

From Loss To Wisdom, From Gratitude To Joy

When I was just five years old I had my first experiences with loss.

My maternal grandmother, my bubbie Lakie, had come to live with us because she was dying of lung cancer. I was way too young to remember the details, but I remember the room that she stayed in, I remember loving having her with us in our home, and I remember finding it strange that she would never again be in "her room." As an infant and toddler, I am told (and have even fuzzier memories), we would regularly go to my maternal grandparents' apartment for Shabbat meals- so they were definitely a part of my everyday existence. A part of my experience that was suddenly, and strangely missing one day.

It turned out that five was not a great age for me. When I came home from my first day of Kindergarten, I can remember quite clearly, sitting down with my mom at our kitchen table. She handed me a stuffed animal, a small green alligator, and told me how much she loved me, and how proud of me she was for being in Kindergarten. And then she broke the news. My parents were getting a divorce. My second experience with loss.

Thankfully, the divorce was amicable (at least from what I knew, saw, and understood). I lived with my mom primarily and saw my dad on Wednesdays

and every other weekend. It was annoying at times, sad at times, and confusing at times, but it became normal. I don't really ever remember having a "whole" family unit at home.

Advancing a few years forward. My father had been dating someone quite seriously who he might eventually have married. She was very much a part of my life when I would go and visit him, as was her daughter and some of her extended family. And then, without warning, she was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. Her prognosis was terminal. She died when I was eight years old. And this loss I remember clearly. I was woken up in the middle of the night by the news and sat with my mother who had to begin to explain to an eight year old what death was really all about. She told me that it was okay to be sad. She reminded me that it was important to share my feelings. She explained to me that while the loss was permanent, people that we care about are always with us in our hearts whenever we remember them. She told me all of this- but I was still sad. It just did not seem fair. I was coming to understand, by the ripe old age of eight, that life was just not always fair.

A few years later, my bubbie Fagie, the grandparent that I knew the best, came to live with us. A small, regal, funny, and loving woman who wore here white hair up in a crown around her head. Bubbie Fagie was from the old country (as were most of my grandparents), coming from Hungary and

making her way to this country before the outbreak of the war. She had a third grade education, but was filled with wisdom. I loved her laugh. I loved her accent. I can still hear her voice.

She came to live with us after she suffered a stroke and could no longer live independently. She had fallen on the floor of her apartment and had been lying there for over twenty four hours. When her children, including my father, finally realized something was wrong, they broke down the door to rescue her. The first thing that she said to her son, my father, "the doctor" who was an endless source of pride for her, was: "Oy, Myron, I didn't mean to take you from work." When she came to live with us, I often reveled in playing the role of "helper." Thinking I was like a speech therapist, I used to try to get her to speak by asking her to read off of my "Mr. Salty" Pretzel box when I was having a snack. How proud I was when I could get her to say a few words! We watched T.V. together, had dinner together, and spent everyday quality time together. I was home with her when she was dying. I was home with her when she died. I was frightened. I was so deeply sad. I literally ran and hid in that moment. I didn't like this thing that was called "loss" that was becoming all too familiar. I was eleven.

And then, less than a year later, came the most extreme blow. The one that I have spoken about from this bima before. I was in the middle of seventh

grade. My mom had not been feeling well, but we didn't think too much of it. I had a half day in school that day so I woke up, decided to let my mom sleep in because she seemed to have a cold, and walked to school. Walking home that afternoon I had no idea that my life was about to be changed forever. Walking into my house to discover that my mom had died, suddenly and without warning, was a horribly painful, unfair, and devastating blow from which I sometimes wonder how I recovered.

And yet. And yet, I did recover. I did manage to make it through adolescence relatively unscathed. And somehow, in a strange and perhaps counterintuitive way, I have come to understand that this series of losses that I experienced as a child filled me with insight, and an appreciation for all of life's blessings amidst life's fragility. Somehow, from a very young age, I have had a fairly clear sense of what was truly important in life, and what was not.

