



Have Faith in Grief

The only way forward is one broken heart next to another, crying together, awakening to the reality that grief is our common bond.

It hadn't rained in 7 months, and the signs of drought were emerging everywhere.¹ The land was parched, soil hardened and cracked. The wells, springs, and cisterns were nearly empty, every trip to retrieve water potentially the last. It was all they could talk about it, all they could think about. "What will we eat? Why is this happening? Should we leave?" You could hear the drought in the hushed conversations around the children. See it in the lethargic movements of the animals. Feel it in the empty stalls of the market, the dry skin of mothers cradling their nursing children.

A neighbor visited with the news that the sages had started fasting. Monday, Thursday, Monday, Thursday. In hope that their personal piety would move the Heavens to open up. But, it wasn't enough. There was still no rain.

Word spread: there can be no bystanders. We are all implicated in this unfolding catastrophe. Everyone must be like the sages. Fast and pray that this terrible drought will end. That no further harm will come our way.

The rhythms of mourning descend on the community. Every individual becomes the bereaved; every home, a private house of mourning. For 7 days, no one works or bathes. No one eats or drinks until nightfall. Everyone is sitting shiva, simultaneously, but separately. Each home a plea aimed at the heavens. But, it wasn't enough. There was still no rain.

This is the story of a community trying to figure out how to navigate desperate times. How to respond, individually and collectively to the experience of catastrophe and the clear-eyed knowledge that if nothing changes, further tragedy awaits. It's a story told by the Mishnah, a 2nd century compilation of rabbinic tales and law. But, its wisdom is as modern as it is ancient. I read in its pages a warning and a way forward for our own desperate times. For our own experience of catastrophe, suspended between the suffering of this past year and the anticipatory dread of what suffering the new year might bring.

¹ The following story is based on [Mishnah Ta'anit 1:4-6](#)

I want to ask us to take seriously what happens next on the pages of the Mishnah. To heed and hear this urgent call from our ancestors.²

Another month has passed, and the drought persists. “Emerge from your houses of mourning,” the court decrees, “sound the alarm, lock the stores, and come to the town square. The time has come for a *ta’anit tzibbur*, a communal, public fast.” No one is exempt. The poor and the rich; those whose storehouses of grain are still full and those begging for food. Elders and children. Women and men. Put on your sackcloth, your torn clothing, that wardrobe of mourning.

Your bodies, drained of water in accordance with the fast, must mirror the land, equally thirsty, equally unsure of its ability to sustain life without water. Your bodies, rehearsing the starvation that prolonged drought will bring. Your parched bodies, a map of where we’ve been and where we fear we’re going.³

“Come together in the town square and place burnt ashes on your forehead. One at a time, your fingers blackened, your foreheads marked with the texture of death.” It almost looks like *t’fillin*, black boxes replaced by black dust.⁴ Words replaced by wordlessness: a different kind of prayer. One at a time, everyone binds grief as a sign between their eyes. No one is exempt. No one is a cut above the grief, the fear, the responsibility that marks this moment.

An elder steps forward, a man familiar with the heartbreak required to lead a community in prayer. *Yeish lo banim u’beito reikam*— he has children, but his house is empty. We’ve never stopped praying that his children would one day return, and his house would no longer be empty. In his dried-out body, there is remarkable strength. His voice calls out:

Blessed are You, God, who remembers the forgotten.

Blessed are You, God, who hears our cries.

Blessed are You, God, who answers in times of trouble.

Tekiah, t’ruah, t’kiah. The sound of the shofar blends with the sound of our weeping, as the people depart the town square and journey together to the cemetery, as if to say, maybe our

² This aspect of the ritual is detailed in [Mishnah Ta’anit 2:1-4](#)

³ I am deeply indebted to the scholarship of Julia Watts-Belser and her chapter on ritual fasting for the sake of rain in *Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity*. Among the many insights I gleaned from this book is the notion that fasting maps the ecological realities of the drought onto the body.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, [Ta’anit 16a](#) makes the connection between *t’fillin* and the ashes explicit

ancestors can strengthen our prayers.⁵ As if to say, we've lost too much already; please, spare us from opening the earth in this place once more. As if to say, enough is enough. Here, they recite together the *ne'ilah* prayer as the sun sets, eyes now aimed upward at the gates of heaven, still awaiting the gift of rain.

