

## **Yom Kippur Day 5780: Are Your Sufferings Dear To You?**

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I've been listening to a new podcast this summer, produced by JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I studied as an undergrad as well as a rabbinical student. It's hosted by a friend of mine, Sara Beth Berman, and entitled "What Now?"<sup>1</sup> You may remember the story I shared a couple of years ago on Yom Kippur about my classmate Rafi--Sara Beth's fiance--who died just before we entered our final year of rabbinical school. His death was tragic, and of course just devastating for his family and for Sara Beth, whom he was planning to marry 6 months later. She tells listeners that she's spent the last decade "banging her head against a wall" to try to understand this loss. In this podcast, she interviews professors at JTS to discover their personal and professional responses to questions of human suffering.

Now, Sara Beth has a very funny and sarcastic way about her, and I bet you'd enjoy listening to her. She is on a mission to talk about suffering, to lessen the stigma around it. In each episode, she asks her conversation partner: "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is missing a flight and 10 is the biblical book of Job (whose 10 children all die and who himself is afflicted with numerous physical ailments), can you share a personal experience of a 1 and a 10?" The 1s are there for comparison and to bring levity to the conversation. They include things like losing keys, spilled coffee, and missing an actual flight. For her, of course, the 10 is the death of her fiance and the inspiration for this project. The professors share their own personal losses--the death of a sister or a parent much too young, the death of a best friend who left behind a husband and a 16-month-old daughter, the deaths of a son and a husband 6 months apart, alcohol addiction that led to hospitalization and a crisis of faith, and many others.

Sara Beth's "What Now?" podcast joins an entire genre of podcasts that highlight stories of suffering. You may have heard of another one called "Terrible, Thanks for Asking", hosted by a woman whose husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor before their wedding and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jtsa.edu/what-now>

who died not long after their son was born. Like “What Now?”, this podcast bypasses the small talk and goes right to the hard topics. I admit, I really enjoy this genre. I really appreciate that in each episode, nobody responds with the expected nicety “Oh, I’m fine” when asked. Because they’re really not.

In a very different way, Yom Kippur does the same thing. In this intense 25-hour period, there’s hardly room for small talk. Our tradition has set aside this single day each year to go straight to the hard topics. The machzor asks, and we wonder: Who will live this year, and who will die? Who by fire, and who by water? On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

Now, we know--and of course so did the rabbis--that being written and sealed in the Book of Life doesn’t necessarily guarantee a year of health and happiness. “Who will be brought low, and who will soar?”, the same prayer asks. *Mi yushpal u’mi yarum?* In other words, “What kind of suffering might be in store for me this year?”

For so many of us, these words are not theoretical. Not at all. We have dealt and are dealing with all sorts of suffering--disease, chronic pain, memory loss, the death of a loved one, divorce or separation, infertility, disordered eating, abuse, depression, anxiety, addiction, a prolonged hospital stay, unemployment, difficulty recovering from surgery, miscarriage, chronic loneliness. And if not us, then someone we know, someone we love. It may or may not be a 10 on Sara Beth’s scale, but it’s definitely more than a 1. And it hurts. A lot. We are not fine.

On this most sacred day of our year, when we are called to afflict our souls, we arrive precisely that way--afflicted. Many of us consider our physical or emotional affliction a distraction from our true selves. It certainly makes life harder. Today, as we afflict ourselves spiritually, let us turn to our tradition’s guidance on suffering and affliction. If you haven’t done so already, consider your answer to Sara Beth’s question: What’s your 1 and what’s your 10? [pause]

Back in rabbinical school theology, our teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, of blessed memory, told us that people would ask us over and over again why God would “give them cancer” or “let a loved one die”. He was right. I do get that question quite regularly. I am also grateful that he taught me not to respond to it directly, because the assumption of that question is that God controls disease and death and all of the other kinds of suffering in the world. If that’s the kind of deity God is, I’m not really interested.

Jewish tradition places the divine presence, or *shechinah*, in a very specific place when someone is suffering--above the head of the sick individual. In fact, the Talmud, Tractate Shabbat,<sup>2</sup> teaches that a person who comes to visit the sick should sit with his or her head below that of the sick individual for precisely that reason. Whether or not you like this particular theological image, it’s message is one of comfort: A patient is never left alone with their suffering, no matter how lonely it gets. The very Creator of the universe is there too, sitting, quiet, receptive.