I know that I am certainly not alone in experiencing a challenging childhood. Compared to many children on this earth, I had it relatively easy. Yes, I suffered loss, but I was fed, loved, nurtured and cared for along the way. Many are not so lucky. And while no child would actively choose suffering, loss, and tragedy, and while suffering is not something that anyone looks forward to, I have come to meet many people over the years, with stories

similar to mine, who also have a strange sense of appreciation for the values that were imprinted in their wounded hearts between the scars of their losses.

Throughout my rabbinate, I have come to meet many people who have faced hardships, trauma, or death, as children, and as adults, who have not only found their way through to the other end grieving their loss, but have managed to do so with a sense of clarity about the values, priorities and beliefs which ground them each and every day.

A few weeks ago we commemorated the eighteenth anniversary of 9-11. A day that forever changed our region, our society, our world, and, to a certain extent, the lives of everyone in our country. In my weekly email I noted the significance of the number 18, as a sign of life, *chai*, and the irony of commemorating such a horrific, incomprehensible loss, with the language of "life." And yet as I considered this somewhat strange anniversary I realized that this too was a reminder to seek clarity of values amidst our national tragedy. How have we lived in the long shadow of death that has followed our country and our world over the past eighteen years? I asked. How have we lived as individuals? How have we lived as Americans? How have we lived as human beings? How have we held onto the values which came out of our experiencing a national tragedy? A sense of unity, of

purpose, or gratitude towards one another, of admiration for the small and large acts of kindness and heroism -- have they been clarified and amplified, or muddied and muted?

Loss, be it personal or national, has the potential to offer us the gift of clarity.

I am in the middle of reading the first Oral History of that defining day. Entitled, *The Only Plane in The Sky: An Oral History of 9-11*, it is filled with thousands of first-hand reflections from September 11th and the days that immediately followed. There is one narrative, in particular, that struck me as exemplifying the type of clarity through loss and tragedy of which I am speaking. It is a reflection from a FDNY firefighter named Paul Somin and a woman he saved named Genelle Guzman, who worked as an office assistant the Port Authority North Tower on the 64th floor. It turns out that she was the last survivor to be rescued. What follows is some of their reflection from those moments, early on the second day of search and rescue, as firefighters were looking for survivors through the 1.8 million tons of wreckage:

Genelle Guzman:

Everyone in my family was in mourning already. They were up all night. They didn't even entertain the thought that I had made it after the collapse. They went through a moment of thinking I was dead and they were not going to see me again. And, as the Bible says, sadness comes at night, but joy comes in the morning. That's what happened to my family. They were sad at night, and the joy waiting until the morning.

Paul Somin:

We started climbing up. It was a crazy climb. Everything was on fire. The steel was all hot. We got to about the 15th floor of the building where we knew that Jonas and those guys survived and we started to search. First, we found a couple of firemen dead. We did not take the time at that point to try to extricate them because we were looking for people who were alive. There was an elevator shaft up there and at that point I started yelling in the elevator shaft and heard someone answer me back...I realized we found somebody....

We got everybody quiet. We tried to pinpoint her voice. Billy Esposito and I climbed down two more floors and realized her voice was getting fainter. We couldn't hear it anymore. We started to climb up and up. Suddenly, I could hear her a lot better. She said: "Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" I assured her, "I'm not going to leave you," At that point, I said: "Tell me your name." She said, "My name is Ganelle." We were literally standing on top of her, but we couldn't find her. I said to her, "Can you stick your hand or anything out?" Out of the rubble came her hand. Immediately I grabbed it- now we had her. Everyone was fired up. This is what we were waiting for. Everyone was exhilarated.

