

Living With Loss

So much has been lost over the past six months. There are days when the loss is so great, is so overwhelming, is so unimaginable, that we have trouble going about the new reality of our daily lives. As one of my mentors said to me nearly six months ago, as we were just entering the coronavirus crisis, "It is a wonder that we accomplish anything on a given day."

Socially, we have lost the ability to gather in the ways that we used to -- in synagogue, at sporting events, at the movies, in restaurants, at concerts, at family reunions, birthdays, anniversaries or bnei mitzvah. We wonder to ourselves: Will those things ever return? Will we ever gather in the same way again?

Parents have lost the ability to send our kids to school without worry and fear: fear that our kids will get sick, that the schools will shut down again, that our children will be forced back into learning in a way that may be physically safe, but is emotionally damaging.

As Americans, many of us fear and worry that we have, as a nation, lost our way. Irrespective of political party or beliefs, irrespective of how you plan to

vote in this upcoming election, I know that many of us wonder what has happened to the America that we thought we understood, to the American dream and vision that we thought existed. *This too is a loss.*

And as individuals, so, so many have lost loved ones to this terrible illness that is rapidly tearing its way through the world, with over 980,000 deaths worldwide as I write this. Not to mention the many individuals who may have survived Covid-19, but who may have residual health challenges for the remainder of their lives. The United States has now surpassed seven million cases. These numbers are unfathomable.

We are moments away from *Yizkor*- the service that brings us together to remember those who we have lost. This is our prescribed opportunity to support one another in community, and to pledge to engage in acts of *tzedakah* in memory of those who came before us.

And even in this, even during our service dedicated to commemorating loss, we are experiencing a different kind of loss, as we are unable to stand side by side with family, with friends, and with members of our Torat El community.

What do we do when we are surrounded by inescapable pain and suffering?
What do we do when we are faced with such staggering personal, national,
and global loss? How are we to respond? How are we to live?

Before we immerse ourselves in the yizkor service, I want to offer four
suggestions for how to answer these seemingly impossible questions:

#1: Search For Meaning.

In his book, *Making Loss Matter*, Rabbi David Wolpe points out that often,
along with loss, comes wisdom, *if* we are open to receiving it. Rabbi Wolpe
points out that there is only one time in the Torah that God speaks directly
to Aaron, only one time when Aaron is able to hear the divine voice of God.
When does this happen? Only after Aaron suffers the greatest loss of his
life: the sudden death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu.

Wolpe explains:

*"Through his pain [Aaron] can hear something that, until this moment,
was too muffled, too distant. Through loss, Aaron hears the voice of
God."*

What wisdom can we learn from the losses that we are all experiencing?
What blessings can we discover, what purpose can we discern, what
meaning can we glean from these overwhelming losses? How can we, in
these painful moments, hear the voice of God?

Rabbi Wolpe correctly points out, "*Living takes courage and courage takes faith.*" It takes courage to live through loss, it takes courage to learn amidst loss, but it also takes trust, it also takes faith: in God, in humanity, and in ourselves.

My friends, if we are lucky, we will survive this moment of global crisis. We will come out on the other side of these losses. But whether or not we will be able to wring any meaning, insight, and wisdom from this experience; whether we will be able to recognize God's presence amidst the remains of all that has been lost -- this is up to each one of us.

#2: Remember to Love Deeply, taking no one and nothing for granted.

The minute we allow ourselves to love another, we risk pain. When we are open, and vulnerable, we unavoidably risk pain, risk suffering, and risk loss.

Parents who are blessed to have children risk these children being hurt, risk having to watch them suffer, or worse. Partners who choose to spend their lives together risk the potential for rocky roads, risk the deterioration of the partnership, and risk the heartbreak that comes with a partner's death.

But closing ourselves off from loving because we are afraid of these risks and afraid of loss is not really living at all. Loss is a natural and inevitable part of living. If we allow our fear of loss to guide our lives, we risk not really living at all. Without love and openness and vulnerability, we are not living. Rather, we are merely existing.

Just this past Shabbat in a NYTimes OpEd written by Amitha Kalachandrain entitled: "How Can We Bear This Much Loss," the author sums up the challenge posed to us at this time: we must try to "accept the tragedy and pain...as part of a life well lived, and well loved, and treat our memories of our past 'normal' as pathways to purpose as we move forward..." She goes on, "As difficult as it is now, in the midst of a pandemic, it is possible -- in fact probable -- that after this cycle of pain we feel as individuals and collectively that we might emerge with a greater understanding of ourselves, faith, and our purpose."

It is true that our hearts will break. It is true that living with love means eventually having to face pain and loss. But, it is also true, as the Kotzker Rebbe once taught, that there is nothing so whole as a broken heart. It is the pain, the cracks, the loss, that remind us to live and love with our whole hearts each and every day.