A few days ago, someone asked me what my *Kol Nidre* sermon was about. I said, "you know how Rabbi Brous' brilliant Rosh Hashanah sermon⁶ was about grief and hope? Well, mine is too... but without the hope part." That's only partially true, of course. I think there's great hope to be found here. Hope *within* grief.

What is grief? I believe it is the sustained note in the song of being alive. It isn't a problem to be solved, a condition to be medicated, or even an event in our lives. It is the persistent humming within our souls, sometimes excruciatingly loud and painful, its volume immobilizing, and sometimes it's tender and soft, a melancholy that accompanies us throughout the routines of life. But, it's always there, always within us; it is the evidence of our loving. In the words of the soulful psychotherapist Francis Weller, "grief and love are sisters, woven together from the beginning. Their kinship reminds us that there is no love that does not contain loss and no loss that is not a reminder of the love we carry for what we once held close."⁷

But, grief is frightening. It pulls us into the dark corridors of life, where the terrain is uneven, where pathways are uncertain. Grief is heavy. Of course it is. It comes from the Latin root *gravis*, like gravity, that undeniable feature of our existence that insists that everything must fall down. The weight of living, of loving, of losing brings us to our knees, low to the ground, where we yearn not to be, in part because we've been told to stay away from this place. We live in a culture that pathologizes descent. We like things rising- the stock market, technological improvement, perpetual, linear progress, climbing the ladder to success. Rise above the troubles. Get up when you get knocked down. To descend, we are told, is somehow to fail.

But, what if it was true, in the words of Oscar Wilde, that "where there is sorrow, there is holy ground."

⁵ The blasting of the shofar, pilgrimage to the cemetery, and recitation of Ne'ilah are concisely explained in Rambam's Mishneh Torah, [Fasts, 4:17-18](#)

⁶ Read and listen [here](#)

⁷ Weller, Francis. *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Ritual of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. Preface XVI. More broadly, Weller's writing on grief was tremendously influential in shaping my ideas and message in this sermon.

We must learn to tend this ground. Now more than ever. This ground saturated with our sorrow. We must learn to put our hands into this neglected and desecrated soil, loosening the clods before they turn into stones. Because grief that is not acknowledged, held, and metabolized mutates into toxic and ultimately dangerous behavior. And tragically, we live in a society that is both fearful and dismissive of grief. Weller writes, “our refusal to acknowledge grief and death has twisted us into a culture riddled with death. Whatever we put into the shadow, that repository of all the repressed and denied aspects of our lives, it doesn’t sit there passively waiting to be reclaimed and redeemed. It regresses and becomes more primitive. Consequently, death rattles through our streets daily, in school shootings, murders, overdoses, and war.”⁸ As Weller reminds us, a society that doesn’t generate the conditions necessary to properly heal leaves our wounds open to infection and spread.

A society that is fearful and dismissive of grief banishes its experience to the private domain. We are taught to be the heroes of our own stories, to conflate asking for help with weakness, to exhibit the self-control needed to rise above the pain. And so we cry alone, determined not to become a burden to someone else.

We’ve been lied to. “Grief is an intensely interior process that can only be navigated in the presence of community.”⁹ That’s true of individual sorrow: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a dream, a marriage. Think of the rituals we practice in these moments, the material and emotional support that’s offered. And, it’s true of collective sorrow: when traumatic events rupture an entire community’s sense of safety and wellbeing. Grief must dwell in the public square, inviting in every last broken soul to reside there.

And it’s here, in the expression of collective grief in the public square, that profound healing can emerge. But, we have to create these spaces, build them where they don’t yet exist. They are subversive, a refusal to accept all the myths dismissing our grief. They reject the failed cultural story that persuades us to pass over our sorrow. The only way forward is one broken heart next to another, crying together, awakening to the reality that grief *is* our common bond. Tears our shared language, our first language. Beyond the distinctions built up through words, through flags, through stories, I can understand what your tears mean, and you can understand mine. And we can understand theirs, and they can understand ours.

My friends, I have great faith in grief.

