

How G-d's Children Should React to Grief

by **Rabbi Ephraim Sprecher**
Dean of Students, Diaspora Yeshiva

“You are Children to your G-d, thus you shall not cut yourselves as a sign of mourning for the dead.” (D'varim 14:1).

Being G-d's Chosen People, His unique treasure in this world, carries with it awesome responsibilities. Since G-d calls us His Children, we are commanded to exercise constraint when mourning for the passing of a loved one. Pagans mutilated their bodies as an expression of grief and mourning. Even today, the Shiites in Iran and Iraq continue this pagan and barbaric ritual at their funerals.

The Talmud in Sanhedrin states that when Rabbi Akiva attended the funeral of Rabbi Eliezer, he beat and scratched his body until he began to bleed. He wept and cried out: “My father, My father”. Tosafot questions Rabbi Akiva's overwhelming display of grief - wounding himself, which is prohibited by our verse.

Tosafot responds that for the sake of lost Torah knowledge, it is permitted. In other words, since Rabbi Akiva was grieving over the loss of his source of Torah wisdom, he was permitted to exhibit such excessive grieving.

Rabbi Chaim Shmeulevitz explains

the Halachic logic behind Tosafot's statement. He cites the S'forno, who explains that we should not be overwhelmed by the feeling of loss upon the passing of a loved one. This is because we still have our Father in Heaven, who is our closest and dearest relative, who never leaves us. In fact, Psalms tells us that G-d never abandons any Jew, even in Hell. (Tehillim 139:8 "...and even if I were to descend to Hell, still You are there.")

This realization provides us with comfort and support, as we encounter our bereavement and loss. This idea, applies only in regards to the loss of a relative. Knowing that our Father in Heaven is always with us, is the greatest source of comfort. However, when Rabbi Eliezer passed away, Rabbi Akiva lost his beloved teacher.

Who was he to turn to now with his questions in Torah? Who would provide his spiritual guidance? Who would help him in his spiritual growth and progress?

Suddenly, Rabbi Akiva felt far away from his Eternal Father - G-d.

Our relationship to G-d is expressed through the study of Torah and the performance of Mitzvot. That is how we become attached to G-d. We merit eternal life through this process. When Rabbi Akiva's Rebbe passed away, his growth in Torah became stunted. His path to eternity was impeded. It was an eternal loss! For such a loss, there are no restrictions

on display of grief.

The Ramban, in his lament for his Rebbe, Rabbeinu Yona, writes that nothing is able to comfort him in his loss. His only consolation was that one day he would also pass on and once again meet his beloved Rebbe in the Afterlife. This is how our great Torah Teachers grieved for their Rebbeim.

Grief eventually affects all of us. We can cope with grief constructively, because we are all G-d's beloved children. 🌸