

Greeting the Mourner

Moed Katan, דף כ"א, עמוד ב, *gemara bet*

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I am particularly drawn to this small section of text because of the multiplicity of sensitivities it's various voices appear to address, taking into consideration the needs and vulnerability of the mourner, but also the circle of his social world. The text helps to direct a mourner's compatriots in their desire to show caring, acknowledges the needs of a community whose leader or teacher withdraws in mourning, protects the feelings of a mourner's new wife from uncomfortable reference to her predecessor, and considers both the mourner's early need for the solace of *not* being greeted, as well as the mourner's later need to be embraced by social greetings that do not transport him back to the pain of his loss.

The *gemara* begins with a *braita*. Our Rabbis have taught: During the first three days of mourning, it is forbidden for a mourner to offer greetings of שלום. From the third to the seventh day, he may respond if a greeting is offered to him, but does not ask after the greeter's שלום in return. From that point onward, he inquires about the well being of others and answers greetings, as had been his prior custom.

A *kashia*, a question, is raised: Is it really true that a mourner is forbidden to ask after another's שלום during the first three days of his own mourning? And a second *braita* is brought as a proof-text, telling of an even earlier precedent-setting occurrence in which a mourner offers a greeting of peace on the first day of mourning. An incident occurred upon the deaths of Rabbi Akiva (120CE)'s sons. All of Israel entered and eulogized them with a great eulogy. When the community was about to depart, Rabbi Akiva got up, and standing on a large bench, addressed the community saying, Listen my brethren, בית ישראל, even though I have lost two sons who were young and vital enough to be bride-grooms, מנוחם - you comfort me for my loss of them, for I am consoled by the honor that you offer them. And if you have come for my sake, well, think of how many mourner's there are in my situation ("כמה עקבה בשוק")! I am not a greater man

than they, therefore you must have been saying to yourselves: תורת ה' בליבו -- we perceive God's torah in his heart (Psalms, 37:31), thus coming here to honor the *torah in my heart*, and not me, personally. Therefore, your reward is double, for having comforted a mourner as well as honoring torah. Go home in peace!

In terms of the talmudic argument, the story has been brought for this concluding line: Go home “בשלום,” as this line is the proof-text, the example of a greeting of peace offered within the first days of mourning. To review, the *kashia* was: how can we say that one is not allowed to offer a greeting of שלום within the first three days of mourning if Rabbi Akiva did just that? At this point in the discourse, the *stama*, the redactor of the text, speaks up to reconcile the seeming disparity, and answers: כבוד רבים שאני - deference toward the public is a different matter. Whereas the first *braita* spoke of an individual greeting or not greeting another individual, the second *braita* describes involvement of an entire community, and when the public is involved, in this case gathering to lament and offer eulogy, different principles and a different logic applies. Therefore, the *stama* concludes, the statement that one cannot offer a greeting of peace to an individual within the first three days of his mourning is *not* called into question by the story of Rabbi Akiva bidding שלום to his community.

Looking at customs of our own times, I notice that in recording his (*halachic*) take on proper greeting of the mourner, or abstinence therefrom, Rabbi Norman Lamb is careful to impart that if representatives from an organization of which the mourner is a member come to the shiva home, the mourner is encouraged to publicly thank them for coming.

Rabbi Akiva honors his gathered community with greeting, even at the moment of eulogizing his young sons. In this incident, it seems that what is most humanly evident is a sensitivity to the needs of the *community*, as opposed to the needs of the *mourner*. Rabbi Akiva is not fully excused from his communal role by the fact of his mourning. The community still rallies ‘round him as their leader, paying their respects because of his position (despite his protestations that he is no different than any other mourner). And because the community comes forward as a whole, there is sensitivity to *their* need to be affirmed, gathered in, acknowledged,

reminded that their teacher is still cognizant of them and able to address them, even while experiencing personal loss.

Only a page back, in *gemara aleph* on עמוד א, כ"א, דף כ"א, the text states that a mourner is not allowed to study religious texts unless the public has need of him - Steinsaltz adds - need of him to teach them, in which case he does not have to abstain from teaching, and the *gemara* goes on to give examples of how this can be done, by way of certain mediations, through a chain of colleagues and a *meturgaman*, who speak the mourning teacher's whispered teaching aloud to the public. The point of connection to our text is the acknowledgment of the public's need to maintain their relationship to their teacher even during the teacher's acute period of mourning, and the Talmudic discourse's sensitivity to this fact.

