

A World is Dying, A World Is Being Born

Our ancestors grieved. They told the truth about the past. And they built a new future—a counter-testimony to the world that was. This is our blueprint, an ancient wisdom born of suffering, and a way forward through painful and uncertain times.

Rosh Hashanah 5781

Sometime in March, about two weeks after the world turned upside down, I had a teary late-night conversation with Valarie Kaur, a dear friend, a Sikh American civil rights activist and author. I need your Jewish wisdom, she said. I need to know how to navigate these times, and Jewish people know what to do when one world dies and another is born.

I have to admit: deep, ancient wisdom was the furthest thing from my mind. Like many of you, I was busy rationing toilet paper, furiously mopping the floors between zooms, trying to keep my kids healthy and sane now that all our worlds had shrunk to these little boxes, working to triage the illness, unemployment, isolation, and anxiety in our community, and learning how to grieve through a screen, all while dealing with my own sometimes irrepressible sadness and fear, not to mention my perennially crappy internet.

But I took Valarie's challenge to heart. I started to read stories of Shoah survivors, people who lost everything and went on to build families and futures—perhaps the greatest testament to the triumph of the human spirit. I thought of the Cantor who told me years ago that he performed three weddings every day in a crowded displaced person's camp after the liberation of Auschwitz. And the extraordinary story of Yossi Klein Halevi's father, who escaped his small Hungarian town when the Nazis came by burying himself in a hole in the forest, where he crouched underground for nine months, emerging only to forage for food at night, until his town was finally liberated by Russian forces.

And I dug deeper into our past. I dove into stories of blood libels, pogroms and exiles, trying to understand how our people, through times far more challenging than these, found the strength again and again to lay old worlds to rest and build new ones in their place.

That's how I came to spend the last many months with the Rabbis who escaped Jerusalem just before the Temple was destroyed 2000 years ago, who set out to rebuild the Judaism that we are all inheritors of today.

First, some context: Three years into the Roman siege of Jerusalem, surrounded by hunger and increasing desperation, one of the leaders of the community, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, determined that he had to escape the city. His students placed him in a coffin as if he were dead, and marched him through the city gates as though they were transporting his body to burial.

The Rabbi and his students emerged from the grips of death and were granted permission to build a small community in Yavneh, not far from Jerusalem. Close enough to smell the fires when Jerusalem was taken by Vespasian Caesar and his merciless Roman forces. Their legions breached the city walls and burned to the ground the *beit hamikdash*, our holiest of holy sites—the center of Jewish religious and spiritual practice, with a fire so fierce Josephus describes the whole city shaking with the sounds of Jerusalem stone exploding. The Romans sought both to humiliate and to annihilate. They catapulted the head of a pig toward the Temple altar, (ARN 4:5) and elders, children, men and women fell at the sword's edge. Those who weren't murdered died from starvation or were brought in chains to Rome to be debased, degraded, humiliated for sport. A *horban* we called it. A complete devastation.

What did the Rabbis—the survivors—do in the face of all this destruction? *They tore their clothes. They cried and screamed and lamented.* (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 4:5)

They mourned—for the desolation and the desecration. For the children who died and those who would not be born. They wept and trembled. They cried out names—of those they lost, those they could not save. They committed to memory everything from the most sacred stories to the most mundane details.

They taught us: a healthy society must grieve!

What about us... have we grieved in this time of incalculable loss? In small and private ways, yes. But as a society, we ache for a collective lament. For public, national, stop-everything communal mourning.

That looks like *Día de los Muertos*, *Yom haZikaron* and Death Wails. Nightly candlelight vigils and the AIDS Memorial Quilt. It looks like flags at half-mast and TV programming suspended until we lift up the names and stories of every last person killed—whether by

war or famine, by Roman legions, wildfires, overzealous law enforcement or by a criminally mismanaged virus.

Public grief is an act of rebellion against the world as it is. It means not letting people disappear from this world. I read last week a post about a recent high school graduate, Eli Sevener, who died from COVID at 19-years old. Eli played baseball and cared about the world. I wonder who he would have been had he lived.

And what about Otilia Levi, whose family fled pogroms in Romania, only to resettle in France where they'd later be pursued by Nazis. As the war intensified, SS soldiers found Otilia trying to hide other Jews and shot her, but she miraculously survived. This spring, she fell to COVID. I want my kids to know her name.

