

Yom Kippur 5781-2020 ~ Finding Our Way Out Together

Rabbi Yael Ridberg

Rabbi Hayyim of Zans used to tell this parable: A sojourner had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw someone approaching him. His heart filled with anticipation. “Now I will learn which is the right way,” he thought. When they neared one another, he asked, “Please tell me which is the right way out of this forest. I have been wandering about for several days.”

Said the other to him, “I do not know the way out either, for I too have been wandering about here for many, many, days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been going, for that will lead you astray. Now let us look for a new way together.”

I used to see this reading as simply a metaphor for the generic work of *teshuvah* that we each must do ourselves, but that having a companion along can help us feel less alone. I was always the “someone” in the tale, coming to support and help others find their way out.

This year, I see it very differently, for I am the sojourner wandering about in a forest lost and unsure of the path. I thought I knew where to go, and what to do. But the truth of the last months for me is I have been putting off loss and grief, sadness and paralysis, because I didn’t want to feel the pain that I knew lived beneath the surface, potentially crowding out my effective, “can do” attitude, my Messiah complex and my desire to help others before myself.

I knew a time would come when I would need to feel it all. I just wasn’t prepared for it to be today. But we plan and God laughs. I’m quite sure God’s been hysterical for six months.

The beginning of the quarantine came with productivity and positivity along with masks and limited visits to the grocery store. We stocked up our pantry, we made learning spaces for the kids, we cancelled vacations, and wiped down our grocery bags.

But with the passing of days into weeks, the minutes were full but the hours empty. Rushing was replaced with paralysis. My children may or may not have watched Netflix for 8 hours on any given day. I myself may have managed to get through 4/7 seasons of The West Wing since March. There were infinite moments of stress and yelling by everyone in my house. More than once. Too much time isolated from friends and work, too much time together in one place. And when the days got longer, time seemed without end.

I thought about that moment when Moses came down the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments and saw the people dancing around and worshipping a golden calf. The text says, “*Vayihar aff Moshe*” – Moses became enraged and hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them.¹

This was the interpretation I had always understood. That Moses was simply angry and frustrated. But I read a midrash recently that completely altered my understanding. The rabbis explain that the letters of the words inscribed on the tablets were what made it possible for Moses to carry them down the mountain. The Divine instructions themselves lightened Moses’ load, because they were aspirational and instructional. The words said *everything* a newly free people needed to know to make their way in the world.

But in the moment when Moses saw the people with the calf, exhibiting a loss of faith and certainty, the letters of the commandments flew off the tablets causing them to be suddenly unbearably heavy, and Moses didn’t have the strength to hold them so they fell to the ground, and shattered.²

Moses received a second set of tablets, we know, but the broken segments of the first set were not discarded. They were placed in the *aron* – the ark that travelled with the Israelites while in the wilderness.³

The word for the tablets used in the text is *edut* – the same word for *bearing witness*. The broken Tablets were a way to remember that which Moses witnessed, even if it was shattering. And they likely were a way for the people to

¹ Exodus 32:19

² Midrash Tanhuma, *Ki Tissa* 30

³ BT Talmud Bava Batra 14b

remember what can happen in isolation, and how uncertainty and anxiety, are very much a part of life. We might also understand that the Ten Commandments themselves - which deal with the human-Divine *and* human- human relationships are meant to *lighten the load* of what it means to be a human being in the world.

Over the last 6 months in isolation, uncertainty and anxiety, I collected the unbearable broken pieces of life, and they have been stored in my holy of holies, but I never really paid them much mind. Until this past week when a morning routine went south, the kids were late, voices were raised, and when they left, I dissolved in a puddle of tears weeping over everything from the mundane to the catastrophic.

When I told a friend about my morning, she said: “Meltdowns are so important. I’m probably due for one soon too.”

“*Al eileh ani bochiya,*” for these things do I weep, my eyes flow tears” says the author of Lamentations,⁴ in response to the destruction of Jerusalem. If I could have conducted Yom Kippur from that moment of release, I would have.

