

## You are children to Hashem, Your G-d – you shall not cut yourselves and you shall not make a bald spot between your eyes for a dead person. For you are a holy people to Hashem, Your G-d. (14:1,2)

The Torah appears to be giving us a straightforward mandate: do not grieve excessively. When someone dies, his relatives should not mutilate themselves out of grief. As a holy people we do not conduct ourselves in such a manner. *Chazal*, however, see a different meaning for *Lo sisgodedu*. The *sisgodedu* is derived from *agudah*, group/gathering of people. They interpret *Lo sisgodedu* as, “Do not form factions.” Hence, we learn that forming factions is prohibited. This plays itself out practically when two *batei din*, courts of law, are in one town; one rules in accordance with the decisions rendered by *Bais Shamai*, while the other supports *Bais Hillel*.

The two interpretations of *sisgodedu* – slashing or factionizing-- are not on the “same page.” What does self-mutilation have to do with disharmony of the legal system? Since the interpretation of both – excessive grief and factionization – are connected to the same word, they must be linked at some level.

The **Shem MiShmuel** quotes *Ramban* who provides us with insight into the prohibition against excessive grieving. He explains that the concept of a holy people is a promise of the eternity of the soul before G-d. A man is not lost once his mortal stay on this world comes to an end. He may not be here physically, but his soul is to be found in other good and exalted worlds, under the care of Hashem. This should be the Jew’s perspective on life. The soul is placed into a human container, called the body, where it resides until the time that Hashem summons it back to the world of souls, where it will glory in His Presence. To deny this idea is to impugn the Jewish philosophy of life.

It is fundamental to Jewish thought that life continues on a spiritual plane after death and that the soul continues to live on in a higher sphere. Self-mutilation reveals a flawed level of grief, a misconceived impression concerning the deceased. It is an indication that one feels that the deceased is completely gone – forever – and that no trace of him remains at any level. While this addresses the soul, what about the body? Clearly, when one dies, his body ceases to exist. It is indeed lost forever, decomposing and returning to the dust from where it came. The bereaved who slashes himself actually mutilates his body, thereby manifesting his feelings of grief over the death of the body of the deceased. Why is this considered bad? One expresses on his own body the feelings he has about the body of the deceased.

The *Shem MiShmuel* explains that such action demonstrates an improper view of the body’s function. The soul is our primary existence; the body is nothing more than the container, thus it is secondary to the soul. In reality, the body is not an end in itself, but, rather, it exists to facilitate the soul, so that it achieves its goals. The soul is a spiritual entity; as such, it is unable to exist in our

physical world unless it unites with the body. Therefore, while the body is certainly needed – it is not there for itself; it is needed only for the purpose of serving the soul. When a person dies, the soul soars up to its Heavenly Source. It no longer requires the services of the body. The body is buried, because it really has nowhere else to go. Whatever honor we accord the body in death is due to its position as the soul's container. One who grieves excessively, to the point of slashing his flesh, indicates a misunderstanding of the principle of the body/soul relationship. The mourner has lost focus by attributing much greater significance to the body, as though it has a purpose of its own.

Let us now return to our original question regarding the relationship between excessive grieving and factionation within the *halachic* system of justice. Factions are the result of dispute and a lack of unity, in which each individual wants to have his opinion heard to the exclusion of others. For the most part, this is a result of an overactive ego – not the pursuit of truth. We must realize that, at some level, the individual *neshamos*, souls, of all of the Jewish people are derived from the same source, the same root. We are all part of one spiritual entity that has been somehow divided in such a manner that each living Jew has a portion/soul. Thus, as far as our spiritual identity is concerned, we are all identical.

It is only with regard to the physical dimension that our physical characteristics differ from person to person. These physical variations can (and often do) give rise to diverse attitudes and requirements, which can often manifest themselves as disputes, divisiveness and factionation. When one focuses inappropriately on the physical component of existence, the differences among people are highlighted, a situation which most often leads to controversy. In contrast is the individual who focuses on the spiritual dimension of life. He will soon see the truth of similarities among people and realize that, after all is said and done, we all stand on common ground. This appreciation will lead to unity among Jews. *Chazal's* connecting two seemingly dissimilar lessons to be interpreted from one *pasuk* is not arbitrary. It is by design, because, essentially they are intricately connected. The individual who is guilty of excessive mourning and the individual who undermines the unity of *halachic* jurisprudence are closely linked in their flawed outlook, which focuses on the physical aspects of life. If they would each realize what is paramount, they would both center in on the spiritual scheme of things, thus allowing them to put bereavement in its proper perspective and also to avoid the pitfalls of a disjointed legal system.