

Connecting All Your Dots: Moving through Unresolved Grief

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I

To Rabbi Mordechai Gafni I owe the following insight: the torah reading for the traditional second day of Rosh Hashanah speaks of the tears shed by Ishmael, Abraham's other son, and Hagar, his common law wife. The traditional Haftarah reading for Rosh Hashanah speaks of the tears shed by Channah, the mother of the prophet Samuel. These sacred readings from the Hebrew bible share a common theme: the shedding of tears. Why would our sages specifically pick texts that speak of tears? Tears have a redemptive quality. Tears help us heal from the wounds of life.

Today is Yom Kippur. On this day, we let our tears flow. On this day, we surrender all our pretenses. We strive to be honest with ourselves and with each other.

II

Several years ago, actress Anne Heche suffered a nervous breakdown. After her recovery she said, "To me, the difference between sanity and insanity is that insanity means that you can't connect the dots of your life."

On this Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, we endeavor to make sense out of our lives. We strive to know our place in the greater scheme of things. We seek to understand and to connect all our dots.

III

In order to pull all our dots together we must talk about loss. We all live with loss. We all struggle with issues around loss. Far, far more than we consciously realize, loss shapes

and influences the course of our lives.

By loss, I refer not only to the loss of a loved one through death. I mean what acclaimed psychoanalyst Judith Viorst calls necessary losses, "The universal, unavoidable, inexorable losses that are a fact of life and growing up."

Viorst writes, "My youngest son is waiting to hear from the college of his choice. He'll be leaving home. My mother, my sister, too many dear friends are dead. I'm taking calcium pills to save my middle-aged bones from osteoporosis. I'm living on lean cuisine in a last-ditch effort to defeat my middle-aged spread. And although my husband and I have maintained our imperfect connection for 25 rich full years, the bombs of divorce and widowhood are falling all around us."

There is no living without loss because these are necessary losses. And there are others. Viorst continues, "We lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety –and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal."

IV

Some of us have spent almost our entire lives desperately trying to escape from the inescapable pain of our unresolved losses.

Through one psychic defense or another, we push away, we block the painful feelings that are there. We engage in all sorts of compulsions and self-destructive behaviors to numb ourselves from having to feel the pain within.

Nevertheless, the symptoms of unresolved grief spill out: have you ever exploded in a frightful rage for no explicable reason? Have you woken up depressed and had no clue as to the reason why? Do you find yourself behaving unreasonably critical of someone you know? All these behaviors may be the voice of unresolved grief within you.

We cannot make our losses go away. We cannot heal from unresolved grief by trying to undo or redo our past. Nor does time heal all wounds. Like a broken bone, grief requires proper attention in order to heal properly [Martin]. It is a myth to think that anyone can "move on" from loss simply by being strong or keeping busy. We don't "move on" from grief. We can only "move through."

Unresolved grief hangs around. It festers and pesters. Wanting to be acknowledged for what it is, grief constantly knocks on our door. Left unresolved, grief can become our state of being, our character style, stealing away our present and our future.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen writes, "...many people do not know how to grieve and heal their losses. This makes it hard to find the courage to participate fully in life. At some deep level, it may make us unwilling to be openhearted or present, to become attached or intimate...we may need to live life at a distance...we may not be able to risk having anything that really matters to us or allow ourselves...to care or be cared about..."

V

In order to experience healing and peace from our necessary losses, we must acknowledge their reality and come to terms with them. Our losses must be grieved.

What does it mean to grieve? It means we must push ourselves to feel our pain, to accept our sorrow, to actively adapt to the loss, to live past it. The capacity to grieve is one of the most important life skills to master. For only when we give ourselves permission to truly mourn do we give ourselves permission to truly heal.

Many of us are afraid that the hurt within will overwhelm and consume us if we truly allow ourselves to feel it. This is not true. The shedding of tears is our human psyche's way to recover from loss. When we resolve to tolerate the deep sadness that loss engenders, our sorrow empties out and we gradually begin to live and love and laugh again.

Our American culture isn't much help with this grief process. The public expression of grief scares us. As a result, society tries to rush us through grief -- not to help the one who grieves -- but to help others feel less uncomfortable about the reality of mortality. Of course, this makes it even harder for all of us to face our true feelings.

One year after 9/11, those who lost a loved one are beginning to hear the familiar refrain: it's time to move on, it's time to get on with your life, you've got to pull yourself together.

We must work against our society's pressure to rush a mourner's grief, either yours or someone else's. All of us know how long it takes to heal a broken arm. We ought not to be surprised that it will take a considerable length of time to mend a broken heart [Martin]!

Rather than try to fix or take away a mourner's grief due to our own uncomfortableness with it, we need to give permission to the bereaved in our midst to be true to their feelings even in our presence: it's okay to feel sad and lonely, it's okay to feel angry or want to cry.

Dealing with our necessary losses takes plenty of courage. The inspiration to do so derives from our awareness of "how inextricably our losses are linked to growth"[Viorst]. For we "cannot become separate people, responsible people, connected people, reflective

people without some losing and leaving and letting go" [Viorst].

Of course, all of us would gladly forego the gain of loss if we could also forego the loss itself. After the death of his young son from progeria, Rabbi Harold Kushner, famed author of When Bad Things Happen To Good People, wrote, "I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back.

If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of my experiences, and be what I was 15 years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy...but I cannot choose."

Each and every one of us in this sanctuary right now has some loss for which we need to grieve. The choices before us are: to live dead, to live crippled, or to adapt and to grow [Viorst]. On this Yom Kippur day, let us choose to grow! Let us accept the painful reality and finality of our losses. Let us stop our grief from robbing us of the happiness and joy that is still available to us.

It's unresolved grief that frustrates you from making sense of your life.

It's unresolved grief that gets in your way of finding your place in the greater scheme of things.

It's unresolved grief that stands in your way of connecting all your dots.

VII

Now can you see what a blessing Yom Kippur is? This day is a window of opportunity, a sacred opportunity to heal from our necessary losses. As the metaphoric gates of heaven close at nightfall tonight, let us get closure on the burdens we have carried within our hearts for far too long.

By sundown tonight, by the time of the closing of the gates, let us resolve to mourn our necessary losses, to let go of the past, to bravely integrate our sorrows into who we are and who we can still become.

For someone new yearns to be born within us.

For someone new yearns to be born within you!

Thank you and good yontov.