

He shall not come near any dead person; he shall not contaminate himself to his father or his mother. (21:11)

Rashi infers from the *pasuk* (which on the surface appears superfluous) that, while the *Kohen Gadol* may not contaminate himself even to a family member, he may contaminate himself to a *meis mitzvah*, deceased who has no one to bury him. To better understand this, we will explain what it means to be alone at the time of death.

By nature, the human being seeks connection and companionship. Human beings are social creatures. As such, during moments of vulnerability, the need for companionship intensifies. Having said this, we turn to the laws concerning the *meis mitzvah*, man who dies alone, found in a field or on the road, with no one to attend to his burial. Even the *Kohen*, who is otherwise not permitted to come in contact with the deceased, may – indeed, should – be *metamei*, contaminate himself, to attend to this man's interment.

Sharing in the pain which another person experiences is external, since we are never truly able to understand the inner – below the surface – pain, anxiety and torment which he or she is going through. Only Hashem knows the inner workings of the mind. He listens to the silent cries, the heartfelt inner weeping born of fear of the unknown which one experiences alone. During moments of anguish and fear, such as when confronting one's mortality, the presence of caring individuals can provide comfort and solace. The thought of facing the end without the company and support of loved ones escalates his emotional turmoil.

This feeling prevailed during the recent pandemic, when individuals were compelled to be alone up until and during their final moments. Many experienced isolation and separation from loved ones, which contributed to a profound sense of loss and grief for both patient and his/her families. I write this as a preface toward grasping the Divine mandate of addressing the needs of the *meis mitzvah*.

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, poignantly describes the disparity between one who dies surrounded by family and one who is relegated to leaving this world alone – with no one at his side. One who is not alone can have his last apologies, forgiveness and goodbye's. He sees the love emanating from his family and is comforted by this. Such a person's soul departs under circumstances which, for all intents and purposes, can be described as positive.

An individual who dies on the road, alone and distant from family and friends, experiences the pain and anxiety associated with death. The fear and regret are overwhelming. Perhaps he had a person to whom he wanted to apologize, a situation that needed to be repaired. He wanted to take his time reciting *vidui*, confession. Such a person, the *meis mitzvah*, experiences a painful end to his journey of life. Furthermore, one who is the victim of a tragic death, whose life is ended suddenly, with extreme pain and overwhelming anxiety, waiting for the final moment – experiences death every moment. He does not die once – but many times.

In addition to the physical pain experienced by the *meis mitzvah* is the emotional trauma, the mental anguish associated with the envy, and even anger, over his passing when others – some who even tormented him – continue to live. Yes, the *meis mitzvah* whose passing was not in a peaceful manner, not assuaged by the presence of friends and family, endures more than one final moment.

Rav Zaitchik takes all of this into consideration in order to explain the *halachah* that a *meis mitzvah* is *koneh mikomo*, acquires his place, i.e., is buried where his corpse is discovered. Implied by the *poskim*, *halachic* arbiters, this is due to *bizayon ha'meis*, disgracing the deceased, if he must be moved. The less movement the better, and it is ideal to bury him where he is found. *Rav Zaitchik* explains that this deceased has suffered enough. He died alone. As a result, he suffered immeasurably. The pain and many deaths that he experienced more than atoned for his life. This person should at least be honored by not having his body dragged elsewhere for burial. He rightfully acquired this place.

No pain is left behind. Every bit of suffering that a person experiences in this world is taken into account. No one will receive more than he deserves. The *meis mitzvah* suffered so much in death, that, as a result, the *Kohen Gadol* who is otherwise not permitted to contaminate himself to anyone – even his father and mother – is adjured to participate in his burial, if no one else is able to do so.

His brothers sold *Yosef HaTzaddik* to the *Yishmaelim* as a slave. *Yishmaelim* normally transport foul-smelling cargo, such as naphtha and tar. In order to spare *Yosef* from that noxious odor, *Hashem* arranged that this caravan carried sweet-smelling spices. Does it make such a difference? *Yosef* was being sold as a slave. His life was ruined. Would one more – or less – indignity change his circumstances? Probably not, but one does not suffer more than he has to. Slavery, yes – but sitting with noxious smelling cargo for the duration of the trip was excessive and not an aspect of the Heavenly decree. Nothing gets past the Almighty.

Having said this, how careful we must be in sharing the yoke of pain with our fellow. *Hashem* reckons every bit of discomfort that we experience. Should we not at least keep in mind that everybody is in one way or another dealing with an issue? Just because one does not walk around with a sign on his back, "I am suffering!" does not mean he is not. *Rav Zaitchik* writes that the emotions that he expressed in this Torah thought were personal. He had been a *Rosh Yeshivah* near *Tarnopol*, *Poland*. The *Russians* did not approve, and they sent him to a slave labor camp in *Siberia*. He describes the physical and spiritual misery that he endured. No *sefarim*, no *Tallis/Tefillin*, no opportunity to observe any ritual. Added to this was his emotional loneliness, catalyzed by the knowledge that his colleagues were able to sit and learn in the *bais hamedrash*. *Hashem* took it all into account. Perhaps this is why he became such a successful *mussar* personality whose words continue to inspire today as they did then.

