

## Responses to the Death of a Loved One

Yizkor Service

Pesach, Day Eight

April 30, 2016

The death of someone close to us leaves a hole in our hearts and in our lives. Our world abruptly changes. Time is divided for us between the time before and the time after. We are plunged into grief.

What do we do after that terrible loss? What can we do? How can we go on?

I have a dear friend and teacher whose son died after a freak accident. My teacher comforted Alice and me after our son Sam died one year ago. My teacher told us, "This loss will break your heart. And then you may learn that it is possible to live with a broken heart."

We can learn lessons also from stories of death in Torah. We must always remember, though, that they are stories, usually told in order to give a lesson. They contain truth, but we don't know that they are factual.

One such story occurs in the very beginning. Adam and Eve lost two sons. One son, Cain, killed Abel. Then Cain was banished and his parents never saw him again.

But the story in the Torah goes on to tell us, "And Adam made love to his wife again." They had another child.

They sustained a devastating loss, but they managed to start all over again. The story of Adam and Eve is a story of loving and losing and then loving again.

That does not always work. Aaron loses two sons to God's anger after they bring "strange fire" to the altar. This happens on the very same day that Aaron becomes the high priest. Moses clumsily offers to Aaron a religious cliché not even worth repeating. It is no comfort. Aaron just looks at him. And the Torah— which doesn't waste words – goes out of its way to tell us that Aaron was silent.

We don't know what Aaron was thinking in that silence. He could have cursed God aloud, but he didn't. Perhaps he did so in the silence of his heart. He also did not praise God aloud.

There is a custom to say "Baruch Dayan Ha'Emet" upon learning of a death. It means "Blessed is the God of Truth" or "Blessed is the True God."

Those words are words in which I find no comfort. I don't say them. Aaron did not say those words when his two sons died, apparently at the will of God.

What Aaron did instead was to withdraw, to nurse his wounds, to take the time to begin to recover. Later, he did resume his duties, but not immediately.

In the Book of Job we also learn about loss. As the victim of a cruel bet between God and Satan, Job at first loses his property and then all of his ten children. Job refuses to curse God for these losses, while at the same time insisting that he, Job, has done nothing wrong.

God finally appears to Job. God confirms Job's opinion: there is no connection between Job's righteousness and his losses. Rather, the workings of the world are known only to God and cannot be explained by mortals.

At the end of the story, Job and his wife, like Adam and Eve, are able to begin again and beget again. They have seven new sons and three new daughters. Job lives another 140 years to see four generations of sons and grandsons and finally dies old and contented.

That is the story of Job. But that is not a factual story. That is an extended contemplation on the riddle of undeserved suffering. The story of Job is an attempt by our ancient forebears to reconcile what they saw of evil in the world and their wish to believe in a God who was both omnipotent and kind.

Another story of heartbreaking loss has been played out in our own historical time, and perhaps does provide us with one model for going on living after a terrible death of one close to us. For three years, from the end of World War Two in 1945 until 1948, Jews who survived the Holocaust were forced to live in "displaced persons" camps in Europe. We could not go back to Poland – even after all that had happened, we were not welcome there and pogroms were still happening there. We couldn't go to Palestine – the doors were locked. We couldn't get to America. So the surviving Jews were cooped up for three years in displaced persons camps.

During those three years, many of these broken people – shards of people, widows, widowers, orphans, mourners – found each other, married, and brought children into the world. It has been said that there were more Jewish children born in those three years than in any other period for which we have Jewish demographic records.

One sometimes hears of people who are not sure whether they want to bring children into this world. If the Holocaust generation had waited until it was a good time to bring children into the world, we would have a smaller Jewish community today. They loved, and lost, and risked again.

There is no theological justification for evil or suffering or premature death. All we can do is respond and go on living.

We learn two responses from Adam, from Aaron, from Job, and from the Holocaust survivors.

First, we must remember. *Zachor*.

Then, we have to renew our lives as best we can, while holding the memory of our loved ones in our hearts and in our memories.

[We continued then with our Yizkor Service]

Responsive reading.

Silent recollection of those dear to us.

Cantor chants Psalm 23:

Mizmor le'David,

A Psalm of David.

Adonai ro'i lo echsar.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Binot desheh yarbitzaini,

He makes me lie down in green pastures:

al mei menuchot yenhaleini.

He leads me beside the still waters.

Nafshi yeshovev

He restores my soul:

yancheini bemag'lei tzedek lema'an shemo.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Gam ki elech b'gei tzalmavet,

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death,

lo ira ra ki atah imadi,

I will fear no evil: for You are with me;

shivtecha u'mishantecha hema yenchamuni.

Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.

Ta'aroch lefanai shulchan neged tzorerai,

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies:

dishanta vashemen roshi, cosi revayah.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Ach tov va'chesed yirdifuni kol y'mei hayai

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
ve'shavti b'veit Adonai lorech yamim.

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

President and Gabbai Rishon reads Yahrzeit names and chants El Malei Rachamim in Hebrew.

I read English translation of El Malei Rachamim:

O God, full of compassion, Who dwells on high, grant true rest upon the wings of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, in the exalted spheres of the holy and pure who shine as the resplendence of the firmament, to the souls of our dear departed, who have gone to the eternal world. May their place of rest be in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, may the All-Merciful One shelter them with the cover of His wings forever, and bind their souls in the bond of life. The Lord is their heritage; may they rest in their resting-places in peace; and let us say: Amen.

We read the Mourner's Kaddish together.

[Shabbat morning service then continued.]

[I concluded the service as follows]

Please rise.

Ribono shel olam. We recall today the lives of our loved ones, and we can also object to their being taken from us, as expressed in by Edna St. Vincent Millay in her poem, "Dirge Without Music" -

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned  
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.  
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.  
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,  
A formula, a phrase remains, — but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love, —  
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled  
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.  
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

May we, each of us, continue to treasure the precious memories of our dear departed.

Shabbat shalom.