The Widower’s Predicament

Widowhood is mentioned dozens of times in the Torah as a situation of vulnerability, exposure, lacking protection. The widow is often mentioned together with the orphan and the convert – those whom it is forbidden to exploit; those for whom society should take responsibility for their wellbeing.

But what of the widower’s personal experience? What is happening in his internal world?

Megillat Eicha expresses the enormity of the fragmentation and the mourning and depicts a metaphoric widow, Am Yisrael, mourning over the loss of Jerusalem. The ‘widow’s’ experience is described in detail with great sensitivity.

We hear the details of Avraham’s involvement in his wife’s burial. We hear him coming to eulogize Sarah and weep over her.

Who is this woman we have lost? Who is this woman, this righteous individual who shared his life misfortune with him, amidst the traumatic transitions from Ur Casdim to Haran and Canaan? This woman was a greater prophetess than he was, but a full partner as they wandered from place to place, spreading the ‘gospel’ of monotheism. She endangered herself for Avraham, and her beauty, her wisdom, her righteousness and noble soul were never tarnished.

As Avraham eulogizes her, the sobbing wells up deep from within, becoming stronger and stronger – perhaps even lasting for days – as the void becomes more and more visceral and he internalizes his terrible loss.

We hear Ya’akov’s heart-wrenching expression “And when I came from Padan, Rachel died on me” (Bereishit 48:7). He says this years later, at the end of his life. We still feel the great chasm, the sorrow and the loss. In the words of the Midrash: “... a woman only dies to her husband, and a husband only dies to his wife.”

The Midrash connects these words to a description of another experience of widowhood, that of Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, upon her husband Elimelech’s passing.

And Rabbi Yochanan says (in that same midrash): “Ya’akov Avinu said: Rachel’s death was harder for me than all the troubles I had.”

“A woman only dies to her husband.” Someone who has not experienced the loss of a spouse cannot understand this. Perhaps one can identify external sadness and vulnerability, but the loss itself, the death, the enormity of the void and its accompanying silence... only the widow or the widower can fully experience.

Yet despite his pain, Avraham marries other women, has more children and lives for almost another 40 years after Sarah’s death.

It is almost impossible to express this dissonance in words. Suffering the most painful of losses in death and then demonstrating the ability to come back to life, to rebuild, to find meaning in and zest for life, and often choosing to marry again. To love and to flourish.

The difficulty in writing about widowhood – and not only carrying on after a spouse’s death but instilling meaning and joy into life – reflects the mystery of widowhood itself.

How does one hold these two opposites together?

The Midrash in Bava Batra depicts Avraham and Sarah’s graves. Avraham lies in Sarah’s bosom and Sarah is contemplating Avraham’s head. A possible interpretation could be that a man says to himself: I have shared the main chapter of my life with my great partner – we shared years of work, faith and children, and in the midrash you will write about me, perhaps I will reappear with the wife of my youth... but as long as G-d chooses to give me life and more days upon this earth, I will live them to the full. I’ll take an active role, contribute to society and, b’ezrat Hashem, I will love life and be content with my life and the life of my family and those around me.

Maybe it is precisely the person who has experienced a great love in his life who will want to restart and love again. And maybe it is precisely a couple who have had a beautiful, successful marriage who will wish themselves or their spouse a good and full life as far as possible, and when the conditions are right, even to marry again. Because with all of its challenges and heartbreak, they realize life is a gift to be enjoyed, a mission to fulfill wholeheartedly.