⁸ Ibid., Preface XVIII

⁹ Ibid., 116

Sit down on this holy ground of sorrow, and don't move. Even when it's dark, don't move. We didn't choose to be here; we were knocked down, pulled into this fearful yet familiar place. But, I promise you: you're not alone here. Stay with the trouble; don't run away.¹⁰ There's too much to learn down here, and so many tears to collect. So many people to learn to love and to be loved by. And grieve. Fully.

Let's return now to the story of the drought. To the Mishnah's vision of collective grief in the public square. A story that reaches across the generations and pulls us down into our contemporary experience of living between a tragic past and a dreaded future. I imagine that the rabbis of the Mishnah truly believed that their fast, their prayer, would bring an end to the drought. I don't share this theology, but I do believe that every component of this ritual helped that frightened community know that they weren't alone in the drought. So too, the Mishnah calls out to us: when you are in the midst of catastrophe, build communal rituals of grief and solidarity. Express the depth and breadth of your pain— there you will find each other; there, you will honor your sorrow so that it doesn't become the cause of someone else's sorrow down the line.

The story opens by guiding us through three stages of grief. The first is a private, individual fast observed by select members of the community. The second stage extends the fast and customs of mourning to everyone within the community, but observed within the privacy of each person's home. Finally, the third stage relocates the community to the public domain, where together everyone participates in a communal grief ritual. In Hebrew, it's the progression from *ta'anit yachid* to *ta'anit al ha'tzibur* to *ta'anit tzibur*.

Grieving cannot be dislocated from the bonds of community, but that doesn't mean there isn't a time and purpose to grieve alone. In the Mishnah, it precedes the shared communal experience. It's an inward turn, where we dare to acknowledge, where we find the courage to feel the contours of our own pain. To begin to know the map of the cracks in your own heart keeps you from getting lost when joining in with the grief of others.

But, as the Mishnah recognizes, the individualized experience of grief isn't sufficient. We must find each other in the pain, leaving our houses of mourning to make pilgrimage to the public square of sorrow. You know this place. We've been there many times this past year.

¹⁰ This phrase is drawn from Donna J. Haraway's brilliant book *Staying with the Trouble*.

At the vigils we've attended, the grief circles, the protests. On that very first evening, when we didn't know how to mark Simhat Torah, but we knew we had to be together. On every subsequent Shabbat, when we found the courage to pray together, to grieve together. When we held each other, an embodied prayer that the 101 remaining hostages will some day soon be held by their loved ones. When we understood, again and again, that the public square of sorrow was big enough, must be big enough, for all grief. How much we have learned and must continue to learn from the Parents Circle-Families Forum, those bereaved parents, Israeli and Palestinian, whose children have been killed in this conflict.¹¹

You must wake up with sorrow, writes Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet.
You must speak it till your voice
Catches the thread of all sorrows
And you see the size of the cloth.¹²

The cloth is immense. And it is torn, a garment of mourning. But, the Mishnah is saying: don't hold your piece alone. The cloth cannot be mended unless each of us brings our piece of the tattered garment into the center. No one is exempt.

And, this isn't a one-time performance of grief. A check in a checkbox. Seven times, the Mishnah teaches, we enter into the fullness of our mourning in the public square for this *ta'anit tzibur*. Seven times we make pilgrimage to be together, sackcloth and fasting, praying and weeping, listening to the broken-hearted elder and the broken notes of the shofar. Seven trips to the cemetery. The number representing the wholeness of creation cries out with the brokenness of destruction. And, the message is clear. We must continue to build and nurture a public square defined by collective grief. No one is exempt.

It is not only the existence of the space but what happens within it that demands our attention. Everyone places ashes on their forehead, except for two. The *nasi* and the *av beit din*, the political leaders of the community, don't place ashes on their own foreheads; the people do.¹³ Your grief, the people say as their fingers press against the leaders' foreheads, must know the touch of our hands. The Mishnah imagines a society in which the political leadership identified with and took responsibility for the suffering of their people.

¹¹ <https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/homepage-en/>

¹² The full poem can be found [here](#)

¹³ As described in [Mishnah Ta'anit 2:1](#) and [BT Ta'anit 15b](#)

Tragically, the same cannot be said about both Israeli and Palestinian leadership. All too willing to sacrifice their own children in perpetual war for political power and personal gain. And so yes, the public square of sorrow is also home to righteous anger. Outrage that demands accountability and seeks justice. Where the voice of the one “who has children but an empty home” can cut through the cowardly hearts of those who have abdicated their duty to protect every last human life.¹⁴ When will you bring them home?

