



How Could This Happen?

Tragedy: Speaking and Listening to Your Children

Generally speaking, grieving does not get better in any predictable pattern, but rather follows a random series of ups and downs depending on a host of factors. There are also distinct phases of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Once you know what to look for, you can almost watch people transition between these phases, although not necessarily in this order.

As the parent of a grieving child, perhaps the most important point to understand is that one never knows which of the countless facets of the tragedy is troubling them. The only way to find out is by talking less and listening more.

Here are some of the messages I have imparted when speaking about tragedy, in the hope you will find at least some of this helpful in speaking to your children:

1. We are in this together. I open by giving an analogy of joining a baseball league, by explaining that joining that group means you practice together and support each other over the entire season. You also celebrate victories and get upset over losses as a group.

2. People grieve differently. Going back to the baseball analogy, reflect on how different teammates respond to hitting a home run, or winning or losing a game. Some take it in their stride and show little emotion while others go way over the top. Just like there are different ways to celebrate, so too, there are different ways to

mourn – and they should feel free to just be themselves, and allow those around them the space to do the same.

3. How could this happen? There are various *hashkafic* approaches to dealing with this kind of question. My approach is a straightforward one and one I find to be honest and teachable. The Gemara occasionally leaves a question unanswered and ends with the word תִּיקוּ, which basically says we need to wait for Eliyahu HaNavi to resolve this. This is simply a תִּיקוּ and is just incomprehensible. My father's death 47 years ago is still a תִּיקוּ to me, and it will probably remain so for the rest of my days.

There will always be תִּיקוּ questions, and that's when בְּטַחוֹן (faith) needs to kick in. The eternal truths of the Torah give us enough confidence in G-d's הַשְׁגָּחָה פְּרִטִית (Divine Providence) to give us the faith to take the plunge and accept things we do not understand. Since in the limited time we have in this world, and with our limited understanding of His ways, it is impossible for us to understand 100% of events that happen, we must leave the rest to faith and accept things that are beyond our ability to understand בְּאַהֲבָה (with love).

Another effective analogy is that בְּטַחוֹן is similar to taking medication a parent hands you, even if you don't know what it is – and even if it tastes terrible – because your life experience gives you the trust in your parents to follow their guidance in areas you don't fully understand.

Many parents and educators hope their kids won't ask these questions, which might have them grasping for answers. That is not the best approach – for an unasked question is an unanswered one, and you may not be there to answer your children's questions when they have them later in life.

On a practical note, please keep an eye and ear open to see if your children are ready to talk about their tragedy with you. It is important they do so. And since the grieving cycle is filled with ups and downs, it is not uncommon for children's emotions to flare up after being completely dormant for days. Please do not hesitate to reach out for professional help if you are concerned that your child(ren) are exhibiting worrying symptoms.

Finally, while this column is child-centered, many of us adults have a challenging time dealing with tragedy. If you find yourself unable to bounce back, please seek professional help yourself. When they do the safety drill on airplanes, they always instruct you to place the oxygen mask on yourself before your child, even though that seems quite selfish to an outside observer. The message is clear though. You cannot be in a position to help your child if you don't take care of yourself first.

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