

## Stones and Memory: A Yizkor Sermon

The extent of the destruction and loss caused by the hurricanes of the past two months is difficult to fathom and comprehend. The overwhelming devastation which has ravaged and ransacked islands, towns and cities, destroying personal property, ruining homes, and uprooting tens of thousands of people did not distinguish between rich and poor. As Sonia Saldana whose home in Houston was immersed in 4 ½ feet of water observed, “Things can happen at any minute. It doesn’t matter your religion, your age, your nationality. When things happen, they happen to everybody.”

A tragedy, especially an unexpected one can be so jarring it can necessitate making major adjustments in a number of unanticipated ways. The changes can lead to the refocusing and reordering of priorities and force people to decide what to save and what to discard and leave behind. Clifford Krauss noted that the storm “has exposed the skeletons of our lives.”

A New York Times piece entitled, “What they Saved: Texans reflect on treasures plucked from Harvey,” presented a photo essay of what people sought to salvage and preserve in the midst of so much loss and chaos. Some saved antiques or heirlooms, others photos, anniversary gifts, a child’s hand-written Father’s Day card to her dad. One story showed a picture of a chipped tea cup rescued from a trash bag destined to be discarded. A young woman retrieved the broken Fitz and Floyd coffee cup from the trash because she knew how much it meant to her grandmother since it had originally belonged to her grandmother’s mother who had passed away almost twenty years earlier. Although she now only had three cups from what once was a set of six, and they were chipped, Shirley Hines was happy to have them, even if they were broken and no longer a set, because they reminded her of her mother. Shirley lamented that she used to drink coffee out of the cups and think of her mother. The connection and the memories it evoked of her mother would have a calming effect on her and help her get through tough times when she was feeling down.

A woman in Frederick, Maryland, Ann Dahms, saw the pictures and read the story. Although she did not know Shirley Hines, she decided to go to the Fitz and Floyd web site to try to buy cups for the Houston resident who had lost so much in the hurricane. Dahms discovered that the company stopped manufacturing them in 1979, nor did they have any in stock. But a thoughtful associate with the company helped her locate three cups on E-bay. Dahms was determined to do something and so she went online, purchased the cups and sent them to the woman who wrote the story for the NY Times, asking her to deliver them to Shirley. Standing amidst the accumulation of rubble that once were her belongings Shirley commented on the unexpected gesture, actually multiple gestures of kindness, telling the reporter who acted as a delivery man “This has really made my day, because at a time of so much loss it brought a little bit of sunshine into my life.”

Mrs. Dahms of Frederick explained what motivated her to go to such lengths for a woman she did not know and had never met. When she saw the picture and read the article she said, “I desperately wanted to replace that broken cup. The world is a broken place, but also a place of strength, dignity, and personal courage. That’s what I wanted to honor. I figured that-- who knows? -- maybe the cups I got for her could also be from her mother, just a long way around, hopping a few decades in the journey.”

The story got me thinking: How many of us would do what Ann Dahms did for a stranger? How many of us would go to such lengths for someone we know? And then I wondered: What reminds us of those who are no longer here? What of theirs do we hold onto and what is precious to us? What in addition to material things, have they passed on? What have we inherited from our loved ones? What qualities will we remember about them? What will others remember about us? What will we leave behind? What are the broken shards of our lives?

There are many things other than natural disaster that can disrupt our lives, overturn our best-laid plans and leave shards and remnants in its wake. Each and every one of us has burdens we bear and scars we carry. Each of us has experienced brokenness in one form or another and has encountered some type of hardship, setback or failure.

Bumps along the way such as loss of employment, separation, divorce, financial difficulties, death of a loved one, addiction, abuse, illness or health problems, sexual abuse, depression, being bullied, rape, miscarriage, difficulties in our children’s lives, difficulties in our marriage and relationships, rejection, loss of friendship, being betrayed by someone we thought we could trust, even growing older can and do hit any of us.

Although we may not realize it, we are not alone. At some time or other most of us have experienced some of these challenges and disappointments. The question is how we deal with the crises we face. They are an integral part of living. But believe it or not we can be transformed and they can offer the opportunity to find meaning. While we have all heard of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, something called Post Traumatic Growth can also occur.

Jeff Bauman was waiting at the finish line of the 2013 Boston Marathon when a bomb went off and he lost both of his legs. Now the subject of a movie starring Jake Gyllenhaal based on the book he wrote about his experience, recovery was not at all easy or smooth, with many setbacks and obstacles to overcome along the way, but he refused to give up and succumb to despair.

In her extremely well-written and profound book, “Option B” Sheryl Sandberg describes putting the pieces of her life together and what she had to deal with after the sudden death of her husband, David Goldberg. It is difficult to imagine the emptiness and void that is felt when a partner or loved one is suddenly gone. One has to learn to cope with all the things that were taken for granted and the order they expected and thought they knew is overturned.

