

### 3rd Yartzeit – Mo'ed Katan Insights on Aveilut – JewishClarity.com

*Mo'ed Katan* deals extensively with *aveilut* (mourning) and its various ramifications, more so than any other section in *Shas* (the Talmud). It very sharply defines the nature and essence of *aveilut* in terms of two different aspects.

The first defining characteristic of the *avel* (mourner) is his profound separation from the rest of the community. The *avel* is essentially alone in his or her loss and pain (although also in their special closeness to G-d) — because it is such a difficult and vulnerable time for them. This isolation may even be relevant in terms of the different mourners themselves. One of the most valuable insights that we received, from another bereaved parent, during our *shiva* was — “Everyone needs to mourn in their own individual way.” *Mo'ed Katan* highlights this inherent isolation of the *avel* with numerous comparisons to other cases which also require separation from the rest of the community (i.e., a *metzora* — one with the spiritual affliction called *tzara'at*, and a *menudah* — one that was socially ostracized).

Along with this isolation, the second defining characteristic of the *avel* is his lack of being *shaleim* (complete or settled). *Mo'ed Katan* expresses this with two different *halachot*:

- a. He is not able to bring a *korban shelamim* — since, as Rashi explains, his *da'at* (mind or thoughts) is not settled to the point of *simcha*.
- b. Others should not give a greeting of “*shalom*” to him.

*Mo'ed Katan* deals almost exclusively with two very different and seemingly contradictory topics — *chol hamo'ed* (the intermediate days of the festivals) and *aveilut*. *Chol hamo'ed* is a time of great celebration while *aveilut* is a time of great sadness. The fact that *Chazal* (the Sages) joined them together within the same tractate is an indication that they may not really be as contradictory as they initially appear to be.

The first indication that the *simcha* of *chol hamo'ed* and the pain of *aveilut* are not so far removed from one another is a very puzzling statement in the *mishnah* (8a) — “One is allowed to dig up the remains of one's previously deceased parents in order to rebury them in their proper ancestral plot, even during *chol hamo'ed*, since this is a *simcha* (usually translated as “joy”) for him.” How could such a sad act be permissible during the joyful days of *chol hamo'ed*, and how could the *mishnah* possibly describe this as a *simcha* for the one doing it?

The final understanding of this *gemara* is that the *simcha* being referred to is the *simcha* of the festival, and this *simcha* is somehow able to mitigate the pain of the reburial enough to make it permissible, even on *chol hamo'ed*. Rashi's initial understanding of the *mishnah*, however, presented a very different picture of the nature of *simcha*. While one will naturally be saddened by the re-experiencing of the death and burial of one's parents, the awareness that they have now finally arrived at their family burial plot will itself be a source of *simcha*; not “joy”, but rather a feeling of well-being and appreciation that things are now as they should be.

*Tos'fot* (8a) similarly speaks of *simcha*, not only as no contradiction to *aveilut*, but as a natural stage in the normal mourning process. The same *mishnah* as previously (8a) forbade hiring a professional eulogist to gather together with one's relatives to lament within 30 days of a holiday. *Tos'fot* points out, however, that according to all views of this prohibition, one would be allowed to deliver the eulogy oneself, even within 30 days of the holiday. Through the process of crying out, one naturally feels more settled with their pain, and will thereby be able to feel *simcha* afterwards.

One of the clearest indications that there is actually some common denominator between *simcha* and pain is a striking *gemara* that directly compares the beginning of the processes of being both

an *aveil* and a *chatan* (groom). The Meiri explains that both are *patur* (exempt) from all *mitzvot asei*, (positive commandments) since both are experiencing such intense emotions.

Perhaps one of the keys to this commonality is that the *gemara* (18a) describes *nechama* (consolation) as the process of “seeking reasons.” This is significant because there are two different aspects of pain that an *aveil* has to deal with:

The inherent pain of the loss — obviously very great.  
The uncertainty of “Why?”