Dr. Alyce Gullattee was a professor at Howard University who taught generations of Black physicians. At the peak of the AIDS crisis, when many were afraid to even talk about AIDS, Dr. Gullattee was known to cradle dying AIDS patients in her arms, kissing them on their heads, comforting them in their dying moments with love. Dr. Gullattee died from COVID in May.

Collective grief means lifting up their stories. Saying their names.

Saying Breonna Taylor and Daniel Prude and Ahmaud Arbery and Aja Raquell Rhone-Spears, who died in this time at 26, 41, 25, 33 years old not from COVID-19, but a much older and even more insidious virus—racism in America.

My friend Rev. Najuma Smith-Pollard [says](#) we need to pray for all of the mothers who've lost children. "We [need to ask] for healing of the womb, because the womb is crying! The womb is hemorrhaging! The womb is hurting!"

When their world was taken from them, our ancestors lamented.

They didn't *normalize* tragedy. They did not accustom themselves to the loss of human life. They never bought the narrative that human beings were expendable, that human life could be compromised in some inhuman calculation wrought by political expediency. They never said, "It is what it is."

They felt the weight of their tragedy not for one day, not for a few. For *generations*. Still today—nearly 2000 years later—we mark sacred time around these losses. We sit on the floor and fast and read Lamentations. We tell stories of women ravaged, men enslaved and children taken captive. עַל־אֵלֶּה | אָנִי בּוֹכֶיָה עֵינַי | עֵינַי נִרְדָּה מְאִים *For all these*

things I weep, My eyes flow with tears (Eikha 1:16). We shatter glass beneath the huppah at every wedding—a reminder even in our most joyous moments to hold the weight of that loss. Its memory is never far from us.

Why have we failed to grieve all the loss from the compounding crises of our day?

It's not that we haven't had the time. There were long months with no NBA, no outdoor concerts, no Shakespeare in the park. We had the opportunity; we failed to muster the collective will. Instead, a reckless, dishonest, self-interested political leadership completely devoid of empathy dictated a national response that left us play-acting that we're ok—when we're not at all ok.

But willful amnesia is not a reflection of a resilient society. It is a sign of a weak society. A society in denial. Public mourning is both a sacred practice and a social necessity, a *moral imperative*, especially after catastrophic loss, because it forces us to reckon and wrestle with the circumstances that gave rise to the unspeakable in the first place.

We may want to skip steps, focus on silver linings... but the heart needs to weep and scream and rail against the injustice of it all! I know mine does. We need to mourn—because every human life is precious. Every one of us created in God's own image, deserving of dignity, in life and in death. And grief it is one of the most powerful expressions of love. It's a cry from the depths of our being that what is, is not what ought to be.

Instead, we live in a country where people claiming to be *proudly pro-life* work feverishly to protect the life of a fetus while blithely condemning 200,000 people—mostly elderly and Black and brown and poor—to die for the health of the economy. "Let nature take its course," they say. "I take no responsibility."

The wisdom of our ancestors calls to us: there's no short-cutting this process. A society that does not honor its dead will fail to honor its living. Our Rabbis took off their tefillin and wept and thrashed about. And we, too, must cry and scream and tear our clothes.

And of course, it's not only the dead we need to grieve.

There's trauma all around us. A collective, searing sense of loss.

Have you yet had the moment when a video or photo from last year pops up on your social media and you find yourself choking back tears as you gaze at images from another dimension? Simple things: friends, unmasked, with arms around each other.

Students chatting as they walk through the hallway, people davening together in a high school gym!

We need to grieve—for the months of terror, sadness and confusion. Months in which we've sat, confined to our small spaces, noticing every scratch in the throat, every wave of heat through the body, wondering if we've lost our ability to taste or if the food's just bland.

Months of worrying for our loved ones, and for ourselves, while forced into a completely *unnatural apartness*? Working alone. Eating alone. Sleeping alone.

And what about this completely *unnatural togetherness*—teenagers with no escape from their homes, parents, especially of little ones, who haven't had a moment of quiet, partners who liked each other more—let's just be honest—when they had a break from each other a few hours a day.

We need to grieve for the months of watching as a latent anxiety, depression or OCD became the dominant feature of our lives or the lives of our loved ones. For the numbing with each new report of infection and death stats. 88,000 infections on college campuses! How can we even begin to grapple with that?

We need to grieve. We need to grieve for the lost work, the lost savings. The big dreams put on hold perhaps indefinitely, the weddings and college graduations that weren't, the proms and b'nai mitzvah, and all the quiet moments in between. The accidental meetings. The human touch. The love that was never given a chance. The children not conceived. The music not recorded and the movies that weren't made. Meals we never got to have and varsity volleyball games my kid didn't get to play. The art store on the corner that's now permanently closed.

