

*Ahavah Rabbah:*  
Opening to Love Requires Opening to Loss

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*Yom Kippur 5779*  
Wednesday, September 19, 2018 / 10th of Tishrei, 5779

[Rabbi Polisson began by teaching the *Ahavah Rabbah* mode/scale, known in Yiddish as the *Freygish* mode, which you can read about here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrygian\\_dominant\\_scale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrygian_dominant_scale)]

The beauty of the *Ahavah Rabbah* mode comes from the interplay between the major and minor notes, the happy and sad notes. This interplay produces tension, emotional power, and beauty.

The *Ahavah Rabbah* mode, the Great Love mode, teaches us that those moments of tension, pain, and sadness are an inherent part of the music of love. They are unavoidable if we wish to experience the full power and beauty of love and life.

How do we, in our day-to-day lives, relate to this reality, the inevitability of pain and loss? Mostly, we try to manage loss as it comes up, without preparing for it or thinking about it far in advance. The fact that we tend to face loss only when it is right in front of us reveals to us our deep fear of facing loss in the first place. I think this fear makes it impossible to fully experience love in our lives. We become anxious, defended, working hard to maintain a stoic approach to life. This cuts us off not only from pain, but from beauty as well. But when we are able to embrace the whole of our nature, enduring love and deep wisdom emerge.

Loss, like love, is natural. And loss causes grief and mourning, whether or not we acknowledge them. Loss and grief are part of life. And they come in many forms. The death of a

loved one is, for many people, the most serious and difficult form of loss, causing intense grief and mourning. But, as pastoral care professors Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson teach, “it is neither necessary nor wise to limit the terms *grief* and *grieving* to the emotional state and the work that the death of a loved one makes necessary... Unless we understand that all losses, even ‘minor’ ones, give rise to grief, we” will misunderstand its “fundamental nature.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps your first child recently moved out of your home to go to college. Or perhaps your youngest child just did that, so that you’re now what some call “empty nesters.” Changing jobs, or retiring, or getting fired are all forms of loss. Moving homes can be a form of loss. But we experience loss at all ages. I was chatting with a Bar Mitzvah student recently about the transition from sixth grade to seventh grade. I asked about his daily schedule at school, and without thinking, asked about recess. The Bar Mitzvah student said: “we don’t have recess in seventh grade.” Is that not also a loss - perhaps even a major loss? The loss of free, unstructured time for movement, exploration, and play? Why shouldn’t we consider the loss of recess a legitimate loss that might cause feelings of sadness and anger? And, as I mentioned on the first day of *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, every change, every new beginning, begins with a loss - an ending - that requires some amount of some kind of grieving.

What, then, is grief? Grief is “a normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions, arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or” or the thing lost.<sup>2</sup> Some emotions that might come with grief include profound sadness, despair, anxiety, anger, fear, loneliness, guilt, shame, confusion, emptiness, and

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, Kenneth R., and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All our Grievs*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54.

helplessness. Grief, then, is the clustering of “some or all of these emotions in response to loss.”<sup>3</sup> And again, we might experience grief over supposedly minor losses.

As we age, the very act of living brings loss. No matter what our age, the process of getting older involves loss; changing schools - whether from fifth to sixth grade or from 8th to 9th grade - may be exciting, but it can also be disorienting and involve loss. The more we age, the more acute our struggle with aging may become - especially since, in our society, aging is considered not only a loss but a problem to be avoided and overcome. I believe that our rejection of the natural course of aging actually comes from our fear of our own mortality.

There's a story about clergy discussing their own mortality. The story goes as follows: A Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a rabbi are discussing what they most want people to say after they've died, when their bodies are on display in open caskets.

The Priest says: “Well, I want someone to say, ‘he was a righteous man, an honest man, and very generous.’”

And the Minister says: “I want people to say: ‘he was very kind and fair, and he was very good to his parishioners.’”

And the Rabbi says: “I hope that someone will say, ‘oh, look! He's moving!’”