A well-known contemporary theologian, Rabbi Harold Kushner, emphasized this way of thinking in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, a response to the death of his teenage child. He writes: "If God is a God of justice and not of power, then God can still be on our side when bad things happen to us. God can know that we are good and honest people who deserve better.

Our misfortunes are none of God's doing, and so we can turn to God for help. We will turn to God, not to be judged or forgiven, not to be rewarded or punished, but to be strengthened and comforted."<sup>3</sup>

It is of course so difficult to deal with serious ailments of all kinds, and part of the hardship is not knowing *why*. I can’t answer that, and sometimes neither can the best medical professionals. But like we discussed last week with regard to antisemitism, what we control in the face of hardship is how we deal with it.

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 12b

<sup>3</sup> Page 44

First Jewish approach: Don't suffer alone.

There's a well-known story in the Talmud<sup>4</sup> about Rabbi Elazar and his teacher, Rabbi Yochanan. Rabbi Elazar had fallen ill, and his teacher came to visit him. Elazar was lying in a darkened room. When Rabbi Yochanan arrived, he rolled up his sleeve, and light radiated from his arm to illuminate the house. He noticed that Elazar was crying and wondered why. He asked, "Are you worried you didn't learn enough Torah?" No response. "Are you worried about money?" Again, no response. "Are you sad about your children who have died?" Finally, Rabbi Elazar said to his teacher, "Actually, when you rolled up your sleeve and your arm glowed, I began thinking about human mortality and was saddened." Rabbi Yochanan nodded in agreement and began to cry himself. He then asked a final question of Rabbi Elazar: "Is your suffering dear to you?" And Rabbi Elazar said to him: "*I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward.*"

This *bikur cholim* situation isn't super typical, unless anyone here has an illuminated arm I don't know about. Rabbi Yochanan was known in the Talmud for his beauty, and that clearly plays a role here.

What's more familiar to us is the fact that one human being came to visit another who is sick. He fumbled around awkwardly for a few questions, not understanding why Rabbi Elazar was upset. Eventually he hit the nail on the head: he asked him about his suffering. You may have noticed, that's the only time in the story that Rabbi Elazar responds directly to Rabbi Yochanan. It's what he needed to talk about.

Our tradition teaches that one who visits the sick takes on one-sixtieth of that person's suffering. But they can only show up--or call, or text, or Facetime, or Facebook--if they know. That first step is on us. We can let someone in.

Second Jewish approach: Believe that the world is essentially good.

One of the benefits of embracing a religious tradition, including our own, is that it teaches us gratitude. What is prayer, if not the opportunity to express appreciation for all that is

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<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud Brachot 5b

good in the world? Even the smallest, quickest blessing before or after a snack acknowledges that the food didn't just appear out of thin air to satisfy our craving. Maybe that's not a small thing to consider, given that we're abstaining today. One of Sara Beth's interviewees, Dr. Alan Mittleman, JTS professor of Jewish Philosophy, suggests that steeping ourselves in Jewish community, where gratitude is central, can remind us that the world *is* essentially a good place, despite the suffering we're experiencing right now. And, practically speaking, a positive environment can provide a counter to the very natural sadness, sulking, and isolation that often accompany suffering.

Within a synagogue community--within *our* synagogue community--there are multiple ways we can work together to help. There are opportunities to gather almost every single day of the week, and all of them have a positive ambience. I'm talking about morning minyan and breakfast if you're available at 8am, Shabbat services on Friday evening and Shabbat morning, coffee and conversation at Pop-Up Rabbi, a variety of classes and activities. It almost doesn't matter what the "program" is; just being together with other people can be a balm in itself.

Sometimes it's not possible to get ourselves going. That's part of suffering, too. One of the features of being part of a Jewish community is that we can also come to you. And I don't just mean a visit from your rabbi, although that happens too. If your suffering makes it impossible to prepare meals, we can organize a meal train to help. And if you think you would benefit from a short visit from another congregant, we can make that happen, too.

