

## **You shall not make a cut in your flesh for the dead...My Shabbosos you shall observe and My Sanctuary shall you revere. I am Hashem. Do not turn to (the sorcery of) the Ovos and Yidanim (those who claim to speak with the dead). (Vayikra 19:28, 30, 31)**

There is no way of getting around it: the death of a loved one is one of life's most crippling experiences. This is especially true for the death of a parent – regardless of his or her age. Respect for parents and the deceased has long been one of the hallmarks of Judaism. When a parent passes on to the World of Truth, the surviving family reacts with grief, followed by public displays of reverence. The family observes *shivah*, the seven-day mourning period. Sons recite *Kaddish* for eleven months following the death of a parent. It is a time when one is able to attend to his/her emotional needs, as well as to acknowledge an intellectual appreciation of the deceased both in general and, in particular, his/her own personal relationship. The *Kaddish* prayer is a form of sanctifying and affirming that the Torah ideals which had been so much a part of the life of the deceased continue unabated in his/her offspring.

The Torah decries over-excessive mourning and displays of grief. This was a practice employed by the pagans, who either venerated death or considered it the very end to everything. Judaism is life-oriented and encourages mourning practices that are restricted and life-affirming, such as *Shabbos* observance, Torah study and praying in a *shul*. This explains the juxtaposition of the above *pesukim*.

The **Bostoner Rebbe, zl**, relates that in America, circa 1930 through 1950, the only Jewish observance which Jews kept religiously, the only contact they had with their local *shul*, was to recite *Kaddish* for the passing of a parent. They kept very little to nothing else, but *Kaddish* for a parent was different. Jews in those days had respect for parents. They represented an old world from which the children had divorced themselves. In some instances, their parents represented their last ties to Judaism.

The *Rebbe* relates that once on a long, hot summer *Shabbos*, he was giving a *shiur* in *Pirkei Avos* in the Bostoner *shul*. In the middle of the *shiur*, a young man dressed in work clothes entered and asked the *Rebbe*, "Can I ask the Rabbi a question?" The *Rebbe* promptly responded in the affirmative. Obviously, the young man did not understand that one does not interrupt a *shiur*.

Apparently, he had just lost a parent a few days earlier, and he was still in the middle of *shivah*. Just before *Shabbos*, someone had mentioned to him that *shivah* is not observed on *Shabbos*, since it is inconsistent with the joy inherent in *Shabbos Kodesh*. The *Rebbe* confirmed this. The fellow looked at the *Rebbe*, and, in all seriousness born of naiveté, he asked, "Can I go to my Saturday job as usual, or must I sit at home?"

The question bespoke an innocence which was the consequence of ignorance of his own religion and was heartbreaking. He had heard of *shivah*, even *Yizkor*, but *Shabbos* – one of Judaism's staples – was foreign to him. He had not the vaguest idea what *Shabbos* was all about. He typified members of the American Jewish community, an entire generation of Jews lost to their heritage. At least this generation was aware of – and understood – the significance of sitting *shivah*. Regrettably, the generation which followed was clueless about *shiva* as well.

That was "then." What about "now"? Decades ago Jews, regardless of their affiliation and preferred mode of Jewish observance, made a point to remember parents. *Shivah* and *Kaddish* were Jewish fundamentals which they remembered and to which they adhered. After all, it was for their parents. It is for this reason that I wonder how we have strayed so far, so quickly, from these basic rituals. Yes, the family aspect which was so prevalent, the togetherness of family which was the symbol of reverence for the deceased parent, is something of the past.

We are living in a time when death creates a vacuum – a leadership void – which creates the opportunity for sibling rivalry. The greater position, the more lucrative the material bounty, the more covetous and grudgingly the various family members become of one another. Sides are taken, positions are carved out and the love and harmony which reigned for a lifetime have suddenly been torn asunder. All for a couple of dollars and a little *kavod*, glory. The *neshamah*, soul of the deceased, cries out, "What about respect? Where is your *Kibud Av V'Eim*, respect for parents?" Is this what a parent deserves to witness while he/she is in the *Olam H'Emes*, World of Truth? This is what I mean: Life was much simpler then. They did not know *Shabbos*, but they understood the significance of *shivah*. Today, we are aware of *Shabbos*, but have lost the true meaning of *shivah*. Well, it is all part of the same Torah. One does not go without the other.