

Carrying Our Seed Bags

On June 15, 1955, a Black woman named Lucille Times was driving to the dry cleaner in Montgomery, Alabama. Suddenly, a white bus driver named James Blake tried to force her from the road. He followed her all the way to the dry cleaner, trying again and again to drive her off the road. After a confrontation, which ended with a police officer beating *her* with his flashlight, Lucille Times called the NAACP to see what could be done. She suggested a bus boycott, but the leadership said they needed more time to prepare for such an action. So Lucille and her husband organized their own boycott, driving to bus stops and offering rides to Black passengers. Six months later, Rosa Parks defied the very same bus driver and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. announced a city-wide bus boycott, a seminal moment in the civil rights movement. Lucille Times died last month at the age of 100.

Aruka Juma, the last surviving male of his Amazon tribe the Juma, died in Brazil last February. Ted Lumpkin Jr., one of the last of the original Tuskegee Airmen, died in December, just days before his 101st birthday.

General Suhaila Siddiq was a renowned surgeon and the first woman to hold the rank of lieutenant general in Afghanistan. When the Taliban took control in 1996 and forced all of the women out of their jobs, they called General Siddiq back to work because they needed her to treat wounded Taliban fighters. She was a feminist icon, one of the few women who dared to walk the streets of Kabul without a face covering. She defied the Taliban by training female medical students whose studies had been interrupted by the takeover, refusing to stop even when the Taliban pressured her. She died last December.

We also lost Charley Pride, the first Black member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, Joe Long, the bassist for the Four Seasons, and John Davis, one of the real voices behind the lip-syncing duo Milli Vanilli.

Lillian Blancas, a widely-respected lawyer in El Paso, died at age 47, five days before her run-off election for municipal judge. She won anyway.

And Honestie Hodges, who was handcuffed by the police outside her home in Grand Rapids, Michigan, when she was 11 -- an incident that drew outrage across the country -- died last November. She was 14.

Lucille Times, Aruka Juma, Ted Lumpkin, Jr., General Suhaila Siddiq, Charley Pride, Joe Long, John Davis, Lillian Blancas, and Honestie Hodges, all died from COVID-19. I could go on, but this year, there are just too many obituaries to choose from. Four and a half million people have died from this virus so far, 650,000 in this country alone. And those are just the ones we know about. The enormity of the loss is difficult to grasp.

In some ways, it's not even the most profound loss we have experienced. 650,000 Americans have died, but for some of us, just one: one irreplaceable mother or father, one spouse or sibling, child or dear friend. And in that one life, a whole world has been taken from us. Even if our loved ones didn't die from the virus, their death this year was even more terrible. They died alone in a hospital, where visitors weren't allowed. They died across the country, where relatives couldn't say goodbye. They left survivors who were suddenly and totally alone, without the comfort of community to embrace them. These things happened all over the world, and in this very congregation, and so many of us felt powerless in the wake of such suffering.

Those of us who were lucky enough to escape a loss like this are counting our blessings, knowing that it could easily have been otherwise. But if you're one of the "lucky ones," and you're still feeling an overwhelming sense of grief, you're not alone. For there is a whole host of other losses we've had to contend with. We've lost jobs, education, and recreation. Our children and their parents had to endure distance learning. Our relationships have suffered, either from not enough time together or too much time together. The very routines and rhythms of our lives have been upended. And perhaps above all, we've lost our sense of security and safety. We are now regularly, often deeply, afraid to go about the daily tasks of living. The very air we breathe is a potential threat. And the hope that we would all go back to our normal lives once the vaccine was available has all but vanished into that potentially COVID-filled air.

Enough already, you might be thinking, tell me something I don't know. This litany of loss is so familiar to us -- after all, we've been living with it for a year and a half. And there is certainly something to be said for not dwelling on the pandemic, for focusing on other things, for moving on with our lives as best we can. But it seems to me that this Day of Days is no time for ignoring or avoiding the truth of our lives and our mortality. On Yom Kippur, we lay bare our souls, facing our anger and fear and grief in the hope that we can transform them -- and transform ourselves -- into something new. That is our task every year, but this year, the pandemic has shaped our lives so profoundly that I don't think we can do the work of atonement or renewal without contending with it. What are we to do in the face of all of this loss?

