

Making Meaning Out of Loss (the 6th Stage of Grief)
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Kol Nidre 5781

“Rabbi,” began the text, “we are moving my mom out of her apartment into more acute assisted living. What do we do with the mezuzahs?” The easy response would be to text back the rules: if a Jew is moving in, you leave them. If not, you take them with you.” But Martin Buber’s words echoed in my mind: Hear the question behind the question. I sensed that this inquiry required more than a technical answer. So, I called.

“This must be hard for you,” I said. All I heard was a sigh and then, “Yeah. It really is. It means that we are all having to say goodbye to a place she inhabited. It means we are one step closer to her end.” And so, instead of speaking about mezuzahs, we spoke about loss, how to honor it, how we might move through it, and how we can integrate it into our lives.

Loss.

It is our common denominator, now more than ever. The hundreds of thousands of needless, senseless and unnecessary deaths are the most obvious. Then there is the economic loss: the loss of jobs and of personal agency; the loss of businesses, the hopes and dreams wrapped up in the materials that drive our economy. And there are the other, less dramatic, but still palpable losses. So

many things didn't occur the way we envisioned them: the B'nei Mitzvah, the graduation, the wedding, the vacation, reuniting with your best friends at summer camp, the time with our children or grandchildren who we see all too infrequently, even our first encounter with a new grandchild.

It's hard to say which loss is the worst, but there is a special sense of loss when only three of us stand at a graveside, masked and gloved, holding shovels with price tags still on them. We know that others watch on Zoom, but we have lost the ability to truly comfort mourners. Not being able to touch, to hug, to hold a hand, to lift a person in a chair as we dance around them. It is loss upon loss upon loss. Now, I know our people have been through worse, some of you have been through much worse. Still, the compounding losses pile on. Like Job, we want to look to the heavens to ask, "How much more, God? How much more?"

If you look behind me, you'll notice that our ark is empty, bare. On this one night of the year, that's how it's supposed to be. Tonight, when our tradition teaches that our lives hang in the balance, our Aron HaKodesh, the holy ark, is supposed to resemble another Aron, another container, a coffin. It's stark. It's sobering. But then, good ritual doesn't duck. We deny pleasures: eating, drinking, bathing, sex, even comfortable shoes. We dress, not so much in academic robes but in a kittel, the shroud in which we are buried. This day asks us to deal

with at least one of the two of Benjamin Franklin's certainties. And no, it's not taxes.

The medieval rabbis constructed this service of Kol Nidre to remind us that no one gets out of here alive. They knew hardship: marauding crusaders, torturing inquisitors, bubonic plague. But I think those rabbis went further. More than asking us to focus on the precariousness of the present, they asked us to look forward. *M'yom Kipurim Zeh* - from this Yom Yippur until *next* Yom Kippur. *Avinu Malkeinu*, an invitation to storm the bima as Akiva did some 2000 years ago pleading with God to help us and save us. And how did those rabbis answer their questions? With words of Torah "*U've'charta Chayim* - Choose Life!"

In 1969, Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler Ross published her seminal work: "On Death and Dying."¹ She found that those who were dying and those in mourning typically experienced five common stages. These included:

- Denial: shock and disbelief that the loss has occurred
- Anger: that someone we love is no longer here
- Bargaining: all the what-ifs and regrets
- Depression: sadness from the loss
- Acceptance: acknowledging the reality of the loss

¹ Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth, "On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families"

Not meaning to be prescriptive; not serving as a roadmap for tucking messy emotions into neat packages; these stages merely describe a general process. Years later, other psychologists noted two important things about these stages. The first is that they are not linear. One does not move in a straight line from Denial to Acceptance. Rather, like a circular staircase, we move backwards and forwards spending more time in one stage, less in another, with acceptance, as the poet writes, "flashing on and off like defective neon."² Second: it can be applied to any loss, not just death. And I think it's safe to say, as you watch this - I hope - from the comfort of your own home, that you, we, all of us, have experienced these stages over and over again over these many months.

As the losses compounded for me - beginning with Noa's Bat Mitzvah, then Elijah returning from school and onto Shai's non-graduation graduation in the new Wegman's parking lot, I kept asking, how much more? How often can my heart break, at what point will it just crack?

Enter David Kessler. David was Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' protege, partner and co-author. After the sudden death of his own son in 2016 of an accidental drug overdose, Dr. Kessler began thinking deeply about the five stages.

² Linda Pasten, "The Five Stages of Grief." <https://wordsoftheyear.com/2018/01/21/the-five-stages-of-grief-by-linda-pastan/>

For years, people thought that reaching acceptance was the goal. Check. Done. Move on. But through his own experiences both personal and professional, Dr. Kessler became aware of a sixth stage: meaning.

As he says, “This isn’t some arbitrary or mandatory step, but one that many people intuitively know to take and others will find helpful. In this sixth stage we acknowledge that although for most of us grief will lessen in intensity over time, it will never end.

