

### **Grief in the Time of Covid-19**

One of the most well-known passages in the Hebrew Bible comes from the book of Kohelet, but most of us know it from the Pete Seeger song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” made popular by the Byrds in the 1960’s.

The lyrics read as follows:

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven  
A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal  
A time to laugh, a time to weep  
To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven  
A time to build up, a time to break down  
A time to dance, a time to mourn*

I have thought about this song a lot in the last few months. Two of the lines stand out especially: “A time to laugh, a time to weep” and “A time to dance, a time to mourn.”

Our lives have been upended by the Covid-19 pandemic since Purim, the last event we held in person at the synagogue back in March. Life as we once knew it has changed dramatically. This year has been a prolonged season of weeping and mourning. In addition to feeling grief over the widespread loss of life caused by the pandemic and our country’s irresponsible handling of it, many of us are also grieving the loss of our normal routine and aspects of life that we once took for granted.

We are mourning the steady income we once collected from secure jobs.

We are mourning the ability to gather in person with friends and family.  
We are mourning the hugs we so desperately want to give our loved ones.  
We are mourning our children's socialization and school experience.  
We are mourning the quiet time we had when our children were at school.  
We are mourning interacting with our students and our co-workers.  
We are mourning seeing people's faces.  
We are mourning going out to the movies, concerts, and sporting events.  
We are mourning traveling and scheduling vacation time.  
We are mourning eating in restaurants and sitting in our favorite coffee houses.  
We are mourning gathering for services and worshipping together.  
We are mourning b'nei mitzvah and wedding celebrations.  
We are mourning crowding homes for shiva minyans.  
We are mourning baby namings and letting our loved ones hold our infants.  
We are mourning the budding romance and connecting with new people.  
We are mourning for so much. We are mourning too much.

As a result of this deep grief it is no wonder that the pandemic has had a major psychological impact on many of us. We have lost so much this past year and with recent comments from the CDC about widespread vaccinations, it doesn't seem that this nightmare will miraculously disappear overnight, especially not before November 3rd. We are in this for the long haul.

One thing this pandemic has made clear is that in addition to the attachments we feel towards other people, we also feel strong connections to those activities that provide a rhythm to our lives. The difference is that we don't have a well defined understanding of how profound some of these losses can be for us. As we have become aware, unexpected endings can cause strong emotions and just the thought of a particular loss can trigger sadness.

This being the case, I think Kohelet gives us sound advice. There is a time to weep and mourn. I once read that the only cure to grief is to grieve.

Here are some ways for us to cope with the immense loss and pain we feel in the moment.

Name what you have lost during the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge these losses. Write them down. Talk to someone about the specifics of what you miss.

Embrace the feelings of anger, heartbreak, sadness, and guilt. Give yourself permission to feel rotten.

Accept support from other people. Perhaps others sharing how they processed their own grief might help you take the next step forward. We don't always have the answers.

Remind yourself that the mourning journey is not linear or predictable. There likely won't be a day when you wake up and feel that everything is alright again. But the sting of the losses will begin to be less painful. And everyone's timeline is different.

Think about your own coping strategies that you have relied on throughout your life. Recall trying times and focus on how you recovered. You were strong then, you can be strong now, too.

Walk, jog, exercise, stay active, and maintain a healthy diet. Doing these will also help with getting better sleep at night.

Consider a news diet. This might be hard with the election and all that is going on, but spending too much time focusing on Covid-19 related news can cause you to focus on what you have lost. But stay informed. It is a challenging balance.

Listen to more comedy. A good laugh boosts your immune system and relieves stress.

Connect with friends and community members. Do not isolate yourself. Our Jewish tradition teaches us to not separate ourselves from our community. We need one another right now for support. While you might think you're

reeling harder from all this, know that everyone is experiencing grief. We just express it in different ways.

As awful as it feels, grief serves a valuable purpose in life. There are positive effects in feeling that way we do now. Grief signals to us that we have experienced a profound loss. It reminds us why the loss is so hard in order for us to feel grateful for that which is no more. And if embraced, it ultimately teaches us that we need to adapt in order to move forward. The end goal is to find meaning in our new lives. In short, grief opens our hearts and helps us appreciate what we've lost before it guides us to acceptance and a new life.

There are two Jewish stories I want to share that have helped me see a path forward through all this pain.

Our patriarch Jacob, in the story of Genesis, fled his home and all that he had known, after tricking his father Isaac into giving him the birthright over his brother Esau. Jacob left his loving mother behind. He was all alone and probably filled with sadness for he knew that his relationship with Esau was over and he would likely never see his family again. Years go by and Jacob ends up creating a new life for himself. One night during the journey he and his family took after leaving his uncle Laban's home, Jacob learns that Esau is approaching from a distance. He is sure Esau is out for blood. Jacob sends everyone away that evening and is all alone in the wilderness. The text tells us that Jacob is visited by an angel who begins to wrestle with him. They wrestled all night until the angel cried to be let go. Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." So the angel blessed him and said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed".<sup>1</sup> The name Israel comes from this text. We are a people who know struggle and yet we always find a way to derive blessing and meaning from our experiences. Jacob teaches us that no matter how broken down we feel, personal transformation is possible. Blessings will come to each of us even in these dark times.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 32:25-29

The next story is from roughly 2000 years ago when the Second Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem. This magnificent structure was the focal point for all religious worship and activity. It was the glue that kept Judaism together. With its destruction by the Romans one would assume that this would have meant the end to Jewish ritual life. Not only was there no Temple, but Jews were killed, forced into slavery, and many fled their homes. Judaism seemed to be on the brink of death. But the rabbis had another idea in mind. In the wake of this catastrophe, the sages were already reinventing the rules for how we connect with God. Without the physical Temple and the sacrificial system, we moved to a home based and community driven model that raised up text study and prayer. We still mourn this calamity every year. We carry the sadness with us. It doesn't leave. It could have stifled us, but we were resilient and forged ahead to a new life. Our sages from so many years ago teach us that in the face of sadness and tragedy, we pivot. We transform. We grieve too, but we do not despair.

My friends, we find ourselves in the middle of the holiest day of the year. The day when God is listening to our most heartfelt prayers and even to our cries.

*God, must we pound our hearts when they are already broken? Have we not been through enough? How much more heartache can we bear? It is so hard to be strong now.*

My prayer is that each of us, in our own unique way, will hear God answer, saying, "My people extract blessings out of struggle, just like your patriarch Israel did. My people discover new meaning out of sadness, just like your sages did. My people shine light into darkness. This is what it means to be a Jew. As my prophet Isaiah once said, 'God will be gracious to you at the sound of your cries; when God hears you, God will respond to you'.<sup>2</sup> May this be so.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 30:19