

The time approached for Yisrael to die, so he called for his son, Yosef. (47:29)

Religion believes that life has purpose; each person's existence has a clear *raison d'être*. One who has no religion does not ascribe to a system of principles and beliefs; he lives a random, carefree life of abandon, without purpose or meaning. One who lacks religion lacks purpose; hence, he has no identity. The secular culture surrounding us – which is the result of a society where decadence is no longer taboo, but in vogue – has little use for religion. From the average “Joe” to the most powerful politicians and world leaders, religion will, at its best, receive nothing more than mere lip service. As Jews, we have both a moral and spiritual calling; thus, we have an identity which is affirmed regularly by our *yiraas Shomayim*, awareness and fear of Heaven. Without this, we are no different than the millions of people floundering aimlessly in a sea of moral and spiritual confusion.

When one remains focused on the purpose of life, he lives with goals and objectives. He realizes that life has its ultimate rewards and punishments; while some of each occurs in this world, there must be something else, something higher and more real to which we strive. This is *Olam Habba*, the World to Come, the Eternal World of Truth. Death is inevitable. It is only a question of “when.” A Jew lives with the notion that, while life on this world is temporary, real life begins when his *neshamah*, eternal soul, the battery pack that sustains his life, returns to the World of Truth. Mortality is part and parcel of the human condition, but so is immortality. Death is inevitable; perpetuating life – thus, achieving immortality - is up to us. When we do good, act with kindness, it continues on long after we have passed from this world. We can overcome death by perpetuating our lives. When our lives are a blessing – we defeat death.

Rejecting purpose was priority one for those who sought to change Judaism from a faith, a religion, into a culture. If people would believe that life has no specific purpose other than living for oneself, then they would reject the tenets of Judaism. How sad it is that secular, gentile historians recognize what our detracting co-religionists have refused to accept. Paul Johnson, a respected secular historian writes: “No people have ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny... The Jew stands at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.” This is one of the very principles of our faith, yet our secular brethren have chosen to deny it.

When one lives life with a purpose, his death also has purpose. In *Parashas Chayei Sarah* we see how the Patriarch of our Nation, Avraham *Avinu*, took great pains to ensure the performance of two *mitzvos* which focus on “continuity”: *halvayas ha'meis*, making adequate provision for the burial of his wife, Sarah *Imeinu*; and *hachnosas kallah*, seeing to it that his son, Yitzchak *Avinu*, found his appropriate mate, so that there would be proper continuity.

Avraham *Avinu* spared no expense in procuring a burial place for Sarah. When one values life, he sees to it that the container, the body which has housed the soul during its earthly journey, is

treated with reverence and respect, and is buried in the ground as prescribed by Torah dictate.

Avraham cared about eternity, but, in order to ensure eternity, one must focus on eternity during his life on this world. He must see that his children are imbued with Torah values, and that his wife is on the “same page” as he is. How sad it is to listen to the anguish of parents who had grandiose plans for their children, which were destroyed when the children connected with friends whose values were not consistent to the spirit of their upbringing. We should not allow our children to live in an environment that is alien to our beliefs. We are a nation with a destiny, a people with a purpose. Unless we understand and commit to this verity, our future will be as meaningful as our present: we will have nothing.

I have chosen to focus on life, its purpose, meaning and future, as a segue to writing about the value of life, concerns about illness and death, as part of “Team *Shabbos*,” a national movement dedicated to generating awareness, education and guidance for the Jewish community concerning end of life matters. *Parashas Vayechi* has been earmarked as the *Shabbos* when rabbis across the country dedicate their sermon to discuss relevant topics endemic to end of life issues. Sad as it may sound, some Jews are not aware of: the many issues involved; the decisions that must be made, both ethical and spiritual; and the options available for traditional burial choices. Since the readership of *Peninim* is eclectic, covering all areas of the Jewish spectrum, *Peninim* is an excellent vehicle to serve as a wake-up call to the many who have never given a second thought to the matter, and to those who have decided that they cope with enough difficulties in the present so they simply do not care about the future.