This joke reminds us that not only do we try to avoid aging, we try to avoid even *thinking about* aging and mortality. And the rabbi in the joke is somewhat justified by Jewish tradition. Just look at our prayers during the Days of Awe: we repeatedly beg God to give us life. We say *zokhreinu le-hayyim* - remember us for life; *kotveinu be-sefer ha-hayyim* - write us in the Book

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

of Life; *ukhtov le-ḥayyim tovim kol benei veritekha* - inscribe all the members of your covenant for good lives. And in *Ne'ilah*, the closing service of *Yom Kippur*, we say *hotmeinu be-sefer ha-ḥayyim*, seal us in the Book of Life, *le-ma'ankha E-lohim ḥayyim* - for **Your** sake, God of Life. We focus on life because our tradition recognizes that life is good, life is sacred, and life as we know it, in this world, is our only chance to serve and to experience.

So we are right to follow the lead of our prayer book in praying for life - after all, it's part of our biological wiring to want to live. But the *Mahzor* and *Yom Kippur* are simultaneously trying to remind us that death is part of life. While we are correct to desire life, we must learn to live - to live **fully** - with loss and death.

If we reject facing loss and death and seek exclusively a life of only ease and happiness, we will narrow our capacity to feel. If we succeed in filtering out the bad, we will have also filtered out the good. We can filter our experiences of pain, sadness, anger, and fear, but we will also filter our experiences of love, joy, pleasure, and peace. Being open to the entire range of human experience is the only way to experience that full range. And that means being open to experiencing loss as well.

My friend and teacher Rabbi Dr. Melanie Landau says that heartbreak can be a path of ecstasy. She teaches that, by owning the full range of our experiences, we empower ourselves, and that our opening up allows Divine energy to flow into us. She urges us to open ourselves up to pain, rather than seek to defend against it, and that our opening ourselves up helps others open themselves, too, providing comfort and support for each other. Rather than protecting ourselves by seeking to hide our very real vulnerabilities, Rabbi Landau teaches that by collectively opening ourselves, we contribute to communal and social healing. To realize our full potential

requires us to embrace the full range of our emotions. Love and the pleasure and meaning it brings can only be experienced if we are willing to feel pain. In opening ourselves up, fully experiencing the pain of our losses, we can discover that we can hold that pain and still also experience joy and love. And yet, it's so scary to consider feeling fully the pain of all of the losses that we experience in life.

We are like the *Kohein Gadol*, the High Priest, who, on *Yom Kippur*, would enter the Holy of Holies, the deepest part of the ancient Temple, in great fear and trepidation, in order to perform rituals of purification, seeking forgiveness and renewed life for himself, his household, and the entire Jewish People. We gather on *Yom Kippur* to seek forgiveness and life for ourselves, for our families, and, in the end, for the whole world.

The literary reenactment of the service of the High Priest that we will read during *Musaf* is a core piece of the *Yom Kippur* service. My friend, Rabbi Ben Goldberg, says that this is because it reminds us that there's a big gaping hole in the middle of *Yom Kippur*. That hole is the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem, and the High Priest, around which our entire tradition used to revolve. The Temple symbolized our relationship to God and its destruction left us, collectively, seeking to reestablish that relationship. Neither the Temple nor the High Priest exist today. Thus, *Yom Kippur* is a meditation on loss, a day when we remember that which came before us with longing, even though many of us have no desire to resume sacrifices in a Third Temple in Jerusalem and are grateful to be where we are today.

This morning's Torah reading shares a similar message. We just read about how Aaron, the first High Priest, would determine which of the two goats would be sacrificed and which would be symbolically burdened with the sins of all Israel and flung into the wilderness as a

scapegoat. This ritual was meant to make the Israelites feel like they were beginning a new year free of sin. However, the Rabbis of the Talmud insisted that the two goats had to be exactly the same - in color, age, and so on. What differentiated their fate? A lottery. The scapegoat ritual was one of chance, decided by a lottery, reminding us that we cannot control everything in our lives and that our destiny is a mystery.<sup>4</sup>

The two goats remind us of the reality of human experience. It is the natural human condition to attempt to control our fate. And some things are indeed in our control. But much of our experience is that of chance, randomness, and unpredictability. In the end, we cannot control life and death. Life is fragile, full of imperfections, and inevitably ends. Life is full of cracks. But as Leonard Cohen says: "There is a crack in everything - that's how the light gets in."

