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Kaddish

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'meh rabah…

Here's what I've learned about loss as a rabbi: Loss comes in endless variety, but all of them are awful. There are long lingering illnesses, full of suffering and pain, that drag on far longer than anyone wants them to; despite all of the mourning that may have been thought to have been done in advance, when death comes it is as painful as ever. There are quick, unexpected losses, the results of trauma or fast-moving infections; despite assurances that "at least they didn't suffer," there is no comfort to be had there. There are deaths of the young, who everyone expected to have many more years, and the tragedy of that unspent time weighs so heavily on the heart. There are, increasingly, deaths of people at 90, at 95, at 100, those who, as people say, "lived a good life;" despite all of the preparation we may think we have, the fact that someone who has accompanied us for so long has left us is inexplicable and shattering. There are deaths of those who are beloved by all and those who left a trail of pain and even hatred behind them; despite how we may think we feel, even if we imagine in our anger that it would be better if they were dead, when the time comes, our hearts break just the same.

Here's what I've learned about loss as a mourner: Loss is a pool of dark water. It looks bounded on the edges, but you can't see how deep it is. You don't walk into it slowly, feeling your way. You are plunged into it abruptly and without warning; no matter how much you expected it, you didn't expect it to happen right then, not that day, not that moment. Finding yourself in the water you reach down your feet to find the bottom of it and find that it has no bottom. Despite the fact that you are then told you need to learn how to swim in it, you find yourself unable to do much beyond treading water, keeping your head up and breathing. Loss upends whatever preparations you may have thought you made for it, physical preparations and planning, mental and emotional preparation. However much you've prepared, you haven't prepared enough. Emotions can overwhelm you sometimes, unexpected, out of your control and impossible to predict. At other times, you seem to be "fine," moving through the world, eating, sleeping, though sometimes with difficulty, even eventually working again and returning to your routines. You imitate someone who is "dealing with it" or "managing" or even "getting over it." Yet sometimes, unexpectedly, even weeks or months or years later, the veil of normalcy that you have drawn over yourself is suddenly drawn aside, and you feel suddenly that you are back at the beginning, struggling in the dark pool, hoping in vain to find firm ground on which to stand.

The very first line of the Mourners' Kaddish recognizes that we live in a world in which God's name is diminished, where God's sanctity is in doubt. If we look around with open eyes, we see all of the ways in which God is not present in our world, filled as it is with tragedy, violence, hatred, and grief. We see all of the ways in which the very idea of holiness is denied, how people act as if there is no consequence to what they do. At most times of our lives we try our best to ignore this fact, to concentrate instead on the goodness and meaning in the world, all the places where we see the divine light peeking through. But when we experience loss, our

hearts are cracked open to what is missing, to the ways in which the world fails again and again to fulfill its potential. In the vision of Isaiah, the angels sing: *m'lo kol ha-aretz k'vodo* – "the whole earth is filled with God's glory!"[1] But the world resists being filled up with God. It abounds in hollows and eddies, dark corners and hidden spaces, places where the divine light, the divine name, the divine sanctity does not reach. So when we have our eyes opened by loss, we cry out: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabah* – "Let God's great name expand and be sanctified!"[2] At the moment when we feel most keenly God's absence, we pray with all our hearts for God's presence to fill up the world, to fill us up, all of the empty and desolate places within us, as we flounder in the dark pool of loss.

…b'alma div'ra kir'uteih…

One of the most shattering moments of loss is the realization that the world goes on in spite of it all. It seems an affront to our grief and our brokenness to see that traffic continues to flow through the streets, newspapers continue to report happenings in the world, and everyone outside the small circle that knows of and honors our loss behaves as if nothing has happened. We want to shake people and say, "Don't you know that everything has changed?!" We want to confront God and shout, "Is this really the world You created? Is this the way it has to go??!" The rabbis find a hint in the story of creation itself that maybe this isn't the only way the world could be, that there were other possible worlds that God considered and even tried out before the one we know. They see this hint in the Torah's description of the very first evening,[3] which does not indicate that evening had to be created, implying that it already existed:

> Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi Shimon said: "Let there be evening" is not written here [in the Torah], but "And there was evening;"; hence we know that a time-order existed before this [world's creation]. Rabbi Abahu said: This proves that the Holy Blessed One went on creating worlds and destroying them until God created this one and declared, "This one pleases Me; those did not please Me."[4]

Nearly every time I recite the Mourners' Kaddish now, as a mourner, I get stuck on the idea that this world was created according to God's will, *b'alma div'ra kir'uteih.* Really?! This world? The one that seems to take no notice of death or loss, that inexorably continues on its tracks like a runaway train, allowing for all manner of tragedy and grief and horror to be swept along in its wake? This is the world that God created? On purpose? After creating and destroying maybe countless worlds, this was the best that God could do??

[1] Isaiah 6:3. This verse forms part of the *Kedushah*, the proclaiming of God's holiness in the prayer service that we recite twice daily.
[2] These words are said to be based on God's promise about the ultimate redemption in Ezekiel 38:23: "Thus will I manifest my greatness and My holiness, and make Myself known in the sight of many nations, and they shall know that I am the Lord."
[3] Genesis 1:5, "And there was evening and there was morning, a first day."
[4] Midrash B'reishit Rabbah 3:8.

As with most things that Jewish tradition asks us to say repeatedly, I have to think that this line in the Kaddish is intended to prompt us to ask just this question. Why wasn't God pleased with the worlds that God created before this one? And, even more importantly, what was it about this world that made God say, "This one pleases me"? When I recite the Kaddish, I think a lot about my dad's life, its ups and downs, successes and failures, accomplishments and missed opportunities. I'm still figuring it out, still struggling to understand who he was and how and why he did what he did in this world, and what that means for me. But when I struggle with the meaning of this being God's preferred world, I always come back to the idea that maybe the high points of my dad's life, and maybe the best things that humans do in this world, are only possible in a world that also includes the potential for so much darkness and heartache. Maybe this world pleased God not because it banished the possibility of evil but because it allowed for the possibility of goodness. And the idea that despite it all, we still hold the potential to do good and even great things in this world, that even though my dad has passed from this world, I still have the chance to do the good that in his best moments he would have wanted to do – that idea gives me some comfort.

…v'yamlich malchuteih b'hayeichon uv'yomeichon uv'hayei d'chol beit Yisrael, ba'agala uviz'man kariv…

In introducing the Mourners' Kaddish, especially at funerals or at *shiva*, I often note that it is a very strange part of our liturgy, so hard to understand and to put into a category that will explain it. Is it a song of praise? A prayer? A supplication? A request? And if it is a request, what does it ask of God? This line, to me, captures what the Kaddish is asking for: "May God's kingdom be established through your lives and through your days and through the lives of all of the House of Israel, quickly and soon." Now, I'm not the biggest fan of the metaphors of "king" and "kingdom" when they're used to talk about God. Especially for us, for whom kings and kingdoms are so far outside of our experience, this language isn't usually helpful. It tends to give us an image of a man sitting on a throne, imposing his will on others without their consent and for his own benefit. Not a way I like to imagine God.

Instead of taking this line so literally, I see it as a metaphor for something we all long for: continuity, especially continuity across the divide between the living and the dead. When death takes someone from us, we feel like our connection to them has been severed. I was shocked, after my dad died, at just the fact of his sudden absence from the world. I was surprised at how attached I was to physical objects that marked his presence: the plain pine coffin at his funeral, which was so hard to let go of at graveside; his many photo albums, which I pored through with my sisters; his sergeant's stripes from his time in the Air Force, which I ended up holding onto and keeping in my pocket through *shiva*. I was maybe irrationally afraid of forgetting him, losing hold of the things that made him part of this world, part of my world and my life. A rabbi friend sent me a card that helped me through. She wrote, "I didn't know your dad, but I do know you. This part of you—is that from your dad? And this thing about you—is that something he passed on to you?" She helped me remember what I knew but had forgotten, that my dad is so deeply imprinted onto me that his presence can never vanish from my life.