The message from our ancestors: weep, child. Your body needs to crack a little. You can't carry all this weight. Let the tears flow. Today, let the tears flow.

But know that this story does not end in grief.

Our ancestors had every right, after all that they had suffered, to walk away bitter and defeated. Eternal victims of cruel external forces determined to destroy them.

And yet, when our Rabbis tell the story of destruction, they do something they did not have to do. They invite a logic of truth telling into the landscape of incalculable loss.

They ask (Yoma 9b): why was the Temple destroyed? מפני שהיתה בו שנאת חנם-- the Second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred—*our* senseless hatred, not the Roman legions. Our cowardice, hypocrisy and callousness, which had become normative in our Jewish community, until it destroyed us from within.

Rather than blame the Romans, our Rabbis hold up a mirror. They venture to try to understand their own complicity: in what ways did we accede to cultural norms that left us susceptible to Roman invasion?

Their gaze is unforgiving: For Rome to conquer Jerusalem, there had to have been weaknesses in the system, much like there are in America today. Too many people willing to turn a blind eye when neighbors were demoralized and dehumanized. Too many who stayed silent and towed the status quo. Too many willing to hide behind their whiteness, and pretend there were fine people on both sides. Too many who failed to distinguish between the truth and obvious lies. Too many who sold their last principles for a chance to get in bed with power. Too many who contributed to the moral vacuum that could be filled only by extremists—*biryonim*—who brought our society to the brink.

Our Rabbis told the truth!

That must have been a hard call. Our people were hurting. They didn't want to hear that their dislocation, their suffering, was in part a result of their own failures of leadership, of courage, of imagination. I bet people resented the Sages for telling this story. I bet they told them not to get *political*. Some may even have withheld their donations! Your job is to be a pastor, not a prophet!

But the Rabbis refused to stay silent. We've suffered enough, they said. It's time to be honest.

Because they understood something about healing: you cannot put a Band-Aid on an infected wound and expect it to miraculously heal. Not when what you need is aggressive surgery.

There comes a time when the only way forward is through the truth. When we're called to speak not only about where it hurts, but to investigate the conditions that allowed for the sickness to spread. Not only to report how many people have been infected by the virus, but also why it took so damn long to get PPE to our hospitals.

Why, in America, wearing a mask—a basic public health necessity, became a culture war! A partisan hill to die on... or more accurately, for others to die on.

Why we *still* don't have free, rapid testing everywhere in this country.

How did it happen that the wealthiest nation in the world can't figure out how to cover unemployment benefits for people who are now unable to work?

There comes a time when we must be honest—about why this country seems so willing to leave old people, Black and brown and poor people, imprisoned people and detainees to essentially die from this virus. And why so many seem unbothered by that.

We desperately don't want to tell the truth!

Because the truth forces us to confront the underlying conditions that made America such a rich breeding ground for the catastrophic intersection of crises we're living through today.

Political corruption. An addictive attachment to white supremacy. A spirit of apathy and indifference. A broken economy that rewards profit over human dignity. That feeds us the toxic myth of radical individualism and eviscerates any sense of collective responsibility.

Imagine a national reckoning with the truth! No more equivocating. No more false histories and naked lies. Thousands of cheap, shoddy statues were erected to perpetuate a false moral narrative—but you can't hide from the truth forever. No more obfuscation and redirection and blurring of moral wrongs. No more engaging the "southern strategy" and "suburban strategy" as if they're anything more than a thin veil over a white nationalist agenda. I hear our ancestors crying out to us: the most courageous thing to do with your anguished hearts is to finally tell the truth!

We grieve. And we tell the truth. And then, we begin to rebuild.

I am sure those who fled Jerusalem for their lives and watched their world burn to the ground, those haunted by the screams of their neighbors and friends who didn't make it out, I'm sure they dreamt of returning home. They missed the sweet bustle of the farmer's market, eating in their favorite restaurants, meetings in their children's schools. They wanted their lives back.

But there was no going back. Because the sorrow and the suffering taught them something. It lifted the veil on what they couldn't see before, with their full inboxes and work deadlines and travel. They learned from all the loss and all the truth telling that

the paradise they lived in before wasn't paradise for everybody. Jerusalem was a beautiful mansion built on a rotten foundation. The sickness of senseless hatred had taken root in the soil. And so, their most urgent task was to rebuild, but not to replicate.

