

Grief



with
Rabba Yaffa Epstein

Wednesday, August 28

“Letting the Tears Come: Sitting with God in our Grief”

This Resource is for Day School Administrators and Teachers

Group Discussion Questions:

1

What has your own grief looked like this year? (What has been one manifestation of your grief this year since October 7?)

2

Has it been important to you to feel that God is grieving alongside us this year since October 7? Why or why not?

3

In your school, who have the students had alongside them in their grief process?

One Year On

Join our 3-Part Webinar to Prepare for the Upcoming Holiday Season and October 7 Anniversary



Texts on Grief and Guiding Questions to Use with Your Learners:

1

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות לב:

וְאָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: מִיּוֹם שֶׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעְלוּ שַׁעֲרֵי תְּפִלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק וְאֲשׁוּעַ שְׁתֵּם תְּפִלָּתִי".
וְאָף עַל פִּי שֶׁשַׁעֲרֵי תְּפִלָּה נִנְעְלוּ, שַׁעֲרֵי דַמְעָה לֹא נִנְעְלוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "שְׁמַעַה תְּפִלָּתִי ה' וְשִׁוְעֵתִי הֲאִזְיִנָּה אֶל דַּמְעֹתַי אֶל תַּחֲרָשׁ".

Babylonian Talmud Brachot 32b

Rabbi Elazar said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked and prayer is not accepted as it once was, as it is said: "Though I plead and call out, God shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8).

Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked with the destruction of the Temple, the gates of tears were not locked, as it is stated: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears" (Psalms 39:13).

In your understanding, what is the difference between "gates of prayer" and "gates of tears"? What does it mean to you that the "gates of tears" are never locked?

2

תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות דף קד.

ההוא יומא דנח נפשיה דרבי, גזרו רבנן תעניתא, ובעו רחמי.
ואמרי: כל מאן דאמר נח נפשיה דר' ידקר בחרב.
סליקא אמתיה דרבי לאיגרא, אמרה: עליוני, מבקשין את רבי והתחתונים מבקשין את רבי יהי רצון שיכופו תחתונים את העליונים.
כיון חזאי כמה זימני דעייל לבית הכסא, וחלץ תפילין ומנח להו וקמצטער, אמרה: יהי רצון שיכופו עליונים את התחתונים. ולא הוו שתקי רבנן מלמיבעי רחמי, שקלה כוזא שדייא מאיגרא [לארעא], אישתיקו מרחמי ונח נפשיה דרבי.
אמרו ליה רבנן לבר קפרא: זיל עיין אזל אשכחיה דנח נפשיה.
קרעיה ללבושיה ואהדריה לקרעיה לאחוריה.
פתח ואמר אראלים ומצוקים אחזו בארון הקדש, נצחו אראלים את המצוקים ונשבה ארון הקדש.
אמרו ליה: נח נפשיה?
אמר להו: אתון קאמריתו.

Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 104a

On the day when Rabi (Judah the Prince the compiler of the Mishna) died, the Rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy (that he would live).

They announced: "Anyone who says that Rabi is dead will be stabbed with a sword."

Rabi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed: 'The ones above (the angels) request Rabi, and the ones below (the Rabbis) request Rabi; may it be Your will that the ones below may overpower the ones above.'

However, when she saw how often he needed to go to the bathroom, painfully taking off his tefillin (phylacteries) and putting them on again, she prayed: 'May it be Your will that the ones above may overpower the ones below'.

As the Rabbis incessantly continued their prayers for mercy she picked up a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground.

They stopped praying and the soul of Rabi departed. 'Go', said the Rabbis to Bar Kappara, 'and investigate'. He went and finding that Rabi was dead, he tore his cloak and turned the tear backwards (this is an external sign of mourning).

He said: 'The angels and the mortals have taken hold of the holy ark (referring to Rabi). The angels overpowered the mortals and the holy ark has been captured'.

'Has he', they asked him, 'gone to his eternal rest?' He replied, 'You said it; I did not say it'.

In what ways can fear of loss sometimes blind people to what is really going on? How might we accept the pain, the grief, and the loss we are experiencing without needing to deny it, or wish it away?