So now, I hear the part of the Kaddish that speaks of the establishment of God's kingdom as a prayer for continuity. May everything that was most important to those we've lost, their most closely held values and beliefs, the highest and greatest parts of them, be carried on throughout our days, through the way we live our lives, and may those things be passed on and on throughout the generations of our people. What it means to be part of God's kingdom is to be conscious of and to value that which transcends the bounds of an individual life, the parts of human beings that touch the timeless, the eternal, the things of lasting value. Those are the things that can never be lost, the things that ensure connection and continuity between the living and the dead. When we recite the Kaddish, we are praying for that, for the best in the lives of those we've lost to be lived out, over and over again, in the lives of those of us still on this earth.

…Y'hei sh'lama rabah min Sh'maya v'hayim 'aleinu v'al kol Yisrael…

Here's what I've learned about healing as a rabbi: there is no easy path to achieve it. As someone struggling with a painful loss once taught me, the only way out is through. Healing is slow, and it is not a straightforward process. The path toward it winds and turns and doubles back on itself again and again. Sometimes, some parts of our hearts begin to scab over and heal just as other parts are ripped open and remain raw and tender. And each person's experience of this path is unique, even within the same family, mourning the same person in the same relationship to the mourner. One of the greatest obstacles to healing is impatience, both our own and that of those around us. We live in a culture that denies death and gives mourning no space and no time. The Jewish rituals of mourning, with their focus on circles of grief spreading out from *shiva*,[5] to *sh'loshim*,[6] to the year of mourning for a parent, are deeply counter-cultural. We have to push back against others' expectations and our own and give ourselves the time we need. We have to be gentle with ourselves and not expect too much too soon from our broken hearts. And we have to give space to each other to find our own path, and to restart it again and again if that's what it takes. It takes a long time.

Here's what I've learned about healing as a mourner: it comes in fits and starts. I was very surprised to find that each stage of mourning, although so difficult to go through, has also felt far too short. I have often encouraged people to surround mourners during the days of *shiva,* seeing it as a time when they should not be alone, but I had never before understood the comfort afforded by the isolation that *shiva* imposes on the mourner, a chance to really do nothing in a protected space with no distractions, where I could experience the rawness of my feelings and just sit with grief. I was shocked when that period ended, and I had to begin to function again as a human being in the outside world. I held tight to the restrictions of *sh'loshim* as well, and it was a blessing to be able to mark its end with many of you by talking about my father and how I was beginning to understand his life and influence on me. But I also

[5] The seven days following the funeral, during which mourners traditionally do not leave their homes and follow many restrictions on their activities.

[6] The time between the end of *shiva* and the thirtieth day following the funeral, during which mourners do leave the house but still follow many restrictions. The end of *sh'loshim* marks the end of official mourning for all relatives except a parent.

felt bereft when that period ended, taking me ever farther from the time when my dad was in this world. So, I learned that while healing can come in little moments, those moments can also crack my heart open anew. Healing and crying often go together.

The other thing I learned about healing was how much other people help. My family, of course, was my greatest source of strength and solace in the days after my dad died, as they have been in the months since. That was no surprise. But I did learn how much the care and concern and thoughts of other people meant to me. Every visit, every card, every phone call, every contribution in my father's name, every expression of condolences face to face, every email, and even every Facebook message meant so much to me. I heard from people I had known for decades and from rabbinic colleagues who I had never met, but who nonetheless reached out to offer me condolences on learning of my loss. Wow. All of that mattered so much. The path to healing is so long and so hard, but it is the fact that it is lined with other people, including so many who began the journey of mourning long before me, that makes it possible to keep walking. Alone, healing seems impossible. Together, there is hope for me and for us all.

…'Oseh shalom bim'romav Hu ya'aseh shalom 'aleinu v'al kol Yisrael v'al kol yoshvei teivel, v'imru: Amen.
May the Source of peace in the heavens send peace to all here who mourn, and comfort to all who are bereaved, among the Jewish people and among all who dwell on earth, and let us say: Amen.