

Sorrow or Strength?

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Rabbi Maurice Lamm, in his book Consolation, tells a story of the time when he entered the military as a chaplain after his ordination. On the very first day of instruction, his entire military class of twenty-six rabbis, priests, and ministers (there's no joke coming here) sat silently in a lecture hall, with their hands folded at attention.

A colonel entered and turned to a large, blank white sheet on the wall.

Without a word, he drew a black dot in the middle of it. "Look at this image for the next ten minutes until I return". Commanding this to graduate clergymen seemed to border on the absurd.... Nevertheless, the chaplains did as they were told. The officer came back and asked for a show of hands to describe what [the chaplains had seen]. Every single one of [them] agreed that [they] saw a black dot.... To this, the colonel responded that [they] were all wrong, and to look once more. Then he told [the group]: We see not a black dot, but a black dot surrounded by a large white space (295-6).

Rabbi Lamm never forgot the colonel's simple, graphic, and valuable lesson. As Rabbi Lamm put it, *"it becomes second nature to focus narrowly on the black dots*

of life, ignoring the whole picture. In the nighttime of life, in the bottomless hours of bereavement, we bemoan the tragedy; this event simply cannot be romanticized and turned into light. We look at the life that we mourn, and we see illness or missed opportunities or frustration or unrealized goals, and we are mystified at the utter futility of it all” (296).

It is easy and natural to see the black dot, to see the darkness of pain, of illness, of death, even though it is surrounded by so much white. It is much harder to focus on the white, the light that is the beauty and blessing of our life. But, over time, even though it is difficult, we are still capable of choosing our focal point, of choosing our response to sorrow and darkness. Do our eyes keep reverting to the painful black dot, or can we see that there is also a great deal of light that remains behind, or even emerges, out of the darkness?

As we look for inspiration and guidance in this area, we can refer back to the Torah and to the stories of our patriarchs and matriarchs. There we find the heart-wrenching story, depicted in but a few short verses, of the birth of Jacob’s son Benjamin and the death of his beloved wife Rachel in the childbirth process. The Torah teaches us, *“They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrat, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Have no fear, for it is another boy for you.” But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him “Ben-*

oni”; but his father called him *Binyamin*. Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrat—now Bethlehem (Genesis 35:16-19).

It seems strange that these two parents chose different names for their child. Why in the world would Jacob opt to call the baby by a different name than the one his dying, dearly beloved wife had chosen? In his commentary on this passage, the great medieval Spanish commentator Nachmanides, also known as the RamBan, attempts to understand this troubling textual point. He tells us that it seems that Rachel called the baby “Ben-Oni” because she wanted to call him ‘the son of my suffering or my mourning’, just as we refer to matza as “Lechem Oni”—the bread of affliction. However, Jacob interpreted “Oni” to mean “Kochi”—my strength, the son of my strength or my might, and thus called him “Binyamin”, “the son of my right hand”, because the right hand is regarded as having in it strength and success. You see, says RamBan, Jacob wanted to call him by the same name that the boy’s mother Rachel called him, only he interpreted the name towards goodness and strength, rather than towards sadness and despair.

Flip open Alkalai’s modern Hebrew-English dictionary and, sure enough, you will find two definitions for “Ohn”—it can either be defined as strength, power, or potency; OR it can be defined as grief or sorrow. It all depends how we look at the word. In the midst of his likely indescribable grief at the loss of the love of his life, Jacob could have chosen to interpret the name Rachel bestowed on

their beautiful new baby as a perpetual reminder of the terrible tragedy and sadness that unfortunately came hand-in-hand with the miracle of the boy's birth. And so it would have been that every time he called his son's name for the rest of his life, or every time Benjamin heard his own name called, the two of them would have focused on the black dot of loss.

Instead, imagine Jacob bravely saying—I shall struggle through the pain and see the strength my wife possessed, able as she was to bring new life into the world even as she took her last breaths. And I shall believe with all my heart that when she named the boy, she really was trying to say that she wanted to pass her remarkable strength along to her son, to our child. He has his whole life in front of him, full of opportunity and potential. Let his name be a mark of honor and an inspiration for him, and me, all the days of his life. I shall call this precious new life Binyamin—and in that way, he will always be a symbol of strength, health, success, glory, and gratitude to God.

Jacob's story is a powerful example of the extreme heights and depths of joy and sorrow we experience as earthly beings who are born and ultimately pass away, in that he experienced both extremes at the same time. He sees the black dot of grief, but he also finds a way to see the large white space that surrounds that black dot, summoning his own strength AND the strength, courage, and values

Rachel left behind to move forward and continue to live life to its fullest, as a father and as a human being.

As we prepare to recite the prayers of Yizkor in a few moments, to remember those people who meant so much to us who are no longer with us in this world—parents, spouses, children, siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, and friends—we can keep in mind Jacob’s courage in the face of loss. And we can reflect and ask ourselves a difficult question:

Looking back, remembering our beloved, do we see only the pain of the struggle, and the abject pain of loss? Or do we also see the strength and values our dear ones left behind to inspire us and remind us every day about the beauty of life? Do we picture their smiles, and smile back? For even from the next world, our loved ones continue to teach us like the Colonel teaching his chaplains: It is not a black dot, but a black dot surrounded by a large, white space. May their memories always be a blessing and reaffirm for us the preciousness of the life we live.

Please rise as the ark is opened and we begin the Yizkor service...