This isn't the first time the Jewish People has had to answer this question. Indeed, we've survived a long list of crises and tragedies. But tonight I want to focus on

one particular moment in our history, a moment that I think can teach us important lessons about how to face our current circumstances. Almost two thousand years ago, in the year 70 of the Common Era, the Temple in Jerusalem was burned to the ground by the mighty Roman army. It had been destroyed before, 600 years earlier, when the Babylonians conquered the Land of Israel, but that time the Temple was rebuilt. This time, the Temple was gone for good. The center of Jewish communal and religious life for the past thousand years, God's very own House, up in smoke. Thousands of Jews were killed, enslaved, or exiled. Worst of all, in the Jewish People's view, the Shekhinah, God's very presence, had also fled the scene. In a striking midrash, after the destruction of the Temple, God summons the angels and asks them, "When a human king has a child who dies and he mourns for him, what does he do?" The angels answer, "He sits and weeps." And God says, "I shall do so as well."¹ Even God doesn't know what to do in the face of such loss, and has to ask the angels for help. And the angels tell God, just sit and cry. That is all there is to be done.

The angels are right. When everything is destroyed, sometimes tears are all we have left. The Talmud teaches, "Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked and prayer is not accepted as it once was.... Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked, the gates of tears were not locked" (Ber. 32b). Though the usual avenues of connection between God and the Jewish People had been cut off, the gates of tears -- through which both the Jewish People and God passed through -- remained open. The Jewish People kept that gate open by instituting the annual fast of Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples and

¹ Eichah Rabbah 1:1

other calamities that have befallen us. Two thousand years later, Jews still observe Tisha B'Av as a day of mourning by fasting, singing laments, and crying.

There is a famous story about Tisha B'Av that goes something like this. One day, Napoleon was strolling through a neighborhood on Erev Tisha B'Av and passed a synagogue. He looked through the window and saw people sitting on the floor in the dark, wailing and lamenting. He asked one of his officers what was going on. "Those are Jews," he answered. "They're mourning the loss of their temple." Napoleon says, "What? I didn't hear anything about a temple being destroyed! When did that happen?" And the officer replied, "It happened 1700 years ago." And Napoleon said, "This is a people who will live to see their Temple rebuilt."

While it may seem strange to mourn a nearly 2,000-year old loss, Tisha B'Av holds the very keys to our survival. As Rabbi Tali Adler writes, "Tisha B'Av, in its best form, is a day when we do not need to be afraid of tears. It is a day when parents teach their children how to cry, how to expose and embrace their pain. On Tisha B'Av, a day of communal mourning, we cry openly because we believe that in the face of a world filled with pain, knowledge of how to cry—the Torah of tears—is a gift that human beings need to survive."²

The gates of tears are still open, and not just on Tisha B'Av. Plenty of us have gone through those gates during this past year and a half. We cried when we or our loved ones got sick, when our simchas got cancelled, when the sheer exhaustion of taking care of small children while working from home just got to be too much for us. We cried as we spent holidays alone or apart from the ones we love. We cried out of fear, frustration, loneliness, despair. It can be disconcerting for those who aren't used to

² <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/338849.15?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

being criers now finding themselves regularly in tears, but it's actually a healthy response to what we're going through. When we cry, we're accepting the loss, feeling the pain, giving voice to it. Tears are honest (unless you happen to be a very talented actor). Tears are cathartic. And tears connect us, for when we see others cry, we see and share their pain. When we let others see us cry, we open ourselves up to the possibility of being comforted by them.

The destruction of the Temple taught us how to mourn, and it also taught us how not to be swallowed up by our grief. The Talmud teaches:

When the Temple was destroyed a second time, there was an increase in the number of ascetics among the Jews, whose practice was to not eat meat and to not drink wine. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: "My children, for what reason do you not eat meat and do you not drink wine?" They said to him: "Shall we eat meat, from which offerings are sacrificed upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist? Shall we drink wine, which is poured as a libation upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist?" Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: "If so, we should not eat bread either, since the meal-offerings that were offered upon the altar have ceased." They replied: "You are correct. It is possible to subsist on produce." He said to them: "We should not eat produce either, since the bringing of the first fruits has ceased." They replied: "You are correct. We will no longer eat the produce of the seven species from which the first fruits were brought, as it is possible to subsist on other produce." He said to them: "If so, we should not drink water, since the water libation has ceased." They were silent. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: "My children, come, and I will tell you how we should act.

To not mourn at all is impossible, but to mourn excessively as you are doing is also impossible.... Rather, this is what the Sages said: A person may plaster his house, but he must leave a small amount without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple.... A person may prepare all that he needs for a meal, but he must leave out a small item to remember the destruction of the Temple... A woman may engage in all of her cosmetic treatments, but she must leave out a small matter to remember the destruction of the Temple” (Bava Batra 60b).