One of the people who came to our *shiva* told us that he had heard the loss of a child, and possibly the loss of any close relative, compared to the amputation of a limb. The process of time healing, therefore, simply refers to one becoming more and more accustomed to living their life without the use of that limb. The longer it has been since our daughter Ruchama Rivka, *a"h*, has passed away, the more I have come to appreciate the truth of that unfortunate comparison. There hasn't been even a single day these past three years that I haven't felt her loss like the loss of a piece of myself. However, as great as this pain of loss has been and continues to be, it is clear to me that this is not the greatest pain that we could ever experience. A far greater pain would be for us to feel that there was, G-d forbid, no reason or meaning at all to our daughter's life, or to her having tragically passed away so young. While it may not be necessary for us to know the specific reason or reasons that our tragedy occurred, we desperately need to know that they do exist. *Nechama*, therefore, requires one to search for reasons — “to (try to) seek (and understand) reasons (for one's loss)”.

The essence of *nechama* is the awareness, and the personal acceptance, that everything — both the obviously beneficial as well as the seemingly tragic — fits within the larger context of G-d's *hashgacha* (supervision) and love for us. It is this *nechama* that makes it possible for one to feel, as a different *gemara* (*Brachot* 5a) requires of us, the very same *simcha* with the *bracha* of “*baruch dayan ha'emet* – blessed is the true judge” over a tragedy, as one feels with the *bracha* of “*hatov v'hameitiv* – [blessed is] the One that is good and does good” over a celebration of clearly beneficial news.

*Mo'ed Katan* (21b) chooses the case of the loss of a child to illustrate what constitutes true *nechama* —

“The son of Rebbe Akiva died and all of Israel entered and gave an enormous eulogy on his behalf. As they began to leave, Rabbi Akiva stood on a large bench and said — “*Acheinu beit Yisrael* (My brothers, the house of Israel), listen to me — Even if I had just buried a married son, I would have been consoled by the great honor which you have bestowed upon me [and my son]. You said that — “The Torah of G-d is in his heart” — which means that you [also] wanted to give honor to the Torah. Your reward is therefore doubled. Return to your homes in peace”.

Rebbe Akiva felt a great *nechama* for his child specifically when he saw that he had been a great vehicle for *k'vod haTorah* (the honor of the Torah). This is also my greatest comfort with Ruchama Rivka. Both in terms of how she lived her life, and tragically through her very battle for life that lifted so many others, she truly embodied *k'vod haTorah*.

While our awareness of the eternal existence of the deceased in *Olam Haba* is certainly an essential element of our *nechama*, the deep pain of their loss, as with an amputation, will always remain with us. *Mo'ed Katan* (26a), therefore, tells us that Elisha tore *kriah* (ripping one's garment as an expression of mourning) when Eliyahu (his Rebbe) left him, even though Elisha knew that Eliyahu would actually continue to live. This is because Elisha also knew that he would never be able to see his Rebbe again.

{We do not tear *kriah*, however, for a Rav or a relative who is merely going to a faraway place, because there is always the possibility that we will end up seeing them again.}

We know that Ruchama Rivka continues to exist, and will exist eternally, in *Olam Haba*. She entered as a pure soul, having been cleansed through the tremendous challenges that she faced during her brief and difficult life in this world. But we also know that we will never see her again in our present-day world. The *kriah* that we tore and the pain which we continue to feel is, therefore, primarily for us, not for her.

*Mo'ed Katan* (29a) concludes by telling us that *Talmidei Chachamim* (Torah scholars) have no *menucha* (rest or complacency) even in *Olam Haba*; they continue to grow in their connection to both Torah and Hashem. While the *gemara* tells us that this is true for *Talmidei Chachamim*, I also imagine that Ruchama Rivka is similarly continuing to grow in her connection to both Torah and Hashem — even in *Olam Haba*.

**This should be *I'zechut ul'illuy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a"h, bat Asher Zevulun***