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Hayyei Sarah 5786

חיי שרה תשפ"ו

Death and Dignity

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Parashat Hayyei Sarah begins with the death of the matriarch Sarah. Interestingly, it is the first time that a death enters into the Torah's narrative. In all of the genealogies from Adam and Eve through the lives of Abraham and Sarah, deaths were matter-of-factly recorded with the simple word וימת. And of course, there was the global death and destruction during the Flood. But the death of Sarah is the first one that generates a story, and a template, as it were, for how to deal with death—burial, eulogizing, mourning, and the subsequent continuation of life.

For many of us, this moment in the Torah feels deeply human. Abraham's acts of mourning and burial show that grief, ritual, and dignity are intertwined from the very beginning of our tradition. The Torah does not simply record that Sarah died; it teaches us how to honor a life and how to move forward with compassion.

Because of this, the eighth-century C.E. halakhic compendium known as the *She'iltot* of Rav Ahai Gaon chose this parashah as the occasion for an exposition on the laws and practices of *aveilut*, mourning. The *She'iltot* is one of the earliest of the medieval halakhic works, dated to the eighth century; it is organized according to the Torah's parashiyot, in a style that poses a question (hence the name) and explores talmudic and other material in order to formulate instruction on practice. It was a way for everyday Jews to see how the Torah's stories could translate into lived, ethical action. Studying the *She'iltot* is an excellent way, week in and week out, to be instructed in and reminded of the central values underlying Jewish law.

What Rav Ahai had to say on the subject of death and mourning gave rise, as the Talmud itself typically did, to many dicta that, while seemingly tangential, continued an underlying theme. In this case, the *She'iltot* presented a list of historical enactments (based on texts in the talmudic tractates of *Mo'ed Katan*, *Ketubot*, and *Sanhedrin*) that were all united by a concern for human dignity.

Rav Ahai begins with an enactment attributed to Rabban Gamliel, who saw that the elaborate conventions attending burial were so burdensome that poor families would abandon their dead to the mercies of the community because they could not afford those expectations. Even today, the cost of funerals and mourning rituals can create anxiety for families already struggling with loss. The rabbis, sensitive to the emotional and economic weight of grief, sought to make dignity—not display—the defining feature of Jewish mourning. Therefore, Rabban Gamliel, hoping to set an example, gave instructions to his own family that at his death, he was to be buried in plain linen shrouds. This very democratic leveling of the socioeconomic strata is the source of this Jewish practice still in use to this day.

From there, Rav Ahai cites several other enactments that were made "for the honor and dignity of the poor," to prevent unnecessary embarrassment to those of meager means. Expectations for gifts of food that would be brought to a house in mourning were lowered, so as not to embarrass those who had little to bring. When the wealthy were themselves in mourning, they were told to pour the customary wine for the comforters to drink with the mourners into the simplest and cheapest possible vessels. All so that when the poor were in mourning, they would not be humiliated by their necessary use of inexpensive cups.

And perhaps most poignant of all is the following: The faces of the wealthy dead used to be visible whereas the faces of the poor—who often died of malnutrition—were covered up so as not to reveal the discoloration that starvation brought on. The Sages eliminated this disparity by ruling that all of the deceased should be covered by a simple shroud, so as not to impinge on the honor and dignity of the poor.

These enactments remind us that human dignity (*kevod haberiyot*) is not an abstract ideal; it is preserved in the smallest gestures of equality and empathy. To ensure that every person, regardless of means, could be buried and mourned with honor was itself a radical moral act. In a world often stratified by wealth and status, Jewish law made compassion the great equalizer.

Rav Ahai compiled this Talmudic material as part of the exposition of mourning practices occasioned by the Torah's first story of burial and mourning. But more than that, it was an opportunity for him to instruct future generations in the importance of *kevod haberiyot*, human dignity. In his teaching, we see a theology rooted not only in reverence for God but in reverence for each other—a belief that our treatment of the vulnerable defines the moral strength of a community.

In our own moment, when economic and social inequality continues to shape so many aspects of life and death, this ancient sensitivity feels remarkably modern. The rabbinic insistence on dignity for all reminds us that compassion and justice must begin with the most intimate human experiences—loss, care, and mourning.

The rabbinic call to uphold human dignity across every difference remains as urgent now as it was in Rav Ahai's time. **JTS's upcoming convening on this very theme invites us to bring these teachings into conversation with our contemporary struggles for equity and compassion.**

Learn more about the JTS Convening:

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (*z"l*) and Harold Hassenfeld (*z"l*).

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