איכה רבה א:א'

אמר רב נחמן אמר שמואל משום רבי יהושע בן לוי, קרא הקדוש ברוך הוא למלאכי השרת, אמר להם מלך בשר ודם כשמת לו מת והוא מתאבל, מה דרכו לעשות? אמרו לו תולה שק על פתחו. אמר להם אף אני כך אני עושה, הדא הוא דכתיב (ישעיה נ, ג): אלביש שמים קדרות ושק אשים כסותם. מלך בשר ודם מה דרכו לעשות, אמרו לו מכבה את הפנסין, אמר להם כך אני עושה, שנאמר (יואל ד, טו): שמש וירח קדרו וכוכבים אספו נגהם. מלך בשר ודם מה דרכו לעשות, כופה את המטות. כך אני עושה, שנאמר (דניאל ז, ט): עד די כרסון רמיו ועתיק יומין יתב, כביכול שהיו הפוכין. מלך בשר ודם מה דרכו לעשות, הולך יחף, כך אני עושה, שנאמר (נחום א, ג): ה' בסופה ובסערה דרכו וענן אבק רגליו. מלך בשר ודם מה דרכו לעשות, מבצע פורפירא שלו. כך אני עושה, דכתיב (איכה ב, יז): עשה ה' אשר זמם בצע אמרתו. רבי יעקב דכפר חנן מפרש ליה מהו בצע אמרתו, מבצע פורפירא שלו. מלך בשר ודם מה דרכו לעשות, יושב ודומם, כך אני עושה, שנאמר (איכה ג, כח): ישב בדרך וידם. מלך בשר ודם אבל, מה דרכו לעשות, יושב ובוכה, כך אני עושה, דכתיב (ישעיה כב, יב): ויקרא ה' אלהים צבאות ביום ההוא לבכי ולמספד ולקרח.

Eikhah Rabbah 1:1

Rav Nahman said that Shmuel said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: The Holy Blessed One summoned the ministering angels and said to them: 'A flesh and blood king, when a relative of his dies and he mourns, what does he typically do?' They said to God: 'He hangs sackcloth on his entrance.' God said to them: 'I, too, will do so.' That is what is written: 'I clothe the heavens in blackness and I place sackcloth as their garment' (Isaiah 50:3). 'A flesh and blood king, what [else] does he typically do?' They said to God: 'He extinguishes the lamps.' God said to them: 'That is what I will do,' as it is stated: 'The sun and the moon darkened and the stars withdrew their shining' (Joel 4:15). 'A flesh and blood king, what does he typically do?' 'He overturns the beds.' That is what I will do,' as it is stated: 'Until thrones were set in place and the Ancient One sat' (Daniel 7:9), [implying,] as it were, that they had been overturned. 'A flesh and blood king, what does he typically do?' 'He walks barefoot.' That is what I will do,' as it is stated: 'God's path is in tempest and in storm, and clouds are the dust of God's feet' (Nahum 1:3). 'A flesh and blood king, what does he typically do?' 'He rends his purple garments.' That is what I will do,' as it is stated: "God accomplished what God devised; God implemented [bitza] God's statement [emrato]" (Lamentations 2:17). Rabbi Yaakov of Kefar Hanan explained it: What is bitza emrato? It is that God rent God's purple garments. 'A flesh and blood king, what does he typically do?' 'He sits in silence.' That is what I will do,' as it is stated: "Let him sit alone and be silent" (Lamentations 3:28). **'A flesh and blood king, what does he typically do?'** **'He sits and weeps.'** **'That is what I will do,' as it is stated: "The Lord, God of hosts, called on that day for weeping and for lamentation and for baldness" (Isaiah 22:12).**

How do you feel about the idea that God learns how to mourn from human leaders? Is there anything missing from the list of mourning practices God implements - anything you would want God to add?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות ג.

