

RESILIENCE AFTER LOSS – YIZKOR 5779

Rabbi Michael Pont

Marlboro Jewish Center

1. Good Yontiv. On Rosh Hashanah we talked about resilience, and today we will pick up that theme, but specifically after the death of a loved one.
2. I mentioned the book Option B by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant. Sandberg, you may know, is the COO of Facebook. In the book she described her courtship with Dave Goldberg in Los Angeles. Goldberg founded SurveyMonkey and grew it into a two billion dollar start up. They wed in 2004, by then respected leaders in Silicon Valley.
3. In 2015 Sheryl and Dave were on vacation in Mexico with their daughter and son. While working out at a private gym, Goldberg fell. He was discovered next to an elliptical machine, barely alive due to blunt force head trauma. He died on the way to the hospital; Sandberg was 45 years old - her kids were ten and seven. How did she persevere?
4. On Rosh Hashanah we focused on inner strength as a source of resilience. Outer strength is just as important, namely the love of others. The support we give to those in crisis can help tremendously – we must let them know that they are not alone.
5. This might seem obvious, but sometimes we fall short. When shiva ends, most of us resume our busy lives - do we stay in touch with that friend who lost his father? Do we try harder to speak with our siblings when a parent passes? We must sustain our support for as long as necessary.

6. Sandberg urges us to connect, noting that fear sometimes stops us from calling or visiting at all. Anxiously we wonder, “What if I say the wrong thing,” or “What if I make her feel self-conscious?” Then come excuses like, “We’re not close friends anyway,” or “I don’t want to bother her.” We put off calling or offering help until we feel guilty that we didn’t do it sooner ... and then it feels too late.” (p.47). Those who are in pain often feel isolated and it’s a mitzvah to bond with them. As one father whose nine-year-old son died of a brain tumor wrote, “Our child dies a second time when no one speaks their name.” (p.33) We crave human contact, so don’t be afraid to reach out.

7. Nevertheless, Sandberg does offer guidance on what to say or not to say. She posted on her Facebook page that, “... a casual greeting like ‘How are you?’ hurt because it didn’t acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary happened ... if people instead asked, ‘How are you *today*?’ it showed that they were aware that I was struggling to get through each day.” (p.38) Just that one word expresses a deeper empathy, and I now follow her advice.

8. Another common expression worth reconsidering is “If there’s anything I can do ...” Saying this is well intentioned, but it puts the onus on the aggrieved. Instead, just do something! Relay funeral information to the community, help set up shiva, make sure the mourners are hydrated – whatever will help.

9. How do those who have a traumatic loss manage? I want to tell you about someone close to me who went on a family vacation out of the country. She, her husband and three young children, two school age and one in preschool, were in a major car accident. The husband died at the hospital, leaving this mother with her three children. I asked how she persevered. She replied that at times she

felt angry that it wasn't fair – why did others still have a husband and a father to their kids, and she did not? Further, her own father died young when she was only 19, so it felt a little familiar. But she put that and other personal needs aside and was strong for her kids.

10. She also said people tried to do whatever they could. Back in Manhattan, this mother brought one daughter to the hospital to check some minor injuries. A celebrity happened to be there and gave the girl an autographed photo. The Preschool teacher took the youngest out for ice cream, and friends in the building took care of the youngest child. The Jewish neighbors of this woman, who is herself Jewish, asked, “What can we do for you? Do you need food? Can we bake you a ham?” She laughed and looking back it was good for her to know she could still laugh.
11. I asked a few of you here today this same question – how did you manage? Staying strong for children, and love from family and friends were common themes. You've been or became regulars at our minyan, which has brought you comfort and community. One of you confessed that, “Every day is hard,” but family is sustaining.
12. Another of you who lost a husband cited her deep faith. She doesn't think about what she lost a few years ago, rather she is grateful for all that God gave her: a wonderful marriage to a great man, great kids and grandkids. One of you said it's painful but attending a bereavement group was a blessing. So was finding a new companion!
13. Each of these individuals show that we are vulnerable in the face of loss, and that we are stronger than we imagine.

14. Psychologist Dr. Steven Hayes wrote recently that the pain of loss is inevitable, yet millions of us try to escape it, which is exhausting and futile. Hayes asserts that sadness does not mean something is broken and needs to be fixed. Pain is not a problem to be solved or a disease to be treated; rather it is an instructor about what is important in life. “Love and loss come as a single package,” says Hayes. “If you are unwilling to be hurt, you are unable to love.” (Psychology Today, August 2018, p. 78)
15. There is no typical response to loss, nor is there a standard way to grieve. Some heal after a few weeks, while others require years. Hayes and his colleagues recommend the following:
 - a. Acknowledge your loss and the resulting pain;
 - b. Embrace those feelings: sadness, anger, guilt, and so on;
 - c. Recognize that feelings of loss identify that which is close to your heart. Use them to figure out what’s important to you, and then strive to be the person you wish to be.
16. In Option B, Sandberg describes a physician who follows Hayes’ advice. Joe Kasper’s teenage son Ryan died from a rare disease. After struggling with the pain, Kasper decided to study Positive Psychology at U Penn. While working toward a master’s degree, he created a therapeutic process called ‘co-destiny’ which encourages bereaved parents to see their child’s life in a broader context so that death is not the end of the story. Parents seek purpose from their tragedies, go on to do good, which becomes part of their child’s legacy. “I realized that my destiny was to live my life in a way that would make my son proud,” Joe explained ... Doing good in (Ryan’s) name motivates me...” (p. 92).
17. The Bible teaches “there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” (Ecclesiastes 3:4) It

is natural and acceptable to grieve after tragedy, but we do not resign ourselves to mourn forever. We should try to appreciate the gifts we have, to balance the sorrow that is a part of existence. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, "There is a part of me that insists on loving people though I know that it makes me vulnerable to the pain of loss, bereavement, and rejection, because my life would be bland and empty without it." (The Lord is My Shepherd, p. 35)

18. I will end with a story about the great violinist Itzhak Perlman, who was performing a difficult piece in front of a large audience. Suddenly there was a loud snap, and everyone knew that a string had broken.
19. Perlman closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra resumed where it had left off and now the musician played the music on the remaining three strings.
20. When he finished, the crowd rose to their feet amidst enthusiastic applause and cheers. The violinist smiled and wiped perspiration from his brow, and explained why he continued to play. "Sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."
21. A loss leaves us feeling alone in the world, broken like that violin string. Our task is to figure out what that loss means, grieve its passing and then continue to make music. Despite the pain we must still live a good life and share joy – we must keep playing.
22. Now it is time to say Yizkor. It might be painful to recall those who are no longer alive physically. Look around, hold hands with family and friends, and realize that you're not alone.