

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman  
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim  
Kol Nidrei 5770  
September 27, 2009

When nothing else could be done to extend Maxine's life, the phone calls began. It is time to come, Maxine is dying. Expensive plane tickets were bought, schedules were cleared. Maxine's children, siblings, cousins, and friends converged on her home. Her elderly husband sat by her bedside. It was as if shiva was happening even before Maxine died – neighbors had brought food, loved ones sat around together, sharing stories, laughing, crying. It was a death vigil like none other. One by one family members entered her room. They reconciled past hurts, and she spoke tenderly to each one, sharing her unique hopes for each of them. When Maxine eventually died, her loved ones surrounded her. They held her hands, they sang, they prayed, they ushered her out of this world with great love and dignity. And then they held each other, they cried, they sat by her body until it was removed from the home. At her funeral the mourners ripped their clothing. Her family spoke about her lovingly and honestly. Her coffin was lowered into the ground, and everyone who had gathered shoveled dirt on her grave. It was the last act of kindness they could do for her. This was really the end.

And then shiva began. More food, more prayers. People from the community poured in to be with the mourners. They told more stories. They cried, they ate, they really mourned.

If only our loved ones died in this way, facing death and embracing life like Maxine and her family did. If only our loved ones died painlessly, peacefully, at a ripe, old age. If only they died after they had forgiven us and we had forgiven them. If only we really allowed ourselves to mourn, to cry, to really grieve.

As we know too well, the dying process is often far from this ideal. Death can be sudden, unexpected, or violent. Our loved ones are too young and die too soon. They suffer in pain or they are alone in their last days. We do not get to their bedside soon enough, or we do not heal old wounds in time. The death produces only bitterness among those who are left behind. We try to move on quickly after the death, as if nothing had changed.

The first funeral I ever officiated at was for a middle-aged man named Joseph who died of cancer. I had been working as a hospital chaplain, and I had been on call the night that he died. The death had been a traumatic experience for his family. Afterwards Joseph's wife asked me to do his funeral, and the next evening I drove to her home. When I entered the home I tensed immediately. The family was at war – the sisters had been fighting bitterly over whether he would be buried or cremated. Others took sides. They contradicted each other. They ignored each other. They competed with each other – who was the saddest, who would miss him the most, who was the best daughter. They screamed obscenities, they shouted that they hated each other. I left the home at the same time as the son-in-law, and he stopped me at a nearby gas station. "You should know," he said, "all of this is about the inheritance."

Losing a loved one is so difficult. Their life, which has been so intricately interwoven with ours, is suddenly over. We are empty, and we are terribly alone – our loved one is no longer here. How much more do we suffer when the death is senseless, unfair, or tragic, or when there is so much reconciliation left undone? When the death rips the family apart? When, for whatever reason, we blame ourselves for what we did or did not do during their life.

Ecclesiastes says that there is a time and purpose for everything. We know that. We know that nothing and no one lives forever. But it doesn't seem to matter when we are hurting so badly, when it's *our* loved one who died. Yes, death is a part of life, but what kind of life is it, really, when we are so alone? Life may go on, but how bleak, and how empty.

Moses knew about loss. What a complicated history he had. His birth parents abandoned him. He grew up in a strange home that was never quite his own. When he became older he got into trouble and ran away. He married a Midianite and they had a baby. As if that wasn't enough, one day he passed by a burning bush, and a voice came from within it and started talking to him, telling him that he had to save the Israelite people. The last thing he wanted to do. But after some pretty traumatic events he rescued his people from slavery and they all set out into the wilderness. The people always grumbled and frequently broke the rules. And then there was the Golden Calf incident.

Moses had been up on that mountain for so long, and the people got restless. They thought that he might not return after all. They needed something tangible to believe in, so they made a Golden Calf. They danced around it and prayed to it. It was so much more familiar to them than the God that Moses had been telling them about.

When Moses saw what was happening, something broke inside of him. His dream of sharing God's ways with his people abruptly and traumatically came to an end. He smashed the tablets onto the ground and they shattered into pieces. Perhaps he smashed the tablets out of anger – how dare his people betray him like this. After all he had done for them. Perhaps he smashed them out of frustration. He had worked so hard, tried so hard to be their leader, but things still didn't go as he had hoped. Perhaps it was grief. What a loss tremendous loss – leading the people was his life's work, and they clearly did not trust him. Or perhaps it was futility – none of it mattered anyway.

