

Bringing an End to Galus Edom

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Over the last number of years, as *Klal Yisrael's* calendar page turns to *Parashas Vayechi*, communities throughout the country dedicate this Shabbos to the topic of *kvod hameis*.

Numerous articles have been written on this topic, many from this author, about the significance of the sanctity of life and of the requirement to prolong one's life, regardless of the level of functionality of that life.

We often quoted the *Chazal*, "*Yafah shaah achas b'Olam Hazeh, mikol chaye Olam Haba* — greater is one hour of life in this world, than an eternity in the next world." *Chazal* refer to the opportunity to accomplish, gain *zechuyos*, and do *chessed* for others that cannot be done in the Heavenly world.

We are all familiar with the famous story of the Vilna Gaon, who was on his deathbed and began to cry. His students questioned his crying and said, "*Rebbi*, how can you cry when you are heading to a *lichtige Gan Eden* in reward for all that you accomplished in this world?"

The Vilna Gaon grabbed hold of the strings of his *tzitzis* and lovingly kissed them and said to them, "How can I not cry when I will soon be leaving the world that is so filled with *mitzvos* that by just putting on a four-cornered garment with *tzitzis* one fulfills a *mitzvah* in the Torah?"

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And so, when first asked to write once again about the topic of *kvod hameis*, I declined, because what else can I add to what has already been said and written? That was my decision until the incredible timing of a phone call changed my perspective and made me realize how very important this issue of *kvod hameis* is.

Two weeks ago, I participated in a program for 500 Jewish university students, mostly either totally unaffiliated or marginally affiliated at best. It was a one-day forum, entitled "The Resiliency of the Jewish People." The dedicated organizers of this program had divided it into two parts.

The morning session would host several speakers, each focusing on a different historical period of *Churban* for the Jewish people that had lasting ramifications.

There was a session on the *Churban Beis Hamikdash* and the Yidden going into *galus*; another on the Spanish Inquisition and a third on the Holocaust.

The second part, held in the afternoon, would focus on the historical periods of rebuilding following the *Churban*, one session on the Chashmona'im, and yet another on the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

I agreed to participate in this innovative program, was given the topic of the "*Churban Bayis*" and was given an hour for my presentation. Immediately following me, was an acclaimed histori-

an and author of the Holocaust period who was slated to bring to the forefront the absolute horrific destruction and suffering that *Klal Yisrael* went through during this period. I decided to stay and listen to his presentation.

While his presentation was enlightening and informative, he went into graphic detail of the use of the crematoria by the Nazis, *yemach shemam*. From my vantage point of the stage, I looked out at the crowd of young students and saw many of them sitting uncomfortably, some squirming in their seats having to listen to the presenter's graphic description of the crematoria. At first, while sitting there, I couldn't understand why he chose to speak about this particular aspect of the Holocaust in such detail and why I needed to hear it. Less than an hour later, I understood.

After his presentation, I left the forum and was in my car heading to my next appointment, when my phone rang. On the other end of the line was a dear friend, the expert and advocate for *kvod hameis*, a person who has dedicated his life to *chessed shel emes*, Rabbi Elchonon Zohn. With his organization, NASCK — The National Association of Chevra Kadisha, he, perhaps more than anyone else, has raised the issue of *kvod hameis* to a place where it deserves to be, in the hearts and minds of every Yid.

The purpose of his call was to share with me another one of his creative ideas to help spread the idea of the importance of *kvod hameis* to the non-traditional Jewish communities. He then shared with me an astounding statistic that totally overwhelmed me: in certain Jewish communities around the country, the rate of Jewish families that choose cremation instead of burial is almost 70%! Nationally, it is about 40%. I was shocked, as I am sure that you are, at the level of disregard for our most sacred *mesorah* of burying our dead in the same manner that our *Avos Hakedoshim* did from the beginning of time.

After concluding the call, I couldn't ignore the coincidence of the timing of this call. I just sat through an hour-long lecture on the horrific fate of *Klal Yisrael* in the Holocaust, that even after all the colossal suffering and murder of millions of Yidden, the Nazis had to even take away the opportunity to allow its victims to be buried with *kevrus Yisrael* and instead burned their *heilige* bodies in the crematoria.

And immediately afterward, I receive this phone call from Rabbi Zohn on the painful statistic of how many Yidden today, in a free country, in a *medinah shel chessed*, choose themselves, to do to their loved ones what the Nazis did to our parents and grandparents just decades ago.