The collective trauma of the last year cannot be underestimated. Dr. Molly Casteloe, an expert in group psychology defines this kind of trauma as: a shared experience of helplessness, disorientation, and loss among a group of people... when “the threatening event gives rise to a shared identification — despite the fact that the victimized individuals have different personalities and family backgrounds, different coping mechanisms and capacities for resilience.”⁵

This is a public health catastrophe, a failure of democracy and its ideals,” she explains. “The deaths of so many — the elderly, the infirm, local healthcare workers and first responders — is already everyday a shared trauma among us.”

We have been sustaining a level of anxiety and loss without an obvious end in sight, and it has been taxing on even the strongest of heart. And let’s be clear, there can be no normalization of this tragedy and trauma. There is *no*, “It is what it is.”

⁴ 1:16

⁵ <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/covid-19-coronavirus-collective-trauma-memorial-monument-history-994173/>

There are more 200,000 dead in the US, 1 million dead worldwide; The healthcare system has been overwhelmed; Mask wearing and social distancing have been politicized; The terrifying domino effect of economic chaos in our country and around the world, with increasing numbers of people unemployed, homeless and uninsured, has been devastating; and the fact is that COVID-19 has *not been* a great equalizer: its impact particularly devastating for communities of color, the poor and too many other disenfranchised communities in our midst, makes it worse.

The ongoing experience of COVID-19 is the foundation of trauma we have experienced this year, but it is only the first layer of compounding losses.

The second layer is that we find ourselves in the deeply overdue reckoning on racism and police brutality, which belies the 400 year-old collective trauma of slavery. In the last 6 months we have witnessed the killing of black men and women killed or shot at while living their lives. We say their names: Ahmed Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Jacob Blake. I am sickened when I think about it.

When I consider the Jewish collective trauma of anti-Semitism in America that still lives and breathes two years after the Tree of Life Massacre and the shooting in Poway, I feel the anxiety rise as well. The horrific attacks at the Jersey City Kosher Supermarket and the one on Chanukah in Monsey NY are just two brutal examples. In addition, the pushing out of Jewish activists in progressive spaces whether in city government or the ivory tower of academia, because of the complexity of Israel-Palestine conflict is worrisome at best.

For most of us this is the first time in our lifetime that doubling and tripling of efforts and time will not result in a work product that reflects the effort. And that's because there is a current reality beyond our control. Like other traumas involving loss, the limitations of the pandemic grip are encountered anew, every time we have tried to do something we used to be able to do thoughtlessly. And each time we are introduced to the loss all over again.

We have grown to expect to want the best, do our best and have the best. But the more effort we put in the more mediocre the results sometimes feel. We have

never encountered such a pervasive and persistent disabler in our lives. It's been humbling. There are no ideal scenarios in this time and space, only the best we can do.

This became obvious to me as lost sacred time markers and rituals became the third layer of disorientation and displacement. As a parent of a member of the now infamous Class of 2020, I received her teary phone call on March 12 that school was over, her senior year irrevocably altered. "It's not fair" she cried. "I know," I said. And then I cried.

My family wasn't alone of course. The graduations, the bnai mitzvah, the weddings, the funerals all experienced in ways *one of us would have wanted*. The adjustments, the alterations, the cancellations became dominos of loss and grief.

But my job was to say, "It would all be ok. We'll make it work." So we dressed up to watch the graduation on line, my daughter moved the tassel on her cap as we stood in our living room and we toasted her achievement.

I performed b'nai mitzvah in backyards, listening to grandparents recite the Torah blessings in glorious delayed cacophony.

I offered comfort in zoom shiva minyanim without hugs, but with multiple screens showing family and friends from all over the country.

After RH services last week I actually worried that when the time comes to resume some sense of pre-COVID normalcy, I won't remember how to do it.

These multilayered experiences of trauma and loss are all around us, and the grief we share is a profound expression of love for one another, our country, and the world.

