

Yizkor sermon: The Balloon

Shavuot 2023

At the cemetery this week, in the row of pines lining the boundary between the graves and a street of residential homes, I saw a single deflated helium balloon, caught in a tree. It was one of those shiny foil balloons that you can buy at a drugstore, which had perhaps escaped from a small hand, floated off, and become captured by the branches and held in place.

I was mesmerized by the balloon— by the way it was both trapped and yet fluttering in the breeze, by the way it glinted when it caught the sunlight, by the way it felt like an echo of both joy and loss.

It also reminded me of a metaphor that I'd like to share with you all today.

First, picture a box.

An ordinary, solid box.

The box isn't empty, however. Inside of the box are two things: first, a completely inflated balloon— pick a color, any color— and second, a stationary button, stuck on the inside of one of the walls of the box.

The box is the human heart. The button, when it is pushed, triggers pain. But then, there's the balloon. And the balloon is what we're going to focus on first, today. Because the balloon, for the purpose of this metaphor, is grief. That balloon, floating around inside of the box, bumping up again and again into that pain button, is the grieving process itself.

At first, the balloon of grief is huge and all-encompassing. There's almost no room in the box for anything else. Leading up to and immediately following the loss of someone important to us, the metaphorical balloon is freshly inflated, filling up the box that is our life. No matter what we do, no matter how gentle we try to be with ourselves, the balloon is so big that it keeps hitting the pain button, all the time. Everything seems to remind us of the person we have lost. Minor things which affect the box can set us off. Because the

balloon of grief is so big, because the wound is so fresh, the rest of life is pushed to the outer edges of the box.

As time goes on, though, the balloon naturally begins to deflate, as balloons are wont to do. This causes the balloon to become smaller and take up less space in the box, and bit by bit, the rest of life, which had been pushed to the outer edges of the box, begins to slowly return to a semblance of its previous order.

As time passes, the frequency of the jolts of pain often lower.

The thing is, though, that the balloon never goes away completely, even though it gets smaller with time. So, too, grief never quite goes away, but instead takes up residence inside of us, albeit in a less inflated way. It's still there, always, inside of the box. And as we go through each day, the ups and downs of emotion and interactions and surprises and arguments all impact the box, shaking it back and forth, sometimes gently, sometimes violently— and sometimes, even though the balloon is smaller now, it will still bump up against that pain button and the pain will roar back to life.

Over time, we may also find that there are actually more buttons in the box– buttons of anger, buttons of guilt, buttons of laughter, buttons of numbness– all kinds of other buttons that the balloon can also trigger, when we remember the person who has died. And, just like with the pain button, over time the balloon may bump these less frequently– but the emotions always remain, called back into our consciousness when our life experiences cause the grief-balloon to bump into them again.

This is the metaphor of the balloon and the box, and there are a lot of things I find useful and comforting about it.

First of all, loss is painful, and healing takes time, and this metaphor reassures us that there's not something wrong with us if parts of normal life remind us of our grief, even farther along in the grieving process.

Second, this metaphor tells us that grief isn't something that we just magically “get over” one day. The balloon-in-a-box framework demonstrates that it is normal to emerge from

acute grief as a somewhat altered person, now carrying around something new inside of ourselves that can still cause us pain down the road.

As Jews, this metaphor also reinforces some of the ancient wisdom of our mourning process and rituals. When the balloon is largest— when the grief is most acute— that’s when we sit shiva. For those first few days, we don’t try and force the rest of life back into its “normal” position, because that would be impossible. Instead, we accept that when the grief is so new and big, and so preeminent, we should sit with it, and honor it, and let it be what it honestly is— both an empty space and a looming presence, both a fragile container and an insistent, driving force.

Sitting shiva helps provide a framework for when the balloon of our grief is completely inflated. And emerging from shiva, like releasing a deeply held breath, can feel like permission for the balloon to slowly begin to ease and deflate, allowing us to return to the world.

But that’s not the end of the story of the balloon and the box.

Because then there are days like today, when we have a Yizkor service, or days like a Yahrzeit, when we say Kaddish and honor the anniversary of death, where it's not a matter of normal life reminding us of our grief and causing the balloon to bump into the pain button— it's actually a choice we make, a brave choice, to intentionally set normal life to the side, and to allow that balloon that we carry within us, once again, to come close to the button on purpose. To intentionally breathe a little air back into the grief that over time had changed shape.

And it takes courage to do this. It hurts to do this. But it's so, so important that we do this.

Yizkor is not designed to be an easy space. It's not designed to be a simple space. Instead, Yizkor is a room full of people who have lived and loved and lost, who are accompanying one another as we come face to face with our pain and share it with each other and with God.

In the hearts in this room there is a whole bouquet of balloons, each of different sizes and colors and shapes— but all being held by the same loving hand.

When I speak to mourners at a funeral, I share with them something I believe deeply: that a funeral is a sacred space, and that that means that our tradition is big enough and deep enough to hold whatever emotions we might bring into that space.

What I've come to realize, though, is that it's not just the funeral that is the sacred space— it's the grief itself. Grief becomes a sacred space that we then carry with us for the rest of our lives and can choose to enter into on days like today. The balloon of this grief will look and feel a bit different for each of us— it may inflate and deflate at different rates and push different buttons for us all. But no matter what, that grief is sacred, and it is a part of us. By coming together at Yizkor, we honor not only the memories of those we have lost, but also the sanctity of the experience of that loss.

When I left the cemetery this week, I did not take the foil balloon down out of the tree. I left it there, entangled in the twigs, even though I felt a bit guilty about it, as though I myself

was littering... but I identified with that balloon. That balloon represented, to me, what being a mourner can feel like: like being caught in emotional branches between a graveside and the “normal” world, trying to show ourselves grace while we are pushed back and forth by the wind.