

In the early days of quarantine, a beautiful video appeared online by the brilliant relationship expert, Esther Perel, in which she encourages us to view this time that we are living through in the lens of mourning and loss. She writes:



“I think we are, many of us, experiencing a deep sense of anxiety. It’s not just about the physical death. I think it’s also the death or the loss of the world that we’ve known. The

loss of a sense of predictable future. Life is lived in the details. So when people mourn, or grieve, or experience losses, and they say, I had this trip planned, I had this talk planned, I had this date planned, you don’t know the meaning behind the event. One person just says it was a date. And you think, oh, a date. But behind that date may be years of loneliness that were finally, hopefully, maybe going to change. And that’s what people are mourning. They’re not just mourning the event. They’re experiencing the grief over what that event meant or means for them.”<sup>1</sup>

Every one of us is, to some degree, a mourner at this particular moment. There are, sadly, among our congregation those who have actually lost loved ones - friends, relatives, many taken mercilessly before their time. And adding on to the experience of loss are the particular restrictions surrounding the ways in which our loved ones are dying. To conceive of the ones we love, who held us and raised us, whose comforting touch was a balm in our moment of fever... to imagine them dying alone in a hospital or nursing home, unable to be held in their final moments adds untold layers of pain to the already unbearable. To mourn for our loved ones in a moment when funerals are primarily held through this maddening God-send of Zoom, to be prevented from giving or relieving the necessary and healing comfort of a hug, we are simply in a moment where nothing feels right or adequate. And we have the benefit of living in a region that has, thus far, been spared the worst and most widespread impact. I pray that we do all of the right things to continue to protect our community as much as possible.

But mourning and grief are not confined to the realm of physical loss of loved ones. As Esther Perel has pointed out, we are also grieving all of the moments and experiences that were suddenly, and without warning, taken from us over the months of quarantine. My heart goes out to every student in a final year of school, whether preschool or grade school, our high school seniors and graduating college students. The culminating experiences associated with these moments take on so much meaning and are the focus of

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1. Esther Perel, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/opinion/esther-perel-coronavirus.html>

our hard work and determination, and to watch them slip through our fingers is a cruel kind of pain.

Our community is filled with people whose life's work and calling is simply not possible in the world of social distancing, and those who are forced to do their best, despite knowing that the current restrictions make it impossible to actually do their best work. Our educators, medical professionals and essential workers of every kind must know, and we must tell them explicitly, how deeply we appreciate their heroic efforts. We are doing the very best that we can here at Temple Isaiah, but I have to be honest that I much prefer to be the rabbi to human beings in real time and space than a disembodied head on a video screen, working extra hard in order to make a fraction of the connection. Don't get me wrong. I fully recognize the impact that hundreds of hours of online classes, prayer services, meetings, phone calls and informal gatherings have made within our congregation over the last six months. But I deeply, painfully yearn for the moment when we can sit around a table, gather in the sanctuary or simply offer a handshake or a hug, share an oneg table or a bagel brunch. I miss you so much, we all do.

As Perel correctly tells us, so much of this mourning is connected to hopes, expectations and dreams that appear to slip out of our hands. I am in awe of the bar and bat mitzvah students (alongside their parents and families), the wedding couples, new parents of babies I've named and individuals approaching the tremendous moment of becoming a Jew by choice. Virtually all of these life-cycle celebrations that I've officiated over the past months were planned long before this pandemic. That this moment of creativity and resilience is inspiring is beyond doubt. Joy and celebration will not be the victims of this virus. However, it would be incorrect to ignore the attendant sense of unfair loss that every person planning a simcha in these months as well as the coming months (into the unforeseen future) is feeling. Anger, frustration, anxiety and sadness are all appropriate responses to the moment we are in. It is the very definition of unfair, and there's not much to do but name it.

I could go on with this depressing tale of woe, but our time is short, and there is only so much wallowing that we ought to allow ourselves. Rather, coming from the context of mourning, I would like to offer some advice that I have been giving to individuals and families experiencing the most profound forms of grief over the years of my rabbinate. I think it is advice that we all, myself included, could use right now.

