

Ethel Bronstein was born around May 6th, around 1920 in Kolki situated in Western Ukraine (at the time, eastern Poland). The Nazis invaded the shtetl where the Bronstein's lived on June 24, 1941. There were signs of danger- trucks, parachutes, the air of unrest. Ethel worried that her participation in the local communist group and her history of arrest would not serve her well when the Germans arrived.

"I came to the main street," she said of the day she fled. "There were a lot of people.

They were debating. They were scared to leave...I don't know why they were

debating to leave or not. I left...I don't know what I was thinking."

"I don't know what got into me. I don't know if I was thinking... I took a coat, a winter coat and a pair of scissors...And I took maybe a change of clothes. We didn't have too much."

Her 17-year-old sister, Pesha, ran after her.

"How lucky you are," Pesha said, as she took off her shoes and gave them to Ethel, as Pesha went away barefoot, herself.

Pesha and the rest of the family would perish in the Shoah. Ethel survived by will, by courage, and with strong feet. Together with her friend Sura, Ethel trekked a total of 2600 miles trying to stay ahead of the German army. They did. They never gave up. This is what it meant to be a survivor.

I know this story because Ethel Bronstein was the mother of Esther Safran Foer, a dear friend and long time Adas member. Esther was born in a displaced persons camp in Lodz, Poland and would move to the United States as a baby. Growing up there was not much talk about the war. It wasn't until 4 years ago, when Esther was writing the book *I Want You to Know that We are Still Here* that she was able to uncover pieces of her family history that she never knew. Esther said in an interview with the Jewish Women's Archive: "My life was full of these mysteries that I really couldn't talk about or ask about for fear of inflicting pain on my mother who had been through so much. It was about protecting my mother and she was protecting me and my brother. She wanted to put that pain behind her. And my mother, who was an eternal optimist, was always about moving forward."

Esther's father had died by suicide when she was eight, but she never knew what had happened. She said, "It was almost like he disappeared and that was it. And we're moving forward. And then in my forties, my mother casually mentioned that my father had had a wife and a daughter (before the war), and here I was 40 years old, the mother of three sons. And she was telling me that I had my own half sister who was killed and she didn't know anything about her. She didn't know a name. She didn't know the name of my father's wife. I think like lots of Holocaust survivors, when they met, my mother said they never talked about the past. It was again about building the future, moving forward and burying that past."

Esther returned to the Ukraine eleven years after her son Jonathan had written a book about his own travels there. His trip opened a door. Esther went and began to put the puzzle together and to face the painful, rich, traumatic past.

One of the things I have been thinking about over this past year are the traumas we suffer and those of past generations. What happens when there are generations of trauma that occur in our families? How do these traumas affect how we relate to the world? And when trauma has occurred

through generations, how do we heal it? In this time of teshuvah- this day of teshuvah- some of the work is always for us to repair where we have gone astray, to look at our relationships and our lives, but some of the work is uncovering our own traumas or the the pain of generations that came before us. In Esther's case, the research to find her family's story forced her to confront her family history head on which she had previously been afraid to do. As she wrote the story she said, "It was clearly not just a story of tragedy, but redemption."

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, a violation to our bodies or a natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.

Trauma can also be inherited from previous generations. This is the world of epigenetics. Epigenetics teaches us that when we do not face the trauma in our lives we can actually biologically pass the trauma on to the

next generation. Traumatic experiences lodge physiologically, and these physiological changes can be passed on.

Dr Rachel Yehuda of Mount Sinai Hospital is one of the leading epigeneticists of our day. She said in an interview with Krista Tippett of On Being:

“One way (to pass on a trait) is to directly transmit something that you have, and you transmit it in the form that you have it. So let’s say a change has been made onto your DNA — an epigenetic mark now sits on a promoter region of your gene, for example. And through the magic of meiosis, that mark gets transmitted through the act of reproduction. The cell divides, there’s reproduction, and the change sticks, and it’s present in the next generation. That’s one thing. That’s a transmitted change.

There’s another kind of change that involves giving your child — either at conception or in utero or post-conception — a set of circumstances, and the child is forced to make an adaptation to those circumstances.

Behaviors and environment can cause changes that affect the way your genes work. Unlike genetic changes, epigenetic changes are reversible and do not change your DNA sequence, but they can change how your body reads a DNA sequence.”

Dr Yehuda studied the children of Holocaust survivors and found that they were three times more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder if they were exposed to a traumatic event. The children of survivors also showed a high level of resilience-related qualities.

