

Yizkor 5773
September 26, 2012
Rabbi Suzy Stone

I met Jerome on my first day as a chaplain at Children's Hospital. Every day I would visit the room of this fourteen year old boy in hopes of having a real conversation with him—but instead—he insisted that we would watch TV together or play videos games—just as long as we “kept it light.”

As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, his situation got worse. He had a very rare form of Leukemia and after 2 or 3 experimental courses of chemo, the doctor finally advised the family to stop treatment.

That was the day that my heart stopped beating in the same way. After almost 50 visits with this one patient, I could not understand how God could have let such a wonderful child endure such pain and suffering. The God I knew-- one of goodness, love and mercy—was nowhere to be found. And after losing seven patients in one week-- the only truth I knew was one of heartache and abandon.

So, in one last-ditch effort to talk to Jerome about how he was really feeling, I decided to lead him through a guided meditation. At the very end of our time together, I asked him: How do you feel?

He said: “I am scared.”

I said: “Me too.”

There was no sense in lying to him because the truth is—we are all afraid to love what death can touch. It is a fearful thing to love, hope, dream, to be...and then to lose.¹

And yet, if we squint hard enough through our pain and tears, we might be able to see that our life here on earth—is simply a parentheses between eternal being and eternal becoming.

While our bodies are a sacred temple, they are fated to crumble under the weight of time. But our souls are everlasting—they are destined to fly free in the eternal bond of life with God.

Many times, in the face of death, all we can see is the loss, pain, betrayal, anger and abandon. But if we look beyond reason, beyond acts or words of faith, we realize we are planted firmly in the world of nature--- where the seasons change, the tides rise and fall, the harvest is grown, uprooted-- only to be planted once again. Because in the world of nature—for every departure there is an arrival.

¹ Adapted from Chaim Stern. [Stern, Chaim. *Mishkan Tefillah For the House of Mourning*. New York: CCAR Press, 2010, 16b]

It is the law of the axe whose handle was a tree. It is the law of the light of a star that hurdled towards us a million years ago, whose light finally arrives today. Because in our tradition there is no such thing as permanent darkness. Perhaps this is why the Rabbis taught us that *each month* we must go out—into nature—and verbally bless the moon.

But rather than blessing the moon when it would seem obvious—when it is at its fullest, brightest and most glorious phase on the 15th day of each month-- our sages instructed us to bless the NEW moon—when it is barely visible—to teach us that even when the world feels dark and alone, there is lightness in the making.

We are not destined for eternal darkness because the world around is turning, and so too can we turn towards lightness, renewal and strength.

But sometimes, even just seeing the new moon is no easy task. In fact, the Rabbis once inquired: Is a blind man required to bless the new moon? Are we required to bless what we cannot see or feel?

This is the plight of the mourner—are we required to bless the world around us when nothing feels or seems like a true blessing?

In the end, the Rabbis teach that us that- yes—even a blind man is required to recite the blessing for a new moon. Perhaps this is to teach us that even when the words of our tradition feel like an insult to our grief—it is through the our ceaseless repetition of these words of hope and praise—that we come a little bit closer to creating the world that we NEED instead of the one that we currently inhabit.

If we allow it, our tradition can be the light that brings us strength, and the wisdom that teaches us that we are not alone in this vast and mysterious universe.

For at least two thousand years, our people have been reciting this blessing—which is called the Kiddush Levanah—the blessing of “lightness” [lit. ‘whiteness’]:

“Praised be the One Adonai, whose words created the heavens, and whose breath created all of the hosts of heaven. God appointed all the hosts of heaven fixed laws and times so that they should not alter from their assigned course. They rejoice and are glad to do the will of their Creator. They work truthfully for their action is truth. And the moon renews itself like a crown of beauty just as she renews the womb of creation so that we will be forever be renewed as an honor to the name of the Creator. Blessed are You, Adonai, who renews the moon month after month.”²

² BT Sanhedrin 42a

Even when we feel blinded by pain, anguish, heartache and abandon, this blessing teaches us that we must find the strength we need in order to create a new reality and a new day so that we can create a new story of our loved one's life through our OWN values and actions.

But, the truth is, no matter how strong we are, or no matter how much support we have from our immediate families, we cannot do this work alone. In fact, we are taught that this blessing must be said in the presence of a minyan—in a community of people who are striving to see this light of renewal and fullness once again.

That's why this year I would like to invite ALL of you to a special **yizkor healing circle**. I am introducing this initiative because when I lost someone immensely dear to me I know that after 30 days of mourning, I was still numb. I had not been able to process my loss, so when I was finally ready to deal with it, my peers were nowhere to be found.

Unfortunately, I don't think my experience was unique. While, as Reform Jews we do a pretty good job supporting one another in the first weeks or months after a loss, we often lack the tools necessary to help one another in the year (or years) following our loss.

My hope is that this small initiative is a first step in a much longer conversation about how we become a truly caring community—one that knows how to support one another in the long run.

Amazingly, our tradition has a *built in* mechanism for remembering and honoring our loved one's more than once a year—it is the *yizkor* service that takes place on the last days of Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot.

Whether you have lost a loved one in recent weeks or months, or whether it has been a year or two—or even more—there is no limit on who may attend—I want to invite you our first yizkor healing circle on Monday, October 8th.

The healing circle will be an hour-long opportunity for learning, sharing and healing. To be clear, this is not a meditation service, nor is it a training on how to comfort the bereaved.

Rather, it is primarily an opportunity to share with one another the stories of our loved one's life, as well as, a bit of Jewish study about this incredible tradition of yizkor and how we can better support one another in this community.

On Monday, October 8th the Simchat Torah service with the *yizkor* prayer itself begins 10:30am. At noon there will be a light lunch, and then I will be leading the healing circle from 12:45-1:45. There will be more information sent via email in the coming days. Please check your inboxes and RSVP as soon as possible.

I encourage you to participate in the entire morning, including lunch, but if you can only participate in the healing circle itself, then you are still (by all means) welcome!

As Jonathan Safran Foer once said: We Jews have six senses instead of five—touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...and memory.” And yet, I believe that when our memory does not have a chance to shine, our other five sense become more muted, more numb, and more paralyzed.

Ultimately, this new initiative is an opportunity to reawaken our sixth sense. So I hope you will join me for the first of three sessions on October 8.

And with that, I would like to close with a prayer—A prayer to help us honor the memory of those we love, while also teaching us how to honor our own life as it moves forward on this journey of eternal being and becoming.

“[Dear God], Let me do my work each day and if the darkened hours of despair overcome me, May I not forget the strength that comforted me in the desolation of other times. May I still remember the bright hours that found me walking over the silent hills of childhood, or dreaming on the banks of a quiet river, when a light glowed within me, and *I promised my early God* to have courage amid the tempests of the changing years.”³

“God, who speaks in silence, teach me not to fear the silence. Remind me that running from pain only causes more pain, and that distraction is no cure for suffering. Give me the courage to embrace the stillness, to encounter the quiet, so that I might hear your still small voice once again.”⁴

³ Adapted from Max Ehrmann

⁴ Adapted from Naomi Levy