Sermon for Yom Kippur 5781
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Mourning Alone[1]

In the last year of my father's life, knowing he was failing, my thoughts sometimes turned, unbidden, to how I might experience his death. Since I lived across the country from him, I knew how unlikely it would be for me to be with him when he died. But that's still what I wanted: for us to be together when he left this world. Two weeks after his 90th birthday, something happened; my sister showed me on FaceTime how bad he looked. Certain that he was dying, I went straight to the airport and flew out to California, and then drove a rental car directly to the home where he was living, arriving around one in the morning. The staff kindly let me in and set up a mattress in his room. I spent the night alone with him, listening to him struggle to breathe, thinking every breath might be his last. But he kept on breathing. In the morning, he started to look a little better, and by the time I left several days later, he was talking and back to how he'd been before. I left comforted by how quickly I'd been able to get there, calmed by the hospice nurses who told me of the signs that indicated impending death, convinced I'd manage to be there when the time came, that we'd be together. Of course, that's not how it happened.

When the call from my sister came about six weeks later, I was alone in the middle of a Walmart, over 400 miles from our home in Philadelphia, and nearly 3,000 miles from my father. And isolation turned out to be the leitmotif of my time of mourning. After the funeral in California, it became clear that there was no way that we were going to be able to get back to Philadelphia for shiva. So instead of sitting shiva surrounded by this wonderful community, I sat in the Adirondacks, with my family and a few close friends to make a minyan for Kaddish. I was surprised to find, when studying the laws and customs of mourning, that although I'd always thought of Jewish mourning as a time for people to gather, to ensure the mourner is never alone, many traditional sources emphasize the ways that being a mourner isolates you from society. Mourning makes you confront exactly the fact you most wish to escape: that one you love has left this world, is no longer here, and has left you here without them. That is why even with hundreds of people around, and even with loving friends and family close by, mourners often feel alone.

These months of pandemic have brought a double tragedy on us: increased deaths from all causes, not just from COVID-19,[2] combined with isolation as relatives are kept away from the dying and mourners are separated from those who would comfort them by the restrictions necessary to control the spread of the virus. It has been heartbreaking. I have talked with the adult children unable to visit their dying parents, reduced to hoping for a glimpse of them through a window or a moment of connection in a video call. I have officiated

[1] This title is inspired by the landmark sociological work Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community by political scientist Robert D. Putnam (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Of course, whereas Putnam probed what made the social "glue" of American life collapse, in our time we have a clear idea of why our communal lives are under such stress, as well as hope (which Putnam shares) that they may improve. This sermon is intended to address what we are to do in the meantime.

[2] See https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2768086

at the funerals with only immediate family at the graveside, deprived of the crowds of relatives and friends who would in other times have been there to support them. One of the images that stays with me is of a single mourner, alone at the cemetery after the too-quick funeral service, staring unbelievingly into the grave in which their loved one had been interred. We are always alone in our grief, but the presence of others helps us to walk through it, to assimilate it into ourselves, to rebuild our world after it has been shattered by the passing of someone so central to our lives. In these times, we too often must do that difficult work alone.

And it is not only those mourning their own dead who must struggle and suffer alone. In recent months, we have also been mourning those killed by police and by the structural racism of the society in which we live, like Breonna Taylor, like George Floyd, and like too many others who still wait for justice. And there are so many other losses, large and small, that we are carrying right now. Losses of jobs and of homes and dreams, of celebrations and graduations and weddings, of trips and visits, of first days of school, first years of college, and firsts of so many kinds, of the closeness of friends and the easy camaraderie of neighbors, of our sense of security and our ability to make plans, of hope and of meaning. Although each of these losses has its own shapes and contours, painful in its own right, what they all have in common is that we must, for the most part, bear them alone. Jewish mourning practices are predicated on a community that surrounds the mourner, and Jewish community is built on the idea that enduring the sorrows that mark our lives is bearable only because we can share the burden with others who know and care about us. Over the last six months, even that has been taken away from us.

What are we to do? How can we mourn all of our losses when we are so isolated from each other?

In the beginning, God creates a single human being, alone in the world and unlike any other creature.[3] God plants a beautiful garden on earth and places the human being in the garden "to till it and tend it."[4] But God immediate realizes that there is a problem: the human being is alone. God reacts unequivocally, "It is not good for the human being to be alone."[5] The fact that these words come from God's mouth, after God has created this very situation of the isolated human, speaks volumes about the ancient belief that to be alone is to be vulnerable, lonely, and lacking in emotional and spiritual resources. God's response is to create all of the wild beasts and cattle and birds of the earth and to bring each of them to the human being to see if they would make a good companion. But none of them is right. Only then does God create a second human being out of the very flesh of the first, and the two humans cling to

[3] See Genesis 2:5-7. This is the second account of the creation of humanity. In the first account, God also seems to create a single human being, but it is confusingly described as being both male and female (Genesis 1:26-28), which leads either to the idea that two beings were created simultaneously (the common sense understanding) or to the interpretation that one being that contained both male and female was created that later was split to create separate male and female humans (see Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 8:1).
[4] Genesis 2:15.
[5] Genesis 2:18.

each other and form a unit, no longer alone but protected and buoyed up by the other's presence.

