



CONGREGATION  
B'nai Torah

## Reunion

Rabbi Joshua Heller

Yizkor, 5780

I had some mixed emotions about going back for my 25<sup>th</sup> Harvard College reunion. On the one hand, I was excited to catch up with old friends and I always appreciate having the opportunity to remind people that I went to Harvard. On the other hand, I attend so many cocktail parties, receptions, and social events in my regular life, that it hardly seemed reasonable to stand through even more in my spare time.

Most significantly, I was somewhat concerned that every conversation would play out something like this:

“How's life?”

“Amazing! And, you?”

“You know, there's so much awesomeness, I just don't have time for it!”

There were warning signs that that was how it might go. There's a whole book, 1,000 pages long that they publish, listing what everyone has been up to over the past 25 years. Some people from my class have done pretty well. We've got a senator, the chairman of the FCC, some other politicians, prominent musicians and writers, the Poet Laureate of the U.S., TV commentators. Businesspeople and bankers, doctors, lawyers and academics. Non-profit leaders and advocates. Even three rabbis. I was sitting at a brunch with a few people whom I graduated with and I realized that together, our net worth was around \$1 billion dollars. Needless to say I brought down the average.

Fortunately, my ego is pretty sturdy, as I am regularly reminded. I suppose I could still say that I was one of the top three rabbis to graduate Harvard in 1994.

The first few conversations I had when I reached campus were more or less as I expected or perhaps feared.

“Awesome?” “Amazing!”

“Amazing?” “Fabulous!”

And then, there was a moment of vulnerability.

“My husband died in an accident, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I had to leave Juneau, Alaska, to move back to Massachusetts to be nearer my parents.”

And I responded in kind.



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“I’m a rabbi, I’m often called upon to support people on some of the best and worst moments of their lives, and to bring God with me, but I’m just a person with my own issues, and sometimes all I can do is just be with them.”

Over the next few days, the floodgates opened. “I teach high school, and I love it, but I live alone in a studio apartment and I feel like people here look down on me.” “I wanted to be an actress but ended up being a lawyer and I hate it.” “I’m quite successful at law, but I’m struggling because my mom is dying, and I can’t write a writ or a stay to prevent it. “I had a hedge fund. But I wanted more out of life, to really make a difference, so I started another hedge fund.” Ok, so maybe not that one.

But that’s not the way life usually goes. That’s not the way polite conversation usually goes. Because it’s not just at reunions that everything is supposed to be perfect. There is a lot of societal pressure to make it seem like everything is alright. When someone asks, “How are you doing?” about 90% of the time, they are hoping that you are, indeed, fine. About 70% of the time, they are hoping that if you are NOT fine, you will keep it to yourself, so you don’t have to get into it with you. There are all those people whose lives look perfect on Facebook. And then there’s Instagram. Are you really “living your best life” because you have found the perfect avocado toast? On Twitter, you are apparently allowed to be angry and anti-social, but it has to be about other people, not about yourself.

In person, online, can we ever admit when we are not, in fact, ok? My reunion led me to wonder, can we come out and be vulnerable about our pains, our disappointments, our anxieties?

I returned from the reunion, a campus swarming with thousands of alumni, to observe Shavuot at B’nai Torah which draws a much smaller crowd. In synagogue, we read the book of Ruth, which is, at its core, a book of loss and friendship, and I realized that the questions I started asking in Cambridge are not new ones.

The Book of Ruth has its beautiful people. There’s Boaz, a wealthy landowner. When we first meet him he is greeting his gleaners in the field.

“God be with you!”

“May God bless with you!”

I can imagine the conversation continuing;

“How’s the harvest?”



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“Amazing. Yours?”

“There’s so much grain to bring in that we’re just dropping it willy nilly for the poor people to gather after us.”

Naomi started out that way, started out as one of the perfect people. There was a famine, but when the going got tough, the tough got out of there. She went with her husband and sons to Moab. Her sons married local women, but then the wheels came off the wagon, and the next thing you knew, she was a poor old widow, returning with her widowed daughter-in-law.

There was quite the hub-bub as she walked into town. The people clamored: “Is this Naomi?” She responded, “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, the bitter one, for the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” What she’s really saying is, in case it wasn’t obvious, “I’m not OK.” Things didn’t work out the way I planned. I went out full and came back empty. I had a husband and sons and came back with nothing. Basically, “God hates me.”

And the sad part is, the Biblical text doesn’t record a response. She doesn’t even get an, “Oh, that’s too bad” from the people of Bethlehem. In Facebook terms, she doesn’t get a like, a heart, a crying face, or even a “wow.” Everyone is so excited about how their own harvest is going, that they don’t know what to say to a woman who has poured her heart out.

