

On Rosh Hashanah morning we read the powerful and frightening story of Isaac's near death at the hands of his father, Abraham. The next *parashah* opens, almost abruptly, with the death of Isaac's mother, Sarah. According to Rashi, "the account of Sarah's demise was juxtaposed to the binding of Isaac because as a result of the news of the 'binding,'— that her son was prepared for slaughter and was almost slaughtered— her soul flew out of her, and she died. Sarah knows that Isaac did not die. What, then, causes her death?

R. Judah Lowe b. Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague uses the Hebrew word *nivhal*—which means panic-stricken or shocked—to describe the cause of Sarah's death. Although hearing shocking news—in this case that only the angel's intervention saved Isaac's life—does not usually cause death, it has a profound effect on us. Rabbi Lowe says that when Sarah learns that her son was almost slaughtered—that "just a small thing kept him from being slaughtered—for this reason she was shocked—*nivhal*. This is the way of humanity," Rabbi Lowe writes, "to be shocked upon hearing that only a small thing kept (some) one alive."¹

Aviva Zornberg, a contemporary Torah commentator, writes that, although we might understand *nivhal* as "shocked," it more accurately describes "something like dizziness, even a kind of nausea. It's vertigo. It's not knowing where one is, a shock in the sense of the loss of orientation. I don't know at all where I am in the world." Zornberg says that it is "a very common reaction to a situation in which one is almost—almost—almost...a sense of theological vertigo, of asking what anything means in that case. If it's really just a matter of a millimeter—it could go this way, it could go that way—how do we understand God's providence? How do we understand anything, in view of such events?"²

Our country experienced a communal state of *nivhal* in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As we observed the 20th anniversary of 9/11 this past weekend, we relived the shock of that day: the looks of horror and disbelief on the faces of bystanders in New York who watched planes fly into the World Trade Center, our collective sense of bewilderment that a beautiful fall day could—so suddenly— be filled with death.

Friends, we are currently living in a state of *nivhal*. During the last 18 months, we, too, have lost our orientation. We have been in an almost constant state of knowing that only a small thing—a matter of a millimeter—could be the difference between health and sickness, between life and death. "Our entire human family," writes Rabbi Art Green, is living through...a whirlwind. Our most basic sense of security has been overturned. Dare I breathe the air around me? May I safely have a conversation with another human being? Is it permitted to touch? To sing? Without these, what will be left of our humanity?"³

Nivhal, in a time of pandemic, also includes loss. Some of us have lost family, friends, and co-workers to COVID. Those who experienced the death of loved ones during the last 18 months—whether from COVID or other causes—have not been able to fully experience the comfort of Jewish mourning rituals. We have lost time and precious moments with friends and family that we could not see, let alone hug. We missed the births of grandchildren, and celebrations of life such as B'nai mitzvah and weddings. We

¹ *Gur Aryeh al ha-Torah, Hayey Sarah*

² "Cries and Whispers: The Death of Sarah," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, edited by Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates, pp. 182-183. Touchstone, New York, 1977.

³ "Keter and Corona: Perspectives from Jewish Mystical Tradition," in *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses*, edited by Erin Leib Smokler, p. 106. Ben Yehuda Press, Teaneck, New Jersey, 2021.

grieve the loss of our sense of certitude that knowledge, resources, and good government would be enough to protect us from the devastation of a plague. We grieve the loss of common sense, and of a shared understanding of what we can accomplish when we act together for the common good.

We are, thankfully, in a different place than we were a year ago. As we return to some semblance of normal life, it is tempting to want to put the last 18 months behind us. Yet both Jewish tradition and modern psychology tell us that this may not be advisable and may, in fact, be unwise. We must find ways to integrate times of *nivhal* into the narrative of our lives if we are to move forward.

Writing about our traumatic and upsetting experiences is one way to do this. Research demonstrates that, for those who have lived through trauma, writing about their experiences can, over time, yield a greater sense of well-being, as well as physical benefits: fewer visits to physicians for health concerns, lower blood pressure, and stronger immune systems.⁴ Researchers found that, as study participants wrote about their traumatic experiences, they were making sense of what happened to them. They were able to arrive at new understandings of the traumatic event, and to reflect on its impact on their lives. They were able to tell a story about their suffering, and about its meaning.⁵

We know that Jewish mourning rituals are designed to help us do just that. Perhaps you recall times in your own life when these rituals brought comfort and meaning. How did the presence of family and friends during *shiva* give you the chance to tell the story of your loved one's life, and to process the circumstances of their death? Jewish rituals connected with death and mourning help us to place the deaths of our dear ones into the framework of Jewish time and tradition. As we gradually move through the stages of mourning during the first year after the death of our loved ones, and as we mark the anniversary of their deaths with each *yahrzeit*, we make meaning of their lives.

Jewish teachings and traditions created in response to our communal tragedies as a people can guide us as we look for ways to integrate the losses we have experienced, while at the same time helping us to move forward. The Talmud relates that, after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE, those who experienced the devastation were not sure that they could continue. Large numbers of people became ascetics—vowing to neither eat meat nor to drink wine. Rabbi Joshua pushes them to examine the logic of their position: in refusing to drink wine or to eat meat, the ascetics are vowing not to consume things that had been sacrificed on the altar in the Temple. Why stop there, R. Joshua suggests: if you won't consume these things, then why consume bread, fruit, and water, since these were all part of the sacrificial rituals?