You can understand why those Jews became ascetics. Their grief after losing their religious and communal home, their very identity, overwhelmed them. Eating meat and drinking wine -- usually symbols of rejoicing -- were now painful reminders of the sacrifices they once joyfully offered to God, a God whom they felt had abandoned them. But as Rabbi Yehoshua shows them, everything they eat and drink, even water, was once used in the rituals of the Temple. To avoid any reminder of their loss would mean death. So Rabbi Yehoshua suggests another way to mourn: don't stop living, he says. Build your houses, make your meals, get dolled up. But leave one small piece unfinished -- a corner unplastered, an ingredient omitted, an accessory left at home. In this way, you don't ignore the loss, but you find a way to accept it and honor it without it taking over your life.

That is our challenge today, to find a place for our grief to live without letting it consume us. For some of us, it's easier to ignore the pain, to focus on just getting through each day, to keep up our “business as usual” attitude as much as we can. Or if we're really in denial, we fool ourselves into thinking that the virus is no big deal, that this is all a conspiracy and a hoax. For others, it's easier to give in to the grief, to

withdraw completely from the world because it's just too frightening to face. But Rabbi Yehoshua urges us to take the middle path, to find ways to acknowledge our loss while continuing to live and thrive. We don't have to leave our house unplastered or our soup unsalted, though if that speaks to you, by all means, do it! Otherwise, Jewish tradition is a treasure trove of rituals, of ancient ways to express the truths that are beyond words. So as we live through this period of anxiety and loss, we might make room in our days for more ritual. Daily prayer or meditation can help us maintain a sense of gratitude, calm, and strength. Making Shabbat a day of rest gives us a regular time for reflection and renewal. And we will especially need our rituals of memory: lighting yahrtzeit candles, reciting Kaddish, giving tzedakah in honor of the lives we've lost. These rituals help us to carry our losses with us as we continue to live.

The last lesson of the destruction of the Temple is a lesson of creativity and adaptability. For out of the ashes of the Temple came the birth of Judaism as we know it. Instead of the Temple, Jews congregated in synagogues. Instead of priests who were born into the job, the leaders of the community were rabbis chosen for their Torah learning and wisdom. Instead of animal sacrifices, prayer became the "offering of our lips." Here's how Rabbi Benay Lappe describes this moment, what she calls the "crash" of the destruction of the Temple: "One small group of queer, fringe-y, outsider, hippie guys...[we call them rabbis today]...had a different idea.... They accepted the crash, they embraced the crash, went back to the tradition, took with them what still worked, mixed the old with the new, and created a radical new tradition."³ When the world was turned upside down and all the old ways they knew were gone, the rabbis didn't give up hope. They remembered what was true and enduring, what no army could crush and no

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBWIEAR_GQY

fire could destroy: the covenant between God and the Jewish People, and the Torah that tells the story of that covenant. So they took it upon themselves to write a new chapter of that story, a story that we're still writing today.

It's too soon to tell what inventions and innovations might emerge from this new reality, but we have had some time to discover what has revealed itself as essential for each of us and what we can live without. There are activities and obligations we won't take on again, having realized that they weren't that important, or we simply enjoy a less scheduled life. We might also decide that there are new hobbies and experiences we're no longer going to wait to pursue. There are friendships we might never rekindle, and loved ones we will recommit to staying in better touch with. And then there are the new discoveries we've made or the truths we had forgotten but are now keenly aware of. We've realized that being in nature is healing, and that we need to spend more time outside. We've come to understand that, like it or not, our behavior affects others -- that's the price we pay for living in community. We can no longer deny that the legacy of racism is a scourge that affects nearly every aspect of our society, including who lives and who dies. We have a greater appreciation for how much good and how much damage our political leaders can do, and therefore how important our civic duties are. And we've learned that while technology has been a lifeline to so many of us, it also has its limits. We simply cannot sing together over Zoom and there is no replacement for an actual, real life hug. If we follow the example of our ancestors, we will internalize these lessons and use them to create something new: not a new Judaism, or not just a new Judaism, but a new world, one closer to the world that ought to be.

One of the texts that has sustained me this past year is Psalm 126. The famous verse from this psalm is, "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy," but I actually prefer the verse that comes next: "Though he goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag, he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves" (126:6). I imagine this farmer walking through the field, tears streaming down his face. I don't know why he's crying, but I can guess -- it's because sometimes life is hard, just too hard to bear. But as he weeps, he keeps working, sowing seeds as he walks. He hasn't given up hope in a better future. He knows that out of these seeds, watered by his tears, something beautiful will grow.