When we experience loss we too experience anger, frustration, grief, and futility. It is a time of brokenness. When loved ones die our dreams die with them. It may be dreams of the future, of growing old with them, of continuing to share our lives with them. Or it may be dreams of the past, of the relationship that never was quite right. Death can be so painful not only because our loved ones are no longer with us but because their absence reminds us of what never was, what we wish could have been different. Death can carry with it real regret. We wish we had been closer. We wish we had behaved differently. We wish we had sought forgiveness or offered forgiveness. We long for a reconciliation that is no longer possible because they are no longer with us.

In times of brokenness, Judaism tells us that we need community. This is why we need a minyan of ten people to say Kaddish. We should not mourn alone. There is tremendous

healing that can come from being with other people. We can support each other as we walk the lonely path in the days, weeks, and months after a death. Joining with other people who are mourning can be a significant source of support, whether it be attending yizkor services or participating in a grief group. When we see others who are grieving it is a reminder that we are not alone in our sadness.

And yet, as important as community is, ultimately we are alone. We come into this world alone, and we leave this world alone. Others can be there for us, but they cannot save us. We are each responsible for our own lives. We have to come to terms with our loss. No one really can understand exactly what we are feeling. Facing this solitude can be terribly uncomfortable. We alone have to walk the mourner's path, and that path is unique for each of us.

After our loved ones die, everything is a blur. We are consumed with anguish, bewilderment, and even denial. How can they really be dead? At some point it hits you, they are not coming back. We may try to forget, to move on, to simply go on without them. So we take their pictures down from our walls. But that doesn't make the pain go away. Trying to make them disappear is a poor substitute for really grieving, for going to those empty, raw places of utter loss.

If we want to heal then we cannot avoid walking the mourner's path. We may wish to protect ourselves, but when we shut others out we only imprison ourselves. There is a real difference between pain and suffering. We feel pain when a loved one dies. It can be sharp and acute, and it cannot be avoided.

Pain is what happens to us. Suffering is our response to the pain; when we don't truly mourn and deal with the pain, we are left to endure the suffering. But we do have a choice in our responses to the pain. We can choose to walk the mourner's path, pass through the intensity of our loss, and move towards healing.

The mourner's path, of course, is hard, it's frightening, and it's long. It means revisiting all of the dreams we had – future and past – and confronting the regret, anger, and guilt that can consume us if we let it. We cannot make amends with someone who has died, but we can come to terms with what we have or have not done, and we can own up to our wrongdoings so that we do not make the same mistakes again in other relationships. Confronting our regret, anger, and guilt can also transform our relationship to the deceased. It does not erase the past, but it can bestow upon us fresh perspectives, deeper understanding, and renewed appreciation.

Walking the mourner's path takes courage. Depending on the severity of the loss we may never be the same again. And even when the pain subsides, there will always be a particular emptiness inside of us. The sharp, searing pain can return when we least expect it. This is part of the journey. It takes faith to open our hearts again. But when we do open our hearts, we open ourselves up to enormous possibility of not remaining stuck in our suffering. We can arrive at a place of acceptance, of accepting our loss as something that we carry with us.

The Rabbis teach that the second set of tablets that Moses brought down the mountain were placed in the ark of the covenant *along side* the broken shards of the first set. Moses did not try to forget the Golden Calf, even though the incident was so painful. He placed those memories at the center of the people – the shards remained right next to the new tablets. When we lose a loved one the brokenness does not disappear, but it can, like the first set of tablets, become part of our story. Moses makes peace with the enormous disappointment of a failed dream – the people would never follow God’s ways as he had hoped – but he readjusts his aspirations and integrates the loss into his journey.

There is a legend that Moses climbed up Mount Sinai a second time at the beginning of Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, to carve the new tablets. He remained at the top of the mountain for an additional forty days. He then descended on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei, which is Yom Kippur. These forty days were a time of teshuvah, reconciliation, and healing for both Moses and the people. They came to terms with what had happened, and they began again. They did not deny their past, but they entered into a period of renewal and hope.

Let this Yom Kippur be a time of teshuvah, reconciliation, and healing. We cannot control death and we cannot avoid pain. But we can live our lives fully and treat our relationships with great care. When a loved one dies we can move through the dark places on the mourner’s path and confront our broken dreams. Like Moses we can be mindful of our broken shards, and we can see them for what they are – sharp and painful, but also holy, for they contain sacred memories. We carry the brokenness with us, but we do not have to remain trapped in our own suffering. We can begin again, and we can enter into a new place of renewal and hope.

*Gmar chatimah tovah – May we be sealed for good.*