

A Jewish Voice on Mourning after September 11th

Despite the fact that President Bush has declared an end to the official period of mourning, we know that as a nation and as individuals we are still grieving the many losses that are the result of the September 11 attacks. We mourn the dead, injured and missing who were the direct victims of the terror. We also mourn the assumptions and values that were shattered in the horror of that day. As those of us who were not directly in harm's way and whose loved ones are not lost, injured or missing begin to face what is ahead, we are charged with the obligation to provide comfort and support for those whose more direct wounds are still weeping. To that end, we look to ancient sources of wisdom for guidance in providing comfort. Judaism's elaborate healing rituals, which developed in response to the times of great communal catastrophe faced by the Jewish people over the millennia, are particularly relevant to the current crisis. They provide for individual needs, in the midst of community, even when the community itself has been deeply wounded. They offer helpful guidelines for this time of national crisis.

The Jewish mourning rituals speak a universal language of solace and healing. Recognizing that healing takes time, they present a time-line of practices, which acknowledge the changing intensity yet continuing needs of those who grieve. They admonish those who urge an impossibly hasty "return to normal" and validate the turbulent emotions that for many are only beginning to break through. Providing for the changing experience of mourning, these rituals console those who may otherwise feel shame and self-doubt when their experience of grief does not conform to the expectation that they should bandage their wounds and get back to a sense of normal that no longer feels appropriate.

The Mourner's Path

A mourner who enters the Temple Mount...may enter and walk around to the left.... They would then say to him, "May HaMakom [the One who dwells in this House] comfort you.... Who are they who circle to the left? A mourner, an excommunicant, one who has someone sick at home, and one concerned about a lost object." -Talmud: Semahot

Judaism's ancient mourner's blessing is especially relevant to our current crisis. When the Temple stood, it acknowledged a broader category of mourners than we usually associate with that term for, as the Talmud tells us, those who enter the Temple through the designated Mourners' Gate (visible today in the ruins of the Temple's southern steps) included not only those who had losses due to death, but also those dealing with illness, the loss of tangible assets, and those who had experienced some change in their sense of community. Certainly, in the wake of the terrorist attacks, almost all of us would qualify to walk the ancient Temple's Mourners' Path.

With the destruction of the Temple, The Mourners' Blessing was reformulated to address the new circumstance of Jewish life. It became the blessing used today: "May God comfort you in the midst of the remnants who mourn Zion and Jerusalem." This blessing

speaks both to the uniqueness of each loss and to the fact that it is offered in a community of mourners. It acknowledges both the pain felt by the individual in need of healing as well as the collective grief that attended the loss of the ancient community's tangible symbols: Zion and Jerusalem. The blessing reveals that even in the absence of those symbols the community can remain intact and offer consolation and solace to its individual mourners.

The parallels between the situation acknowledged by this blessing and the current crisis are clear: The architecture of New York and Washington has been altered. The pain is heavy in our collective hearts. But we are witnessing a resurgence of community spirit. It is within that heartbroken yet united community that the individual mourners and trauma victims, with their unique needs for healing, stand for blessing. We offer our hearts and hands to them, even as we tend our own collective wounds and reach out for answers.

God the Comforter

Perhaps the greatest teaching on how to comfort comes in the name of God that is invoked in the Mourners' Blessing. There are many names for God in the Jewish tradition and many of them describe Divinity through qualities or attributes associated with The Divine. God is known as *HaRachaman* (God, the Compassionate One), *El Emunah* (God, the Faithful One), or *Dayan HaEmet* (God, the True Judge). These are only three of many on the long list naming God through descriptive phrases.

But *HaMakom*, the name of God that is used in the Mourners' Blessing, is different. A name for God that is not descriptive, HaMakom literally means "The Place." HaMakom embraces the mourner without defining the nature of the embrace. It provides a context without a prescription for behavior. It neither describes the face of Holiness whose presence is invoked or the behavior of the one that is being encouraged to find Its presence. By invoking this face of God, the Mourner's' Blessing provides the mourner with the non-intrusive embrace that is exactly the kind of safe attention needed to find the voice of healing. It countenances the array of feelings that those who suffer may experience without prescribing what they are to feel. It makes it easier for them to express a variety of deep and impassioned emotions and ask searing questions of God and of the universe. The space to voice this rage and agony in confronting the Divine allows them to move through the transition of faith described by the wife of a New York police captain who was killed on duty in 1994, when she reached out to today's mourners saying, "You lose your faith, but you get a new kind of spirituality." HaMakom allows the mourner to rail against God, until that new sense of faith begins to emerge. The fact that grief provoked this kind of spiritual crisis was recognized by the Rabbis of the Talmud, who ruled that people were exempt from many religious obligations during the early stages of mourning.