In the end, it all works out for Naomi. Her daughter-in-law Ruth catches Boaz’s eye, and through Ruth’s marriage to Boaz, the family returns to greatness. Ruth’s great-grandson is King David, who wrote the Psalms.

David was someone who understood what it meant to be communicative when he was sad, depressed, or struggling. We often read the cheerful Psalms, full of “*halleluyah*,” “praise God!” “You lifted me up.” “You set a table for me before my enemies.” But there are also Psalms where David, lover, fighter, poet, greatest king of our Jewish people, admits that he is struggling. Psalm 6: “I weep all night, my pillow is wet with tears. My eyes go weak with anger.” Psalm 17: “I am overwhelmed by my troubles and terrified by my thoughts.”

In Psalm 51, he wrestles with his guilt and shame for what he did with Bathsheva and her husband. “I know my sins, and my offenses are before me always.”

It worked out well for Naomi. It worked out well for David. But we are reluctant to let down our guard. We are reluctant to admit that we are wrestling, that we are struggling. On Rosh Hashanah we read about Hannah, who wanted a child more than anything, she poured out her heart. Her husband said, “What’s the big deal? I’m as good as 10 sons.” Her co-wife taunted her. The priest Eli judged her and told her, “Go home, you’re drunk.” Only God actually heard



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and respected her openness, her honesty.

Maybe we will be afraid that we will be treated like Hannah.

Maybe we are afraid that people will judge us as weak. "It's not a big deal. Suck it up." We are afraid that people will try to one-up us, "Oh, triple bypass that's quaint. I had quadruple." Maybe we are afraid, that others will treat us like the people of Bethlehem treated Naomi, and just ignore our pain.

And so, we are afraid to admit our weakness, our suffering. We are afraid to expose our vulnerability. You may have heard the story of the town mayor who was visiting the blacksmith's forge. He idly reached out to take one of the horseshoes that was sitting on the table, that had come from the fire just moments ago. The blacksmith warned him, "Don't touch those, they are hot!" But the mayor kept going. Almost as soon as he touched it, he dropped it with a loud clang. "Warm there, wasn't it?" asked the blacksmith. "Nope," responded the Mayor. "Just doesn't take me very long to look at a horseshoe."

In some sense, this is what Yom Kippur is about. It's about admitting our limitations, it's about being open about guilt and shame that are holding us back. It's about having honest conversations with those whom we have hurt, or who have hurt us. If we can't acknowledge wrongs, we cannot forgive or be forgiven. If we are perfect, we cannot ever improve. Maybe that's why David and Hannah are mentioned in the Yom Kippur Liturgy – because they knew what it was to call out in distress.

There's a classic interpretation that Yom Kippur is closely related to the holiday of Purim. It would seem like those two holidays could not be further apart, in time and in tone. But our sages in the *Zohar* say that *Yom Hakippurim* is actually *Yom ki-Purim*. They are two sides of the same coin. After feasting yesterday, today on Yom Kippur we fast with solemnity. On Purim, we fast the day before, then we eat and drink, even to excess, and everyone is fair game for laughter and mockery, with costumes and masks.

On Purim, we put on masks, and pretend to be other people. On Yom Kippur the challenge is to take off those masks and try to be ourselves. My friend and fellow alum, Rabbi Shai Held (who did not come to the reunion) has written that we live in an era where self-promotion and "personal brand" are everything. Being genuine, showing your true face, is an act of rebellion and counterculture.

There is a risk in being vulnerable. There is, absolutely, a risk in laying ourselves bare. A risk of rejection, a risk of mockery, a risk of judgment. But there is a danger of not doing it. It's a



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lesson I learned from the lobster. Many of you are wondering what I might possibly know about lobster, and the answer is “not very much.” I didn’t eat the lobster mac and cheese that was a featured dish at reunion. But I do enjoy a different kind. The little plush kind with magnets in its claws. One of those little magnets was the first gift I ever got Wendy. It went missing at some point, so at the reunion, I got another one. It says Harvard on it. Several months later, it still lives on the dashboard of Wendy’s car. I guess she likes it more than the necklace I got her at the Unclaimed Baggage Center in Alabama.

Anyway, there’s something we can learn from the lobster. Here’s the thing about the lobster. The lobster has a hard shell, but every now and then it sheds that shell, and it takes about 30-40 minutes for a new one to harden. During that time, the lobster is incredibly vulnerable to any predator that might come along. During that time, it’s easy prey for any fish that swim by. They don’t need special forks or drawn butter. So why do it? Why take that risk? Why shed that protective layer? Because the shell constricts it and prevents it from getting any bigger. It is only during that time when it is out of its shell, when it is out of its comfort zone, when it is vulnerable, the lobster can actually grow. If we are already amazing and perfect, we can never improve or get better.