In this time of added stress, deep grief and loss, it is important to try, with every ounce of energy left in your depleted reserves, to be kinder and gentler than necessary. Be kind to one another. Try to hold back the biting remark, the unhelpful word of criticism. Family systems, communities and even nations go through moments of trauma when the almost natural reaction is to take out our anger on those who are the easiest targets - people who already love us. People who we believe will continue to love us even after we've shown our least attractive selves. Perhaps our outburst will be met with more compassion when

the person we direct it towards knows a little bit about the pain we are going through. But, no. If we can muster the ability to be kinder than necessary, to ask ourselves the key questions before giving “advice” - Is this going to be helpful or harmful? Is it absolutely necessary that I say this thing out loud? Would I want someone to tell me this if the roles were reversed? - to ask these questions BEFORE opening our mouths in criticism is of tremendous value.

But it is not only those that we love that we turn this anger on in moments of elevated stress. We are a nation of raw nerve endings. There is an unspoken anxiety owing to the confluence of factors - of which COVID-19 is only one - which has made this nation not just a powderkeg, but an unstable munitions depot situated in between a fireworks warehouse and a match factory! The absolute inability of people to hear one another, to try to understand the experience of the other, even when it is profoundly different than one’s own experience, does not bode well for a nation in need of repair and the hard work that will be necessary in order to simply survive. And so, I implore you - be kinder than necessary. Try to take a deep breath before reacting to the environment around you. It is almost impossible to know with certainty the burden that the person before you is carrying - and many of the most profound of burdens show no immediately observable markers. Just be kind.

And if we ought to bring an added measure of kindness to our family, our friends, and our neighbors - familiar or stranger - then the single most important thing that we can do which will make a difference right now is to be kinder than necessary to yourself!

Mourners often say to me “I know I’m supposed to be feeling...fill in the blank.” Or, “Everyone says that I should...” Or, “Rabbi, I know that Jewish law tells me that I have to...” When I have these conversations with a newly bereaved friend, I will pause to correct their interpretation. Jewish tradition, in its wisdom, has termed the period of time from the death of a loved one until the mourners leave from the cemetery as Aninut, the immediate period of raw grief. This person, termed an Onen, has absolutely no responsibilities, and no one can make demands or expectations of that individual - essentially, not even God, as the Onen is not even held responsible for saying any of the regular prayers. The wisdom in this is to give the individual in the initial shock of loss the space and support to pay attention to their feelings and to act on those without apology or criticism. They need this time to process the loss, and it is our responsibility as a community to enable them to do just that - whatever the structure.

There are, within our midst, those who are in the state of Aninut as a result of the current situation - and for some, we might be stuck in that place. With an actual death, there will be a funeral, and the wisdom of the Jewish tradition of moving as quickly as possible towards burial is, in part, to help the mourner progress past the state of being an Onen. However, this is not always possible, and for some initial grief lasts for a long time, even forever.

In the structure of Jewish mourning, though, the next phase is that of shiv'a - the seven day period following the burial of our loved ones. During shiv'a we encourage the mourner to allow their community to make arrangements for them. Neighbors and friends bring a meal, make sure that the mourner doesn't have to focus on the mundane aspects of life, and can instead address the reality of loss. The tradition of covering mirrors has to do, at least in part, with discouraging the mourner from being harshly critical of their own appearance, taking one factor of stress off of their plate. At the same time, we are instructed that when we enter a shiv'a house and approach the direct mourner, we are to allow them to speak first. If they wish to discuss the deceased and their pain, we go with them there. If they wish to ask about us, or discuss the weather, sports or other trivial matters, they direct the conversation and we follow.

In this latter example are those who have experienced tremendous loss in these last months, but who would prefer to speak of past or future, rather than wallow in the present. If we are to support our friends in that state, the best way is to "go with them."

During the thirty-day period of Sheloshim and the first year of mourning, the individual is gently eased back into life. But gently and gradually is the key. And grief is not a linear trail. There are switchbacks and unintentional detours that return us to a part of the climb that we thought we had made it through long ago, a stretch of this journey we are not keen to revisit.

We are all travelling a mourner's path. Depending on how we are built, what we've endured, we are likely all at different stages along this journey. What is essential, though, is that we recognize the tender spots on those around us, the places where just the lightest careless touch can wound and sting. And that we give others, and even more importantly, ourselves the permission to travel this path in whatever way is right for us.

Self-compassion is the terminology used in psychological circles. Can I approach myself with the kind of grace and compassion, understanding and empathy that I know I am capable of showing to others, even complete strangers?

It seems trite to make the analogy, but there is a reason that flight attendants - remember those!?! - continue to remind those travelling with young children that in the event of an emergency, they must first put their own mask on, BEFORE they assist their child. We must take gentle care of ourselves, or we will be of no use to anyone else.

Over these days of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, and at all of the festival gatherings, we turn to the words spoken in the Torah when Moses prayed to understand God.

Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum VeChanun - a God compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true

Notzeir Chesed LaAlafim - showing mercy to the thousandth generation; forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon.<sup>2</sup>

These words come to be known as the Thirteen Attributes of God. But it is worth pointing out that this description of the closest thing that mortal human beings are able to understand of God's reality was revealed to Moses at a very specific moment. Moses had just smashed the initial tablets of the Ten Commandments, the ones that Torah teaches were inscribed by God's own finger. Moses, upon seeing the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf at the very moment that he descends with this Divine gift in his hands, smashes the tablets to bits at the base of the mountain.

One would logically assume that this is the end of the story for Moses. He's lost his temper; squandered the holy gift in an act of rage and violence... But no, that is not the response God brings to this moment of rupture. Instead, God instructs Moses, "Carve for yourself two tablets of stone like the first set, and I will engrave them once again with the words that were on the ones that you shattered... Come up to Me on the mountain [so that I can make My self known to you]."

God's response to Moses' moment of distress, remorse, anxiety and anger is to show kindness and compassion. It's at least a part of why we read these words on Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur - to remind ourselves of the kindness, compassion and love that is symbolized by the possibility of Teshuvah, of Return.

In a moment when virtually none of us feel whole, when our spiritual resources have been stretched beyond their limits, and our physical, emotional, financial and interpersonal wellbeing is likely at minimum damaged; when many are harshly asking themselves if they have even come close to doing "good enough" against the odds that are perpetually stacked against them at this time - are we good enough partners, good enough children, good enough professionals, friends, neighbors? Are we, in this moment, Good. Enough? ; and when the search for answers or assurances turns up very little solid ground to stand upon, let us hear these words in the depths of our souls:

Adonai, Adonai - A God, compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true; showing mercy to the thousandth generation; forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon.

God is patient, kind and forgiving - to us, to all. We owe it to ourselves to be patient, kind and forgiving, to others, and above all to our selves, particularly in this singular moment of distress.

Parker J. Palmer, a poet, theologian and teacher writes: "I am that to which I gave short

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2. Exodus 34:6-7

shrift and that to which I attended. I am my descents into darkness and my rising again into the light, my betrayals and my fidelities, my failures and my successes. I am my ignorance and my insight, my doubts and my convictions, my fears and my hopes. Wholeness does not mean perfection – it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. I’m grateful for this truth as age leads me to look back on the zigzagging, up-and-down path I’ve hacked out during my far-from-perfect life.”<sup>3</sup>

And while we are being as forgiving as possible towards ourselves and others, let us recognize the good we have done in this time. Newly acquired skills. Hobbies and passions re-discovered. Family meals around a table without the need, or really, the ability, to rush to a thousand activities and distractions. Those whose discomfort with technology - young and old alike - may have kept them from participating in gatherings they wish they could have been a part of. I think about the online seders that so many of us participate in early in the quarantine. For me, the attendees at our family’s Second Night Seder had not all “shared” a Passover table since I was about 8 years old. And to gather in a way that we hadn’t been able to, or hadn’t allowed ourselves was a blessing, regardless of the factors that made it also a necessity. Temple Isaiah has been able to welcome members from across the country and around the world in these months, many of whom were regular weekly service-goers until they moved too far away. It has been nourishing to connect, even if in non-ideal circumstances.

During these days of Rosh HaShannah to Yom Kippur, these Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, Ten Days of Return, may we remind ourselves that Teshuvah - True Return - begins perhaps in treating others with the sort of kindness that is encoded in the words of Torah: “A God, compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true...”; that the kindness we show to others is perhaps most appropriately, even if it is a struggle, and especially in this moment of distress and hardship, best directed at ourselves. Be kind and forgiving to yourself, more so than you think you deserve. I promise you, you deserve every ounce of kindness. The imagery of the beloved High Holy Days text, Ki Hinei Kachomer, makes the case beautifully: “Consider the clay in the potter’s hand, stretched and rolled as the artist desires; so are we in Your hand, our loving Protector. Look to the covenant, not our imperfection.” We are the raw clay, the pure materials out of which something beautiful and broken, exhausted and elevated will yet be made in this year to come. Let us treat others with more kindness than necessary, and let us bring that same impulse to our own self-care.

From me and my family to you and yours, I wish you a Good, a Sweet and above-all a Healthy 5781. Shanah Tovah U’Metukah!

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3. On the Brink of Everything, Parker J. Palmer, pp. 15-16, with thanks to Cantor David Green for the recommendation.