

“A Year of Grief”

I have never been a coffee drinker. My caffeine of choice is Iced Tea or hot tea. In fact, I start most mornings with a large iced tea from Dunkin Donuts. One town over from where I live is a drive-thru Dunkin so even in the winter, or during Covid I can be a lazy suburbanite and not get out of my car. A few weeks ago, I pulled up to the Dunkin drive up window and taped to the window was the following sign, “The whole world is short staffed. Be kind to those who showed up.” I immediately got upset. I have gotten to know the people who work at that window, and I was feeling a bit protective of them.

I asked Carol, who is usually working when I get there in the morning, “Are people being nasty to you?” “What?” she asked. “That sign, why did they feel that they needed to put up that sign? Are people being mean to you?” “Ah,” she said, “The sign. Yes, people have not always been very patient and understanding when the line is slower.” “I’m so sorry – you all deserve to be treated kindly.” I replied feeling angry at anyone who would abuse a sweet lady like Carol, who is just trying to earn a living and provide for her family.

And yet, anger has been in the news of late: a flight attendant shoved, a guy having to be duct taped to his seat on a plane, restaurant waitstaff yelled at for slow service, hospital personnel threatened for wearing masks, school board meetings at riot stage over mask mandates, people irate at being fired for non-vaccination compliance ... lots of folks on edge with anger and frustration oozing all around us. So why the anger? Why are we lashing out at each other? There are many obvious reasons.

There are many scary things going on in the world.

While we might easily point a finger at the polarizing effect of politics, there might also be another not so obvious explanation. A few days ago, my friend Gabby and I were talking about how the Delta variant is affecting our lives. Gabby's daughter has asthma and is about to start school. Gabby is worried sick about her. What she said to me struck me as true for so many of us. She said, "I feel so much grief and loss right now." Pause

Grief and loss. These last 18 months have been filled with grief. So many deaths...But not just deaths, losses. The loss of simple, everyday things: the loss of personal contact with family and friends, loss of being in school or of not being able to go away to college, loss of going to concerts and the theater, the loss of travel, the loss of dropping into a restaurant without constraints. People have lost their jobs, their homes, so many have lost opportunities to celebrate with family and mourn with family. And then there are the deaths.... I wouldn't be surprised if every one of us knows someone who has died from Covid, and/or someone who has been debilitatingly sick. There are really too many losses to name...some of them big and some of them small. Each one of us and everyone we love, has experienced a multiplicity of losses.

As if this wasn't enough....just a few months ago, we thought we had this thing beaten. Most of us were able to get vaccinated and we were sure that Covid would quickly be in the rearview mirror. We were going to have a great summer, start to return to the things we love to do and get back to some level of normal, whatever that is. We were going to be back together at Hebrew Tabernacle, in the sanctuary for these holidays. So, we already had the grief that the 15 months of Covid

brought but on top of that, just when we thought things were getting better, the Delta variant invaded and left more grief and loss in its wake.

As far as the other kinds of losses are concerned, we have an amazing number of expressions for dealing with such disappointments: we could wallow in it or, we could “Roll with the punches.” “Just suck it up and deal with it.” “Be New York tough.” Yes, we do have to keep going in spite of everything that this virus has handed us and yet... ignoring the grief does not make it go away – in fact, it is the opposite. Unexpressed grief sits with us and causes us to act out in other ways.

In their book, “On Grief and Grieving” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler share the following, “Grief is the intense emotional response to the pain of a loss. It is the reflection of a connection that has been broken. Most important, grief is an emotional, spiritual and psychological journey to healing...Grief alone has the power to heal...Many problems in our lives stem from grief unresolved and unhealed. When we do not work through our grief, we lose an opportunity to heal our soul, psyche, and heart.” (p. 227)

Grief is unavoidable and if we don't deal with it in the present, it will reappear in the future, often in ways we don't expect or recognize – in anxiety, anger, lack of focus, sadness, depression, even substance use and abuse. Late night talk shows and social media were awash with jokes about how much alcohol was being consumed during the pandemic. But it really is no joke.