And, if we are lucky, we can surround ourselves with people who will be with us through our vulnerability. People who are grounded. Turf to our surf<sup>1</sup>, if you will.

In the two weeks leading up to the High Holidays, we always read *parashat Ki Tavo*, which includes the most horrible threats, curses and punishments. God lists 68 terrible things that will happen to the Jewish people if we don’t listen. One of the stranger punishments is “you will grope in the daytime like a blind man gropes in darkness.” In the Talmud (Megillah 24b), Rabbi Yosi pointed out that this curse was highly illogical: after all, if you are truly blind, you don’t care if it is dark or light, day or night. Then he had an experience that, so to speak, opened his eyes. As he told the story: “I was walking in the pitch-black darkness of night, and I saw a blind man walking with a lit lantern in his hand.” I said to him, ‘My son, why are you carrying a torch?’ The blind man responded, “As long as I have the torch in my hand, people see me, and save me from pits and thorns and thistles.”

There are times when it is ok for us to carry a torch, metaphorically speaking. To let people know that the road ahead is not clear for us. Where we really should let people know that we are at risk of stumbling and tripping. There are so many situations where we could use the support and understanding of those around us.

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<sup>1</sup> Not sure I am supposed to mention this in a sermon, especially on Yom Kippur.



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So often, I meet with a couple who have encountered a pregnancy loss or infertility. “We didn’t want to tell anyone.” Someone just vanishes, turns out they are in rehab. Someone is struggling in a career. Others are wrestling with challenges with aging parents, with raising children. When we are having a tough time because we are lonely, we hold it in.

There are some stories that should remain private. Some stories are perhaps not ours to share. But I find that the people who actually most tempted to overshare are the ones who have the least to say. The people where everything is always drama. Often, though, they aren’t specific. You’ve seen that post on social media: “You know when people do that thing we all hate? Well, someone did it to me today. You know who you are. And I need to complain about it without giving any details, because I want everyone to ask me about it.”

People want to be heard. People want to be cared for, even if they have trouble expressing themselves.

Maybe you don’t need to post your troubles on the internet, but you do need to find the people who will look for your torch. And if you feel you truly can’t share it with friends, find the right professional: a counselor, a psychologist. Even a rabbi. I have my own *tzuris*. My own anxiety, my own baggage. I even have baggage about baggage. Some people can’t leave the house because they are afraid that they left the oven. That’s not me. I’m not afraid that the house will burn down, but I have this paralyzing fear that I’ve left something behind. I’m trying to be a human being out in the world while dealing with my own stuff, my own pain and irritation. But as I told my friend at the reunion, one of the things that brings that brings purpose to my life, is that pretty much every week, I have the opportunity to be with people on the 10 best and the 10 worst times of their lives. I’m kind of like a walking Las Vegas, what happens with me, stays with me. And as a result, there are days when I come home, I have a couple of stories and emotions that I, metaphorically speaking, put down before I walk into the house.

In a few minutes, we will be reciting the sacred Yizkor service, as we do four times a year. One wonders, why these four times. Why on Yom Kippur the holiest day of the year, when we are thinking about our own selves, do we turn our thoughts to those who passed away, and need no further atonement? Why on the three harvest festivals, the closing days of Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot, do we mitigate what is supposed to be the unabridged joy of the festival, the satisfaction and gratitude of the harvest, to reflect on those we have lost, on all that we are lacking?

For an answer that compels me this year, I turn back to the way that I began my remarks this morning, something I learned at my college reunion. This year, I actually had a fifth yizkor. On



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the last day of the Harvard reunion, we had, if you will, our class yizkor. Every reunion includes a memorial service for the members of our class who have passed away. Since I was one of the clergy members in our class who had come for the reunion, I was asked to be one of the officiants. Out of about 1,600 who began with us, 22 had died. It was just over 1% of us who didn't make it to 30, to 40, to 50. These were people of talent and intellect. These were souls of kindness and caring. They deserved fullness, health and hope, but lived lives interrupted. So much lost potential. I want to tell you a few of their stories.

By the way, I could just as easily tell the same stories about people that we know, people that we will be remembering in our Yizkor service today, but I feel like I do not want to ambush anyone in the congregation with their own story. But maybe you will hear the echoes in the stories of my losses. You will hear about my classmates and think of loved ones taken through accident and intentional violence. Sudden illness and heartbreakng decline. Infirmity of body and unsettledness of soul.