A person who has no one to bury him (regardless of the circumstances) is a *meis mitzvah*. This means it is a *mitzvah*, positive commandment, incumbent upon every Jew to see to it that this

deceased receives a kosher Jewish burial *b'kever Yisrael*. Our people have received the brunt of every despot's irrational self-loathing. We have suffered throughout the millennia in ways that defy description. Jewish corpses were left to rot because no one cared, and no one dared to defy the murderers whose primary enjoyment was derived from persecuting Jews. It has been the few members of the *Chevra Kaddisha*, Jewish Burial Society, in every community who risk life and health to see to it that every *meis mitzvah* reaches *kever Yisrael*. This was true during every pogrom, during and after the Holocaust, and, most recently, during the pandemic, and after the tragic murders of October 7th. These men and women seek no accolades and perform their service with the greatest devotion to preserving the dignity of the deceased. Quietly, unobtrusively, with unswerving adherence to the details of *halachah*, throughout the generations, these men and women have committed themselves to the real concept of "no Jew left behind."

The following story is not new. It is, however, novel. It is a moving portrait of how a simple act of benevolence translated itself into unparalleled Heavenly reward. Mr. Moshe Friedman (not real name) was born in Poland a decade before World War II, and, by Heavenly design, he and his family were spared. Siberia was the alternative to Auschwitz. When the war was over, Moshe's father heard that the accursed Nazis had disgraced the Jewish bodies by transforming them into soap. When his father heard of this outrage, he decided to return to Poland to purchase whatever soap there was from the gentiles, so that he could give these remains a Jewish burial. They spent days walking up and down the streets offering cold cash for the Nazi-supplied soap. They proceeded to bury the remains of these holy martyrs.

The story does not end here. Fast forward a few generations. Moshe Friedman immigrated to America where he married and raised a family. He married off his children, retired from his work and was looking forward to some well-deserved retirement. His son-in-law, who was of *Sephardi* descent, suggested a visit to the Holy Land. Mr. Friedman had not been there, and he was excited about seeing the Land, visiting its *gedolim* and petitioning their blessings. His son-in-law prepared an itinerary which naturally included *Horav Ovadiah Yosef, zl*, on the list of *gedolim* to visit.

As soon as they entered *Rav Ovadiah's* study, the sage asked, "Why do I detect the scent of *Gan Eden* on your clothing?" Moshe Friedman felt ill at ease and did not know what to say. "What special deed did you perform that such a Heavenly scent permeates your clothing?"

"I have several children whom I support in *kollel*," he replied. "Many people do this, yet their clothes do not carry this scent," countered *Rav Ovadiah*. The *Chacham* detected that, indeed, Moshe knew the answer to his question, but did not want to reveal it in public. He then asked everyone to leave the room except for a young man who acted as translator.

Moshe related the story of his father's post war purchases, followed by his bringing the martyrs' remains to *kever Yisrael*. He then added an unknown part of the story.

"We had spent a few weeks collecting as much soap as was available and decided it was time to

return home. The day we were planning to leave, a gentile approached me (I was fifteen years old at the time) and asked if I was buying human soap. I replied that I was. 'I have a full box which I am willing to sell you for the right price,' he said. I was willing to pay his price, but I had no money with me. He said, 'No money, no soap.' I promised to return in a few hours with the money. He absolutely refused to acquiesce to my offer. Finally, I said, 'I see that you are wearing thin cotton pants. These pants will not do anything for you in the cold winter months. I will give you my wool pants in exchange for the box of soap.' He agreed."

Moshe buried the remains and rejoined his family in Siberia wearing nothing more than thin cotton pants. It was a cold winter, but the warmth spread by the *mitzvah* of bringing Jewish remains to *kever Yisrael* compensated for it.

When *Rav Ovadiah* heard the story he said, "This explains why the scent of *Gan Eden* permeates your clothes. You buried the remains of *kedoshim*, Jewish *neshamos* who died *al Kiddush Hashem*. They are certainly in *Gan Eden*. These *neshamos* have accompanied you throughout your life."

A Jew who dies alone achieves an elevated spiritual plateau. Certainly, his loneliness at this most difficult time is an atonement. Hence, he, too, is rewarded with a special place in the Heavenly sphere. As a result, those who are *misaseik* with bringing his remains to *kever Yisrael* share in his *z'chus*.