

17TH OF TAMMUZ – JULY 9, 2020

A DIFFERENT KIND OF GRIEF AND MOURNING

We are all grieving.

We grieve over the brokenness of the world, as climate change endangers all of our futures, as refugees and asylum seekers desperately seek safety, as poverty and hunger increases, as people of color are threatened by state violence, and as too many live without basic freedoms.

We grieve over personal losses — the death of loved ones, our own loss of safety and security in the face of a global pandemic, loss of jobs and economic security, and the loss of the old “normal” as our everyday lives change drastically.

In the midst of the large-scale grief of the world, some of us may feel that our personal losses are not worthy of attention. But our personal grief over the small and large losses in our life are just as real, and just as deserving of mourning. David Kessler, co-author with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross of *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, explained recently,

*The people who are wrestling with grief because they lost their job — that’s a very valid loss, and it deserves to be honored and acknowledged, just as we should acknowledge the grief of somebody whose sibling died of the virus. Those losses are not the same, but they are equally valid ... Your work is to feel your sadness and fear and anger whether or not someone else is feeling something.*¹

The fast of Shiva Asar B’Tammuz (the 17th of Tammuz) begins an annual period of mourning in the Jewish calendar. This day commemorates the moment that the Romans broke through the walls of Jerusalem, leaving the people huddled and frightened in their homes, waiting for the inevitable final destruction. Three weeks later, our grief culminates with Tisha B’Av (the 9th of Av), which marks the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem, as well as other tragedies of Jewish history.

As we experience losses both small and large, this three week period offers us an outlet for expressing our grief. The 17th of Tammuz allows us a moment to feel our personal pain and our fear of what is to come, before the more public global mourning of Tisha B’Av. Rabbi Rachel Barenblat writes,

*The Jewish calendar gives us these Three Weeks as a time for feeling the brokenness that characterizes every heart and every life. These weeks offer an invitation, and an opportunity to feel what hurts. Not because we’re going to stay in that brokenness, but precisely because we’re not — and because recognizing what’s broken is the first step toward healing, as individuals and as a community.*²

In the grand scheme of the Jewish calendar, the Three Weeks are the ultimate descent, with the grief serving as the jumping off point for the slow ascent to the High Holidays. From the grief of Tammuz and Av, we turn to the reflection and repentance in Elul, and, ultimately, the joy and celebration in Tishrei.

¹ <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

² <http://thewisdomdaily.com/why-the-three-weeks-of-grief-in-the-jewish-calendar-can-be-healing/>

WHAT WE ARE MARKING

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6

There were five events that happened to our ancestors on the Seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the Ninth of Av.

On the Seventeenth of Tammuz: The tablets were shattered; the *tamid* (daily) offering was cancelled; the [walls] of the city were breached; Apostomos burned the Torah; and an idol was placed in the Temple.

On the Ninth of Av it was decreed that our ancestors should not enter the land, the Temple was destroyed the first time and the second time, Betar was captured, and the city was plowed up. When Av enters, they limit their rejoicing.

חֲמִשָּׁה דְּבָרִים אָרְעוּ אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּשַׁבְּעָה
עֶשְׂרֵי בְּתַמּוּז וְחֲמִשָּׁה בְּתַשְׁעָה בְּאָב.
בְּשַׁבְּעָה עֶשְׂרֵי בְּתַמּוּז נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלְוִיחֹת,
וּבִטְלַת הַתָּמִיד, וְהִבְקָעָה הָעִיר, וְשָׂרַף
אֶפּוֹסְטוֹמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, וְהֵעִמִּיד צֶלֶם
בְּהִיכָל.

בְּתַשְׁעָה בְּאָב נִגְזַר עַל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שְׁלֹא
יִכְנָסוּ לָאָרֶץ, וְחָרַב הַבַּיִת בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה
וּבְשֵׁנִיָּה, וְנִלְכְּדָה בֵּיתָר, וְנַחֲרָשָׁה הָעִיר.
מִשְׁנַכְנְסֵי אָב, מִמַּעֲטִין בְּשִׂמְחָה

How do the events on Shiva Asar B'Tammuz differ from those of Tisha B'Av? How might the people have responded to each? Which losses in your own life or your own world feel parallel to each of these categories?

SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Talmud, Yevamot 43b

אלא אמר רב אשי שאני אבילות חדשה מאבילות ישנה ושאני אבילות דרבים מאבילות דיחיד:

Rather, Rav Ashi stated: New mourning is different from old mourning, and the mourning of the public is different from the [private] mourning of the individual.

