

Fourteen years ago, as I began my first pulpit position, following ordination from Rabbinical school, I attended a conference run by the Rabbinical Assembly for Senior Rabbis and their newly hired Assistant Rabbi. This conference was a part of the Eit Ratzon offerings of the RA. Eit Ratzon is a phrase that comes from the verse, from Psalms, we sang today when taking the Torah from the Ark:

Psalms 69:14

Va'ani Tefilati l'cha Adonai Eit Ratzon, Elohim b'Rov Chasdecha Aneini b'rov Chasdecha

"As for me, may my prayer come to You, O LORD, at a favorable moment; O God, in Your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance."

It is a favorable moment when a rabbi takes a new position. It is a favorable moment when a congregation and a rabbi begin their journey together. I'm happy to be in such a favorable moment at this time.

Many insights were shared about how to build the relationship between the Senior Rabbi and the Assistant as well as the relationship between the new rabbi and the congregation.

One of the things I most remember from the conference was a discussion about loss. We were taught that any change, no matter how small, brings with it some loss and along with loss comes the need to grieve. Whenever a new rabbi enters the congregation, there are many changes and therefore many feelings of loss experienced by the congregation. The job of the rabbi is to acknowledge the loss and make room for the grief without feeling it as a personal affront. This allows the congregation to move on from their loss and open up to the positive that change can bring. I hope that this is the case in our situation at Tifereth Israel.

Partially because of change and partially because of actual loss, our entire country is in a similar period of mourning right now. Some people have experienced the death of a relative or a close friend while others are grieving for the life they were living pre-covid.

Many are aware of the work *On Death and Dying* done by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Kubler-Ross describes a number of stages that people experience as they approach death or if there has been a death in their family. She speaks of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance being a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live death.

It is important to note that there is no one right way to grieve. Some spend different amounts of time in these stages. Some skip right past some. Some circle back and repeat, maybe even a few times.

Just as this happens with the death or terminal illness of a person, it also occurs when experiencing change.

Dr. Sanford C. Shugart, President of Valencia College, once shared the observation that “People aren’t afraid of change, they’re afraid of loss.”

Why shouldn’t they be. If loss means having to deal with denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, and you go through those stages with every change in your life, why would you want change?

One of the things for us to notice right now, in the midst of the Covid pandemic is how much change we are experiencing. Almost nothing is the same as it was before the pandemic - we eat differently, shop differently, work differently, care for children differently, socialize differently.

It is also important to notice that we, as a country, and as a world, are not fully grieving during the pandemic. Yes, individuals who have lost someone to COvid are having mourning rituals but we have had no space for communal mourning - no memorials, no ceremonies, no days of national mourning. We all know the numbers. We know that there have already been over 200,000 deaths in the United States from Covid. My colleague, Rabbi Elliot Kukla points out, “Just consider the scale of resources given to grieving the 3,000 lives lost in 9/11, versus the 190,000 people (and counting) who have died in the COVID-19 pandemic in this country. Where are the large national memorial services, the plans for monuments, the presidential condolence visits? Much of this disparity is linked to who is dying (at least in the public imagination), and the prevailing belief that “only” old, sick, and disabled people die of COVID-19.” There not being memorials could be a product of us still being in the throws of the pandemic but it doesn’t change the fact that we are feeling great loss without appropriate outlets for the emotions we are feeling.

The deaths from Covid are not the only thing to be mourning right now. There are major wildfires that are burning up and down the West Coast. The habitats of so much wildlife and the homes of many people have been destroyed. This is devastating and should be mourned appropriately.

The economic impact of the pandemic is also a cause for mourning. Over 22 million jobs were lost due to the pandemic and less than half of them have been recovered. There are those close to us that are feeling the direct financial impact of the virus and so many others that we don’t know who we should be grieving with.

We are also in a state of grief for the isolation we all are feeling as we shelter in place or socially distance. Right now, there may be a numbness to it but the funk that is hanging over us all is real. We miss the ability to give someone a hug when we greet them or we leave. We mourn for the ability to just call a friend and go out for coffee. We long for the day when our children can have play dates with others outside of any “pods” we have set up for them. We grieve the loss of our community that is strengthened every time we get together for a shabbat service and all the more so by the Shabbat kiddishes.