Observing traditional Jewish rituals of shiva and sheloshim helped her get to the next marker and to the next stage in life. She took baby steps and notes the irony that once a person experiences tragedy and loss, one can come away more appreciative of what they once had. “I have at my fingertips this unbelievable reservoir of sadness. It’s right next to me where I can touch it – part of my daily life. But alongside that sadness, I have a much deeper appreciation for what I used to take for granted: family, friends and simply being alive.”

As she slowly worked on putting her life back together, resuming activities and trying to reestablish a routine and get used to the new normal, she confessed to feeling guilty the first time she felt joy and the first time she danced again. She wisely writes something that qualifies as Talmudic and reflects a philosophy consistent with Jewish thinking that could have been attributed to our sages, “A life chasing pleasure without meaning is an aimless existence. Yet a meaningful life without joy is a depressing one.” Our sages embraced this approach. Achieving this balance of joy and meaning is a necessary quality that allows for equilibrium in life.

She, like many others who have been forced to deal with adversity reminds us how important it is to move forward and not to wallow in self-pity. Sandberg suggests one of the keys to overcoming what afflicts us is perseverance and determination. That, coupled with the love and support she received from family and friends helped to buoy her spirits and carry her.

Faith is also an important component of healing and a resource to draw upon during difficult times. Our pain and suffering can be the instrument which carries us back to God. She recounts the oft-told story of the footprints in the sand. A person looked back and saw two footprints in the sand and felt God’s accompanying presence. During times of anguish, sorrow and defeat, he noticed, however, there was only one set of footprints. Feeling forsaken and abandoned during the toughest times, the storyteller asks God why he was left alone and not there to accompany him when he needed God the most? God replied, “When you see only one set of footprints those were the times when I carried you.”

Yes, there are those who become victims and never escape the tragedy that engulfs and consumes them. Yet there are many who hold onto hope and succeed by persevering in the face of adversity. Kayvon Asemani who went on to become a valedictorian and student body president tells of the hardships that followed when he was nine years old and his father assaulted his mother, leaving her brain-dead. As someone who was small, he was picked on and bullied, yet through music and other abilities rose above the sadness and exceeded. Explaining how he found the strength to carry on, he said, “Although I lost my mother I never lost her faith in me.” Those are the precious things I was referring to earlier that we hold onto and that can help us keep going in the face of travesty and travails.

Part of what helps us during our journey through life is that we carry with us what has been bequeathed to us by those who came before us. We can still hear and benefit from the advice,

love and wisdom of our loved ones, even if they are not here. We can hear their voice and carry the memories of the time we spent with them to help guide us.

The Torah tells us that when the Israelites were getting ready to leave Egypt Moses went to look for the bones of Joseph to bring them with the children of Israel upon their departure from Egypt. He was fulfilling a pledge made by his ancestors. When Joseph was on his deathbed he made his offspring promise that when they left Egypt and returned to Eretz Yisrael they would take his remains with them. According to the legend in the Midrash, Serach, who was extremely old and was the last surviving person still alive from the time of Joseph, the generation that had come to Egypt 400 years earlier told Moses where to find her uncle's remains. She showed him where he was buried near the Nile and explained they buried him there because the Egyptians wanted to sweeten the water. With her guidance, Moses was able to find Joseph's coffin. He carried his bones with him throughout the forty years of their wandering in the wilderness. And so as they wandered in the desert, the Children of Israel carried the tablets of the law in one box, and in the other they carried with them the remains of the man who fulfilled all the commandments inscribed in the other one.

We Jews of today, like our ancestors, the children of Israel of old we carry with us the heritage and legacy our ancestors left for us, for it enriches our lives and like Joseph's bones, sweetens the waters of others as well. We understand the importance of remembering.

When Reverend Haywood Robinson and members of the First Baptist Church of Silver Spring joined us for a service honoring Martin Luther King he quoted the Biblical text about memorial stones set up at Gilgal by Joshua to commemorate the crossing of the Jordan River. Joshua tells the people, "When your children ask you what these stones mean to you, you shall tell them that these stones are to serve as a perpetual memorial for the Israelites."

The reverend spoke in a deep, resonant voice, the voice of an African American Baptist preacher about stones, stones and stories, about birthstones used by slaves and midwives, as he melodically repeated the words - stones and memory, stones and stories. He spoke admiringly about the trait of the Jewish people to remember and to preserve memory, and how much African Americans can learn from us. He said that we tell our story and pass it on from generation to generation, as he repeated the words: from father to son, stones and stories, stories and stones. It was extremely powerful.

