

## **Is Your Suffering Dear to You?** **Rabbi Suzie Jacobson, Rosh Hashanah 5780**

This summer we spent most Friday nights celebrating Shabbat in the Temple Israel garden. The space is beautiful - soft grass, shady trees, the cool breeze from several fans Rabbi Zecher placed around the garden. And before the *sh'ma* when the clergy invited the congregation to take a deep breath, close our eyes and sink into the silence we heard ... traffic. And in this neighborhood, often the piercing wail of an ambulance siren or the overwhelming whoosh of a medical helicopter.

If this congregation were suburban, we might close our eyes and hear birds and cicadas. We might consider prayer to be a vacation, a refuge, a moment to put down the real and immerse in the ideal. But here, we are blessed to always know just where we are, surrounded by so much life.

Health and illness. Joy and suffering. Hope and anguish.

When we pray, we don't separate ourselves from life, we submerge ourselves. With every passing ambulance or helicopter, our hearts flicker, even for the briefest moment, towards that unknown person on the gurney. But we don't need a siren to recognize suffering. Here, sitting next to us in this room there is pain too. Sometimes it is easier to pray for the unknown patients, doctors and caregivers than to share and acknowledge the pain we each carry.

There is so much life in this room.

I see parents and children, grandparents; Friends, strangers; My students and my teachers; Leaders of this community, past and present; Newcomers and those who have been here for decades. Those who chose Judaism and those who inherited Judaism.

But in a crowd it is hard to truly see one another. We can't easily recognize-  
The person with an invisible disability, or a chronic illness who struggled mightily just to show up this morning.

The person who is exhausted because they work full time, parent full time, care for a sick or struggling loved one full time.

The person living with depression, anxiety, disordered eating, addiction, who suffers in silence because when asked how they are doing, it is polite to just reply "I am fine."

The person who mourns but is no longer invited to stand first for kaddish. The person for whom grief is complicated or ambiguous. The person who hears the sound of the shofar, and yearns for their spouse, child, parent, sibling.

I am reminded of this beautiful and complicated story in the Talmud.<sup>1</sup>

We are taught that Rabbi Eliezer was ill, and his teacher Rabbi Yohanan came to visit him.

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud Bavli Brachot 5b

When the teacher enters he sees his student lying alone in a dark room. Rabbi Yohanan exposes his arm and light radiates, filling the house. He now sees that Rabbi Eliezer is weeping and asks, “Why are you crying? Are you crying because you did not study enough Torah?”

“No,” says Rabbi Eliezer.

“Are you crying because you are poor and lack food? Not everyone can be wealthy”

“No,” says Rabbi Eliezer

“Are you crying over children who have died, I have lost children myself.”

“No,” says Rabbi Eliezer. “I am not crying over my misfortune. I weep because all light fades into darkness and all beauty eventually rots.”

Recognizing the deep depression of his fellow, Rabbi Yohanan responds: “Yes. That is certainly a reason to weep.” and they cry together

He continues, “Is your suffering dear to you?”

Rabbi Eliezer responds, “Neither this suffering nor its outcome.”

Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yohanan says, “Give me your hand.” Rabbi Eliezer gives him his hand and he is helped out of bed.

There is so much to learn from this story. Rabbi Yohanan embodies the practice of *Bikkur Cholim*, visiting the sick. When he enters into Eliezer’s darkness and desperation, it is his very body, his physical presence that shines light. They weep together. Yohanan is able to meet Eliezer face to face in his pain. Tradition teaches that when we visit in this way, when we truly show up for the other and acknowledge their reality we can remove 1/60th of their pain. We can not cure, but compassion brings real healing.<sup>2</sup>

From Rabbi Yochanan we also learn what not to do. When he sees his student crying, he is determined to know why, he makes assumptions. “You didn’t learn well, you are poor, you have suffered personal losses.” In this version of “Don’t be sad, everything is ok” Rabbi Yohanan forgets to actually ask Rabbi Eliezer what he needs. He at first does not realize that his presence is precious, not his wisdom.

Yohanan asks, “**Is your suffering dear to you?**” Eliezer is only released from his darkness when he is ready and surrounded by someone he trusts.

The Talmud is not advocating for a “God heals all wounds” theology. Nor do the rabbis reject medicine. They often discuss different potions and illnesses.

Instead, we are meant to understand that each of us, the great and the humble, have an important role to play in supporting each other through life’s tribulations.

### **Is your suffering dear to you?**

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<sup>2</sup> Nedarim 39b, Leviticus Rabba 34

The Talmud wants to teach us to say, “no,” to follow the Deuteronomist<sup>3</sup> and choose life, choose a tradition that encourages us to search for blessing and connection, rather than self pity or shame.

**Is your suffering dear to you?** What if sometimes the answer is yes?

What if suffering is like a memento, a cherished reminder of a current or past experience, something you’re just not quite ready to let go of yet.

In grief, suffering is evidence that you loved.  
In pain, suffering is evidence that you live in a fragile, mortal body.

**Suffering is dear to me**, suffering is a teacher.

The Greek playwright Aeschylus called this *pathei mathos*, “learning from adversity,” the wisdom that arises from personal suffering.

