

Rabbi Jen Feldman  
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One of the great privileges and responsibilities of the rabbinate is being welcomed into people's lives during times of sorrow as well as during times of rejoicing. I have seen lives heartbreakingly changed overnight due to illness, unexpected events and deaths. But serving a congregation in an ongoing way, over a period of years, means that I also witness as lives continue beyond those times of transition -- as new realities unfold, and people rebuild and find meaning after illness, suffering and loss. I've been inspired by countless individuals and I have developed a deep respect for the human capacity for strength and resilience.

For my family, as you know, this past year has been [to use one of my husband Ben's favorite phrases] a rich and multifaceted one. It has included, on the joyous side, the gift of our second son, Hillel, and the pleasure of starting our older son, Sol, in kindergarten; on the more difficult side, there's been Ben's back injury and hospitalization as well as illness in my immediate and extended family. Many of you have faced challenges and all manner of difficulties and losses as well. And, as all of us know, if we didn't have such experiences during the past year, they undoubtedly await us in some year to come.

So this morning I want us together to delve deeper into the complex issue of resilience, and examine its mystery through a Jewish lens: How do we get through life's most difficult trials?

As an entryway into this discussion, I'd like to turn to this morning's Torah reading. One reason we read this portion on Yom Kippur is because it relates the sacrificial service of the High Priest that provided atonement for the Priest, his family, the community of Priests, and ultimately the whole community of Israel in the biblical era. It links our modern-day soul-searching and our *teshuvah* to the ancient practices of the first Israelites in the desert generation. But this year I see a different reason for our reading this *parsha* on Yom Kippur, inspired in part by a teaching from my colleague and friend Rabbi Rachel Gartner. The Torah portion begins: *Acharei mot*. After the death. This refers to what has happened in a previous part of Leviticus (Shemini, Lev. 10:1-10:3). There, the two sons of Aaron, the High Priest, are offering a sacrifice -- when, unexpectedly, brutally, they are instantly killed and consumed by fire. Overcome with grief, Aaron is *tidom* -- he is silent.

It is striking that after such a loss, the current Torah portion begins, almost nonchalantly, *acharei mot*, after the death. Somehow, following grief so deep that he is stunned into silence, Aaron gets up and continues his duties in the Temple as he had done the very days before. The Torah on Yom Kippur, then, puts forward the truth and the mystery of the human capacity to continue. Aaron's ability -- our ability -- to go on.

Consider another example from Torah, perhaps a more familiar one. After years of fear and estrangement Jacob is on the way to meet his brother Esau. Before crossing the Jabbok River to meet Esau, he has a mysterious encounter. We read in *B'reishit*, in Genesis:

<sup>22</sup> That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. <sup>24</sup> So Jacob was left alone, and a man

wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. <sup>26</sup> Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

<sup>27</sup> The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

<sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, <sup>[e]</sup> because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

<sup>29</sup> Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, <sup>[f]</sup> saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

My colleague, Rabbi Miriam Klotz, sees in the story of Jacob's wrestling with the man or angel a paradigm for our own encounters with illness, death and grief. When the diagnosis comes, when we receive the inconceivable phone call about a death or tragedy, our reality changes overnight. We may feel that we have entered an endless night of struggle, that we are confronting a loss that is unbearable, perhaps even beyond words to describe it, with no light for seeing the way forward. We wrestle in darkness unsure of our future. And yet Jacob, our ancestor, made it to the morning. He survived and, what's more, demanded and received a blessing from his midnight challenger. He wrestled meaning, and ultimately could see and name the face of G-d in his struggle.

But if these two stories – of Aaron after the death of his sons, and of Jacob and his long night of wrestling – provide examples of resilience in the face of loss and challenge, still they do not tell us how to achieve resilience. We are left with the question with which we began:

How do we get through life's most difficult trials? How do we find the way, the strength to begin again?

Admittedly, some of what makes a resilient spirit will always be a mystery. But a Jewish practice guides and strengthens us in at least three parts of the answer: Nurturing the ability to imagine a better future – call this "hope." Power in being present for those who are grieving, or "witness." And our flashes of experiencing God's presence with and within us, which we might call "grace."

Barbara Fredrickson, principal investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at UNC-Chapel Hill, made hope sound simple in a recent interview. "Any situation in which you are still breathing there is something good to find in it," she said. In Jewish terms we have the insistence of the Torah, "choose life that you shall live." We define God as the source of life -- *melech chofetz* bachayyim, the One who desires life. But sometimes it can be difficult to find hope inside, or to choose life. How do we get there?

In our tradition, those mourning the death of a family member recite the *Kaddish Yatom*, the Mourners' Kaddish, throughout their period of grieving. People are always surprised when they

discover that the Mourners' Kaddish does not say a word about death. Rather, it praises God in every way possible:

*Yit'barakh v'yish'tabach v'yit'pa'ar v'yit'romam v'yit'nasei v'yit'hadar v'yit'aleh v'yit'halal sh'mei d'kud'sha b'rikh hu.*

Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty, upraised, and lauded be the Name of the Holy and Blessed One!

And it ends by imagining a future of abundant life, in which “the One who makes peace in the heavens” causes peace to descend onto us all.

