

Can We Mourn Too Much?

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When someone dies, this week's parashah tells us, we should not ritually cut ourselves or our hair. In other words: we should not mourn excessively.

You are God's children. Do not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, God has chosen you to be God's treasured people. (Deut. 14:1-2)

This prohibition, here extended from the priests to include all male Israelites, refers to a ritualized type of self-harm that is different from the hurt that some people inflict on themselves as a way to release painful emotions. To this day, self-laceration remains an expression of mourning in some cultures. In a few weeks, when Shiite Muslims celebrate Ashura and the martyrdom of Imam Husain at Karbala, some will flog themselves until blood flows, even as others reject these practices as extreme.

But why does the Torah tell us not to mourn too much? What is wrong with feeling our losses intensely? We read here that it is because we are "God's children . . . chosen to be God's treasured possession." Excessive mourning is rejected because it is not seen as behavior fit for a holy people. One view is that the prohibition stems from gashing being associated with idol worship, as in the case of the Baal prophets who confronted Elijah (1 Kings 18:26-28).

The rabbis of the Talmud offer another interpretation. "Weep not for the dead, do not lament for them," we read in Jeremiah 22:10. The Talmud explains that the second half of this verse refers to going beyond the traditionally prescribed periods of mourning, while the opening sentence alludes to extreme mourning (BTMoed Katan 27b). This interpretation follows a harrowing story about Rav Huna and a bereaved

mother who refuses to be consoled. "One who grieves excessively will in the end weep for another person," the Talmud warns the reader. But the mother does not listen to Rav Huna's admonition to stop mourning. She continues to cry and eventually loses her remaining sons, and her own life. This kind of mourning, the Talmud implies, is a criticism, an indictment of the Divine. Bereavement, too, comes from God, and extreme mourning is seen as a refusal to accept God's will.

The example of the twelfth-century polymath Moses Maimonides reveals the tension between interpreting mourning and living it. On the one hand, Maimonides saw mourning as a pedagogical tool. When we encounter death, he writes, we are called to "prepare ourselves and repent and awake from sleep" to face our lives, and our mortality (*Hilkhot Avel* 13:12). But in an intimate letter, he also describes how he spent an entire year bedridden and in great despair when his beloved brother David was lost at sea, a loss he called the greatest misfortune of his life. Maimonides was well familiar with the long tentacles of grief: the pain of this experience, he writes in the same letter, was reawakened when he as much as glanced at his brother's handwriting.

Limiting deep mourning is difficult but, our parashah insists, necessary to regulate the pain of existential loss. Plunged into the alien world of the bereaved, Jews have access to finely tuned practices reaching from *Aninut* (usually the time between death and burial) to shivah (the seven days of mourning), and distinct periods of mourning, a year for parents and *sheloshim* (thirty days) for others. Experiencing a death can shatter our sense of self, and mourning customs offer orientation: *Aninut* exempts the bereaved from the everyday demands of spiritual life. You are now, *Aninut* says, free to mourn as deeply as you wish. Shivah, and to a lesser

extent *sheloshim* and the year of mourning, are periods of declining intensity that ritualize ways in which we can express emotions, and gently guide the mourner back into life after death.

The prohibition against excessive mourning grew out of the lived experience that loss, and mourning loss, is an existential challenge. What does this prohibition mean in the face of a pandemic that robbed us of so much, including the comfort of ritualized mourning? Many funerals were solitary affairs, with loved ones following along on Zoom or, if they were lucky, from their cars. When my father died in Germany last year, ten days passed between his death and his funeral, and I had to re-evaluate what *Aninut* meant for me (we were fortunate, others had to wait three weeks). How many people sat shivah at home, comforted virtually by loving friends and family, and yet alone. Some of the changes brought by the pandemic will surely stay: virtual shivah visits have opened up the mitzvah of *nihum avelim* (comforting the mourner), gathering mourners and those who love them, wherever they may live. Virtual minyanim are bringing welcome accessibility to mourners who for a myriad of reasons—physical ability, dearth of community, convenience—might not have been able to say kaddish otherwise. For others, the disappearance of what we now call “in-person services” and the solace that can come from saying kaddish in shared space has been devastating.

As we (hopefully) emerge from this current pandemic, I am not sure that I am ready to heed the advice to limit mourning quite yet. I do not mean that we should get mourning haircuts or scar our bodies. But before we can celebrate the lessons learned during the pandemic, it may be good to acknowledge the hard parts: people we lost, months spent indoors, time not spent with friends and families, the times when we missed out on watching babies morph into toddlers or sitting with the elderly or the ill.

With Elul approaching, and the High Holidays not far behind, we are invited to tune into the rhythm of the Jewish year. We close out one year and turn to the next. We complete one cycle of the Torah and open it again to begin afresh, with our grief, our mourning, and all the hopes that

make up our human experience. We are also called to reach out to those who lost someone over the last year. For although no gashes or shorn hair remind us of their losses, they may yet still be in pain.