Rabbi Joshua says to them: "My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mourn overmuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure."⁶

The sages knew that it was vital for people to remember the Temple's destruction—a pivotal time in the history of our people— while at the same time moving forward with their lives. The Rabbis established rituals that helped people express their loss through physical manifestations, thus encouraging us to weave the memories of communal *nivhal* into the fabric of our lives. For example, the Rabbis taught

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/24/opinion/covid-pandemic-grief.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 60b

that, when coating a house with stucco, a small section should be left bare. When planning a banquet of many courses, one or two items should be removed. When putting on jewelry, a woman might leave off one or two items. Ashes should be placed on the bridegroom's forehead on his wedding day. Our sages knew that, while we might want to retreat from the world after an enormous loss, we must step forward into life. In their great wisdom, they understood that we should keep the awareness of what we have lost, and the pain it engenders inside us, while at the same time experiencing life's sweetness.⁷

There is something sacred about holding the awareness of what has been lost side by side with our capacity for life. Aviva Richman writes that "Holding loss could mean fully articulating what we have already lost in chaotic circumstances and naming our fears of what we might yet lose, in a way that sharpens, rather than shuts down, our capacity to hope and dream."⁸

Holding loss and hope together changes us. Having lived through a state of *nivhal*—disorienting shock—we will not be the same as we were before.

My family experienced a shocking loss in December of 1988, when my husband died in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. Our children were quite young: ages 7 and almost 4. At the time I was a psychotherapist. I knew that I needed to find a way for our family to hold this terrible loss, together with hope, in our hearts. I knew that my husband's death would change the trajectory of our lives. We would not be the same. Life would not go back to "normal." Several months after my husband's death, a friend told me that she missed the "old" Stephanie and wondered when she would be coming back. I responded that the old Stephanie would never be back...I knew that I had been profoundly changed by this loss, in ways that I could not name.

Although I did not know the term *Kintsugi* then, it describes so well the way in which our family tried to hold both loss and hope moving forward. *Kintsugi*—as Rabbi Schwartzman taught us in her beautiful sermon on Rosh Hashanah—is a technique developed by Japanese artists in which pottery that has been shattered is glued together, the seams dusted with gold or silver powder. These gold and silver seams make the "new" pottery pieces unique and beautiful. Later, *Kintsugi* described a philosophy of life, in which terrible things that happen to us do not need to shatter us into irretrievably broken pieces. In putting our lives back together after terrible loss, we do not discard the broken pieces, but use them to build our lives going forward, reminding us of the tragedy we've experienced and how we overcame it.⁹

In putting our lives back together after my husband's death, my family held the reminders of our loss in our hearts, using them to rebuild as we went forward. My children became sensitive to other people's suffering in ways that they might not have without the loss that they experienced. To a teacher who was ill with cancer, my then 8-year-old daughter wrote: "Never give up hope." It became our family *minhag* never to leave the house without saying "I love you." I found love with Henry, a wonderful man who had also experienced the death of his spouse, and who understood how our family's loss, and the loss that he had experienced, would be part of building our new life together. The death of my husband

⁷ "Introduction: Theological Vertigo in Proximity to Plague," by Erin Leib Smokler in *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses*, edited by Erin Leib Smokler, p.5 Ben Yehuda Press, Teaneck, New Jersey, 2021.

⁸ "Loving God Through Life and Death: An Embodied Theology of Loss," by Aviva Richman, in *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses*, edited by Erin Leib Smokler, p. 50 Ben Yehuda Press, Teaneck, New Jersey, 2021.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/24/opinion/covid-pandemic-grief.html>

pushed me to think about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life and ultimately led me to become a rabbi.

On the day that Henry and I got married, a well-meaning relative hugged me and said: “See: everything turned out all right!” Everything did not turn out all right—it turned out differently.

As I think back over the last 32 years, I see the broken pieces of our lives, fused together by seams dusted with gold and silver powder. In my mind, these beautiful seams of gold and silver are almost transparent, light streaming through them.

It is the light emanating from such brokenness that Leonard Cohen writes about in his song, “Anthem.” Cohen based his song on a text from the Jewish mystical work the Zohar. Two rabbis disagree about whether God’s primordial light—shattered when God created the world—should remain hidden until the world is perfected or should continue to shine forth. Rabbi Judah teaches that, without this light of brokenness, the world cannot be sustained: “Every single day, a ray of that light shines into the world...with that ray [of light and hope] God feeds the whole world.”¹⁰

Cohen writes:¹¹

The birds they sing, at the break of day
Start again, I heard them say.
Don’t dwell on what has passed away
Or what is yet to be.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

We will not be the same after this pandemic. Kintsugi teaches us that, as we put the broken pieces of our lives back together, and rebuild our lives going forward, we remind ourselves not only of the *nivhal* through which we have lived, but of how we overcame it. In what ways will we fashion unique, beautiful, and hopeful lives from this terrible time?

As we move through the pandemic, may we embrace both what we have lost and what we hope for the future. May we use the sense of *nivhal*—the shock that we have experienced from a world turned upside down—not to rush headlong into normal—but to move forward in our lives so that the light of all we have experienced will shine in.

Amein

¹⁰ <https://www.eurasiareview.com/17082021-from-leonard-cohens-hallelujah-to-his-anthem-oped/>

¹¹ https://www.lyricsfreak.com/l/leonard+cohen/anthem_20082876.html