Genelle Guzman: *Someone grabbed my hand, they called me by my name and said: Genelle, I got you. My name is Paul." The person had my hand, and I knew I was not dreaming....*

Paul Somin: *Away she went (in the ambulance). In our minds we we're thinking. Now we're going to start finding other people. We started to climb out onto the pile, and we started finding more dead fireman. As it would turn out, she was the last survivor of the World Trade Center.*

Genelle Guzman: *I was praying for 27 hours. Being the last survivor- it was a huge thing. I felt totally different. When I came out of that rubble, I felt a total conviction. From there I knew that the Holy Spirit was working in me and had changed my life. Since that day, I've been serving the Lord.*

After I came out of the hospital in November, I went to the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church. I got baptized. I got married to my boyfriend. I've been living the Christian life since. I had two kids after that marriage and the Lord has been good to me. (Graff, The Only Plane In The Sky, 394-396)

It should not take loss to create clarity. It should not take challenging childhood experiences, adult encounters with trauma and loss, or encounters with national tragedy on the scale of September 11th, to remind us of what is truly important in life; to remind us to put our loved ones, our values, our beliefs, front and center.

It shouldn't..... but it often does.

That message, that life is ever so fragile, that we are mere mortals, and that everything as we know it could change in an instant, is the message of Yom Kippur. Getting our lives in order, finding clarity, and living with purpose- these are the themes of this holiday and this season. We dress in white to remind us of the burial shrouds in which we will all be buried one day. We fast to remind us, in part, of our mortality. And if we emerge from yet another year intact, and if we are blessed enough to have been given a second chance at life this year, we are reminded, from the moment that we put that first nail in our fragile Sukkah and beyond, that there are no guarantees in this life. Even after we make it through Yom Kippur, we are being given the message that the Sukkah -- that is, our lives -- could fall

down at any second. Sukkot reminds us that we had better learn to proceed with care, forethought, and a sense of gratitude for all that we have been given. This is the wisdom that comes along with Yom Kippur and the days that immediately follow.

As Rabbi Alan Lew, in his book, "This is Real, And You Are Completely Unprepared," once wrote:

We need a taste of this emptiness, to give us a sense of what will go with us, what will endure as we make this great crossing. What is important? What is at the core of our life?... what are we clinging to that isn't important, that won't endure, that isn't worthy?

What do we want to live on? Our money, our pride? Our anger, our selfishness? If not, we better let go of them now, before they become what we are, what we will always be in that great emptiness for which we are bound? We taste death on Yom Kippur to remind us of what we must hold on to, and what we must let go of, of who we are, and where we come from...

He continued:

Life is a series of crushing disappointments...We suffer broken relationships with our parents or our children. A close friendship goes bad or simply withers from distance or neglect.

We suffer the death of those who are close to us and the diminishment of our own capacities through illness or through the simple advancement of time and age.

Winning? Come on. How can we talk about winning when the overwhelming first-person biological reality of our experience as human beings is that from our twenties forward, we are unmistakably, definitely losing? Except, of course, for one small detail. There is in fact one human capacity that actually increases, that grows stronger and deeper as we grow older, and that is wisdom.

And the reason wisdom increases as we age is that the source of all wisdom is precisely our death. As we approach death, we approach wisdom. 224

As we approach death, we approach wisdom.

As a twelve year old boy I approached death, quite literally, even if it was not my own, and it graced me, ever so painfully, with wisdom. As the last survivor of the collapse of the twin towers, Genelle Guzman approached death and emerged with insight and a clarity of purpose.

It does not always work this way. I do not mean to simplify or dismiss the challenges of recovery from trauma of any sort. Clarify is not always gained so easily. What I mean to say is that recovery from trauma **can** work this way. Facing death, loss, and tragedy, **can** lead to wisdom. Living our lives with a Yom Kippur state of mind, **can** lead to wisdom and perhaps even to faith. *That is why* death and loss are the central metaphors of this day. *That is what we are being asked to remember*, and act upon, as we gather here in this sacred, broken, and frightening space. *That is what we are being asked to remember* each and every day that follows, until we gather back here again, *some of us*, next Yom Kippur.