As a rabbinical student, I feel empathy for the rabbi/teacher who cannot fully step out of his role during what must be a deeply private period. Two months ago, a very public teacher/clergy and communal leader in my neighborhood lost his father. The e-mail announcement of this loss, of funeral arrangements and *shiva minyanim*, also included an educational piece about communication with the rabbi during his shiva period. All were invited to attend *minyanim*, but the *kahal* was advised that we should not think of the rabbi as hosting us in his home, that he would not, necessarily, greet us or converse with us, and that we should refrain from raising any synagogue or organizational business of any sort. While many in the community may be unfamiliar with Jewish mourning practices regarding greeting and conversation, this letter also served as a reminder that the rabbi should *not* be expected to serve the community in his spiritual or leadership capacities during the shiva. The letter seemed to convey a notion of rabbinic *smicha* (*smicha* literally means "leaning") reflecting a mutual sort relationship between rabbi and congregation, wherein the rabbi can *lean* on his community in certain moments, and be allowed the full vulnerability of his mourning.

Clearly, the letter was pro-active in creating space for this rabbi's mourning, but if we consider the letter in the context of our section of Talmud text, we might also think of it as an electronic conflation of Rabbi Akiva's public greeting of the *kahal* and the various Talmudic

rabbis' mediated teaching in the *Bet Midrash* during mourning. I say this because the letter made a point to recognize the community in the moment of its rabbi's personal loss and expressed gratitude for community support of the rabbi's *mitzvah* of saying kaddish, just as Rabbi Akiva bid his community peace and thanked them for comforting him. In addition, the email anticipated possible communal or personal needs that might arise amongst the rabbi's "*talmidim*" during this acute period, re-routing congregants to lay go-betweens. And the e-mail imparted Jewish custom, offering a teaching through the conduit of a board member, a chain of communication not entirely unlike the murmuring rabbi whispering a teaching through a *meturgaman* to his students.

Personal conversation within the *chevruta* in which I studied this text has touched upon how customs of abstention from greetings can be effectively explained and enacted in a contemporary context. This, particularly because one of my *chevrutot* anticipates an imminent shiva in her own household and will wish to adopt some form of suspension of mundane conversation at that time. My own experience, at the time of my father's death and shiva in my home, was that refraining from greeting visitors or returning their greetings was not universally understood or as well received as I had expected it might be. I, too, wished to observe the custom of refraining from greeting my visitors, and while many in my community knew the custom, or accepted my desire once it was explained, not everyone did; a few were offended by what they experienced as a lack of acknowledgment. In my case, a sign was posted outside the front door of the home, explaining that, as a mourner, I would be seated on a stool and would not rise to greet visitors. It asked that voices remain low in the house and that the mourner be greeted with the traditional greeting, but not be expected to return greetings or converse. I thought the sign was sensitively written. But, to my surprise, one visitor to my home during the *shiva* severed the relationship between us subsequent to what he considered my gross rudeness.

As unhappy as I was about this outcome, until reading this narrative about Rabbi Akiva, and the *stama*'s summation that the needs of the community "is a different matter," I assumed that the individual who was so offended was overly needy and unempathic. It did not occur to

me that maybe, *maybe*, there is room within the traditional norm to consider the needs of the community of *shiva* visitors, even as one mourns.

Akiva's community was familiar with Jewish customs pertaining to a mourner, and, still, they needed his acknowledgment on the day of his sons' funeral; how much the more would a community to whom these traditions are quite foreign benefit from acknowledgment of their visit! True, I was not a rabbi or the community's teacher or leader, and the group gathered in my home did not represent a particular organization or synagogue. Nevertheless, the fact of their assembly made of them a community -- the community of folks who stepped forward to be present for and with me, to support me at a difficult time. In retrospect, I wonder whether their collectivity around that *mitzvah* merited my standing on my stool and thanking them for coming, bidding them שלום... I am moved to find that my investigation of this text leads me to question what I thought was proper traditional behavior - in the direction of more tolerance, leniency, and an outreach of sensitivity.

The *gemara* continues, picking up after the discourse on the first temporal period of mourning mentioned in the opening *braita*, restating the second two clauses of that passage: From the third to the seventh day of the mourning period, the mourner may respond, but does not initiate inquiry; from that point on, he asks and answers as is his custom. Here, again, an objection is interjected. Rashi explains that this רמיניהו, this objection, takes exception with the period of mourning being cited, he says to read the text as saying: NO, we do not return to normal customs of greeting after the first week, rather, one who comes upon his friend, who is a mourner within the first thirty days of his mourning, *still* offers him words of consolation and does not yet greet him with שלום. The *remihu* continues: If one encounters the mourner after thirty days, one asks after his שלום, his well being, but no longer offers him consolation.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz explains that after thirty days it would be unkind to remind him or his loss. In this passage, the discourse provides for the mourner's possible need to move past his initial state of grief, suggesting the creation of a social context in which the mourner will be greeted with a question as to the state of his שלום, which, of course, includes his feelings as a

mourner, but does not focus on his loss, per se. With this more general greeting, the mourner, in the second month of his loss, has options: he can respond by speaking of his grief, or choose not to.