#3: Live With An Open Heart.

Rabbi Ariyeh Levin, the holy sage of Jerusalem, once noted that:

*"Every man is in a prison of his own self. He cannot leave by going out of the house, but only through the door of the heart. And to make an opening for himself in his own heart- that anyone can do, even a prisoner behind bars. And then he will truly be spiritually free."*¹

During this strange and challenging time, we may not be able to open our homes to one another. We may not be able to open our offices and our schools in the ways we once did. We may not be able to open our restaurants, our museums, our theaters, and our stadiums the way we wish we could. And we may not be able to open our synagogue building to welcome our family of families.

¹ Wolpe, 46

But, each of us *can* open our hearts. We can open our hearts to one another, we can open our hearts to our families, our friends, our neighbors, and even the strangers whose eyes we see peeking out from above their masks.

Don't wait until tomorrow, teaches Yom Kippur, to tell a loved one how much you care about them. Hug those who it is safe to hug, give a friendly greeting to those who you encounter on the screen or six feet away. Look into the eyes of people you encounter and wish them well. Let them know that you see them. Reach out to friends, and family, and co-workers, and classmates who you are unable to see in person, and let them know you care. Open your hearts to the blessing and privilege that is being a part of the one human family. Because letting someone know that you care, letting someone know that you see them, and letting someone into your heart, is something that can not only boost them, but it can boost you as well, allowing you to be spiritually and emotionally free.

And #4: Do not become indifferent to those in need.

I have always found it somewhat odd that it is the context of yizkor that we "pledge to do acts of charity for the sake of the souls of our loved ones."

Why is it that, in this particular moment, confronted with our own personal loss, we immediately pledge to do for others?

Perhaps what this framing, the message at the core of this ritual, is teaching us is that it is *precisely* when we are facing our own sense of loss that we must consider others who are in need. Not only does this remind us that we are not alone in our suffering, but it reminds us that it is through our responsibility towards others that we can discover healing. Through consideration of the vulnerable and the needy in this moment, we are given the opportunity to transform our loss and our pain into something purposeful and sacred.

My friends, I know this is all so incredibly hard. Some of us have become numb to the loss. Some of us don't even want to think about it. But all of us have experienced loss this year, in ways both large and small.

But at the same time, we have been together. We have been together, you and I, during weekday and Shabbat services that we wish were in person, during classes and meetings and conversations that we wish were in happening across a shared table, and during "Shabbat in the Lot" experiences that, while novel and entertaining and powerful in their own ways, were also strange and sad.

We have been together, you and I, on hospital visits by phone or facetime, delivering end of life prayers through gadgets, with a nurse silently holding the phone or ipad as family members pray with, and say goodbye to, dying loved one over a screen. We have been together, you and I, during Covid funerals, when friends and family members could not be present, when phones had to suffice to connect, when we could not even bury or mourn our loved ones with the traditional rituals and customs and rhythms. Most personally, Jane-Rachel, our children and I thank you all for being together with us, with love and comfort and care, in spirit and over zoom, as our family sat shiva for my mother-in-law, Joan Sanow, who died on the first day of Pesach from Covid-19, taken from us too early and too quickly.

In all of these instances, while we may not have always been physically together in the ways we expected or wanted or needed, we were blessed to at least connect in some way -- to speak by phone, to see one another via computer, to wave from a safe distance -- and to realize that, even in these moments of physical separation, we are not alone.

Yes, there has been so much loss and loneliness. But through it all, my friends, we have miraculously found ways to be **together**. Even now in this moment, even though I can't see your faces, I can feel your presence, and I

know that we are together. There are so many ways our community members have adapted and adjusted and been there for one another. This is what it means to be a synagogue, a family of families, a community building relationships.

As Kalachandrain points out in Saturday's OpEd: "*The word 'healing' is derived from the word 'whole.' Healing, then is a return to wholeness, not a return to 'sameness.'"* As we enter into this new Jewish year, filled with uncertainty, we all know that things are not the same, and perhaps they never will be again. But as we prepare to say yizkor for our loved ones and for all that we have lost, let us remember that ***all is not lost***. We are still here. We are each, so blessed, to still be here. So let us remember to wrestle meaning from each new day we are granted, let us remember to love deeply, to live with an open heart, and to be living embodiments of God's presence in this world by never being indifferent to the plight of those who are vulnerable and in need. Because then, maybe, just maybe, we can return to wholeness, and give the precious gift of our living during ***co-vid---*** ***-the ka-vod***, *the honor*, that it deserves.

Yehe Zicronam Barukh- May the memory of all who we have lost to Covid-19, and the memories of all our loved ones who we honor at this most sacred moment, be for a blessing.