Obviously, the constraints of space do not permit a complete treatment of the manifold issues which may arise. Awareness, however, is the primary goal of this *Shabbos*. Many observant Jews are uneducated concerning the questions surrounding end of life issues. Our non-practicing brethren are, for the most part, unaware of the Torah’s requirement for in-ground burial, which follows after the ritual preparation of the body by competent and knowledgeable members of the *Chevra Kaddisha*, Jewish Sacred/Burial Society.

From time immemorial, the greatest fear of the European Jews was not death, but the fear of the grave – of not reaching *kever Yisrael*, a Jewish burial. *Dayan Moshe Swift, zl*, relates how his saintly, pious, aged grandmother, who summoned her children to her bedside as she neared her last moments, removed from beneath her blanket a well-worn pouch in which were wrapped some bills. She said, “This is to pay for my funeral! This is what the people feared: Will I lay among Jews? Will I have a burial?”

During World War II in England, *Dayan Swift* was called to attend the execution of a Jew on the gallows. One of the last words uttered by the victim prior to his execution was, “*Dayan*, who is going to bury me, and where will I be buried?” The grave has been hallowed in Jewish life; the greatest *mitzvah* is *chesed shel emes*, kindness of truth, whereby one does not expect any recompense, since the beneficiary is deceased; and the most sacred institution of its Jewish

community is its *Chevra Kaddisha*.

Yet, despite this, many of our co-religionists have chosen to disregard this hallowed practice wantonly. Cremation is a method of destroying the Jewish body, so that there is no physical remembrance left of the Jew. This method was employed by our enemies, whose insane hatred of the Jew drove them to act as barbarians. Why must we follow their lead, unless our self-loathing is comparable to the animus they had manifested towards us.

Our *parsha* relates the last hours of the life of Yaakov *Avinu*. The story is one that every living Jew should read over and over again. We may derive the significance of life from viewing our Patriarch's perspective on death and burial. Yaakov *Avinu* had a difficult life, in the sense that he went from anguish to anguish, misery to misery. He lay there on his deathbed, surrounded by his family. The life that had known so much anguish and suffering was now drawing to a close. He entrusted to no one his dying request, but to his beloved and trusted son, Yosef. He did not even trust Yosef until he exacted a promise from him to honor his dying wish to be buried in *Eretz Yisrael*. He even gave special instructions about who should carry his coffin, with three sons carrying the bier at each side of the coffin. No Egyptian could touch Yaakov *Avinu*'s coffin; no one would defile its *kedushah*, holiness. We should learn how to live from the way he showed us how to die.

When confronted with end of life issues, even observant Jews are apt to lose perspective. Observing a close relative in terrible pain, suffering "needlessly" (as the medical profession will have us believe), can be overwhelming. We believe that life is precious. We do not eschew life just because it is accompanied by chronic pain and illness. Hashem wants us to do the best that we can with what we have been given. Perhaps this is the underlying motif of the *pasuk* in *Devarim* 30:19, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; you shall choose life so that you and your descendants will live." Hashem gives us a choice; why would anyone in his right mind not choose life over death? Furthermore, the *pasuk* seems to equate life with blessing and death with curse. Why would anyone choose curse over blessing?

Obviously, no sane person would choose death over life, or curse over blessing. What happens, however, if one's perspective on life becomes distorted; or if one perceives a blessing to be a curse? When a person is in terrible pain, he/she might feel that this is not a life worth living; it is not a life of blessing, but one of curse. Pain, misery, anguish, anxiety can drive a person to the brink, to the point that he/she, or those who attend to him/her believe that this is no life; it is a curse – not a blessing. Thus, Hashem says, I determine what is life and what is death; likewise, I designate what is blessing and what is curse.

We have no idea of the infinite value of each and every moment of life. Our *neshamah*, soul, which is our life source, is a *chelek Elokai miMaal*, part of the Divine Above. Who are we to measure or determine its significance? When we attempt to put labels on life, it is an indication that we fail to recognize life's most basic verity: it is an expression of Divine Will. He created us and He will

summon our souls when He sees fit. We live at the “pleasure” of the Creator. The *ratzon* Hashem, will of G-d, should be the only determining factor in our life’s decisions. “What is it that Hashem wants?” will find its answer in the Torah as interpreted by our spiritual leadership. For information concerning Team *Shabbos*, Traditional End Of Life Awareness Movement, please contact NASCK, National Association of *Chevra Kaddisha*, Richmond Hill, New York.