And once we confront this reality. Once we are brave enough to come face to face with loss, with suffering, with an awareness that life is ever so precious, then we may not only able to clarify our values and our priorities;

but we may also be able to let go of anger and of pain; we may also be able to forgive, and move forward into the unknown that we have now come to accept.

In the book that I referenced earlier written by Rabbi Alan Lew (z'l), there is a story involving two siblings, an elderly simple woman from the country, and her cowboy brother who worked at the local rodeo, who wore a big Stetson hat and belt buckle the size of a football, and who seemed larger than life. The woman is in hospice, nearing the end of her life, and the brother comes to see her for a few weeks. Only this was the first time that they had spoken in nearly three decades. Sitting with the local chaplain, the brother began to reveal the following story about his and his sister's life.

...They had been quite poor as small children-dirt poor in fact- and after their mother died, their father neglected them, abused them, and finally abandoned them altogether. They had been placed into foster homes, one nightmare after another. And during those years he had been mean to his sister- very mean. In fact, he had abused her and hurt her very badly, and when they grew up, they drifted apart and became estranged from each other. Now that she was dying, he felt terrible about it. After this conversation, [he went] into his sister's room and...asked her for forgiveness. He told her that he realized that he had treated her very badly and that he was very, very, sorry, and he begged her to forgive him.

His sister was quiet for a while, and then, speaking with great difficulty, as she was very close to death, she said: "The people here feed me. The people here keep me clean. I'm surrounded by love. I have everything I need. There's no blame."

When this big cowboy with the Stetson hat and belt buckle as big as a

football heard those words, he dissolved. His face was consumed first with an infinite sadness, then with wonder and amazement, until finally it looked like the face of an innocent child. He was transformed by his sister's forgiveness. In a moment, in an instant, he had been relieved of a lifetime's pain. There's no blame, his sister said, because she was surrounded by love and had everything she needed, and she understood very well that she would only imprison herself if she continued to harbor anger and resentment toward her brother. She understood that anger can never produce love. Only love can produce love. Only compassion can free us from the prison of our own anger, the compassion we feel for others, and the compassion we feel from them, the compassion we feel for ourselves.

And it took a great deal for her to be able to understand all that. It took the love, the sense of having her needs provided for. ***But also, I think, it took the fact that she knew she was dying and needed to free her soul from its earthly binds;*** I don't think she could have let go without this. Letting go of our anger and the leverage we imagine it gives us against others is one of the hardest things a human being can do...

Who will live and who will die? None of us knows what will happen this year. Most of us will live, but some of us will die, and it might be me and it might be you. But whether we live or we die, we will only have one soul to do it with, one precious soul to inhabit for one brief moment on this mortal coil. Why have we chosen to torment this soul, to fill it with anger, and hatred, to hold on to the hot coal of self-righteousness with all our might, in the foolish hope that it might someday hurt the person we imagine to be our enemy, while all the while it's only hurting us, while all the while it is our own soul- the only soul we have- that is writing in torment. What have we been thinking of?

*Loss leads to wisdom (**Pause**) and wisdom can lead to forgiveness.*

*Tragedy begets clarity. (**Pause**) And clarity can lead to a life of priorities and purpose.*

This is a difficult day- physically and spiritually. But it also has the potential to be an incredibly uplifting day. Indeed in the Mishnah, (Taanit 4:8) Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught that there were no days of greater joy than Yom Kippur, when the daughters of Israel would come out dancing into the vineyards. Is it really possible, we wonder, that *this* day, this serious, somber, and frightening day should somehow be joyous, should somehow be a day of celebration and of gratitude?

The answer depends entirely on whether or not we are brave enough to live in the way that this moment demands.

We have been granted another tomorrow.

We have been granted an opportunity to live, an opportunity to grow, an opportunity to forgive, to let go, to begin again.

We have come through to the other side of this year and have been granted an opportunity for a new day- something that is by no means a guaranteed certainty.

What could be more joyous than that? *Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*