ponder the nature of death, and to wonder about spiritual matters. At times students want to explore esoteric questions such as where the *neschama* is, what is happening to it, and other very spiritual topics which they may have little information about
- It is normal to want to do something, to undertake some practice or pledge in memory of the *rebbe*.

In coping with the challenge of grief and loss for a *rebbe*, it is necessary to address and elaborate on each of the above pointers.

- There is a difference between reactive sadness and clinical disturbance or depression. Most people who grieve a loss do begin to regain their strength and motivation in a week or two. When the sadness is very embedded and unchanging, when one feels unable to return to their usual self or continues to feel “not like myself”, it is important to confer with a trusted mature adult. One can consult with a rabbi, with a *rebbe*, with a *rov* or with a parent. There should be no shame associated with admitting that you are struggling. A mature, compassionate mentor will never make you feel stupid or embarrassed if you disclose that you are continuing to have a difficult time. Logic and reasoning are seldom sufficient tools or interventions to jolt one out of feeling depressed. It is important to be able to “process” your feelings and if you cannot do so with a *rebbe* or parent, it may be helpful to speak with a professional who understands the differences between grief and depression
- Anxiety is part of the human condition and can take many forms, depending on the type of stress which has troubled a person and depending on the person himself. Anxiety can present as nervousness, nervous energy, fear, phobia, panic or even a host of physical symptoms. It generally abates over the short term but if you continue to feel “out of sorts” after two weeks or so, or if even early on you are experiencing intense debilitating anxiety, you will likely benefit from a consultation

with a professional who understands the anxiety continuum and who can help strategize for healthy management of your worries and fears

- People do tend to withdraw at first upon hearing bad news. It is most therapeutic, however, to get yourself back into your routine, and to encourage your friends to do so as well. This does not mean that you are supposed to deny or suppress your thoughts and feelings. It does mean that you are supposed to talk them through with those who respect your internal process while also giving yourself the healing gift of letting yourself recover your love of learning and your love of life. Never sacrifice your basic human needs for food, water, warmth, shelter and camaraderie when you are struggling with grief

- Loss of a *rebbe* is a spiritual as well as a psychological crisis. The concept of death is, for most younger people, concealed in a lot of mystical cloudiness... and confusion. Fortunately, we have not only Torah sources to turn to for help in navigating some of the mystery, but we also have great Torah leaders to whom we can pose our uncertainties and, hopefully, be given either words of encouragement or words of enlightenment. Find someone who you can feel close to, and whose words can illuminate and strengthen you. This is not a moment in your development where you should be teased or humiliated for expressing your musings. Find a mentor. Ask him to help you know what to study and how to make sense of your spiritual questions. Do not conjecture or speculate about spiritual realities that you may know little about. There is so much non-Torah information out there on these topics which is harmful, misleading, and very contrary to our own beliefs. Get your information from a true Torah scholar. There is nothing like death, sadly enough, which brings out the immediacy of one feeling something deeply moving inside which can lead to spiritual awareness and maturing.
- A mentor can help you determine what can become a productive spiritual course to follow at this time, and what might be overdoing it. Too little attention to one's spiritual yearnings is antithetical to our *hashkafa*. Excessive immersion in ritualistic behavior, however, is seldom healthy. Keep away from extremes and aim for stability, especially at this time
- *Chazal* (*Yevamos* 97a) tell us that when we learn the teachings of those who are no longer among us, we keep a part of them "present" in our midst. For that reason, as well as for one's feeling that they are displaying respectful homage to their teacher, it is valuable to adopt stable resolutions so that we continue to feel a link to that *rebbe*, so that we are a facilitator to the *aliya* of that *neshama*, and so that his memory remains alive within us. People accept upon themselves learning programs, mitzvah adoption, helping others, checking in on the family of the *rebbe*, greater caution with different behaviors and some of the future-oriented self-grooming along our own path towards being a *ben aliya*. Generally, it is wise to seek the counsel of a wise mentor in helping us select our own personal course to follow.

In the aftermath of loss, it is common for people to inspect their ways and to look for steps towards improvement. That is healthy and praiseworthy. What is not healthy is fixating on what you might have done to avert the tragedy, because this can lead a person to becoming overly absorbed in their feeling to blame, and as if the fate of the *rebbe* rested solely on one's own conduct. This leads to excessive and unwarranted feelings of guilt, which is not a useful tool for coping with loss. While it is always useful for us to look ahead at how we

can make adaptive and corrective changes in ourselves, this does not mean that we should try to discover a cause-and-effect connection between what we did or did not do, and why the *rebbe* suffered and died. *Chazal* (*Moed Katan* 27b) admonish one not to be “*misabel yoser midai*” – to becoming enmeshed in grief – and they tell us that this is a sign that we may be “mourning for someone else”. One interpretation of that statement is that *Chazal* are referring to that obsessive mourner as being, in reality, mourning over *himself* rather than over the *niftar*. Fixated obsessive guilt has that same quality of being too wrapped up in one’s self-importance rather than having a realistic perspective. Again – avoid extreme reactions and extreme behaviors.

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