

Rosh Hoshanah 2024

Recently Taffy Brodesser-Akner wrote a novel called Long Island Compromise based on the true story of Jack Teich who was abducted in his driveway in 1974. He was a wealthy Jewish businessman and after his wife and brother paid the ransom of \$750,000 (equivalent to \$4.6 million in today's money), he was returned to his family. In her July 14 NY Times cover story about the actual event, Brodesser-Akner shared how she knew this family growing up and over the years was amazed at how well Jack Teich was doing in the days, years and decades since.

In preparation for writing her novel she interviewed Jack Teich, only to learn that she had projected an awful lot onto him in terms of having a “great life”. On the outside he and his family looked like they were fine, but they were anything

but fine. Here are the ways Jack Teich was not okay. In 2020 he wrote a book about the ordeal called **Operation Jacknap: A True Story of Kidnapping, Extortion, Ransom, and Rescue**. He hired someone to create a Wikipedia page about the case with a PO box for leads, and he offered a reward for any information. He still wanted to know what happened to the ransom money. He wanted it back to donate to the Federal Law Enforcement Foundation. He told Brodesser-Akner he wanted justice. Only one of the kidnappers was caught and imprisoned. After 17 years the kidnapper appealed on a technicality, was successful in his appeal and was freed. At that point Jack Teich bought a gun as he did not feel safe. He has two file cabinets with files related to the kidnapping. He made a CD and keeps the audio on his phone of the ransom call, he had panic buttons installed at every outside door. To this day, there are lights

and locks everywhere. His house alarm is always on. He sleeps with the shades up, he tries not to leave home in the dark. When the family moved in 1984, they moved 1183 feet from the police station. For many years a person who acted as handyman, driver and bodyguard lived on the property. Jack still lives in this home. This traumatic experience scarred him for life. How could it not?

Fifty-one years ago, my father Samuel Shapiro was the victim of a premeditated murder in Baltimore's Belvedere Hotel. I was 12 years old at the time. Some of you may recall that a year and a half ago, in memory of the 50th anniversary of that horrible event and all of the twists and turns surrounding his life and death, I wrote a Dvar Torah chronicling my journey toward forgiving him for not showing up as a loving parent.

Right around the time of his June birthdate this year, my sister and I were talking and our dad, much to my surprise, she shared that she had negative feelings about our dad.

This surprised me because she had always described herself as his favorite child. Having made some peace with my sad feelings about my lack of relationship with him and that time of my childhood, I found myself sinking back into the trauma of those early years. This was trauma I was sure I had worked through and gotten to the other side of. Or so I thought.

This past summer President Biden stopped his Presidential campaign. During his official televised speech to announce his plans, he took the opportunity to share some of the highlights from his time in office. At one point he said how

proud he was that the US was not currently at war. I was taken aback because I “knew” that indeed we were at war and that he was confused. But it was me who was confused. The US is not at war. Israel is at war so I feel like my country is at war. I had to separate out my identities that of being American and that of being a Jew and having two countries. That was not hard once I became clear. Maybe like some of you I find the situation in the Middle East traumatizing - the loss of innocent life In Israel, in Gaza and the surrounding areas.

Soon after her son Hersh was kidnapped from the Nova Music Festival on October 7, Rachel Goldberg-Polin said, “Hope is Mandatory”. She would share on social media that life was hard for days and months during the nearly 11 months before the murder of her son - but she never lost

hope. I became very interested in how someone could experience such trauma yet carry hope. While today's Haftorah reading was written some 2600 years ago, it continues to offer us valuable lessons, as does current literature on trauma, spirituality, healing and hope.

Today's Haftorah reading comes from the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 31 verses 1-19. Jeremiah was broadly known as the "weeping prophet". In her article "*Jeremiah: The Traumatized Prophet*" from **The Oxford Handbook of Jeremiah**,

Professor Juliana Claussen of Stellenbosch University in S. Africa calls him the traumatized prophet due to the emotional and physical anguish he experienced throughout his life.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, he faced rejection, ridicule, imprisonment, and threats to his life due to his prophecies. He was commanded by God to deliver a

message of impending destruction to a people who refused to listen. He lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile, events that shattered the identity of his people. He heard the cries of people, animals and earth and witnessed the profound destruction of cities, people and even birds. And as Claassen points out, he shared what was missing in life as noted in Jeremiah 7:34: “the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem had been silenced.” He saw the temple, a central symbol of faith, destroyed. This must have been emotionally crushing. He was not allowed to marry and have children by Divine command and probably lived a lonely existence. As Claassen points out, Jeremiah’s own life experiences mirrored the difficult prophecies he shared with his people.

In the book **The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma** Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist and trauma specialist, explores how trauma affects the brain, body, and mind and how it can manifest physically, emotionally, and psychologically long after the traumatic event has passed. Of course this information is not new. What is new is that it is now proven scientifically.

Jeremiah wrote of this in chapter 4:19-21 “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste.”

Trauma changes the way the brain functions. The amygdala is the brain’s fear center, and becomes hyperactive in

trauma survivors, leading to heightened states of anxiety, hyper vigilance, and fear responses.