She says that in order to heal from the traumatic event or the generational trauma,

“what we have to do is give ourselves a little time after an adverse event, to kind of take stock and not be so hard on ourselves, or not set expectations, and just listen to our bodies and give ourselves the space to be quiet and to heal and to see, to ascertain what has been damaged and try to counteract that by putting ourselves in a healing environment...to promote a biological and molecular healing process that might forestall some of the epigenetic and molecular changes. Feel it. Feel it, instead of running..” And of course, we would do well to face trauma with the help of loving guides and therapists.

The thing about our past and our pain is that we cannot run from it. It will eventually catch up with us, force us into repeating patterns of behavior that are not useful because we are trying to avoid the pain of something

that happened to us, reliving it instead of healing it or living in the dark - sometimes not even knowing our full story.

When I think about the collective trauma of our people in recent memory I go right to the Shoah, but in ancient memory I travel to the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples. It is hard for us moderns to understand how unbelievably life changing the experience of the destruction of the Temple was for ancient Jews. Not only was there loss of life on a mass scale and exile but Jewish life was completely destroyed. Sacrifices were gone, the central gathering space was gone, the rituals, the smells, the emotions that went with a religious life were burned to the ground. The rabbis brilliantly rebuilt Jewish life into the incredible text based system that it is today but first there was terrible loss. So much loss that it was hard to face. There is a midrash in eichah rabbah about the intensity of this loss and the desire to put it away- to get rid of the intensity of the pain. The midrash says:

מַעֲשֵׂה בְּאִשָּׁה אַחַת שֶׁהִיְתָה בְּשִׁכּוּנָתוֹ שֶׁל רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל, וְהָיָה לָּהּ בֶּן תַּשְׁחֻרֶת וּמֵת, וְהִיְתָה  
בּוֹכָה עָלָיו בְּלֵילָה, וְהָיָה רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל שׁוֹמֵעַ אֶת קוֹלָהּ וְהָיָה נֹזֵקֵר חֲרַבֵּן בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, וְהָיָה  
בּוֹכָה עִמָּה עַד שֶׁנִּשְׁרָרוּ רִיסֵי עֵינָיו, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁהִרְגִישׁוּ בּוֹ תִלְמִידָיו, עָמְדוּ וּפְנּוּ אוֹתָהּ מִשְׁכּוּנָתוֹ.

There was a story about a woman who was in the neighborhood of Rabban Gamliel and she had a young son who died. And she would cry at night and R. Gamliel would hear her voice and remember the destruction of the Temple. And he would cry until his eyelashes fell out. When his students became aware of this they got up and removed her from his neighborhood.

Rabban Gamliel's students could not bear seeing his grief from the trauma so they sought to remove what they thought was the source; the weeping woman. The story is troubling on many levels but it is also 100 percent true. We are accustomed in our culture to bury trauma and the grief that it causes us to feel. We struggle to face it, to sit with it, to find its root. The students in this story, by rushing to remove the trigger for Rabban Gamliel, do not actually heal him because they do not spend enough time listening and understanding the root of his grief. The woman's sadness was a trigger for Rabban Gamliel but her sadness was not the root cause of his.



We cannot mend what we do not spend time understanding. Healing, expiation, kaparah emerges from sitting with our losses, our pain, our alienation, our trauma and the ways we have both suffered and caused suffering. Individually and communally. Acknowledging the wounds that have occurred by understanding them, seeing them, and naming them.

I think this is true whether we are talking about trauma in our individual lives, in our communal life, or in the life of our nation and its brutal past. To face what was, we are forced to see in a different way patterns that have emerged in our lives and also in the life of our country. This is why we have to listen to the 1619 project and include it in how we teach America's past. Eyes wide open. Facing the painful past and how it hurt real people. We also have to commit to knowing our own stories of trauma as a people so we know where our blind spots are...where fear takes over and we can no longer see what is happening. As Jews, this happens a lot when we delve into conversations about Israel and Palestine- the ways we talk to each other or more likely cannot hear each other and are not willing to see beyond our own perspective. When we become stuck because at the core- we are afraid.

Everywhere we go we carry suitcases full of past experiences. We live in 3 time zones- the past, the present and the future. When the past is a teacher and we are aware of it as a memory and we have processed what has occurred in our lives- then we live with memories and we are able to be fully present in the now. But when the past has been affected by trauma or deep pain- we often are living its fears, its sadness and our anxieties in our present lives.