It was at that moment that I decided to take pen in hand and once again reach out to *Acheinu Bnei Yisrael* to

take this issue very much to heart and let everyone do their part to increase the awareness of the value of life in this world and the significance of *kvod hameis* for those who have left this temporal world.

Many months ago, a very wonderful Yid from the Five Towns community reached out to me with a painful *she'eilah*. His father unfortunately suffered a major stroke more than a year ago and has remained in a comatose state ever since. Months earlier, he was transferred to a facility that is about an hour's drive from his son's home. For the first few months, he visited his father every single day after leaving work before he went home. Then he limited his visits to once a week and lately he has been going every other week.

The *she'eilah* that he asked me was a difficult and painful one. He explained that his father is in a coma and has no knowledge on any level that he is there to visit him. He has a very full day with a large growing family at home and each visit which is an hour's travel time each way, takes out more than two and a half hours out of his already hectic day, leaving him physically and emotionally drained. Yet he feels terrible that he is not providing the proper *kibbud av* that is required of him and the infrequency of his visits to his father is greatly troubling him.

His *she'eilah* to me was, what is his requirement to his father under these circumstances and how often should he go. He made it very clear that he would follow whatever I instructed him to do.

I am sure that my Rabbinic colleagues reading this also share my uneasiness *paskening* this type of *she'eilah*. On one hand, the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av* is a *mitzvah rabbah* and is not meant to be an easy *mitzvah* to perform. On the other hand, the son's responsibility to his own family and his own well-being is of paramount importance as well. I took the easy way out and told him I would consult with Harav Dovid Feinstein, *shlita*, on his *she'eilah* and get back to him in a few days.

A few days later, a friend, Rabbi Binjamin Koval, the *Rosh Kollel* of the Flatbush Morning *Kollel*, shared with me the most incredible insight that he had heard in the name of the then-*zakein hador*, Hagaon Harav Aharon Leib Shteinman, *zt"l*, that will be life-changing for many.

An elderly Yid was approaching his 100th birthday and he was greatly troubled. He explained, "I need to understand why I am *zocheh* to have this *arichus yamim*. My father died at 46 and his father before him at 41. I am a simple person, not learned or accomplished, why am I *zocheh* to live now until the age of 100 (and beyond)?"

He decided to present the *she'eilah* to the *Gadol Hador* Rav Shteinman to receive guidance on what he could

answer his father. What the *Rosh Yeshivah* answered was absolutely incredible and it could only come from someone whose vision of the happenings in this world, big or small, is worlds apart from our own.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* responded, "Tell your father the following reason why he is *zocheh* to *arichus yamim*. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is working to bring an end to *Galus Edom*. The *zechus* that Edom had all these years was the great *kibbud av* that Esav had for his father. And so, Hashem in the *tekufah acharonah* was *meshaneh teva ha'olam* [changed the nature of the world] allowing people to live longer. *Klal Yisrael*, in caring for their elders longer, can generate additional *zechuyos* of *kibbud av* which is *k'neged* the *zechus* of Edom, thereby being able to (finally) bring an end to *Galus Edom*."

In other words, this person was *zocheh* to *arichus yamim*, so that more *zechuyos* could be generated by his children and thereby additional *zechuyos* for *Klal Yisrael*.

What an absolutely incredible insight into the *darchei ha'olam*. What our simple eyes see as a good fortune of growing old, is really part of Hashem's plan to bring the *Geulah* for *Klal Yisrael*.

After hearing this idea, I quickly called the fellow who asked me the previous *she'eilah* and shared it with him. I suggested that he should keep the *Rosh Yeshivah's* insight in mind when trying to determine what his course of action should be in juggling his obligation to be with his father and his obligation to himself and his growing family.

This person called me again several months later. He just got up from the *shivah* for his father, but wanted to express his *hakaras hatov* to me. He explained that ever since I shared with him the thought of Rav Aharon Leib, he once again began to visit his father several times a week.

However these times he wasn't burdened with wondering what good his visits were accomplishing when his father was not even aware of his presence. Now every time he got into his car for the hour's drive to his father, he had in mind that he was contributing to bringing the end of *Galus Edom*. This so motivated him that he went enthusiastically, and it invigorated his family as well, as they all supported his efforts not only on their behalf, but on behalf of all of *Klal Yisrael*.

There you have it. It's all interconnected. *Kvod hameis* and *kvod hachai* should be viewed by us as not burdensome or insignificant (*chas v'shalom*), but rather as bringing an end to this bitter *Galus* that we are in, one *zechus* at a time.

May it happen speedily in our day.

This article is written l'zecher nishmas Sarah Chaya bas Reb Aryeh Zev, a"h.