Some of you may be familiar with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' 5 stages of grief. While Kubler-Ross developed these stages while working with terminally ill patients, she

argues in her later writings, that there are many kinds of grief, not just when a loved one has died. I would like to try and apply her 5 stages to the impact that this pandemic has had on us and our lives. It is important to note that while she puts these stages in a certain order, she explains that each individual may experience the stages in a different order, some stages and not others and/or more than one stage at the same time. As we grieve a loss, we may also return to a stage with which we thought we were finished.

The first stage is denial. Remember when Covid first happened, or when the Delta variant started making things worse again? Do you remember thinking, “this isn’t happening.” “This can’t be getting worse again – we were moving forward!” Sometimes we need denial, not to keep us from facing reality but to let that reality slowly sink in when it is too difficult to face it all at once. As Kubler Ross and Kessler wrote, “Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. It is nature’s way of letting in only as much as we can handle.” (p. 10) Of course, there has also been a lot of dangerous and unhealthy denial like, “I’m young I won’t get Covid” or “It’s just like the flu, not so bad.” Denial helps us to slowly cope with something awful, it lessens the shock, but we have to be careful not to get stuck in it to the point where we harm ourselves.

The second stage is anger. Even though anger is often judged as inappropriate in our society it is an essential part of the grieving process. Kubler Ross and Kessler explain, “Underneath anger is pain, YOUR pain.... for now, your job is to honor your anger by allowing yourself to be angry. Scream if you need to. Find a solitary place and let it out. Anger is strength and it can be an anchor, giving temporary structure to the nothingness of loss....Anger is a natural reaction to the unfairness of loss.” (p. 15-16). We need to find safe places to express and vent our anger or it just churns inside

us like a volcano waiting to blow. Looking back on the last 18 months we do have plenty to be angry about. It's okay to say that and to find ways to let it out. But please, don't vent it towards people who don't deserve it.... whether it is family members or the woman working in the drive-thru window at Dunkin.

The third stage of grief is bargaining. Negotiating with God or the universe to ensure that the bad we fear won't happen. This happens especially when faced with a serious situation or illness. "God, if you save me from this I will change my life; I will become religious; I will do whatever it is I think You want me to do." I have spoken to people who went through this very thing when they had Covid, and it seemed like their life might be in danger. But we don't only bargain when we face death. We could be facing the loss of a job or a business, or challenges with our kids or simply getting through this period of the pandemic. We may not even believe, deep down, that our bargaining will work but it gives us the hope, even if it is a vein hope, of escaping the situation we face. Like denial, it gives us a chance to adjust to our painful circumstances.

The fourth stage is depression. Depression is a natural part of the grief process and helps us heal. I'm not talking about clinical depression, from which many people suffer, and the cause of which is not a direct external event -such as loss. Depression is an appropriate response to loss; it is entering our grief on a deeper level. Kubler-Ross shares, "As tough as it is, depression can be dealt with in a paradoxical way. See it as a visitor, perhaps an unwelcome one, but one who is visiting whether you like it or not. Make a place for your guest. Invite your depression to pull up a chair with you in front of the fire, and sit with it, without looking for a way to escape. Allow the sadness

and emptiness to cleanse you and help you explore your loss in its entirety. When you allow yourself to experience depression, it will leave as soon as it has served its purpose in your loss. As you grow stronger, it may return from time to time, but that is how grief works.” (p. 22). It is not just okay but necessary to give voice to our sadness and pain.... like my friend Gabby did that day.