The *gamara* broadens its circle of sensitivity as it continues with another scenario: If the mourner has lost his wife and has re-married, one is not allowed to visit him at home for the purpose of offering words of condolence. Why not? So as not to offend his wife with a reminder of her predecessor! But, Steinsaltz continues, if one encounters that same mourner, alone, out on his own (in the שוק) without his new wife, one does acknowledge his loss by greeting him with שלום in a soft voice and with a lowered head.

All in all, the lessons in etiquette contained in this *reminhu* are brilliant. This voice posits that a mourner doesn't move on so quickly. He remains in an acute state of mourning for a good month after the loss of a parent, child, sibling or spouse, so don't ask him how he is (You know how he is!). After the first month, he may or may not be ready to address his feelings in conversation, so leave the possibility open, but don't approach the subject explicitly. If he's re-married, don't enter his new wife's domain to dredge up memories of the love she is replacing but, rather, understand that, with a new marriage, life must, necessarily, focus on the unfolding of the future. Still, this mourner has, indeed, lost his spouse, and when he is alone, it is important not to ignore the complexity of his life and feelings. Here too, an indirect social expression of empathy, one that allows cues to be taken from the *mourner* is suggested. Lowering of voice and head convey respect for his sorrow without any explicit reference or reminder that might increase the mourner's vulnerability.

Returning to Talmudic logic, Steinsaltz fleshes out the *reminhu's* argument, restating that the passage discussed above is brought to prove that there is a prohibition against asking about a mourner's שלום throughout the first thirty days of mourning, not just within the first week alone. Thus Steinsaltz punctuates the conclusion of this voice in the text.

Next, a named voice, Rav Idi bar Avin (c. 250CE) enters the discourse, opposing the above *reminhu*. He says: He, the mourner, is permitted to ask about the well being of others

because others are at peace, but others may not ask how he is doing because he is not at peace. Steinsaltz says (and in my paraphrase, I expand on this), read the passage thus: The first *braita*, speaks of how the *avel*, the mourner, himself, should behave. The mourner is protected from having to greet others for that first week, but once he returns to greeting others, there is no need for him to take special precautions, lest he be insensitive in his manner of greeting. There is no problem with the mourner asking after the peace of others, because they *are* at peace. But the second *braita*, which we've been referring to as the *reminh*, and which cites a prohibition against greetings of peace for a full thirty days, does not deal with what is acceptable behavior for the mourner, but rather, refers to the proper behavior of those offering consolation, those greeting the mourner. In the second *braita*, the Talmud text speaks of, "אחרים" - "others." "Others" don't ask about "his" - the mourner's - שלום for a full thirty days because he, the mourner, is **not** at peace, and it would be insensitive to do so.

Still another voice answers Rav Idi: But in the first *braita* the text uses the term "משיב," meaning, he may *answer* a greeting of peace after three days. If the mourner answers, does that not imply that he's been asked about his well being within the first week of his mourning? And a voice supporting Rav Idi's argument responds: דלא ידעי - the didn't know... Those who asked did not know that the man being greeted was in mourning and therefore mistakenly greeted him by inquiring as to his שלום.

A problem is raised with this scenario too: If the mourner, who is erroneously greeted with an inquiry as to his peace, is allowed to respond when that greeting is offered him after the first three days of his mourning, it would stand to reason that he would also be allowed to respond if the same error took place within the first three days of his mourning. After all, a mistake is a mistake. But a voice answers: No; if such an error is made within the first three days of his mourning, the mourner must share information of his loss, and then make no further response. But after the first three days of his mourning, the mourner can let it go, can simply respond to the greeting without explaining that he is in mourning.