In some cases, families and friends kept the cause of the loss private. Then there were those who were willing to, like the Biblical Naomi, be open about their loss, and their bitterness, so that perhaps, shells and masks off, we could grow just a little bit. We heard the stories of those losses.

Some died by chance: crashes of cars, of bikes, of planes. Others fought for years valiantly against cancer or succumbed to sudden, aggressive illness.

Then there was my friend Katie Tucker. She and I had done computer science homework together. Had she lived, she could well have brought up the average at the billion dollar brunch table. She was bright and talented, but she battled depression and took her own life. We hide mental illness. We fear it, we stigmatize it. We whisper it like we used to whisper "cancer." What if we encouraged people to be open about their struggles?

Robin Mitchell was a veteran and chief neurosurgery resident. She was married to an Olympic athlete who murdered her. We don't talk about domestic violence, abuse that happens just one door away.

Carey Gabay was the victim of random gun violence, struck in the head by a stray bullet coming from a gang shootout, in Flatbush. We live in a country where thousands of deaths from guns are taken as a given. We go to the nth degree making cars and planes safer, and surely we can figure out how to make a dent in this one.



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Nick Cowell died of a Fentanyl overdose. We underestimate just how many people are battling addiction. You may assume that it is people of a certain class, or race, but it's not. It's our friends. Our children's friends. Our parent's friends. It's people we know. Opiates take the lives of over 70,000 Americans a year, double what it was a decade ago. And there's everything else, alcohol, prescription, you name it. We just don't talk about it.

And those who are left behind carry around that pain. And we cover it up, we let it scab over. Or we limp through it, we don't talk about it. Those of us who were gathered in Memorial Church, some of whom had never met each other, despite being in the same class for 29 years, held each other, and in a different way, appreciated the gift that we had been given. It was a gift just to be able to be at the reunion.

I think it is quite on purpose that we put our memorial services at times of festivity, at times of gathering- not just my college yizkor, but our Jewish yizkor as well. It's not just that everyone is gathered together. It's that it is at times when everyone is celebrating, our times of communal reunion, that we might be tempted to answer questions with our shells, with our masks on:

"How are things?" "Awesome."

"And, you?" "Oh, yes, quite fabulous."

But it is precisely at those times that we should be real.

We are about to observe yizkor, together, because, even on the holiest days of the year, especially on those days, we are allowed to admit that we are sad. We are encouraged to admit that we are discouraged. If we want to take the holidays seriously, we can take off our masks, and unbind our wounds. If we can't be our true selves here, in front of God, then what truth is worth telling? We have to be able to own our grief, our loss, our loneliness.

It doesn't have to be just these four times a year. More often than you might think, someone will come to me and say, "I would like to come to minyan. I'd like to say kaddish for my loved one. I'd like to come to services, but I don't want to cry in synagogue."

There have to be places where we can be like our Biblical heroes, like Naomi, like King David, like Hannah, where we can pour out our hearts, and cry and admit that we are not ok. That we are suffering from our losses. We need to find those places. There need to be people with whom we can be honest about what hurts us. We don't have to be self-conscious. And if this can't be one of those places, and if these aren't those people, then maybe we really do need to do more talking and less praying.



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When Naomi returns to Bethlehem, she has lost, she believes, everything. She has lost her husband, her sons. She has no blessings, only bitter curses. When she walks into Bethlehem, it is all that she can do to say that she is not ok. She is still mourning past losses. She is offering her own yizkor, but she does not realize that Yizkor always comes at a time of harvest.

Naomi reminds us that we are, none of us, completely ok, but that - in and of itself - is ok, even normal.

Life is, in fact, sometimes amazing despite, maybe sometimes even because of its imperfections. It's when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, that we are able to actually grow. It's when we hold out a torch that others can show us what we ourselves can't see. If everything is amazing and perfect, it can't ever get better.

As we turn to the Yizkor service, we remember those who are now beyond pain, beyond loss. Whatever hurt them in life, they no longer mourn. Children gather to remember parents. We remember spouses and siblings. Children. Friends, the martyrs of Israel. We gather at a time of spiritual harvest, to admit that our baskets are not quite full, but they are also not quite empty. We are not quite ok. But admitting that to ourselves is the first step in being a little more ok. We are grateful to still be here, to have the ability to remember, and to carry on the legacies of those we have lost. Because our tradition teaches us that there is another, greater reunion still ahead. A reunion, in another place, another time, another space. All will be present and all will be perfect.