The Prefrontal Cortex responsible for rational thinking and emotional regulation becomes less effective in trauma survivors, making it harder to process emotions and make logical decisions under stress.

The hippocampus part of the brain involved in memory can shrink in response to trauma, which can lead to fragmented memories and difficulty distinguishing past trauma from the present.

There is a long list of how trauma impacts the body which can include migraine headaches, digestive issues, autoimmune disorders, and chronic pain.

While talk therapy can be helpful it may not be enough and Van Der Kolk encourages additional holistic approaches such as yoga, EMDR, meditation and somatic therapy.

Van der Kolk teaches that trauma can isolate people making them feel alone in their pain. This reminded me of Jeremiah who was already isolated by the mere fact of being a prophet and unmarried but also because of all the trauma he experienced.

In the **Body Keeps the Score** we learn that the brain is capable of change through neuroplasticity - the ability to rewire the brain and heal from trauma.

Whether one has personally experienced trauma, heartache, or disappointment, it is not unusual to look for help not only through therapies and exercise but also through spirituality or religion.

In his article “Trauma and The Spiritual Path”, from the PTSD Association of Canada website, Jonathan H Ellerby PhD, a trained therapist, chaplain and practitioner of complementary therapies, writes that spirituality should be a starting point for working with traumatized people. He shared an experience of being mentored by a Native American therapist, who was also a community spiritual leader. One particular day he observed this therapist leading a training program on a reservation for Native American trauma counselors, many of whom were also trauma survivors. The healer talked about the essence of what it means to be a

unique person, that each person has a part of life inside an essential self. This of course reminded me of the Yiddish expression - a pintele yid – which translates as the divine spark inside of each of us. We are more than what has happened to us and as Ellerby eloquently said “a healthy spiritual practice or perspective teaches us that we are something greater. The essence of the spiritual life is to stay connected to the sacred place within that holds the memory of wholeness, peace and balance for us, no matter how far our hearts or minds may be pulled.”

Ellerby says a spiritual journey can help us develop a sense of identity and great purpose. We shift from asking “why me” to “what can I do about it?” We shift from “what is wrong” to “what can I be grateful for?” We not only can heal, we can help others to heal.

Jeremiah lamented frequently to God about the suffering of his people and his own personal struggles. In fact in Jeremiah 31:9, God says, "With weeping they shall come, and with compassion I will guide them." Jeremiah 31:18 includes the plea, "Bring me back, let me return, for You are the Lord my God." Jeremiah called out to God in his laments. Like this reluctant prophet, we too might look for a stronger connection with the divine through trying times. Lamenting is a form of prayer and a way to engage with God.

The High Holidays provides us with a framework for delving into both a spiritual and religious practice of reflecting on our actions, seeking forgiveness and praying for divine mercy. This is a reset for the coming year. This is the reason we read this Haftorah today. The Judeans were sent into exile in

Babylon because of their persistent idolatry, social injustice, moral decay, and refusal to heed God's warnings. Despite the repeated efforts of prophets like Jeremiah to call them back to God, they continued to break their covenant, trusting in false gods and corrupt leaders. We read in today's Haftorah that God forgives the Judeans and welcomes them home. God shows compassion and mercy towards the people of Israel. We too can show compassion to others and forgive - forgive not only others but ourselves for not living up to standards we might set for ourselves.

In her NY Times article, Taffy Brodesser-Akner writes about her own traumatic experience giving birth to her first child. She was given a drug that made her hallucinate and then was mentally manipulated by the doctor while hallucinating which led to her undergoing a possibly unnecessary

Caesarian section. This was followed by PTSD misdiagnosed as post-partum depression. Due to her misdiagnosis, it took her a protracted time to get the correct treatment. She writes about making sense of her own trauma by learning about trauma that her childhood neighbor experienced. She also writes “That is how the traumatized life goes. You work your whole life to overcome the terrible thing that happened to you only to find at the end that overcoming it *was* your life....and then at the end the vine you rest beneath is that you get to stop working so hard to pretend that you put it behind...the sheer amount of energy it takes to pretend that I’m over anything is killing me.”

When traumatic events happen we have a choice whether to live life as a victim or transform that experience. In my own case I realized from the recent conversation with my sister

that I can stay in the place of forgiving my father even as I am still traumatized by his death. They are two separate things - an absentee dad and a murder.

If we interpret this Haftarah as a spiritual awakening for the Jewish people then we have a blueprint for how to move forward. In the Haftarah, Jeremiah conveys a profound message of **God's love for the people**, despite their past mistakes and the trials they have faced. In Jeremiah 31:3, God says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have drawn you with kindness."

In Jeremiah 31:13 we read of God's promise "I will turn their mourning into joy, and I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow". Even in the trauma or heartache we

feel right now, through our own personal efforts in addition to faith, difficult situations can turn into hope, joy and renewal.

While the book of Jeremiah is 52 chapters, this reading is just more than half-way through. This prophecy is positive. Jeremiah goes through rough times again. That is how life goes. As we know, no one is exempt from sorrow but it is how we help ourselves that defines how we live with the sorrow or move past it even if it is always a part of us.