My father died when I was a sophomore in college. When I was barely six years old, my parents separated and divorced. I was raised by a single mother, and never got to know my father as well as I might have hoped. When my father died, two very simple things helped me to cope and to heal: space and community. Or, perhaps more accurately: absence and presence. Emptiness and fullness. I experienced the full range of both emptiness and fullness in my mourning - and I continue to experience those emotions in ebbs and flows, because grief never fully goes away. It just becomes part of the fabric of our experience.

In the immediate aftermath of learning of my father's death, I needed, on one hand, time and space to grieve. On the other hand, I also needed people and presence and distractions.

For me, the first few weeks of grieving were, in fact, a lot of sitting around, lying in bed, doing nothing. Of course there were bouts of intense crying; there was anger, and despair, shock,

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<sup>4</sup> *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, p. 279.

and disbelief, confusion, and fatigue, and long periods of just nothingness; feelings of emptiness. And, in other moments during those first weeks of mourning, many people were there for me. Through them, I experienced presence and even fullness and love. My roommate would play video games with me and listen to me and just sit with me. Friends came by to see me. My Resident Advisor at Brandeis, who was an Irish Catholic baseball player, brought me pizza for dinner. I went to see the Jewish Chaplain at the time, Rabbi Elyse Winick, who gently explained to me that I would need to learn to live with a new reality - one in which my father was dead.

And I continue to learn to live with that reality. That is the process of grieving, which never fully ends. In grieving, I do not seek to give up my connections to my father or to let go of them completely. I seek to live with memories of those connections, connections that will never be the same but remain within me, so that I can live with the reality of the loss, but without losing myself in it. Thanks to the support of various people, communities, traditions, and shifting beliefs, I moved from intense mourning to less intense grief, and was able to move forward in life, making attachments and investments in other people and things without fearing loss at every turn.

The experience of mourning did strengthen my relationships with those who supported me. I was able to feel their love. In mourning, I also experienced pain and despair. And as I said, I don't think grief ever goes away fully. I mark the *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of my father's death, every year in the winter. And sometimes more intense feelings return. And it's painful. Even when I try to remember that I have to be open to loss so that I can be open to love, it's painful. On rare occasion, when I am able to be open to both, I am able to experience the beauty and power and pain of life and love. I know that if I find myself crying on my father's *yahrzeit*, I

will also find myself comforted and supported by my wife, my family, and my friends; held in love and care and even hope for the future.

The beauty and power of life was exemplified by Claire Wineland, an activist, author, and public speaker, who died just a few weeks ago after a lung transplant. Wineland was born with cystic fibrosis and survived many critical medical emergencies over the course of her 21-year life.

Wineland said that, through her many speaking engagements, she “wanted to share the fact that you can suffer and be okay.”<sup>5</sup> She taught that “the quality of your life isn’t determined by whether you’re healthy or sick or rich or poor, not at all, it’s determined by what you make out of your experience as a human being, out of the embarrassing moments and the painful moments. It’s what you make and what you give from that place.”<sup>6</sup>

Claire Wineland taught that it’s okay to feel pain. She taught that, “in fact, if you can actually experience” pain “without judgment, without, ... trying to fix anything,” then you can learn from your experience and discover that sometimes, between or even amidst the experiences of pain, there is joy and love.

Wineland’s TEDx Talk is titled: “Don't wait to be healed to start serving humanity.” I know that I’m not fully healed - I doubt that I ever will be. And you, as you grieve losses large and small, may not be either. So we can try to follow Claire Wineland’s wisdom. We can choose to serve humanity, and to serve love, and to serve that which is holy by embracing this imperfect, impermanent thing we call life.

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<sup>5</sup> “Don’t Wait to be Healed to Start Serving Humanity,” Claire Wineland at TEDxCardiffbytheSea <https://youtu.be/HH3m1OSiOT0>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

This is, I believe, the message of this morning's Torah reading. The Torah reading from this morning comes from the Torah portion titled *Aharei Mot*, which means: after death. What happens after death? We seek to live lives of holiness. After we read *Parashat Aharei Mot*, we read a Torah portion titled *Kedoshim*, which means: be holy. Be **alive**. **Live** with the **love** and **pain** and hold yourself and others with gentleness and kindness through it all.

This year, let's strive to be holy by opening up to the fullness of human experience - the experience of both loss and *Ahavah Rabbah*, great love.

*Gemar hatimah tovah.*