תניא, אמר רבי יוסי: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך ונכנסתי לחורבה אחת מחורבות ירושלים להתפלל. בא אליה זכור לטוב ושמר לי על הפתח, (והמתין לי) עד שסיימתי תפילתי. לאחר שסיימתי תפילתי אמר לי: "שלום עליך, רבי". ואמרתי לו: "שלום עליך, רבי ומורי". ואמר לי: בני, מפני מה נכנסת לחורבה זו? אמרתי לו: להתפלל. ואמר לי: היה לך להתפלל בדרך. ואמרתי לו: מתירא הייתי שמא יפסיקו בי עוברי דרכים, ואמר לי היה לך להתפלל תפלה קצרה. באותה שעה למדתי ממנו שלשה דברים: למדתי שאין נכנסין לחורבה, ולמדתי שמתפללין בדרך, ולמדתי שהמתפלל בדרך מתפלל תפלה קצרה. ואמר לי: בני, מה קול שמעת בחורבה זו? ואמרתי לו: שמעתי בת קול שמנהמת כיונה ואומרת: "אוי שהחרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגלית את בני לבין אומות העולם". ואמר לי: חייך וחי ראשך, לא שעה זו בלבד אומרת כך, אלא בכל יום ויום, שלש פעמים אומרת כך. ולא זו בלבד אלא, בשעה שישאל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות ועונין: "יהא שמיא הגדול מבורך", הקדוש ברוך הוא מנענע ראשו, ואומר: אשרי המלך שמקלסין אותו בביתו כך, מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו, ואוי להם לבנים שגלו מעל שולחן אביהם.

Babylonian Talmud Brachot 3a

It was taught Rabbi Yosei said:

I was once walking along the road when I entered the ruins of an old, abandoned building among the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray.

I noticed that Elijah, of blessed memory, came and guarded the entrance for me and waited at the entrance until I finished my prayer. When I finished praying, Elijah said to me: Greetings to you, my Rabbi. I answered him: Greetings to you, my Rabbi, my teacher. And Elijah said to me: My son, why did you enter this ruin? I said to him: In order to pray.

And Elijah said to me: You should have prayed on the road. And I said to him: I was unable to pray along the road, because I was afraid that I might be interrupted by travelers. Elijah said to me: You should have recited the abbreviated prayer instituted for just such circumstances. Rabbi Yosei concluded: At that time, from that brief exchange, I learned from him, three things: I learned that one may not enter a ruin; and I learned that one need not enter a building to pray, but he may pray along the road; and I learned that one who prays along the road recites an abbreviated prayer. And after this introduction, Elijah said to me: What voice did you hear in that ruin? I responded: I heard a Divine voice, cooing like a dove and saying: Woe that I destroyed My house, burned My Temple, and exiled my children among the nations. And Elijah said to me: By your life and by your head, not only did that voice cry out in that moment, but it cries out three times each and every day. Moreover, when Israel enters synagogues and study halls and answers, May God's great name be blessed, the Holy Blessed One, shakes their head and says: Happy is the king who is thus praised in his house. How great is the pain of the parent who exiled their children, and woe to the children who were exiled from their parent's table.

How might this text help us feel closer to God? How might it cause us to feel further away from God?

Overarching Question:

Has it been important to you to feel that God is grieving alongside us this year since October 7? Why or why not?

Suggested Activities

1

On the one hand, Jewish tradition tells us (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Moed Katan 9a) that we are not meant to pile one happy event on top of another - each one needs its special space for celebration. On the other hand, when it comes to times of grief, Jewish tradition piles on the tragedies of our history (Mishnah, Tractate Ta'anit 4:6). Discuss that distinction with your students. Then have them consider: if you were choosing just one element of this past year to grieve over, which would it be, and why? You might even have your students, using clay or other art materials, concretely depict the distinction as they understand it, along with an artist's statement.

2

A person's handwriting is theirs alone, distinct and unique. And Jewish tradition tells us that each person is unique and distinct as well, so much so that anyone who destroys a life, it is as if they have destroyed the entire world (Mishnah, Tractate Sanhedrin 4:5). Share with your students the concept of Ot Hayim, a project that created new fonts out of the unique handwritings of nearly 30 Israelis murdered on Oct. 7 or who fell in battle since that day. Invite your students to learn about one particular person memorialized in this project (and their font), and after doing a study of those chapters of Tehillim that Jews traditionally commit to saying at difficult times, to add one chosen psalm to their daily prayer practice, print it in their chosen font, illuminate it, and add it to their own siddur.

Closing Intention

There is a sacredness in tears.
They are not the mark of
weakness, but of power.
They speak more eloquently
than ten thousand tongues.
They are the messengers of
overwhelming grief, of deep
contrition, and of unspeakable
love.

Washington Irving