Traditionally, “new mourning” and “individual mourning” are understood as the mourning brought on by an acute crisis, like the death of a loved one. “Old mourning” and “public mourning” are understood as the mourning we inherit from our ancestors — mourning over the Temple, exile, and antisemitism.

What to you right now feels like “old mourning”? What feels like “new mourning”? What mourning feels private, and what feels public? What are your different experiences with each kind of mourning? In what ways do you or don't you feel connected to others, to your community, or to the larger world in each?

Mishneh Torah, Fasts 5:1

There are days on which all Israel fasts because of the misfortunes that occurred on them, in order to arouse the hearts to open to the ways of repentance, and that this be a reminder of our evil deeds and the deeds of our ancestors that are like our deeds that caused these misfortunes for them and for us. In remembering these things we return to goodness, as it is written, “And you shall confess your transgressions and the transgressions of your ancestors” (Lev. 27:40).

משנה תורה, הלכות תעניות ה':א'
(א) יֵשׁ שֵׁם יָמִים שְׁכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתְעַנִּים
בָּהֶם מִפְּנֵי הַצָּרוֹת שְׂאֲרָעוּ בָּהֶן כְּדִי לְעוֹרֵר
הַלְּבָבוֹת לְפָתַח דְּרָכֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְיִהְיֶה זֶה
זְכוּרָן לְמַעֲשֵׂינֵינוּ הָרָעִים וּמַעֲשֵׂה אֲבוֹתֵינוּ
שֶׁהֵיָה כְּמַעֲשֵׂינֵינוּ עֵתָה עַד שְׁגָרָם לָהֶם וּלְנוּ
אוֹתָן הַצָּרוֹת. שֶׁבְּזְכוּרָן דְּבָרִים אֵלּוּ נָשׁוּב
לְהִיטִיב שְׁנֵאמַר (ויקרא כו-מ) "וְהִתְוַדוּ
אֶת עֲוֹנֵם וְאֶת עֲוֹן אֲבוֹתֵם" וְגו':

In what ways can taking time to slow down and feel grief “arouse our hearts” to act differently in the world, and to pursue justice? In what ways are we still suffering from the deeds of our ancestors? Why is it important to confess to the transgressions of past generations? How have the transgressions of past generations — and our own — led to the inequities that this crisis is exposing? How have you experienced grief and anger over these inequities? How can we move from that grief into action and reparation?

Balak 4 (from *Sefat Emet* 4:157-8; Bemidbar 5648/1888)

It is taught that “the broken tablets lie in the Ark.” Surely the gift God gave us was not for naught. If we were not yet ready to receive the gift, it was hidden away in the Ark. The breaking of the tablets took place on the Seventeenth of Tammuz [the date when the wall of Jerusalem was breached by the Romans]. All these breaks have to be healed. That is why Israel is dispersed and exiled throughout the lands, in order to gather those fragments. When all is restored, we will be able to receive those “first tablets.”

Arthur Green (translation and commentary), *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet: Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1998), pp. 261-2.

The Sefat Emet points out that the Israelites continue to carry the shards of the broken tablets through the desert as a reminder of the sins of our past and as a promise of a future where that brokenness will become whole. Mourning is a part of healing.

How will you know that the world has healed — that it will be time to turn our mourning into rejoicing? What do you imagine our healed world looks like?

Benji Hart, *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief*, edited by Cindy Milstein (AK Press, 2017).

Pretending I am not sad, hiding my pain, will not make me stronger. In fact, suppressing my true self, ignoring the fear and rage that surrounds loss, is exactly what in the long run will weaken me. When we talk of self-care, self-defense, and self-preservation, we need to talk not about overcoming our feelings of grief but allowing them, making room for them. We need to talk about movement building that allows us to feel—in all the different ways that may come—and does not expect us to erase or bottle up our sadness in the name of organizing, leadership, or action.

Let us not push forward so decidedly that we do not stop to mourn. It is not merely OK to grieve. It is wholly necessary if we are to remain connected to our collective power, truly invested in our liberation, and whole enough to sustain ourselves in struggle.

Benji Hart is an artist, activist and writer currently living in Chicago. Much of his work focuses on using the dance form [known as] vogue as a tool for teaching black and brown queer history, and planning direct actions. More of his writing can be found at his blog, Radical Faggot, at radfag.com.

How will you take time for your grief, regardless of what you are grieving? How can this grief connect you to others? How can leaning into your grief in this moment ultimately become a source of strength? How can it help contribute to our collective liberation?