When he finished speaking we were all left speechless, dumbfounded, mesmerized by his words and the cadence with which he delivered them. I knew I had to get up and say something to thank him and to conclude the evening. I quickly asked my son Micha to go to my office and bring me a couple of stones that were on a bookshelf. Holding them in my hand, I then said, "A poet once wrote that there are some hearts that can be as hard as stones and there are stones that can have a heart." Holding up the stones in my hand, I said, "These stones have a heart."

And they have a soul and they tell a story. That's because these are stones I picked up from the concentration camp in Auschwitz, Poland."

And then after I presented the stones to the pastor for him to put in his church, as a reminder of the evening, of his message, and of the connections and bond of suffering both our people have known. I concluded by saying, "In Hebrew the word for stone is *"ehven"*, which is a combination of the words *"av"*, meaning father and *"ben"*, meaning son. And so, you are correct to say that stones remind us to pass on our stories, from one generation to the next, from father to son, *av* and *ben*, as in *ehven*, stone."

The stones we carry with us, even those which are painful can teach and strengthen us. In fact, sometimes they can be the best teacher. Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches that confronting the reality of our mortality teaches us not to take things for granted, but to appreciate the blessings God has given us. One of the most famous expressions of gratitude in the Bible, and in all of Western literature is found in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Content with his lot in life, the Psalmist proclaims, "*Kosee revayah, My cup runneth over.*" Rabbi Kushner points out that the author of the Psalm says this after he has passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. With time and perspective even though he traversed through a low point he was eventually able to appreciate what he had, what he still has, and what he has to look forward to. This is the meaning of resiliency. Somehow, the nature of the human spirit is to search for and find the path to be resilient.

One of the other gifts we have which helps us get through tough times is the gift of tears. A midrash tells us that when the first night descended upon the world, Adam did not know what to make of it. He was scared when the sun disappeared and he was enveloped by darkness. And so God gave him two gifts – He taught him how to make a fire to bring light in times of darkness, and he gave him the gift of tears.

In 1967 Israeli paratroopers captured the Old City and made their way to the Kotel, the Western Wall, the last remnant of the Temple of King Solomon. Many of the religious soldiers were overcome with emotion and leaned against the Wall praying and crying. Far back from the Wall stood a non-religious soldier who was also crying. His friends asked him, "Why are you crying? What does the Wall mean to you?" The soldier responded, "I am crying because I don't know why I should be crying."

Shattered cups, broken dreams, tears, an imperfect world, fragmented lives in disrepair, thinking about what matters, holding onto memories. All of this is what the holiday evokes and helps to bring into focus, especially on this day and at this time, time devoted to remembering and to thinking about what we treasure.

Sandberg writes that if only she would have known that she and her husband would only have eleven years together, “I would’ve made sure we spent more time together. I wished that in the hard moments in our marriage, we had fought less and understood each other more....”

We call the prayers we are about to recite Yizkor – remember.

Memory is an important component of what it means to be a Jew. The word *zachor* appears about 170 times in the bible. Usually it is in connection with the commandment to remember our experience as slaves in Egypt, something that most people would want to forget. Many have noted that most other ancient peoples told tales of their beginnings in lofty terms, but our ancestors preserved the memory of our enslavement, because the experience of slavery and of being foreigners in a strange land is meant to help teach us to be compassionate toward the stranger and the less fortunate.

When the great Seer of Lublin was a child he lived near a forest and he would go into the woods by himself. His father was concerned that something might happen to his son, and so he asked him to be careful, and inquired why he went into the forest. The boy said that he goes into the forest to find God. His father said that he was proud of his son and pleased to hear that. “But,” he told him, “don’t you know God is the same everywhere?” The little boy answered, “Yes, God is, but I am not.”

And so we come here in this sacred place and at this hour to ponder these matters. We remember the love and kindness of loved ones whose touch we can no longer feel. As the Book of Ecclesiastes (Kohélet) says, money and possessions may be fleeting, lost or destroyed. Health may fail, but memories of good deeds and kindnesses live on.

We recognize that not all those we remember were always kind or forgiving or good to us. Some of our memories may be painful. But we can still try to learn from them and grow from our experiences. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “That which doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger.” The stones we carry with us, even those which are painful can teach and strengthen us. After all, it is the stone in the water that causes a ripple, and the irritation caused by a grain of sand in the oyster that creates a pearl.

Yizkor, let us remember. Let us connect with our past, but also with ourselves and thereby with our future as well. In thinking about what reminds us of those no longer here, may we recall the time spent together and cherish what they have passed on to us. In addition to reflecting on what qualities we will remember may these moments of Yizkor help us also think about what we wish others to remember about us and what we will leave behind after we are gone.

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