What kind of world must they build? One day, R' Yehoshua went walking with R' Yohanan ben Zakkai past the burnt embers of Jerusalem, the world that was, a painful reminder of what they had lost. R' Yehoshua wept—how he longed to return! How will we connect with God now that our sacred home is destroyed? He asked.

There's no going back, said his teacher. Now, we build something new.

But here's a connection I never made until this year: Remember how the world that died was saturated in שנאת חנם—senseless hatred? עולם חסד יבנה, said Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai: Now we build a world of love, a counter-testimony to the world we laid to rest.

And so, thirty miles or so from a decimated Jerusalem, in a small town called Yavneh, Judaism was reborn. A society that died on the sword of its own rigidity became known for its adaptability. In place of sacrifices, they developed a world of personal prayer. In the place of callousness they birthed a world of compassion.

In the years after the destruction, R' Yohanan ben Zakkai instituted nine *takanot*—nine rulings: זכר למקדש – ostensibly to honor and remember the world that was. But really, it is clear, those rulings planted the seeds for the world that could be. Our new world would reflect the hard-won lessons from the old.

Imagine what tomorrow looks like if—as much as we crave normalcy—we resist rushing back to normal. As much as I want to get my kids back in school and hug my mom and daven and sing and cry in a room with a thousand of you, imagine if we prioritize addressing the pre-existing conditions that made us susceptible to the virus and violence and fires we're living through now. Imagine if we treat this crisis as an invitation to confront the spiritual sickness in our society, and rather than racing to reclaim some mythic past, we fight with all we've got to build something new?

What new world would we build—a counter-testimony to the inequities and injustices laid bare in this pandemic?

Imagine a world that centers justice, equity and human dignity. That's built on the shared assumption that every person is truly created in the image of the Holy One. I'm asking you envision a society that protects those most vulnerable, affirms that Black

Lives Matter, engages in truth and reconciliation, pays reparations, and cultivates a moral imagination big enough to embrace us all.

Imagine a world rooted in the realization that we're all a part of an invisible web of humanity that crosses land and sea, that gives us both the privilege and the responsibility of caring for one another. Have we not learned that from this tiny, invisible virus, that hit the world with the blunt force of a thousand asteroids, leaving no corner of the earth free of its reach?

Imagine a world in which we pay teachers what they deserve, and honor farm, grocery, garbage, and postal workers as essential and invaluable, since we've learned that we literally cannot function as a society without them.

Imagine a world in which community safety is completely reimagined, so that it's a reality not only in wealthy enclaves but everywhere.

A new world, rooted in the shared knowledge that we must live responsibly and sustainably on this planet, lest we bequeath to our children endless fires and heat waves, hurricanes and pandemics.

A new world in which we treat our bodies as precious and touch as sacred. A world in which our eyes are trained to see beauty and poetry everywhere. A world of love.

Our ancestors grieved. They told the truth about the past. And they built a new future—a counter-testimony to the world that was.

This is our blueprint, an ancient wisdom born of suffering.

These *aseret yemei teshuvah*-- ten days of repentance, interrupt our regularly scheduled September every year to call us to the rigorous work of self-accounting: Who am I and who does the world need me to be? This year, it's clear what work we need to do.

First, let us use this time to grieve: to become the storytellers of our generation. Read, write, weep for all that we've lost. Walk through the IKAR Memorial Garden. Affirm. Console. Wrestle. Remember.

Second, we need to practice telling the truth. Be more honest this week than you've been trained to be, more honest than is polite. Truth telling is a muscle. We'll only emerge from this train wreck when enough people are willing to tell the truth.

And finally, we need to dream audaciously of the next chapter. Stretch your imagination. This moment is an inflection point—a once in a generation opportunity for transformation. What can we—*what must we* build from out of the ashes?

In the days ahead, I will take comfort in the image of a great Rabbi, wrapped in a coffin, sneaking past the walls of a mighty city that had been weakened by hatred. A teacher, at once broken-hearted and already dreaming of a new, love-driven reality.

We're not there yet. Before we come out of this, there will be more anguish, more loss. We'll be pushed to our limits in the months ahead.

Hold on, beloveds. Listen closely, and you'll hear the whispers of the past: from our shared loss and dislocation, our brokenness and grief, we'll be given the opportunity to transform this time of collective heartache into an era of collective rebirth.

Our world is dying right now. After all the destruction, we will build a new world, in which each of us will be called to the sacred task of tipping the scales toward love. And that, friends, will be something truly beautiful.