In his book *Healing Collective Trauma*, Thomas Hubl writes:

“Trauma can be said to reduce, separate, fragment or flatten an aspect of the body mind complex into a 2D representation which is thereby disassociated and disembodied. Everywhere people go, they carry mental suitcases full of their own 2D fragments, their own ghosts. Trauma work can be a kind of spiritual search and rescue mission. It does not require that we endlessly revisit every tortured experience, crying, shouting, or talking it through. But we must locate our disembodied ghosts, buried somewhere in that frozen grave of the disassociated self.”

What Humbl is asking us to do is to bring back the past that has been buried. To give it life- 3 dimensional life- to cry with it, sing with it, mourn with it and to give it a place to rest after we have spent time there.

As a country, America has many 2D ghosts that we are carrying. Ghosts that walk around from our past.

Clint Smith, a writer for the Atlantic, tells of his experience as a black American visiting the bottom floor of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. On this floor there sits an exhibit of the stories that were collected in the Federal Writers' Project- a New Deal program that collected the oral histories of thousands of Americans. From 1936 to 1938, interviewers gathered the firsthand accounts of more than 2,300 formerly enslaved people in at least 17 states. Smith writes that "for many black Americans, there is a limit to how far back we can trace our lineage. The sociologist Orlando Patterson calls it *natal alienation*: the idea that we have been stripped of social and cultural ties to a homeland we cannot identify. I have listened to friends discuss the specific village in Italy their ancestors came from, or the specific town in the hills of Scotland. No such precision is possible for Black Americans who are the descendants of enslaved people. Even after our ancestors were forcibly

brought to the shores of the New World, few records documented their existence. The first census to include all Black Americans by name was conducted in 1870, five years after slavery ended. Trying to recover our lineage can be a process of chasing history through a cloud of smoke. We search for what often cannot be found. We mourn for all we do not know. But the descendants of those who were interviewed for the Federal Writers' Project have been given something that has been denied to so many Black Americans: the opportunity to read the words, and possibly see the faces of people they thought had been lost to history.”

There is something to seeing the faces, hearing the stories, walking the paths of those who came before us. Who suffered, who built lives even amidst brutality.

Our tradition wants us to face our past with an openness to all that is. This is why we continually return to the Temple in the midst of our daily prayers in the siddur. We don't forget its destruction- we remember it. And our tradition believes that if we do- we can move

forward with a depth, connection and personal power that is less possible without this work. We often think about the acts of teshuvah, repentance that we are asked to do as fixing a relationship, a misstep, a pattern of anger- teshuvah is that, but there is something deeper to it as well. The Rambam teaches in Hilchot teshuvah, “גְּדוּלַּת תְּשׁוּבָה”

נְשַׁמְרֶת אֶת הָאָדָם לְשִׁכּוּנָה לְנֶאֱמָר (הוֹשֵׁעַ יֵד ב) "שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

So great is the returning “Shuvah” of a person that it brings one close to the presence of God. We come out of the dark and break free when we can heal old wounds, sometimes ancient wounds and find our place.

The Rambam goes on to say "וְאֵין הַשְּׂמִחָה גּוֹף כְּדִי" וְשִׂמְחַת עוֹלָם עַל רֵאשִׁים" וְאֵין הַשְּׂמִחָה גּוֹף כְּדִי" וְשִׂמְחַת עוֹלָם עַל רֵאשִׁים שְׂתַנּוּחַ עַל הָרֵאשׁ..... שְׂיִוְדָעִים וּמְשִׁיגִין מֵאֲמַתַּת הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מֵה שְׂאִינָם יוֹדָעִים הָאֶפֶל הַשָּׁפֵל:

“And everlasting shall joy be upon their heads (Is. 35.10); now joy is not a body to rest upon one's head....(What is joy?)...It is that by which they know and attain part of the light/the truth of the Holy One, something they do not know while in the dark.”

In order to get out of the dark we must return to ourselves. HaRav Kook writes about this return of Teshuvah in his book Orot HaTeshuvah saying:

‘When we forget the essence of our own soul... everything becomes confused and in doubt. The primary teshuva, that which immediately lights the darkness, is when a person returns to himself, to the root of his soul – then he will immediately return to God, to the soul of all souls.’

Back to Esther Foer- She said “The title for my book came from my visit to Ukraine in 2009. I went there looking for my family’s stories, but I also wanted to leave something of myself in these places. I immediately knew I would leave our Rosh Hashanah card. We do a card every year. I’ve done it since our first son was born, and some of them are framed on a wall in our house. I love looking at them year after year, seeing our first son, then three sons, daughters-in-law and six grandchildren. My mother was often in that card, too. I thought, this is what I’m going to leave behind. This is how I’m going to say to my grandmothers and these mass graves, “You had no idea what was going to happen. You had no idea that anybody survived, but we’re still here.”