The *Kaddish Yatom* is powerful, inspiring and uplifting. I believe that it is for these very qualities that our tradition, in its wisdom, insists that those in the depths of grief recite it, over and over and over again.

As Jews, we believe in the power of words. Words can destroy: Our tradition teaches that engaging in gossip, *lashon hara*, is the equivalent of murder. Words once spoken, cannot be taken back and their damage cannot be undone. Words can create: *B'reishit*, Genesis, tells us that the world itself came into being through God's words: “Let there be light! Let dry land appear! Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature.... And, behold, it was so.”

In a time of doubt, isolation and unaccustomed silence, the familiar words of the Mourners' Kaddish reach out to us across the centuries and insist: There is meaning in this world. There is blessing. These are ideas that might be impossible for grief-stricken people to say, think, or feel on their own. With each recitation, this prayer offers the mourner a connection to the world of the living, a vision of the world as it may yet be. It helps to instill and reinforce hope.

But davening *Kaddish Yatom* is not a path one travels alone. In our tradition mourners recite it only in the presence of a minyan, a quorum of ten adult Jews. Words – even the words of the Kaddish, which serves as a bridge between death and life – do not, alone, strengthen the soul sufficiently. That requires the presence of other people.

Sylvia Boorstein, the meditation teacher known for fusing Jewish and Buddhist thought, recounts the following parable in her book, [Happiness is an Inside Job](#): A woman comes to the Buddha and begs him to revive her dead son. The Buddha says that he will -- once she has succeeded in gathering a mustard seed from the homes of everyone in the village who has not been touched by death. She comes back empty-handed and becomes a disciple of the Buddha. Boorstein remarks, though, that the parable concludes too quickly. It is missing a crucial step. In her version, this classic tale is reimagined to end instead, “and then the Buddha and the woman sat together and they cried.”

There comes a point when sorrows are too great to bear alone. And this is when we must be present for each other. Rabbis of the Talmud (Nedarim 41a) wrote that each person who visits a sick person lifts 1/60 of their illness. They concluded that if someone received 60 visits they would be cured. I have seen first hand the spiritually healing power of simple presence. When we are able to visit and simply listen to another person who is ill or grieving – when we can sit

with them, and be truly present for them -- this simple act has the power to lift them -- for a few moments at least, and sometimes more -- out of the confining, silent place of loss and sorrow. When my husband, Ben, was hospitalized with a ruptured disc at the beginning of the summer, friends from the Kehillah came by to visit. Another friend whom Ben has known for nearly 30 years took several days off of work and flew down from New Jersey. In pain so excruciating that he sometimes literally couldn't walk three steps, Ben will tell you that those visits made a world of difference. He was reassured by the ability of people he knew simply to be with him while he was in pain. Their visits reminded him of the world outside the hospital, of the possibility of recovery, and helped him to find strength and even a modicum of humor in a difficult and decidedly unfunny situation.

A dear friend and colleague of mine lost her mother less than a week before this past Rosh Hashanah. She told me how every person who came to *Shiva* and every card that she received -- even from people she thought of as distant acquaintances -- meant the world to her. She told me how at a time of profound loss she felt literally "held" by so many people near and far.

At times, we may be aware, too, of another kind of presence. Rabbi Naomi Levy tells the story of a family whose whole neighborhood was destroyed by wildfires in California. Sifting through the debris of their lives they found the mezuzah from the front door. It seemed miraculous to them that the mezuzah, and the scroll inside, had not been destroyed. The family related to Rabbi Levy how in that moment they knew that there was a part of them that could not be destroyed by the tragedy. That they could rebuild. Rabbi Levy writes:

Within each of us, I believe there lies a space that is as indestructible as a sacred scroll. A space that is holy and eternal, unalterable and untarnishable. A space of purity and wisdom that enables us to find the strength to rebuild our lives after tragedy. Not even death can have dominion over it...call it the soul, the life breath, the spirit. We all have access to it. It is the seat of God within each of us. ...Not the God who can prevent evil or cure disease. But the God who can heal us by being beside us in our suffering. The God who gives us strength to dream once more. The God who assures each and every one of us, You are not alone, I am with you

One of our own congregants, after the tragic death of her life partner, wrote this exquisitely sensitive poem expressing God as her ability to withstand the pain of this loss and to continue on. She has given me permission to share an excerpt of it with you today:

If there is one who holds my pain  
If there is, it is you.  
You are what holds my heart when it breaks too broken to see that there is you.  
You hold it with me, You hold it for me  
When I cannot bear to go on  
If there is one  
Who holds my life, it is you.

When we leave the synagogue this evening we will wish each other L'shanah tovah m'tukah -- a good and a sweet New Year. We hope for ourselves and for each other that this will be a year of joy and blessing. Even while we make those wishes, we are well aware that we cannot know

what the future holds. So we pray: God, grant us the wisdom and presence of mind to appreciate every moment of happiness and beauty. When we are faced with difficult times, guide us to comfort each other. Help us to nurture hope within ourselves, and strengthen our souls with Your presence.

May we all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life and blessing for the coming year! G'mar Chatimah Tovah.