The fifth stage is acceptance. This stage is often misunderstood to mean that we are finished grieving and are “over” our loss and have “moved on.” A loss, of any kind changes our lives forever.... this is the stage where we learn to live with our new reality. When we started to adjust to living with Covid, wearing masks, social distancing, etc. we were in the acceptance stage. We weren’t happy about the discomfort, inconvenience, the loss of personal freedom and physical connections.... we didn’t want to stay there, but we learned how to adjust our lives to the new reality. As Kubler-Ross says, “Acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss.”

Jewish tradition teaches us to take grieving seriously. There are many rituals around death that not only support our mourning, but essentially command us to take the time to grieve. When we sit shiva, we take the time to process our loss, talk about our loved one and what he/she meant to us, share memories, cry, hug and allow our feelings to come to the fore. It is during this time that we may be in shock and the early stages of grief. Then after shiva the mourner may return to work but there are still restrictions during sh’loshim, the first 30 days after death like attending concerts or parties – supporting the mourners as they may be experiencing anger and depression and be in no mood to celebrate or look happy. But the Jewish period of mourning is not

officially over until the first year has passed. It is only then that the stone or marker on the grave can be dedicated. All of these traditions help us to acknowledge that grief takes time, and we are not expected to “get over it” quickly or on a particular schedule.

This is what we do when someone dies and yet we experience all kinds of grief during our lives.... grief is a natural part of what it means to be alive....Judaism teaches us to treat ourselves with care during times of grief so that a healthy processing of that grief can take place and lead us, hopefully, to acceptance and healing.

One final point: In his book, “Finding Meaning” David Kessler says the following, “But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn’t mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining.” (p. 29). This is what I tried to do for my friend Gabby that day, I let her express her grief with what was happening to her life as a result of the Delta variant. I bore witness to her grief, did not try to find a silver lining.... I just listened and let it sit between us. This is what we need to do for each other right now. We need to allow each other to express our grief in any way that helps us, without judgement, and then we need to simply listen to one another, to acknowledge how painfully difficult these 18 months have been.

In our Torah reading this morning, Hagar and her son, Ishmael are cast out from their home. Hagar had been Sarah’s maidservant and Ishmael is Abraham and Hagar’s son. They wander in the desert and run out of water. They cry in grief and despair – grief from the loss of their home and family and despair at having no water. The Torah employs an unusual phrase to describe God hearing Ishmael crying, “b’asher hu sham,”

“where he was.” That is, God was present for them in that moment, in the emotional state that they were in – not where God or anyone else thought they should be. God speaks words of comfort to Hagar and tells her to look up – and there she sees a well of water, right in front of her. God does not tell Hagar “it’s time to move on,” “you gotta be strong.” God hears, God listens, God witnesses their grief. Hagar and God are our models here. It is important to express our grief, express our loss, even anticipated loss and then as God does.... hear the grief that has been expressed, without judgment and comfort the one who grieves...where he or she is at that moment.

Once again, I will turn to the grief specialist, David Kessler for advice. He writes, “What does finding meaning look like in a pandemic? How can there be meaning in a virus that sickens and kills those we love? There is no meaning in the virus or the pandemic; meaning comes from what we do in response to it.” So, perhaps our response to this virus is to pull together, not push each other away. Perhaps it is to allow each other to grieve freely and in healthy ways. Perhaps it is to allow ourselves to be angry or depressed but to be careful not to take our anger and frustration out on the people around us who are just trying to get through this too. Perhaps it is to listen and support each other through this very difficult time.

Twenty years ago, on September 11, 2001, a great tragedy happened in this country. In the face of tragedy, loss and an ongoing threat to our safety we pulled together. We acknowledged these terrible losses and we mourned together. We listened to each other and supported each other. That is some of the meaning that we made out of a horrible, horrible experience. May we keep the meaning that we made out of one great tragedy help us find the strength to move through this seemingly

endless tragedy. May it bring out the best we are capable of being as we treat each other with compassion, caring and kindness. May we listen to each other, support each other and mourn our losses together. And please don't forget, as I am reminded every time I pull up to that drive thru window, "Be kind to those who showed up."