Eulogies--for the Living: Thoughts on Parashat Hayyei Sarah, November 22, 2009

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When Sarah died, the Torah tells us that Abraham came "to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her." Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, noted that this passage seems to describe things in the wrong order. Normally, we would expect that a person weeps when learning of the death of a loved one; then, at a later point, the mourner offers words of eulogy. Yet, the Torah states that first Abraham eulogized Sarah, and then afterwards he wept.

Rabbi Halevy explained: Abraham was certainly grief-stricken upon hearing of Sarah's death. When he eulogized her, though--when he actually articulated her virtues and his love for her--only then did he fully realize how much he had lost by her death. The words of eulogy made him fully internalize the reality of Sarah's death, causing him to weep more profoundly. So first he eulogized, and then he wept.

Indeed, people may be in a state of shock or denial when confronting the death of a loved one. When they give or hear words of eulogy, only then does the reality set in, and only then do they actually begin the mourning process.

It is a mitzvah to eulogize the dead. It is a source of honor for the deceased and for the surviving mourners.

I have often thought that eulogies sometimes come too late. All the nice words of praise and appreciation come after the person has died. If the deceased person had heard these same words while still alive, it would have been a source of ineffable happiness.

When I was in college, a friend of mine had a cousin who was killed in a gang war in the Bronx. At the Shiva home, family members reminisced about the dead young man: yes, he was tough, but he had a good heart; he got mixed up with the wrong people, but he had so much good in him; he was respectful to his parents and kind to friends and neighbors. Everyone seemed to find something good to say about him. My friend stood up and said with great emotion: if he had heard these things from you while he was still alive, maybe he would still be alive! All I ever heard you say about him was that he was a no-good hoodlum, a bad

person, a violent person. There was a great hush in the room. Indeed, that young man's self-image and self-esteem might have been very different if he had heard those loving words of praise during his lifetime.

Sometimes people go through life without ever knowing how much others love them, admire them, see virtue in them. I have been at many funerals where mourners have said: I wish I would have told him how much I loved him; I wish I would have done more for her; I wish I had let him/her know how much I cared.

The question is: why wait until someone dies to say words of eulogy? Why not tell people how much we love them, how much they mean to us, how great are their virtues--while they are alive and can feel satisfaction and happiness from our words. Why don't we realize how powerful words of praise can be and how painful words of condemnation and ridicule can be?

Words of sincere appreciation can change a human life. A loving hug, a pat on the back, a smile, a genuine compliment--these things can give joy and meaning to those we love, respect and admire.

We ought not wait for eulogies to express our true feelings. We ought to live as loving, thoughtful and sharing human beings who honestly cherish and value our family and friends--and who let them know how much they mean to us.

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