

Shemot 5782 - My Friend Is Sad  
Rabbi Heath Watenmaker  
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Sometimes, there's nothing like a good children's book to capture how I'm feeling and offer deep insight into how to move forward. There's something about the way a good children's book author can take a complex set of difficult feelings and distill them into a heartfelt, clear. This week, I've been thinking about the Mo Willems book *My Friend Is Sad*. It features two of Willems' most beloved characters: Gerald, an Elephant, and Piggie, who's a pig. Throughout Willems' Elephant and Piggie books, these two best friends go through all sorts of silly antics together, but always have some important lessons hidden between the snarky humor and the witty dialogue. In *My Friend Is Sad*, Piggie comes upon Gerald who seems down in the doldrums. Though it's unclear at the beginning of the story what, exactly, is bothering Gerald, Piggie understands early on that her friend is sad. What follows are Piggie's usual high-energy, wacky attempts to cheer her friend up - she pretends to be a cowboy, a clown, a robot - but despite a momentary smile, Gerald is still sad. But after all the antics, when Piggie just sits next to Gerald, she says to him, "I am sorry. I wanted to make you happy. But you are still sad." In that moment, something shifts. Gerald replies, "I am not sad now. I am happy!" "You are happy?" replies Piggie. "I am happy because you are here!" says Gerald, wrapping Piggie up in a big elephant hug.

I've been thinking a lot about this book this week for a few reasons, particularly because my friend, our beloved Cantor Jaime, is sad. As many of you may know by now, her mom, Marci Shpall, passed away early Wednesday morning. Marci was a kind, warm soul, and a wonderful, regular presence at so many B'nei Mitzvah services on Shabbat mornings over the years. She will certainly be missed and her memory will continue to be a blessing to all who knew and loved her, and we send prayers for comfort to Jaime, Marcel, Ella, Sam, Lauren, and George.

There's also a more general sense of sadness – or despair, or what some mental health professionals call ambiguous loss or ambiguous grief – that seems to be in the air as news reports of the rapid increase in the Omicron variant spreads across the country and across the globe. With this new spike comes the now-all-too-familiar sense of uncertainty and frustration as well. For some, it's a reminder of the trauma of those early days of this pandemic, or a recognition that we're still not past the trauma brought on by a global pandemic and the disruptions and losses left in its wake. But this is not March of 2020; we have vaccines and boosters, we understand the tools and the safety precautions much better than those scary, early days. But still, enough already.

One of the things I love most about what Piggie and Gerald learn in *My Friend Is Sad* is the very simple and elegant way Willems uses their experience to teach empathy. The idea of being present for someone going through something difficult. It's not taking on their pain and it's not about trying to make it go away. It's a very Jewish lesson of just being present. Not worrying about finding the right thing to say or do, but just showing up - whether physically or with a phone call (even to just say "I'm here for you" or "I care and I can just listen") or on Zoom - when

those we care about are hurting. There's a teaching in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Jewish legal codes, that when visiting a mourner, comforters (yes, this is what our tradition calls someone visiting a mourner - מְנַחֵמִים - ones who provide comfort) comforters should not begin a conversation with the mourners until the mourners begin one first<sup>1</sup>. It's about following the lead of the person or people who are hurting.

Certainly Judaism and the Jewish people are no strangers to sadness and despair, to pain and loss. But at its core, Judaism focuses not on despair, but on the importance of holding onto hope in the midst of the most impossibly difficult moments.

This week, we begin the book of Exodus, which recounts our central narrative of hope, of moving from the pain of the things that restrict or constrict us and journeying, slowly but determinedly, towards freedom. Our Torah portion this week, and indeed the Hebrew name for the book of Exodus, is Shemot, names. The portion begins with a recounting of the names of Jacob's sons (unfortunately omitting his daughter Dinah) who went down and settled in Egypt, and the subsequent success and flourishing the Children of Israel enjoyed in Egypt. But, despite this success, over time, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8), and the tides turn. Indeed, our portion this week starts off with an apparent loss of hope, moving from the high point of Joseph's fame and respect throughout the land of Egypt, to the rise of a new Pharaoh who "did not know Joseph," and instead sees the Israelites as a threat. In an attempt to minimize this perceived threat, he enslaves them, but still their numbers increase. In fear, he orders that newborn males be put to death, but thanks to the bravery of the midwives, many Israelite baby boys are spared. Things continue to devolve, until, after years of this increasing oppression, the Israelites cry out to God. In the text, we read, "God remembered God's covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Ex. 2:23-24). It is perhaps this outcry, this moment of faith in impossible circumstances, that sets the Exodus in motion - the verses that follow this outcry cut to Moses, in tending a flock as an Egyptian outcast in Midian, who encounters a bush that was all aflame, but not consumed. This moment sets Moses on a path that brings him back to Egypt, bringing the hope of redemption to the Israelites. Despite his resistance and the dangers that lay ahead, Moses shows up for his tribe.

Throughout Jewish history, one traditional response when faced with fear or difficulty or death, is to turn to the words of the Psalms. Words that speak of God's nearness, and ask some of the hard questions we often find ourselves asking in challenging moments. In Psalm 27, which is traditionally read throughout the month of Elul, the month of introspection and soul-searching leading up to the High Holy Days, we read:

Hear, Adonai, my voice –  
I am crying out!  
My heart has said to You: "Seek my face."  
I am seeking Your face, Adonai –  
Do not hide Your face from me.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shulchan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 376:1

Do not turn Your servant away in anger,  
You have been my help –

Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, God of my deliverance!

The Psalm beseeches God to not forget about us. Even if you don't believe in God, or this image of God doesn't resonate with you, it's a call out into the universe, a prayer that we not be left all alone. That in our moments of despair, we need help; we are not meant to go it alone. At the end of the Psalm, the Psalmist concludes:

קַוֵּה אֶל-יְהוָה חֲזִק וַיֵּאמֶץ לִבְךָ וְקַוֵּה אֶל-יְהוָה

Wait (*kaveh*) for Adonai –

Fill your waiting with hope in Adonai;

Let your heart be strong and of good courage,

And wait hopefully (*kaveh*) for Adonai.<sup>2</sup>

The word *kaveh*, repeated twice in this last verse, here translated as “wait,” is also connected to the word *tikvah*, hope. In his commentary on this last verse, Rabbi Richard Levy, of blessed memory, explains that the word *kaveh* suggests “not merely patience (“wait”) but an active, prayer-filled patience (“hope”).”<sup>3</sup> What Rabbi Levy suggests is the idea that though hope includes an element of patience and waiting, at its core, hope is about more than just waiting - it is waiting with faith.

Doing the robot or dressing up as cowboys or clowns might not take away sadness, but for Gerald, it does bring a momentary smile to his face, a bit of joy and hope in the midst of sadness. When we show up, and are present for ourselves and for those going through difficulty, we carry hope and faith with us. Together, we can wait actively, and work towards fashioning a world with a little less brokenness than the world as it is today.

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by Rabbi Richard Levy, in *Songs Ascending: The Book of Psalms, A New Translation*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 100.