Generating HaMakom

Listen people of Israel! God, our God, is One! -The Shema

Everything I know about helping I learned from the *Shema*, Judaism's central prayer. "Listen people of Israel," it says—the most basic directive for the work of comforting. The *Shema* enjoins the caregiver, who stands as representative of God and community to the holy tasks of listening. As it is written in most prayerbooks, the *Shema* contains an encoded message. Hidden in the print, this message reveals the primary role we have in listening to the stories of the victims. In the first line of the *Shema*, the Hebrew letters ayin and dalet, the last letters in the words *Shema* (listen) and *Ekhad* (one) are written larger than any of the other letters in the prayer. One can stand back from the prayer book and have only the word composed of those letters, ayd, (witness) visible. Just as the people Israel's primary obligation is to witness God's Oneness, this emphasis on the two letters of this word, underscores the primacy of our obligation to witness the healing story that is unfolding. "Ayd" shares its three letter Hebrew root with the word, "*adah*," which means community. As caregivers, we come as witnesses on behalf of God and community.

Mourners and trauma victims need witnesses. When they are ready- when it feels safe enough, they must tell their stories. They must tell them as graphically as possible and with all the attendant emotions of terror, sadness, and rage, telling them over and over until speaking of them no longer feels like inflicting profanity on innocents. They must tell these until they have purged themselves of the horrific images and the emotional charge of the stories begins to dissipate-until, in the words of trauma specialist, John Brier, "the traumatic memory becomes simply a memory."

As we listen to their traumatic stories we will absorb some of that profanity. The Talmud says that in visiting the sick, we take away 1/60 of his or her illness. As witnesses to the profound sickness of the events of September eleventh, even 1/60 of the horror is enormous. So as we listen to the stories of the primary, secondary and tertiary victims, we must attend to the trauma that we acquire in hearing the stories of others. To find a spiritual mikveh (ritual purification bath) for the trauma we acquire, we will turn to others who will listen to our experience of listening.

We stand in concentric circles around those whose proximity to Ground Zero was the greatest. Each successive circle listens to the more central stories and then, having witnessed these tales of horror, turns to the circle beyond to ask them to listen to these incomprehensible stories. This story is so big that it will take the entire community to serve as a vessel to contain it. And the process of coming together will build what Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi refers to as "The God-Field" another way of saying HaMakom.

How do we listen?

Judaism is quite prescriptive about behavior in the presence of mourners. After the funeral, a condolence call is paid to the House of *Shiva* (literally means seven), where family members sit to receive visitors for a week. During this period, the community attends to the physical care of the mourners. They are brought food (particularly round foods, such as eggs, lentils, bagels, and peas) by visitors who sit in silence taking cues

from the mourners regarding when it is appropriate to speak. That silent cocoon embraces the mourners at a time when their awed horror often leaves them numb and mute. Much of what is spoken is expressed through ritual and liturgy. Visitors recite the mourners' blessing, pray with the mourners, and say Amen as they chant the Kaddish (a prayer, which signifies turning, points and is most familiar as a prayer said to commemorate the dead). As those who say Amen, community members are reminded of the fluidity of roles, for the Talmud informs that round foods are served in the House of Shiva because, "like the pea, sorrow rolls. Today's mourner is tomorrow's comforter and today's comforter is tomorrow's mourner."

Tools for the On-Going work of Mourning

After the period of Shiva has ended, the members of the community gradually release their guardianship, as the mourners move from the cocoon of community back into society and the activities of daily life. This return takes place within a decreasingly protective communal embrace and provides a series of rituals, which acknowledge that profound change will continue to effect lives. These rituals mark the end of the first month (*Shloshim*, which means "thirty") and the end of the first year of mourning (the unveiling of the tombstone and the *Yahrzeit* {the observation of that anniversary of a death). In some cases, they provide daily contact for the mourner for almost the entire first year. In addition the on-going practices of *Yahrzeit* and *Yizkor* (Memorial services which are held four times a year) also assist mourners in transforming their relationship with the person that has been lost from a severed physical connection to an enduring spiritual bond. They support the cultivation of an on-going and healing relationship with the deceased.

The Jewish community provides an example to America that it is possible to survive and flourish even in the wake of unfathomable terror and destruction. While the details may not match, the horror at this current heart of darkness is one that the Jewish people has known, been engulfed by, faced, and from which it has risen many times. Its experience offers a fertile drop of optimism into the ocean of despair and practical suggestions for navigating these dark waters. May God comfort you amidst all those who mourn.

Amen.

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Anne's book *Mourning & Mitzvah: Walking the Mourner's Path* (Jewish Lights, 1993 & 2001), now in its seventh printing and second edition, is the only bereavement guide in *The Millennium Whole Earth Catalogue*. It was honored by the American Psychological Association. She has contributed to *LifeCycles: Jewish Women on Personal Milestones and Life Passages*, *Jewish Pastoral Care*, and many other publications.

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