As compounded as the voices are becoming, more and more significant sensitivities are being raised. The principle of whether or not the mourner should correct an acquaintance who greets him without being aware of his suffering is another example of the discourse grappling with social responsibility the mourner might have to others in the community, even as he suffers. There seems to be an aspect of this issue that has to do with providing the innocent acquaintance with the information that will allow him to conduct himself with compassion, and, even, to spare the unaware acquaintance a degree of humiliation, lest he later discover his error and, hence, his inappropriate greeting. It is as if the mourner reaches out to help the greeter perform the greeter's *mitzva*. With regard to the timing of the greeting, it seems that it would, somehow, be particularly unseemly to make an error in greeting within the most acute period of mourning, and therefore the mistake is addressed in such a case. As time passes, however, the oversight is, perhaps, less reprehensible, and therefore the mourner is not obliged to make the effort to apprise the greeter of his situation. I am struck that the mourner is specifically asked to reach out to sensitize his acquaintance during the period when it is likely to be hardest for the mourner to do so.

The *gemara* continues with another *reminhu*, this time contrasting the *braita's* reference to thirty days as marking the temporal moment in which we shift in how we greet a mourner, with a source stating that the twelve month point as the time for transition back to normal greetings of peace without mention of the mourner's loss. This *reminhu* also adds an element that was absent in the prior *braita*, namely, that, although after a year consolation is no longer offered, one may still refer to a person's loss indirectly. Rashi says this means that comfort may be offered without, specifically, naming the deceased.

In the face of this permission for indirect consolation after twelve months, Rabbi Meir (160CE) objects, emphasizing the *reminhu's* admonition against bringing up the mourner's loss when he is already beginning to heal from sorrow. He likens meeting a mourner and offering him words of consolation after twelve months have elapsed to a physician greeting a man whose leg had been broken and has already healed by saying: Come, let me re-break your leg so that

you can experience *my* expertise in healing you! This is what it's like to be so presumptuous to offer comfort when *time* has already healed a loss! The implication is that such comfort is self-serving, motivated by the greeter's need to sooth and insensitive to the mourner's actual stage of recovery.

The text's redactor (500-800 CE) is moved to reconcile tension in the discourse. He announces that there is no contradiction between the source's respectively citing one month and one year in the mourning process as the appropriate time to shift manner of greeting a mourner, because, whereas, this last citation refers to a person mourning a parent, the former reference is to a person mourning other near-of-kin (spouses, siblings, or children). The timing of healing for these categories of mourner differs, and therefore the therapeutic need to be greeted in one way or another shifts at different moments.

A question is raised regarding the redactor's differentiation between these categories of mourner: Shouldn't the same principle of offering indirect comfort apply to both? If the latter *braita* referred only to mourners who have lost a parent, and we are encouraged to offer them indirect comfort once we are forbidden to offer direct comfort, should we not go back and apply this principle to the earlier *braita*, which refers to mourners of other near-of-kin? And the text affirms: Yes! We should apply the same principle there too! When that *braita* states: After thirty days offer no words of consolation, what is meant is: One may not offer words of consolation in the usual manner, but, rater, obliquely.

Thus *Moed Katan*, עמוד ב, כ"א, *gemara bet* draws to a close. This tiny patch of text is constructed like a bit of Pointillist painting, each detail of behavior argued for by one of the texts voices functioning as a single dot that combines with other disparate dots of social detail, to yield a combined image of ideal communal relationships and interactions. But the metaphor is not only apt because the text deals in minutia, building an image through its particulars. It is also pertinent because, as in Pointillist technique, each contribution retains its specific color, even as the amalgam of particulars generalizes into a whole. Thus, unless we're trolling for *halachic* outcomes, what emerges from this text is the pastiche of opinions about how a mourner ought to

be greeted and how he ought to be expected to respond, from all sorts of points of view, taking all social players, their feelings, vulnerabilities and needs into account. The beauty in not blending the dots is that the vitality of each dot's individuality remains fresh. Here, it is the vitality of *sincerity* emanating from each voice in the discourse that remains fresh, for every opinion rendered is an expression of ardent caring as to how best to handle these situations of human frailty.

Holding a visionary stance in conceiving how a mourner ought to be approached seems to have been quite a juggling act. The contributors to this discourse struggled to balance the personal needs of the mourner with the importance of that small degree to which the mourner remains responsible to his community. And the Rabbis' concern extended to the mourner's eventual need to re-enter his own life and the life of his community.

In my estimation, the most marvelous Rabbinic offerings in this passage are those that suggest digressive or implied approaches: recognizing the admonition against studying sacred texts, but teaching through mediation; not greeting individuals but acknowledging the community; not offering condolence in the home of a remarried widow, but honoring his loss when is out, on his own; refraining from words of condolence, but lowering the head and voice; making a provision for indirect comfort when direct comfort is prohibited. There is a reasonableness to these divergences that amplifies understanding of individual needs and sensitivity to the power of subtle, implicit ways of being. We are provided a window into a deeply considerate process of imagining a social order and a heaven on earth.