I want to share an example of just that. Over the summer, one of our new congregants, Megan Maisonet, was thinking about how she could teach her 2-year-old daughter Tessa and 6-month-old son Malachi about mitzvot. She asked if we had any older members who might like a visit. *Do we ever!* Some of you know our oldest congregant, Hilda Kadden, who just turned 98. She's been living at home, alone, all these years. And then she fell and broke her hip. Megan brought the kids (and her fabulous babysitter, Lily Fanwick) to visit

her, and it brought a huge smile to her face. But that wasn't all. Megan was here for our women's challah bake, and she got the idea to deliver the extra challot to some of our more homebound congregants. Just 2 weeks ago, Megan visited with Hilda Schwartz and Myra Dashefsky in their homes and traded a holiday challah for some fascinating stories and the beginning of a connection. I've no doubt that Megan will keep this up, and I bet others of us would love the chance to do the same. Let me know after the holiday if you'd like to make a visit.

Third Jewish approach: Your suffering will teach you something about yourself. Nobody asks for cancer. Or an eating disorder. Or the death of a loved one. Or trouble conceiving. Or an addiction. Or any of the other afflictions we suffer. And yet, the process of dealing with each of them inevitably leads us to look at our priorities. How do I allocate my time, and is it different now that I'm dealing with my affliction? Is this particular item really that important to me? How do family and friends fit into my life? Where does my community fit in? Sometimes we end up reevaluating. We might realize that we've changed, that we stand for something else. And that's not a bad thing.

This idea has gotten a lot of traction in the public sphere this year with the publication of New York Times journalist David Brooks' book *The Second Mountain*--many thanks to Stuart Garrelick for sharing it with me. Brooks sets out to study what makes certain individuals deeply joyful, even though their daily tasks are not usually glamorous at all. He locates them all on what he calls "the second mountain". What he discovers is that the vast majority of these people have left behind their old lives of ambition in the wake of a personal tragedy--he calls it "the valley". Brooks' own valley was the dissolution of his 27-year marriage and the realization that he was a workaholic and not a very good partner or friend. Many of the afflictions we suffer would be considered a "valley", too.

Whether or not any of us ends up on a second mountain, we will still change because of our suffering.

Don't suffer alone, look to Jewish tradition for a boost of gratitude, learn something from our suffering and maybe be changed by it. Taken together, these pieces of guidance send

one overall message: We can't ignore our suffering. We must not try to avoid it. It's like the anthropologist Clifford Geertz taught in *The Interpretation of Cultures*<sup>5</sup>: "As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but *how to suffer*, how to make... physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat... something bearable, supportable, something as we say, sufferable." How to make them, in the words of Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud, "dear to us".

In a short while, we will sing the words of Untaneh Tokef for the last time this high holiday season: *Mi yichyeh u'mi yamut?* Who will live and who will die? *Mi yushpal u'mi yarum?* Who will be brought low and who will soar? On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur--today--it is sealed. As we walk through this year, we will discover what's in store for us. We may not feel equipped to deal with whatever is coming, but we do indeed have tools at our disposal, and we needn't walk alone.

You've been holding onto your level-1 suffering and your level-10 suffering this whole time. You may not be interested in sharing it with anyone around you, and that's ok. I'm not going to ask you to do that, although please know--this is a safe space for doing just that. Just by being here today and experiencing Yom Kippur together, we are taking that first step. I'd like to recite a communal mi sheberach, a prayer for all of us who suffer, to conclude.

If you'd like to look to the people on either side of you and acknowledge their suffering, please do that. If you're feeling just a tad braver, you can hold their hands.

*Mi shebeirach*<sup>6</sup> *avoteinu*  
*M'kor hab'racha l'imoteinu*  
May the source of strength,  
Who blessed the ones before us,  
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing,  
and let us say, Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz (1973). "The Interpretation of Cultures", p.111, Hachette UK

<sup>6</sup> Copyright 1988 Deborah Lynn Friedman and Drorah Setel (ASCAP), Sounds Write Productions, Inc. (ASCAP).

*Mi shebeirach imoteinu*

*M'kor habrachah l'avoteinu*

Bless those in need of healing with r'fuah sh'leimah,  
The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit,  
And let us say, Amen.

Amen.