My rabbinical school Dean and beloved teacher Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld rolls her eyes and calls this “Another Growth Opportunity...”

Personal loss is so often the genesis of true learning.

In the Torah, each of our Biblical forebears struggle with their own insecurities, failures and losses as they seek to carry out God’s will. Abraham’s story begins when he separates permanently from his family of origin and travels to a foreign land. Joseph endures the pit, jail, and exile from his people. And in the haftarah for today, Chanah watches everyone around her give birth to healthy children, as she mourns her empty womb.

Their suffering is for a time dear, it serves as a guide and teacher.  
Abraham bravely travels a lonely road so he can merit the covenant  
Joseph endures the pit so that he may rise to become a great leader  
And Chana’s infertility teaches her how to pray, and she gives birth to a great leader in Israel.

In each story, our characters struggle and then heal. They learn and change, but when ready they put down their suffering, they move into a new narrative. Eventually their suffering no longer serves them; neither as teacher nor memento.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes, “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.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Deuteronomy 30:19

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz (2017). “The Interpretation of Cultures”, p.111, Hachette UK

The first noble truth of Buddhism is that suffering is part of human life. The fourth noble truth is that freedom from suffering is achieved through practicing Buddhism.

Sorry folks! Freedom from pain sounds great! But Judaism offers no such promise.

Suffering and pain are intrinsic to the human experience from the moment Adam and Eve leave that garden. Our tradition offers no magic elixir, no philosophical or spiritual balm, no freedom from the human condition. Rather, Judaism teaches us that the only way to make suffering sufferable, is to remember that we are never alone. That we have a community that is responsible for us, and we are responsible for the community.

In Talmud Taanit, a person is told that if others in the community are in pain, they are not permitted to enjoy themselves.<sup>5</sup>

**Your suffering is dear to me.**

Instead insisting that others move on, get over their grief and angst, we are called to sit down and bear witness to their pain.

In a recent TED talk, journalist David Brooks shares his own story of pain.<sup>6</sup> He sees his suffering in the context of a cultural epidemic.

He shares, “I was detached. And at the same time, a lot of other people were detached and isolated and fragmented from each other. Thirty-five percent of Americans over 45 are chronically lonely. Only eight percent of Americans report having meaningful conversation with their neighbors. Only 32 percent of Americans say they trust their neighbors...The fastest-growing political party is unaffiliated. The fastest-growing religious movement is unaffiliated. Depression rates are rising, mental health problems are rising... life expectancy is falling, not rising....”

Brooks calls this a “social and relational crisis,” marked by increased fragmentation, isolation and extreme loneliness. And he believes the answer is to stop suffering in silence and relearn how to connect to other human beings.

Brooks believes that the way to do this is to learn from the people who already do this well, people who intrinsically know how to connect and make others feel seen. He calls such people “weavers,” and he shows how they are already doing remarkable things to build connection and community in our world.

In this community we have some incredible teachers to learn from-

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<sup>5</sup> Taanit 11a

<sup>6</sup> See David Brooks, “The Lies our Culture Tells About What Matters, and a Better Way to Live,” [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_brooks\\_the\\_lies\\_our\\_culture\\_tells\\_us\\_about\\_what\\_matters\\_and\\_a\\_better\\_way\\_to\\_live/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_the_lies_our_culture_tells_us_about_what_matters_and_a_better_way_to_live/transcript)

We have the TI Cares Army of Kindness, led by Remi Dansinger and Andy Lesser Gonzalez, who show up powerfully with words and meals for those who struggle with illness or suffer a loss.

We have so many people who write beautiful cards in times of joy and sorrow, show up at funerals and shivas, sometimes with cookies, and make it a point to show each other how much they matter, every day.

We have leaders like Cantor Einhorn, and Rabbi Zecher whose holy work is rooted in decades of relationship and support for the members of this community.

Our world is full of such pain right now, political pain, social pain, personal pain. But here we have the opportunity to do something countercultural. We can build a community that is sweeter, deeper, more loving than the polarized and pained world around us.

In a moment we will read the words of the Unetaneh Tokef. One of the most challenging and complicated prayers in our tradition.

“Who will live and who will die?”

“Who will be serene and who will be troubled?”

“Who will be tranquil and who will be tormented?”

Perhaps those are the wrong questions to ask as we enter this new year.

Let us ask these questions-

“Who will heal and who will reach out for healing?”

“Who will listen, and who will find a voice to speak?”

“Who will love, and who will learn that they matter?”

When Rabbi Yohanan enters Eliezer’s darkness, he brings light and patience and compassion. Only then, when asked if suffering is dear to him, is Rabbi Eliezer capable of moving beyond his pain to a place of healing and hope.

For so many of us, suffering lingers - serious illness, unimaginable loss, trauma and tragedy. Suffering is a part of what makes us human. It may be for a time an important memento that helps us understand where we have been. Or an intractable part of what makes us who we are. But when we deeply connect with compassionate community, in our suffering we can find a measure of healing, beauty and love. Even if only by 1/60th.

This year, may our healing be contagious. May we prioritize building a community where every person matters, where we take the time to sit and visit with those who are in pain. And may we all find sweetness, growth and joy in this new year.