A Piece of Lomdus on Avelus for One’s Rav by Rabbi Shlomo Zuckier (SBM 2012), Post from Facebook

I wanted to share a short piece of Iyyun relating to Hilchos Avelus in honor of the passing of Rav Lichtenstein, hik”m.

The Rambam provides an interesting source (based on Moed Katan 26a) for the obligation to mark one’s Rabbi’s death by tearing one’s garment:

רמב"ם הלכות אבל פרשת ט הלכה
ומנין שקורע על ראב"עアプリ, שמאמר והוא אומר לא אצי יכריעו אלא אציו עדו וייתן

Elisha’s cries over the death of Eliyahu, his teacher, are marked by the rending of his garment into two. This source is particularly fitting because it demonstrates Rambam’s comparison between a Rebbi and a father, as Elisha calls out “My father! My father!” for his teacher. But the source is also problematic; the example of Keri’ah noted in this Pasuk is very unusual because Eliyahu has not died! How can there be Keri’ah, a sign of mourning, without a death?

Let us consider a different Halacha by the Rambam in this same chapter (based on Moed Katan 25a):

רמב"ם הלכות אבל פרשת יא הלכה כל מי שעמד עם המת בשעת יציאת נשמת אדם שיאינו קורע חיב לקורע ויהיו עד שיאינו קורע

Here, someone present at the time of another person’s death tears their clothing, despite the lack of any connection between the deceased and the observer. Why does one tear their clothing in this case?

I believe we see in the Rambam two different triggers for tearing one’s clothing that are separate from one another, which really are two different aspects (Tzvei Dinim) of that obligation. The first trigger for Keri’ah is experiencing the end of a person’s life. This encounter with human frailty suffices to bring into effect an obligation of Keri’ah, as one rips their clothing to symbolize the soul leaving the body. The other aspect relates not to death per se but to the loss of formative influences and close relatives from one’s life. The sense of loss, of something being wrenched away, is symbolized by tearing one’s clothes, as well.

These two sources typify the two aspects: being present at a death, even of a person with whom one is unacquainted, necessitates Keri’ah; additionally, one whose Rebbi leaves the world, even without experiencing death (as Eliyahu), must rend their clothes.

Yesterday, we experienced both forms of mourning. We saw the end of Rav Lichtenstein’s life, showing that even the strongest of men is still human. And we have all suffered the loss of Rav Lichtenstein’s presence, as we are an orphaned generation who now must go on without our irreplaceable Gedol ha-Dor.