From the moment of its creation, everything that the first human being encounters seems to indicate that being alone means that nothing matches, nothing resonates. The first human's experience is unique, and no other creature can understand the human's joy or pain, accomplishment or loss. This is something we encounter in mourning all the time. Looking around at a world going on without who or what we have lost, we feel that no one can understand what we are going through. With the author of the Book of Lamentations, we cry out, "Look and see: Is there any pain like my pain?"[6] Each of us struggles with pain that is like no other's, and our pain cannot be compared on any scale. No one, even those closest to us, can truly understand all that we are going through because our loss and our pain are reflections of who we are, the deep ways that we have been imprinted by those whom we mourn, the past experiences that make this present one resonant in ways that would be impossible to explain. Even if we are one of many who mourn the same person or event, our grief is ours alone.

Yet the story of the first human being does not stop there. After despairing of finding a matching creature that can empathize with the first, God creates one, a second human being that shares its makeup and structure, if not its memories and experiences. As the two humans now join together, that first human, no longer alone, discovers that while the other will never completely understand, there is at least some analogy that can make their experiences resonate despite the inevitable distance between them. So, the first human learns that despite the impossibility of perfect understanding, the experiences of others can be a guide for us. And this, too, we know from mourning. While there is no pain that is exactly like ours, the stories of loss that others tell provide enough of an analogue that we can each get some comfort by encountering each other. That is why even just reading the story of someone who has "been there," can be so important to helping us each along our own path of mourning, even when we mourn alone. So, the first lesson we learn about mourning alone is that we can find support in the stories of others who have loved and lost and mourned and lived, a model of how we can go on, even when our own path seems to lie apart and in shadow.

When Jacob leaves his parents' house, fleeing his father's shattered trust and his brother's murderous rage, he finds himself alone for the very first time in his life, with only wilderness and strangeness around him. With a rock as his pillow, he falls asleep and dreams of the ladder with angels going up and down on it, and the presence of God over it all, promising him that God is with him wherever he goes. When he wakes, he exclaims, "*Yesh Adonai ba-makom ha-zeh v'anochi lo yad'ati* – God is present in this place, but I did not know it."[7] Jacob has never felt the presence of God before, but in this isolated place, unsure of his future, his dream reveals the surprising truth that the divine is with him, an unseen force providing him with protection and companionship as he moves forward into the unknown.

[6] Lamentations 1:12.
[7] The entire story is found in Genesis 28:10-22; the quote is from verse 16.

We know from our human experience of mourning that it is in our moments of extreme isolation that we sometimes can feel the presence of the divine within and around us. Removed from all distraction, isolated in grief like Jacob isolated in the wilderness, we are sometimes more open to sensing the inchoate yearnings within ourselves and the answering inexplicable presence of a force that is both inside and outside of us. That force can give us the strength to continue with our lives, to do what is necessary to go on, even if our own hearts fail us, sometimes wanting only to stop or to withdraw. That force can also sometimes enable us to hear the voice of one we have lost in our head, to imagine what they might say, how they might comfort and motivate us, the memories of them that we can hold onto for sustenance. And through a sense of the divine presence, we can feel connected to those who are no longer in this world, imagining, as in the prayer in the weekday evening service, that in God's hands God holds together the souls of the living and the souls of the dead, the breath of all humanity. So, the second lesson we learn about mourning alone is that our isolation can open us up to the divine in a way nothing else can, especially when the human world seems to offer us little comfort.

At the burning bush, Moses encounters God much as Jacob does, alone, having fled the anger of Pharaoh and found refuge in the wilderness, sheep his only companions. In front of the inexplicably long-burning flames, God offers Moses not comfort and protection but a challenge, a challenge to finish what he has started, to return to the one from whom he fled, and to demand freedom for the Israelites, with whom he has already aligned himself.[8] Moses resists the call. Unlike Jacob, he has found a place for himself away from his former life, connected to neither the Egyptians nor the Israelites. God's challenge pierces his isolation and places on him the obligation to connect divine values with human struggles. Rather than allowing him to remain alone, God pushes him to use the insight that his isolation has given him into both the human world and the divine in order to address the suffering of others.

Over time, the isolation of mourning holds the potential to change us, to make us different people than we were before. Having experienced loss can make us more sensitive to the suffering of others, more ready to offer our help, and quicker to see the urgency of alleviating the pain of others. We become more able to combine the human examples that guide us with the sense of the divine we feel, so that we are actually more capable of pushing the world toward the acknowledgement and relief of suffering. While we would never have sought to learn these lessons, mourning can position us to help. So, the third lesson we learn about mourning alone is that our time in the protected space of reflection and pain can propel us to connect our encounters with human and divine, to push us forward, perhaps acting in memory of those we have lost, bringing a little of their light into a world that, tragically and beautifully, goes on without them.

We would never have chosen to mourn alone. We still long for arms to surround us with comfort and for the embrace of community. But in this time when we are forced to carry

[8] The full story is found in Exodus chapters 3-4.

so many losses alone, the lessons of these three isolated figures from the Torah can help us through. May our tears and our cries and every difficult step on our path lead us to comfort, to healing, and to peace.