And we also know, at least existentially, that we are not the first to suffer. After the destruction of the Second temple in Jerusalem our ancestors replaced sacrifices with study, prayer, and acts of loving kindness; after the Holocaust, Jewish families resurrected life in the second, third, and now fourth generation

with creativity, brilliance, agitation, and a profound sense of urgency to re-build out of the ashes.

In one of my favorite interpretations of Psalm 23, Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches that the most powerful action verse is: *Gam ki elech b'getzalmavet – lo ira'ra – ki atah imadi*. “Yay though I walk through the valley of death, I will not be afraid, For You are with me God.” Kushner teaches that it is no mistake that the verse says “*though I walk through*” the valley of death. For it might well have been rendered, “*though I get stuck in the valley of death,*” but it doesn’t. God *isn’t* there to prevent, protect, or to justify the challenges humanity will ultimately face; rather, God is there for comfort and strength, *when we are in the midst of such challenges*.

“The human soul is capable of astonishing resilience. Don’t be afraid of the future, not because life will be without suffering, or that good people will always get what they deserve, but because good people in difficult circumstances can come up with the spiritual and emotional resources to deal with what comes.”⁶

Trauma, suffering, and loss are valleys we walk through to something on the other side that *we simply don’t yet know. Yet we are not alone*.

And so, we must grieve the losses of this past year, the personal, the communal, and the global. Each of us has likely travelled the spiral staircase of grief like that Escher drawing where you cannot tell if the stairs are going up or down, and where they lead.

Kubler Ross’ stages of grief: *Denial – anger – bargaining – depression – acceptance* are not linear, in my experience, nor is there a single moment when grief is “over.”

But Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* reminds us that the will to move through a valley of dark shadows depends on seeing life as a quest for meaning. “We must retain the ability to choose our attitude; We must realize there will be suffering and it’s how We react to suffering that counts; There is power in

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2004/11/26/november-26-2004-harold-kushner/15271/>

purpose; The true test of character is in how we act; And human kindness can be found in the most surprising places.”⁷

These sentiments, while written in 1945 after Frankl survived the Holocaust, were embodied by two American heroes whom we lost this year: Rep. John Lewis who died in July, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who died last week.

They were of the same generation, from completely different backgrounds, but each was an ordinary person who saw the ways society was lost, and became legendary American warriors for justice and equity, compassion and empathy to build an America where “we the people” could be expanded exponentially to include *everyone*.

Both of them endured discrimination, loss, and trauma, and went on to live lives of meaning that made it possible for others to do so as well. Their loss is profound, and we might wonder who will fill their shoes? But each of them was like the person in the parable who said to the lost sojourner: “Let’s find a new way out together.”

In his letter to America shared after his death John Lewis wrote: “You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in your shoes, though decades and centuries before you. The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time...Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. ...let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”⁸

And just this week, my friend and colleague, Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, eulogizing the Justice reflected: “To be born into a world that doesn’t see you, that does not believe in your potential, that does not give you a path for opportunity, or education, and despite this, to be able to see beyond the world you are in, to imagine that something can be different,

⁷ <https://www.realtimperformance.com/5-lessons-from-viktor-frankls-book-mans-search-for-meaning/>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>

That is the job of a prophet. And it is the rare prophet who not only imagines a new world, but also makes that new world a reality, in her lifetime.”⁹

When a person dies, we say *zikhronam livrakha* – "may their memory be a blessing." We turn the memories of those we loved and admired, whether or not we knew them personally, into blessings, and the example of their lives into an ever-expanding view of the world and its challenges.

Today on Yom Kippur, we recognize our own mortality, and take note of all that have sacrificed these past 6 months. Let us grieve and weep for what we have lost, show up for those who need it most, and let us re-build the world we know is possible with the sacred values and vision that will help lighten the load we carry every day.

May goodness and steadfast love pursue us all the days of our life, and may we come to dwell in divine wholeness and holiness for our length of days.

Gmar Hatima Tovah – May we find our way out, together.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007356706/justice-ginsburg-rabbi-eulogy.html>