I want to explore one last haunting image from the ritual in the Mishnah and the question it poses to us today. It says that the people carried the ark into the center of the town square, opened its doors, and placed ashes on the Torah scroll itself.

Why is the Torah covered in ashes? Perhaps it’s the grief of a religion that has been the object of hate for centuries, history’s scapegoat. The grief of a teacher whose students have been persecuted, murdered, and shunned. The Torah knows better than most how old stories can be renewed so it mourns the reemergence of the oldest hatred in its newest forms.

Why is the Torah covered in ashes? Perhaps it’s also the grief of witnessing its wisdom, its message of love and concern, twisted into ideologies of violence and hatred. It mourns for what is being done in its name. In our name.

When the Talmud asks this question, trying to explain the audacious gesture of bringing the Torah into the public square and covering it with ashes, its answer is stunning.

Reish Lakish said, quoting the prophet Isaiah: In all of their affliction, God is afflicted. *B’chol tzaratam lo tzar*. When we suffer, God suffers. When we grieve, God grieves. God joins us in the public square of sorrow, weeping.¹⁵

I read an interview between Kimberley Patton, a professor of religion at Harvard Divinity and Reverend Betsee Parker, who was the head chaplain at Ground Zero in New York City. In the first weeks after 9/11, she would spend all day walking through the ruins of the World Trade Center site tending to the first responders, the rescue workers, and family members desperately hoping for information. Gradually, her work shifted to the Bellevue Hospital

¹⁴ I am thinking about the moral leadership of the hostage families and the power and poignancy of Rachel Goldberg-Polin and Jon Polin’s courageous demands for the release of the hostages. In a poetic sense, Rachel and Jon, and too many others, are the broken-hearted prayer leaders the Mishnah describes: “the ones with children, but an empty home”

¹⁵ [BT Ta’anit 16a](#)

morgue, where bodies and body parts were sent before being laid to rest. Here are their words, exploring her experience:

This particular morning I heard a very deep, very frightening, deep moaning sound as I walked through the morgue. It frightened me because I had definitely never heard this sound before. And, because I hadn't heard it before, you'd think I didn't know what it was, but I did know. I knew that I was hearing God weeping.

Why was God weeping, Betsee?

Well, she responded, my sense was that [it was because] those whom He loved the dearest had been ravaged and hated and destroyed by those whom He loved the dearest.¹⁶

Here, in Betsee's words, we encounter a God whose capacity for grief is limitless. Whose capacity for love is boundless. We are not God, but we are called to emulate God. This image of God's expansive grief summons us to the deepest and widest grief that we can inhabit. It reminds us that Oneness is found in grief, this common bond of our humanity.

Because something shifts when you look someone in the eyes and witness their tears. When they do the same for you. The heart softens, barriers of distance, of judgment melt away. Tears loosen the terrain, hardened by our perpetual need to argue and shout, and we begin to ask the right questions. How can we care for each other? How can we heal together?

Have faith in grief, the only language that requires no translation. When we build spaces that honor our sorrow, all of it: the individual losses and the communal pain, we construct the architecture of change. We begin to transform a culture of denial and toxic rage, a culture of castigation and vilification, into one of kindness and kinship. Make pilgrimage to the places where we can witness each other's pain, that's where hope can be found.

Here we are, in one of those spaces right now. Beginning our own *ta'anit tzibbur*, our own communal, public fast. Yom Kippur is an invitation into the public square of sorrow, the holy ground of sorrow. So let your tears fall. All the heartache belongs.

¹⁶ "God's Weeping and the Sanctification of Ground Zero," in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*. Eds. Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, 287.

Weep for your loved ones who've been gone too long; weep for the new names that pierce your Yizkor.

Weep for the broken promises, the missed chances, the forgotten and dismissed dreams.

Weep for the passage of time, and all it's claimed from you.

And yes, cry our collective tears, for the year that was and the frightening future we face.

Here, in this sacred ellipsis in time, we grieve together, and no one is alone.

And then, only then, when the sun is setting and our lips move with the words of *Ne'ilah*, we'll lift our eyes to the gates of Heaven, ready to begin again.