One thing we often hear is how we can't wait to get back to normal. The problem with that is that "normal" does not mean the same thing for everyone. This pandemic has shone a light on many of the imbalances in our society. This is a source of grief as well.

When schools had to move to online learning in the spring, there were plenty of districts delayed as they arranged for devices and internet service for their families while in wealthier districts, they could hit the ground running as their students already had these items. Not to mention the students who relied on school for nourishing meals or mental health care. Is that the normal we want to return to?

What about health care. "The latest available COVID-19 mortality rate for Black Americans is 2.4 times higher than the rate for Latinos, 2.5 times higher than the rate for Asians, and 2.7 times higher than the rate for Whites." There are a number of factors that exacerbate this imbalance but needless to say, this should not be normal.

As if this all was not enough, more and more of us are awakening to the awareness of a systemic issue of race and racism in our country. For many of us it is something we always sort of knew was there but now we see it as something that can no longer be pushed under the rug.

The ongoing issue of disproportionate force used by police against people of color is in our faces day in and day out and we don't see our leaders responding in any positive fashion, and in fact see them making it worse.

We are soon going to recite the yizkor prayers and while we each have people we will personally keep in mind, we also direct our attention this year to the collective grieving we need to do as a community.

On the various listservs and facebook groups I am a part of, I have seen numerous examples of how people are incorporating modern issues into the traditional liturgy. Some have suggested that either here in Yizkor or later in the Eileh Ezkarah, martyrology, section to include pieces that mention people of color who have been killed by police. Others have written remembrances of those in the Jewish community killed in the Jersey City Kosher Supermarket shooting or the Chanukah stabbing in Monsey. These are tragic and can stand on their own as something to remember but they are also a part of the collective grief we feel from 5780.

So, how do we make a turn as we leave 5780 behind and head into 5781.

On Wednesday, Maya and I went to the Supreme Court building to engage in the Jewish practice of escorting the dead. We stood in line with many others who came to have a final private moment in the presence of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. We overheard many people talking about the impact that she had on their lives and on the country as a whole.

The thoughts that came up for me were about being in a liminal moment. So much has been said about RBG having a mezuzah on the door of her office. We put the mezuzah on the door where we enter and exit the house or a room. It is a marker of a liminal space where we stand between two places I felt, standing before her, that we were at a liminal moment. We were there to reflect on her life and legacy. We were there to share

the respect we have for her for all that she has done in fighting for the underdog, the oppressed, the marginalized.

But, we were also there knowing that we are to look forward as well. We will move ahead, carrying the tools she has left for us but without her to use them. We are moving ahead to much uncertainty in our country. There is much to be done and while we may feel like we are moving ahead without her, we will always have our memories of her and the things she has done as a support and foundation.

I began today speaking about the Eit Ratzon conference I attended as I began my rabbinic career.

In the Talmud, the question is asked: When is a time of favor? It is at the time when the congregation is praying.

We will soon be sharing the Yizkor prayers. We don't do so as individuals but rather as a kehillah kedoshah, as a holy community that has come together in prayer.

There certainly are barriers to feeling that sense of community this year but we are together nonetheless and it is a time of favor. It is a time when our prayers reach up to the Divine and when our prayers reach to our neighbors. It is a time for us to gain strength from the collective support of our community. It is a time when we make promises to do better in memory of those we mourn.

Rabbi Hayim Hering shares the following about the Unetanetokef prayer which we will say in Musaf. He focuses on the line that states "But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the evil decree. His reading of it is as follows: A form of the Hebrew word from this phrase, מַעְבִּירִין, appears five other times in the *u'netaneh tokef*. Its root meaning is "to pass," and that definition neatly fits these five other instances. What happens when we incorporate the literal meaning into our theologically troubling passage? It now reads, "Teshuvah - Repentance, Tefillah - prayer, and tzedakah help us pass through life's calamities.

We have all been focusing on teshuvah on how to redirect ourselves towards better behaviors. We have been reciting many prayers that focus on this and other important values and now, in Yizkor, we make a pledge of Tzedakah. We say in the memorial prayers that we will work towards righteousness in memory of our loved ones.

Let's mean it. Let's find our way through life's calamities, especially the ones that are casting us into grief this year, and pursue righteousness in 5781.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, may it be God's will.

Amen.