But if we allow ourselves to move fully into this crucial and profound sixth stage, it will allow us to transform grief into something else, something rich and fulfilling. Through meaning we can find more than pain. Finding meaning in loss empowers us to find a path forward. Meaning helps us make sense of the grief.³ That is what our tradition, especially our mourning rituals, teaches us to do. **It’s why we light candles, buy memorial plaques, give tzedakah.** That is what this Day of Atonement and its emphasis on repair is all about. It’s why we donate food. It’s a day that says, “don’t duck! Instead, determine who you want to be and how you want to show up.”

A story (one you’ve probably heard before): Rabbi Judah, the greatest sage of his time died. Because of his stature, God gave him a choice. Where would he like to spend eternity: Heaven or Hell?

³ Kessler, David, “Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief.”

“I hadn’t given Hell much thought,” said Rabbi Judah. “Could I see it?”

Immediately he found himself in a gilded banquet hall, tables laden with delicacies. People stood around them and, with long handled spoons strapped to their arms, the people groped at the food but because they couldn’t bend at the elbow, they couldn’t get the food into their mouths. This WAS Hell.

“Show me heaven,” Rabbi Judah said to the Holy One.

Immediately he was in the same gilded banquet hall with the same laden tables. Again, people stood around with long handled spoons strapped to their arms. Yet this time, they were feeding each other. That was heaven.

The Holy One then turned to Rabbi Judah. “Nu? Where would you like to spend eternity, in Heaven or Hell?”

And Rabbi Judah answered, “Hell.”

“What!?” replied the Holy One.

“Why would you want to spend eternity there?”

“So that I can teach them how to make it into a better place.”

This is what it means to make meaning out of loss - to take the challenges life puts before us, to choose how we want to respond. We might not create Mothers Against Drunk Driving as Candice Lightner did after her daughter Cari was killed by a drunk driver. We might not be like Elie Weisel z’l who took his experiences of the Holocaust and became an international spokesperson for peace

and tolerance. But we might just find meaning by leaning into the loss - whatever that loss is - and creating something greater instead of trying to detach from it, even if that appears to be as simple as asking a rabbi what to do with the mezuzah on your mother's door or hand delivering the favors for a party that wasn't to your daughter's friends on the afternoon of her Bat Mitzvah.

When this pandemic began I instinctively reached for Viktor Frankl's cornerstone work, "Man's Search for Meaning⁴." A Jewish Austrian psychologist, who spent years in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl concluded that those who did best were those who never gave up the choice of how to respond. "We who have lived in concentration camps," he said, "can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." When we make the choice to do that, we can turn tragedy into an occasion for growth. We can make meaning out of loss.

Ultimately, this question of finding meaning out of loss all comes back to how we choose to answer a deep theological question, "How could an all-powerful and benevolent god allow all this pain and suffering to occur?"

⁴ Frankl, Viktor E. "Man's Search for Meaning."

I still find the reframing of this question by Rabbi Harold Kushner to be most instructive. “Don’t ask why. Only God knows why. Instead ask, ‘now that I am here, what am I doing to do about it. How am I going to respond?’” We don’t know why. We may never know. And if we could find out, we might not be able to handle it. But we can “choose our own way.”

This, I believe, is what the sixth stage of grief comes to answer. Instead of the passiveness of acceptance, finding meaning is an active answer. It’s the purpose of religion: to give us a path to follow instead of merely lying in wait or groping in the dark.

A final story and a final act to remind us that what we choose to do with our loss can give us a sense of both meaning and purpose to help us, as our Torah will state tomorrow, “to choose life so that we and our descendants may live.”

In a mother’s womb were twins. One asked the other, “Do you believe in life after this world?”

The second baby replied, “why of course. There has to be something after this world.”

“Nonsense,” said the first. “There is no life after this world. What would that life be? The umbilical cord supplies nutrition. Life after this would be impossible. The umbilical cord is too short. There can’t be a world after this one.”

The second baby held his ground. “I think there is something, and maybe it’s different than it is here. Maybe we’ll see each other there.”

The first baby replied, “If there is another world, no one has come back from there. Leaving here is the end of life, and after delivery there will be nowhere to go and nothing but darkness.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said the twin. “But certainly, we’ll see Mother and she’ll take care of us.”

“Mother?” the first baby guffawed. “You believe in a mother? An all-powerful intelligent being that makes all this happen? Where is she now?”

The second baby calmly and patiently tried to explain: “She is all around us. It is in her that we live. Without her there would not be a world.”

“Ha, I don’t see her, so it’s only logical that she doesn’t exist.”

To which the other replied, “Sometimes when you’re in silence you can hear her, you can perceive her. I believe there’s a reality after this world.”

None of us knows what comes next. All we can do is to be here now, in the gift that is called the present and to choose how we want to respond, choose what story we want to tell, choose to make these chapters meaningful. That will empower us to find a path forward. That will help us make sense of all this loss.

I invite you to digitally join me in an act of meaning, of placing our Torah scrolls back in our ark. May it serve as a reminder that we need not stare into an

empty void but instead, on this day of atonement, we can to choose how we want to live, certainly how we want to respond. That is our task on this day. May it be then, for you, a day filled with with meaning...

Let us rise.